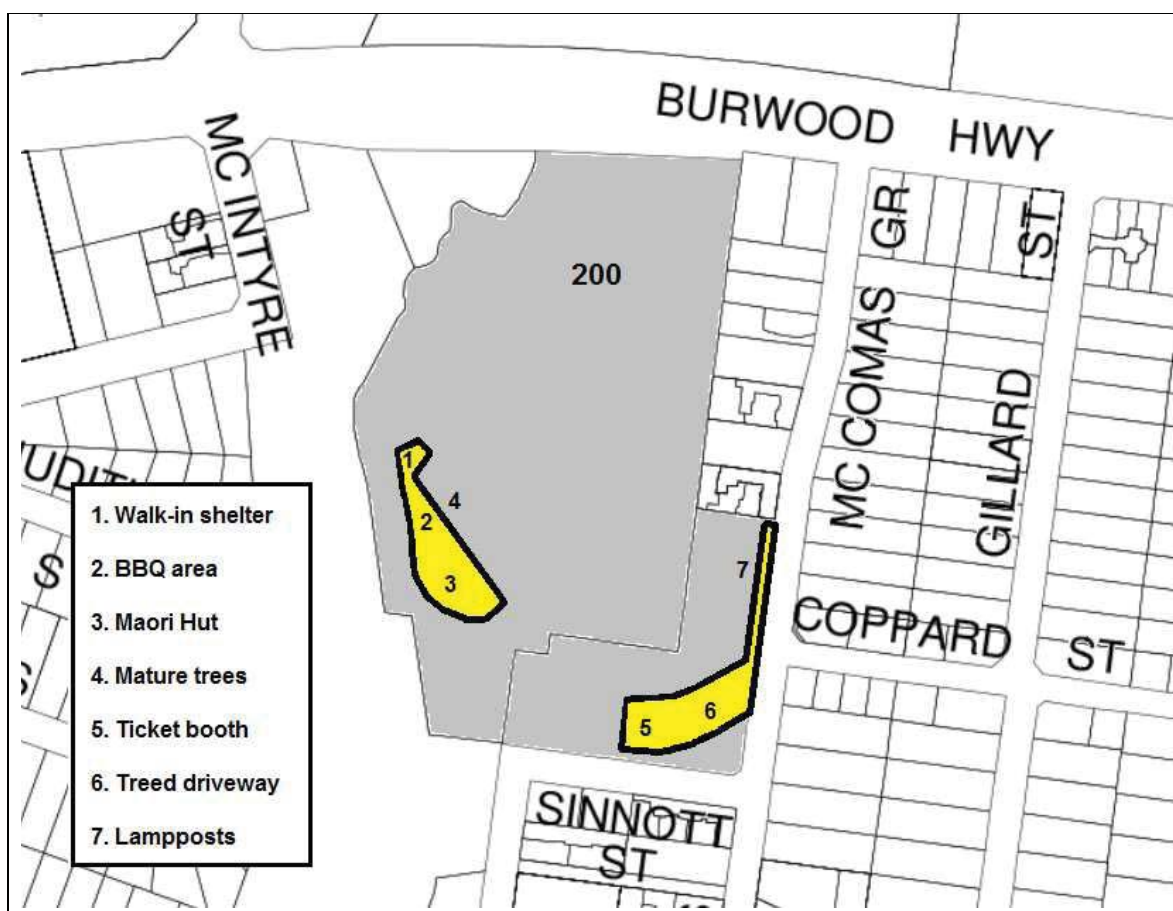


<b>IDENTIFIER</b>	BURWOOD SKYLINE DRIVE-IN CINEMA (remnant elements)	<b>Citation No</b>	F002
<b>Other name/s</b>		<b>Melway ref</b>	61 A6
<b>Address</b>	200 Burwood Highway (part) McComas Grove (off) BURWOOD	<b>Designers/s</b>	A C Leith, Bartlett & Partners Trevor Jones & Associates
<b>Dates/s</b>	1955, 1959 (early buildings; BBQ area) 1970s (ticket booth; lampposts)	<b>Builder/s</b>	



<b>Heritage Group</b>	Recreation and entertainment	<b>Condition</b>	Good/fair (individual elements)
<b>Heritage Category</b>	Drive-in cinema	<b>Intactness</b>	Good/fair (individual elements)
<b>Theme/s</b>	3.4 Linking Victorians by road in the 20th century [subtheme: <i>The influence of the motor car</i> ] 5.6 Entertaining and socialising [subtheme: <i>Creating picture theatres after 1945</i> ]		
<b>Recommendation</b>	Include on heritage overlay schedule as heritage precinct		
<b>Significance</b>	Local (notable across entire municipality)	<b>Date</b>	24 April 2014

## History

These scattered structures off Burwood Highway and McComas Grove in Burwood East constitute the remnants of the former Skyline Drive-in Cinema which, at the time of its opening in early 1954, represented the very first example of its type not only in Victoria, but in Australia. This was one of many initiatives to emerge in the early post-war period as a reflection of a new fascination for the potential for a car-oriented society. Since the end of the Second World War, private car ownership in Australia increased at a phenomenal rate, with the first locally-made cars produced at Fisherman's Bend in 1948, and wartime petrol rationing abolished two years later. During the early 1950s, there was much discussion on the implications of motoring, which saw entrepreneurs return from trips to the USA enamoured by the possibilities for the local introduction of motels, drive-in shopping centres, drive-in banks and other hitherto unseen car-oriented building types.

One such entrepreneur was George Griffith junior, southern division manager of Hoyts Theatre Ltd, who returned to Melbourne in September 1952 after six months in the USA. Griffith, who had worked for the firm since the 1920s and regularly visited the USA to follow the latest trends in movie-going, decided that open-air drive-in picture theatres, so popular in California and elsewhere, would be similarly successful in Australia's warm climate. With the Hoyts management initially unenthusiastic about Griffith's plan, he decided to form a syndicate and proceed with the project himself. The syndicate, subsequently incorporated in July 1953 under the name of Auto Theatres Australia Pty Ltd, included amongst its directors Arthur Cedric Leith (1896-1972), principal of the prominent city architectural firm then known as A C Leith, Bartlett & Partners. In March 1953, Leith had sought permission from the local council to proceed with the project and was promptly advised by the Town Clerk that 'the proposal contained in your letter for a drive-in theatre on an area of land in the vicinity of Burwood Road [as it was then known] and McComas Grove was considered by my Council at its last meeting when I was directed to inform you that the Council will raise no objections to the proposal'. Approval was also sought, and granted, from both the Country Roads Board (CRB) and the MMBW

The firm of A C Leith, Bartlett & Partners proceeded to prepare its scheme for the development of the site. Occupying sloping land overlooking the Gardiner's Creek on the south side of Burwood Highway, the ten acre site formed a natural amphitheatre that allowed the projection screen to be erected on the edge of the creek without needing to be elevated on a frame. The vast wedge-shaped parking area, with space for 652 cars arranged in eleven radiating arcs, was to be accessed off McComas Grove, with an exit to Burwood Highway. The original buildings, as documented in working drawings finalised in September 1953, comprised the concession building (an elongated flat-roofed block in the centre of the site, containing the cafeteria, toilet facilities and projection rooms), a ticket booth at the McComas Street entry (also serving as an office for the manager/cashier), a combined storeroom and staff cloakroom, and a substation on the Burwood Highway frontage. With the exception of the brick substation, the buildings were of timber-framed construction, with vertical timber board cladding and broad-eaved skillion roofs. The playground in front of the projection screen was to be enclosed by a low picket fence, and the two access roadways along either side of the parking area were to be illuminated with rows of floodlights mounted on poles 35 feet (10.6 metres high).

Site development had commenced by early September 1953, when the architects advised the CRB that the 'construction of the drive-in theatre is now well advanced'. A few weeks later, the working drawings were submitted to the Department of Public Health for approval. Approval, however, was delayed due to some new concerns raised by the CRB regarding vehicular access and egress from the property. The CRB stressed that it 'does not wish to prevent the arrival of drive-in theatres, but thinks this is a particularly bad location for the first experiment. It is situated near suburban development and cannot be regarded as an open country site. There is insufficient land available to permit proper carriageway and roundabout development to dissipate traffic problems, as is usual with the American type theatre'. Concerns were also raised about the suggestion that multiple exits might be in operation at once. The matter was finally resolved when the CRB agreed to approve the project on the condition that only two gateways would be used at a time, and the others only for emergencies. Approval was confirmed at the end of October, and construction of the buildings began soon afterwards.



*The original concession building as it appeared in the mid-1950s, with the projection screen in the background (source: [www.driveinsdownunder.com](http://www.driveinsdownunder.com))*

The new Skyline Drive-in Cinema, as it was named, was completed in early 1954. Its first film was a special preview screening of *The Conquest of Everest*, which was shown to an invited audience on the evening of 17 February. The next night, it was officially opened to the public with a screening of *On the Rivera*; the fact that this film was released three years earlier suggests that the promoters were well aware that the venue, rather than the film, was the main attraction. The forthcoming opening attracted much attention in the press, with articles carefully explaining exactly what a drive-in theatre was, and how they operated. The *Age* reported that 'patrons of Skyline can drive their cars and families, or friends, into the large auditorium and park alongside a post, which houses a speaker in a small box. An attendant passes the speaker into the car and the passengers sit back to hear and see the film in self-contained comfort. They may smoke or drink or even comment on the failings of the film without the risk of persons in the row behind shushing them'. The *Argus*, meanwhile, was moved to point out that the screen, measuring 50 feet (15 metres) by 34 feet (10 metres), was 'the largest in the southern hemisphere', and that the opening of the venue was 'probably the most interesting development in entertainment here since the advent of sound pictures'.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, given this publicity overload and the unfathomable curiosity of Melburnians, the opening night resulted in gridlocked traffic in both directions along Burwood Road as 2,000 cars (more than three times the venue's total capacity) struggled to gain access. Amidst concerns that the CRB's predictions of poor traffic circulation had come to pass, general manager George Griffith told the *Argus* that such problems would abate once the novelty had worn off.<sup>2</sup> Although this proved to be the case up to a point, the drive-in cinema would for some years be plagued by complaints (invariably from local residents) regarding both traffic congestion and noise. Later, the CRB even admitted that, had they been aware that these problems would eventuate, they would never have granted approval for the project.

Nevertheless, the Skyline Drive-in Cinema at Burwood proved an enormously successful venture. By June 1954, George Griffith was already proposing the establishment of two further venues, at Preston and Oakleigh (which opened, respectively, in December 1954 and March 1955), with plans for a fourth at Broadmeadows (belatedly realised in 1958). All four venues were promoted under the Skyline banner, a division of Hoyts Theatre Ltd. Of course, numerous other drive-in cinemas were established throughout suburban Melbourne (and regional Victoria) by rival operators. By the end of the 1950s, there were 25 in operation across the state, of which around half were located in the metropolitan area.

<sup>1</sup> 'It's comfort lies in all the things you can do', *Argus*, 17 February 1954, p 10.

<sup>2</sup> 'Curious jammed drive-in', *Argus*, 20 February 1954, p 6.

Notwithstanding the competition, the original Skyline at Burwood enjoyed healthy patronage, and was upgraded several times to keep up with the demand. Not long after opening, its parking area was expanded to accommodate 700 vehicles and, during 1955, the projection screen was enlarged to full Cinemascope proportions. That same year, original architects A C Leith, Bartlett & Partners prepared drawings for two new buildings. The first of these was a small flat-roofed soft drink and sweet stand, to be erected in front of the existing diner, and the second was a larger building to be erected as the focal point for a landscaped section on the south edge of the main parking area, overlooking the creek. A large gable-roofed structure of timber construction with an external finish of Conite (a type of render), it was intended for informal dining around a communal central table. Described on the original working drawings as a 'Maori Hut', the structure paid homage to the current fad for Polynesian culture, with patterned bargeboards and painted Tiki motifs. Elevated slightly above ground, the building was accessed from the north-eastern frontage by a raised platform, connected to ground level by a bridge-like ramp.

A few further changes took place over the next few years. In 1956, the children's playground in front of the projection screen was expanded to include a petrol-driven merry-go-round and, the following year, it was proposed to enlarge the concession building. This time, plans were prepared by the architectural firm of Trevor J Evans & Associates, whose titular principal had formerly been a director of A C Leith, Bartlett & Partners before opening his own office. Evans' drawings, dated July 1958, proposed the addition of two flanking wings to the existing building to considerably enlarge the public area of the snack bar. Work was completed by early 1959. Later that year, Evans prepared drawings for a small wedged-shaped brick building, described as a 'walk-in shelter', which contained four rows of seats and was intended for patrons without cars. This was completed by early 1960. At some point, and probably during the 1960s, the area around the so-called Maori Hut was landscaped to create a western-themed barbecue area.



*View of the drive-in in operation, circa late 1950s, looking from the projection screen and showing the concession building (left), the children's playground with merry-go-round and, in the distance, the Maori Hut (right)  
(source: [www.driveinsdownunder.com](http://www.driveinsdownunder.com))*



*View of the drive-in following alterations and addition to the concession building in the early 1970s  
(source: [www.drive-insdownunder.com.au](http://www.drive-insdownunder.com.au))*

Trevor Evans was still associated with the facility more than a decade later and, in 1972, was engaged to enlarge the concession building. This time, the snack bar was reconfigured to allow the toilets to be enlarged, and an H-shaped brick wing added to accommodate a new servery, food preparation area, cool room and so on. While this work was ostensibly undertaken to mark the venue's 21st birthday, it also coincided with the death of its original architect/promoter A C Leith, who died on 6 January that year. A brief obituary in the *Age* newspaper, simply headlined 'Drive-ins pioneer dead', drew particular attention to his role as the man who 'designed, built and financed Australia's first drive-in theatre at Burwood'.

One of the last additions made to the Burwood Drive-in was the replacement of the original timber-framed ticket booth at the McComas Grove entrance with a larger counterpart of brick construction, which took place in 1975. By that time, the popularity of the venue was starting to decline. The former Maori Hut in the corner of property, latterly adapted as an eatery referred to as the steak-house, had fallen into disuse, with patrons preferring instead to purchase fast food from the refurbished snack bar. With the introduction of colour television in Australia, also in 1975, and the emergence of multiplex cinemas from the early 1980s, the popularity of drive-in cinemas plummeted. The Burwood Drive-in was one of fourteen such venues in the Melbourne metropolitan area alone that ceased operation between 1980 and 1984. It closed on 22 June 1983 following a final screening of a double feature of *Local Hero* and *We of the Never Never*.

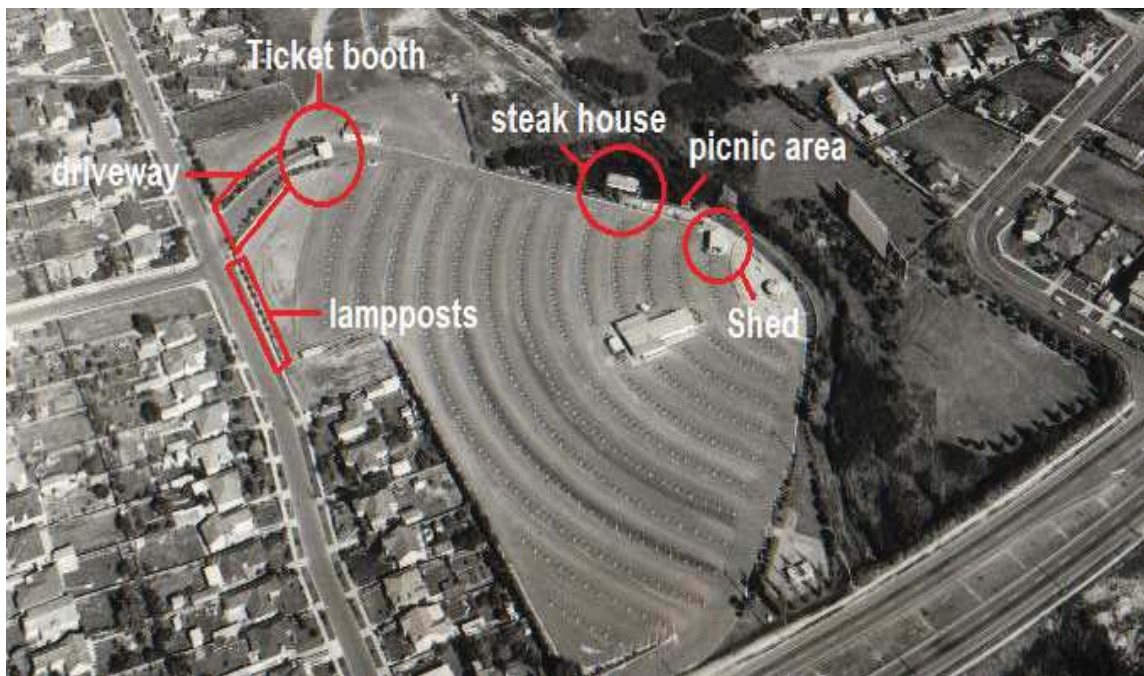
The three-hectare site was purchased by the City of Box Hill in what was described at the time as 'a million dollar deal which will allow it to centralise its electricity supply company'. Following a further outlay of a reported \$3million, the site was redeveloped as an electricity depot, with a new building erected on the site of the original snack bar and projection booth. While the projection screen was removed, the barbecue area and steak-house were retained (for staff use), and the walk-in shelter was adapted for use as a storeroom. On the McComas Grove side of the property, a small area was set aside for a public park, with the former ticket booth converted into a barbecue shelter. Box Hill's electricity company ceased to exist when the SEC was privatised in the mid-1990s. The Burwood depot was taken over by a new company, United Energy, which, in turn, was absorbed by another company, Alinta Energy in 2003.

In more recent years, the parkland on two sides of the depot has been redeveloped as an open-air local history museum, which includes interpretive signage and artwork pertaining to the site's history as Australia's first drive-in cinema. In 2008, the surviving elements of the Burwood Skyline were classified by the National Trust.

### Description

The remnant infrastructure of the Burwood Skyline Drive-in Cinema exists in a somewhat fragmented state, spread over the large ten-acre site that the venue formerly occupied. Some of the elements are located in the publicly-accessible parkland off McComas Grove and others remain within the confines of the electricity depot, although the latter remain clearly visible from public vantage points along the Gardiners Creek Trail.

The largest concentration of remnant infrastructure, which also represents the oldest surviving fabric of the former drive-in cinema, is located along the western boundary of the electricity depot, in the vicinity of a long and narrow carparking area for depot staff. A row of mature trees, including one large Cypress, runs along the outer edge of this carpark, and the crescent-shaped strip of land between these trees and the creek itself forms the hub of the original barbecue area of the drive-in cinema. Here, a shallow depression, edged with large rocks, marks the location of what was once the small man-made lake. The former Maori Hut (aka steak-house), which runs at an angle parallel to the line of trees, is a single-storey building on an elongated rectangular plan. The gabled roof retains its original cladding of corrugated galvanised steel sheeting with a layer of shingles, penetrated at the south-east end by a pair of capped metal flues, which indicate where the kitchen was located. The external walls, which also appear to retain their original Conite (rendered) finish, include a row of long rectangular windows along its south-east side, overlooking the creek. While the raised timber platform and bridge-like ramp appear to remain intact at the north-west front of the building, the distinctive Maori-themed elements shown on the original drawings, including the patterned bargeboards and painted tikis, are no longer evident. It is likely that these elements were removed while the drive-in was still in operation, when the fad for South Polynesian culture, which peaked in the 1950s, abated in the 1960s.



*Vintage aerial photograph from the late 1960s, with surviving infrastructure indicated in red  
(source: [www.drive-insdownunder.com.au](http://www.drive-insdownunder.com.au))*



*The so-called 'Maori Hut' or steak-house (1955), since adapted as employee's lunch room*



*The former walk-in shelter (1959-60), now adapted for use as a maintenance shed*



*Former picnic area, showing Cypress tree, picnic table and painted brick barbecue*



*The former ticket booth/entry gate (1975) since converted into a public BBQ shelter*

To the north-west of the Maori Hut/steak-house, near the large Cypress tree, are the remnants of the barbecue area proper, which include a red brick barbecue (now painted white) and a metal-framed and timber-slatted picnic table. Further north, at the far end of the carparking area, is the former walk-in shelter, which is now used as a shed. It is a small single-storey cream brick building on a wedge-shaped plan, with a broad skillion roof. The north-west frontage of the shelter, which was originally open to the projection screen beyond, is now infilled with metal decking. A more recent gabled-roofed metal shed has been erected alongside it.

The other remnants of the drive-in infrastructure are located in the small public park at the corner of McComas Grove and Sinnott Street. The park is bisected by a curving asphalted and tree-lined roadway that, although designated as Old Sinnott Street, actually represents the original driveway entrance to the drive-in cinema off McComas Grove. At the far western end of this driveway is the former ticket booth building, which is now a barbecue shelter. Constructed of variegated red-and-brown wire-cut bricks (typical of the mid-1970s, when it was built), it is a flat-roofed structure on a T-shaped plan. It comprises a large open area, where the roof is raised up on tall brick piers, which formed a pair of covered vehicle entrances to the drive-in cinema. Between these two entrances, on a concrete slab floor, is a smaller enclosed area with a slightly lower roof, which formerly accommodated the ticket booth proper. Inside the structure, the ceiling is lined with varnished timber boards.

Although as yet unverified in documentary sources, the row of four colonial-style lamp-posts along McComas Grove, made up of cast iron columns with Corinthian capitals, is likely to be another remnant of the drive-in cinema, probably also dating from the 1970s. It is worth noting also that the main driveway into the electricity depot, off Burwood Highway, also follows the exact alignment of the cinema's original exit roadway.

Interpretative elements added in recent years include a large blue-painted metal frame bearing the words 'DRIVE IN' (evoking an entrance gate), a car sculpture representing an F J Holden (by artist Salvatore Amato, 1993), playground equipment in the form of a car in front of a small projection screen (bearing the sign 'Burwood Skyline Drive-in'), and an illustrated signboard (part of the Whitehorse Heritage Trail, 2001).

### **Comparative Analysis**

As only one drive-in cinema was ever established in what is now the City of Whitehorse, the remnant infrastructure of the Skyline ultimately remains as unique evidence of this typology in the municipality. Comparisons can be drawn, on various levels, with other drive-in cinemas that existed, or still exist, elsewhere in the metropolitan area.

As one of four venues that were established and maintained under the banner of Hoyts Skyline, the Burwood site is comparable to the other three, located at Preston, Oakleigh and Broadmeadows. All four cinemas appear to have been built to a similar design, with buildings of the same type and form as those documented by A C Leith & Bartlett for Burwood. However, no evidence remains of any of them. The Broadmeadows Skyline closed in 1972 and its site served as a caravan sales yard for some years. The original street signage remained until the late 1980s, when the site was cleared and subdivided as an industrial estate. The Skyline cinemas at Preston and Oakleigh, which closed in 1984 and 1990 respectively, were both cleared and redeveloped for retirement homes. The latter venue is known to have once had a western-themed barbecue area, presumably identical to that at Burwood.

Ultimately, very little evidence remains of early (pre-1960) drive-in cinemas in Victoria. Other suburban examples from the mid-1950s, including those at Croydon (1954), Essendon (1955), Maribyrnong (1955) and Rowville (1956) have all been obliterated by subsequent redevelopment. Vacant and derelict for many years, the last remaining buildings at the Clayton drive-in (1957) have been razed since 1990. The Dandenong drive-in (1957), which closed in 1984, re-opened in 2002 and currently remains in operation. The venue was much upgraded for its new incarnation, including the erection of two more projection screens (complementing the existing one, itself rebuilt in 1973) and the refurbishment of the diner. It remains as Melbourne's only other pre-1960 drive-in to retain any significant elements. Apart from the much-altered diner, these include the original ticket booth, a row of cypress trees and a walk-in shelter for patrons without cars – according to the National Trust, the only other surviving example of that particular typology. Two other drive-in cinemas also remain in operation in Victoria. Located at Dromana and Coburg, these opened in 1961 and 1965 respectively, and thus are later developments when compared to the Burwood Skyline. Some physical evidence also remains at the sites of long-defunct drive-in cinemas of the 1960s, including those at Bulleen (1963), Wantirna (1968) and Sunshine (c.1969) in the metropolitan area, and a few others in regional Victoria.

### **Statement of Significance**

#### *What is significant?*

The remnant infrastructure of the former Burwood Skyline Drive-in Cinema is located within the boundaries of the electricity depot at 200 Burwood Highway, Burwood East, and in a small park off nearby McComas Grove. It is all that remains of what was Australia's first drive-in cinema, which opened in early 1954 and operated for nearly thirty years before its closure in June 1983. The original tree-lined entrance driveway off McComas Grove represents the only surviving fabric from 1953-54, with other elements providing evidence of later expansion and upgrading from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. These comprise a former detached dining building referred to as the Maori Hut (1955), the former walk-in shelter (1959-60), a tree-lined barbecue area with barbecue, picnic tables, man-made lake and remnant landscaping, and the replacement ticket booth/entry building (1975) and lampposts.

The identified landscaping elements, namely the mature trees along the former driveway entrance and the north-west edge of the barbecue area, are considered to contribute to the significance of the place.



#### *How is it significant?*

The surviving infrastructure of the Burwood Skyline Drive-in Cinema is of historic and social significance to the City of Whitehorse.

#### *Why is it significant?*

Historically, the surviving infrastructure is significant for associations with the emergence and early development of drive-in cinemas in Australia (*Criterion A*). While it is of note as a unique example of that typology in what is now the City of Whitehorse, it is of broader historical significance as the very first example to be erected anywhere in Australia. Immediately popular, the Burwood Skyline ushered in the era of drive-in cinemas that would see two dozen others established in Victoria before the end of the 1950s, and more than fifty by the early 1970s. As most of these venues closed during the 1980s, and their sites were redeveloped, the remnant infrastructure at Burwood provides extremely rare evidence of this once-widespread but now almost disappeared aspect of post-war recreation (*Criterion B*). It is one of only five drive-in cinema sites in Victoria to retain at least some of their elements, and one of only two where those elements date from the 1950s. The walk-in shelter is also confirmed as one of only two surviving examples in Victoria. The former Maori Hut, which provides evidence of the fad for South Polynesian culture in the 1950s, is likely to be a unique survivor of its type in Victoria as well as a very rare example demonstrating that particular fad.

Socially, the surviving infrastructure is significant as evidence of a post-war cultural phenomenon that is fondly remembered by several generations of Melburnians from the mid-1950s to the 1980s (*Criterion G*). These venues catered to a wide audience including families with young children, teenagers wishing to socialise away from their parents, and young adults attracted to particular film genres and the intimate private space provided by the car. One of the more successful drive-in cinemas in Melbourne (as well as one of the longest running, for almost thirty years), the Burwood Skyline placed a particular emphasis on wholesome family-oriented entertainment, demonstrated by the children's playground with merry-go-round (no longer evident) and the landscaped barbeque area (which still remains partially intact).

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#### **Identified by**

Andrew Ward (additional research and assessment by Built Heritage Pty Ltd)