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CULTURE/MELBOURNE

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Setting
the scene

Melbourne's Sun Theatre is a prime example of how the magic of cinema can boost an area long after the credits roll.

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Why do we prefer watching films at a cinema rather than at home? It's not only about the large screen and enveloping sound (though those certainly help). It's also because laughter and tears feel that much sharper when they are shared. Emotional bonds are created in the darkness of a projection room – and the cinemas that manage to create a community beyond the screen deserve particular praise.

West of Melbourne's CBD, Yarraville is a village-like suburb where narrow streets are lined with handsome heritage buildings – among them, the art deco home of The Sun Theatre. On its eight screens the cinema shows arthouse films and classics as well as the latest releases – but residents appreciate it for more than that. "It's the heart of this community, not just a hub for lovers of cinema," says punter Claudia

(**1**) Buttery popcorn freshly prepared (**2**) The Grand, The Sun's largest screening room, seats 200 (**3**) Reel time (**4**) The Sun's iconic sign lights up its surroundings (**5**) Art deco entrance (**6**) Rapt audience members

Funder. "Without it, we might not have this," she adds, gesturing to the park in front of the theatre. The green square is humming with people sipping coffee in the late afternoon sun.

It was The Sun's owner who suggested closing the once-busy street to cars and creating a European-style piazza. The People's Park, as it is now known, has become a meeting point for the area. "You cannot overstate the influence this cinema has had here," says Funder.

It's something that makes The Sun's owner Michael Smith very proud. "This theatre has always served its community," he says. Opened in 1938 as an opulent 1,050-seat cinema in what was at the time a working-class neighbourhood, The Sun was immediately embraced by residents. But as television flourished, the crowds started thinning so in the 1960s The Sun was repurposed as a Greek cinema, frequented by the many immigrants who had come to Australia after the Second World War. That incarnation didn't last long and The Sun went on to spend 20 years derelict.

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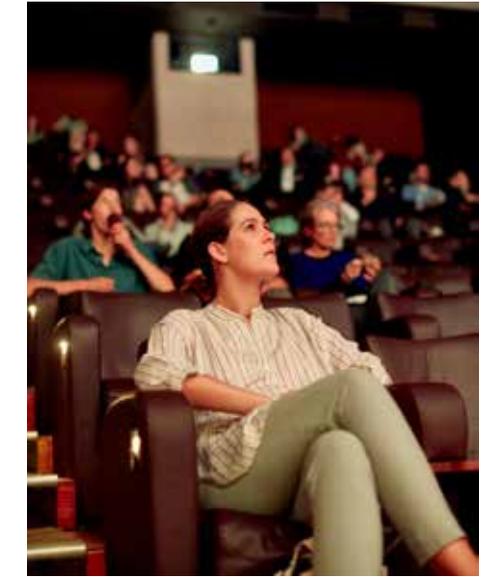
Smith came to the rescue in 1995, when he began to operate a film society from the building. It proved so popular that he and his interior-designer wife Anne decided to restore it to its fully functioning glory – with luxurious leather seats and ample leg room. The whole area stood to benefit. "When we purchased it, about a third of local businesses were boarded up," says Smith. "When people come here I want them to go to the local cafés and restaurants, pick up a book next door. The money has to be shared." This outlook is behind The Sun's decision not to serve meals – though you can buy a glass of wine or choc-top ice-creams made on site.

The community-centred approach extends to what is shown on screen too: Smith won't play any adverts. Instead, the cinema has a strict eight-minute rule: two trailers and a short newsreel highlighting stories from the Yarraville community are shown before every feature.

Trevor Junge has frequented The Sun since its early days as a film club. "It has become a second home; it's the friendly faces you see," he says. "It's the act of dedicating yourself to a film for a few hours, then bumping into people you know afterwards and talking about it." With fans like Junge and Funder, Smith need not worry about streaming services killing cinema; the average Australian might go to the movies just four times a year but the average Sun patron does so 17 times. At dusk, as the cinema's neon sign switches on, a queue starts forming for the next screening, proving that venues such as The Sun can really become a neighbourhood's cultural shining light. — (M)
suntheatre.com.au