



MOORABBIN BOWL (NATRUST 2010)

Remember those bowling nights?

In early 2009, following news of the impending demolition of a vintage bowling alley at Northcote, the Trust turned its attentions to this distinctive, but up until now, unresearched post-war building type. Simon Reeves, member of the Trust's Building Committee, reports.

American-style tenpin bowling was introduced to Australia in early 1960, when an eight-lane manually-operated centre opened in the disused Seaview Theatre at Glenelg, South Australia. In April, the first fully automatic lanes were demonstrated at the Sydney Easter Show, and the country's first purpose-built tenpin bowling centre, in the Sydney suburb of Hurstville, opened in September. A venture of Bowling Centre Holdings P/L, it was designed by architects Fisher & Jackson, who went on to design others (for the same company) at Sylvania, Blacktown, Enfield, and Parramatta. Early the following year, Victoria's first tenpin bowling centre was opened in Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn, by a rival firm, Indoor Bowling Australia P/L. Their architect, Theo Berman, also went on to design other centres: Box Hill, Ringwood, Brighton, Footscray, Preston, Moorabbin, Shepparton and elsewhere. Several other tenpin bowl companies also emerged, for example Bowl-o-matic P/L built centres at Geelong (1961), Dandenong (1962), Morwell (1962) and Frankston (1963), all designed by Smith & Tracey. The Sydney-based firm of Bowling Centre Holdings P/L, which introduced the sport to Australia, belatedly tried to break into the Victorian market when it provided bowling alleys within the new Chadstone Shopping Centre and Southern Cross Hotel developments in Melbourne. The firm went on to design stand-alone centres at Ballarat and Northcote (1963), both designed by

Fisher & Jackson. This boom period also saw a number of defunct cinemas around Melbourne converted into tenpin bowling centres – the Grand Theatre in Sydney Road, Coburg (1961), the Camden Theatre, Caulfield South (1963) and the Plaza Theatre in High Street, Northcote (1963).

With so many centres and rival companies, the local tenpin bowling industry was flooded by the mid-1960s. After an initial boom of enthusiasm, patronage declined; many bowling centres closed down or adapted for other uses. A handful remained in operation, but the boom was over; no more bowling alleys would be built in Victoria for more than a decade. The sport has since undergone troughs and peaks of popularity. Most recently, it has become fashionable again through the slick 'bowling bars' that have opened in the CBD and elsewhere.

Today, few of the bowling alleys associated with the sport's initial heyday remain in operation. While those at Hawthorn, Altona, Camberwell and Footscray are long gone, a surprising number of others have been razed in the past few years alone: St Kilda, Box Hill and Essendon. The destruction of the last – the earliest, finest and most intact example in the state – is surely one of the most shameful heritage casualties of the past decade. Others at Brighton, Frankston, Dandenong and Ringwood have closed down and been remodelled beyond recognition; those at Northcote and Mentone remain

threatened with demolition, and only three are still in operation in the metropolitan area. One, at Chadstone Shopping Centre, is buried in the bowels of the vast (and much-altered) complex. Of the other two, the Mentone Bowl was the standout example: a lively Featurist building with stone and brick feature walls, original signage and a giant rooftop bowling pin. Sadly, this fine building was unsympathetically remodelled – literally rendered unrecognisable – only weeks after the Trust completed a Classification Report recommending state listing. Attention was then turned to the remaining Moorabbin Bowl, which was duly classified as a building of state significance: not only Theo Berman's most resolved and mature bowling alley design – by his own admission – but also, with 28 lanes, the largest one ever built in Victoria during the sport's 1960s boom.

Much assessment remains to be done of our early tenpin bowls in regional Victoria. The first one built outside Melbourne, which opened at Wangaratta in 1961, has already gone; another at Geelong, which now represents the earliest survivor in the state, has been converted to other uses. Others remain in operation (albeit in various states of intactness) at Colac, Shepparton, Warnambool and Bendigo.

By Simon Reeves, Architectural Historian, Built Heritage and member of the Trust's Buildings Committee