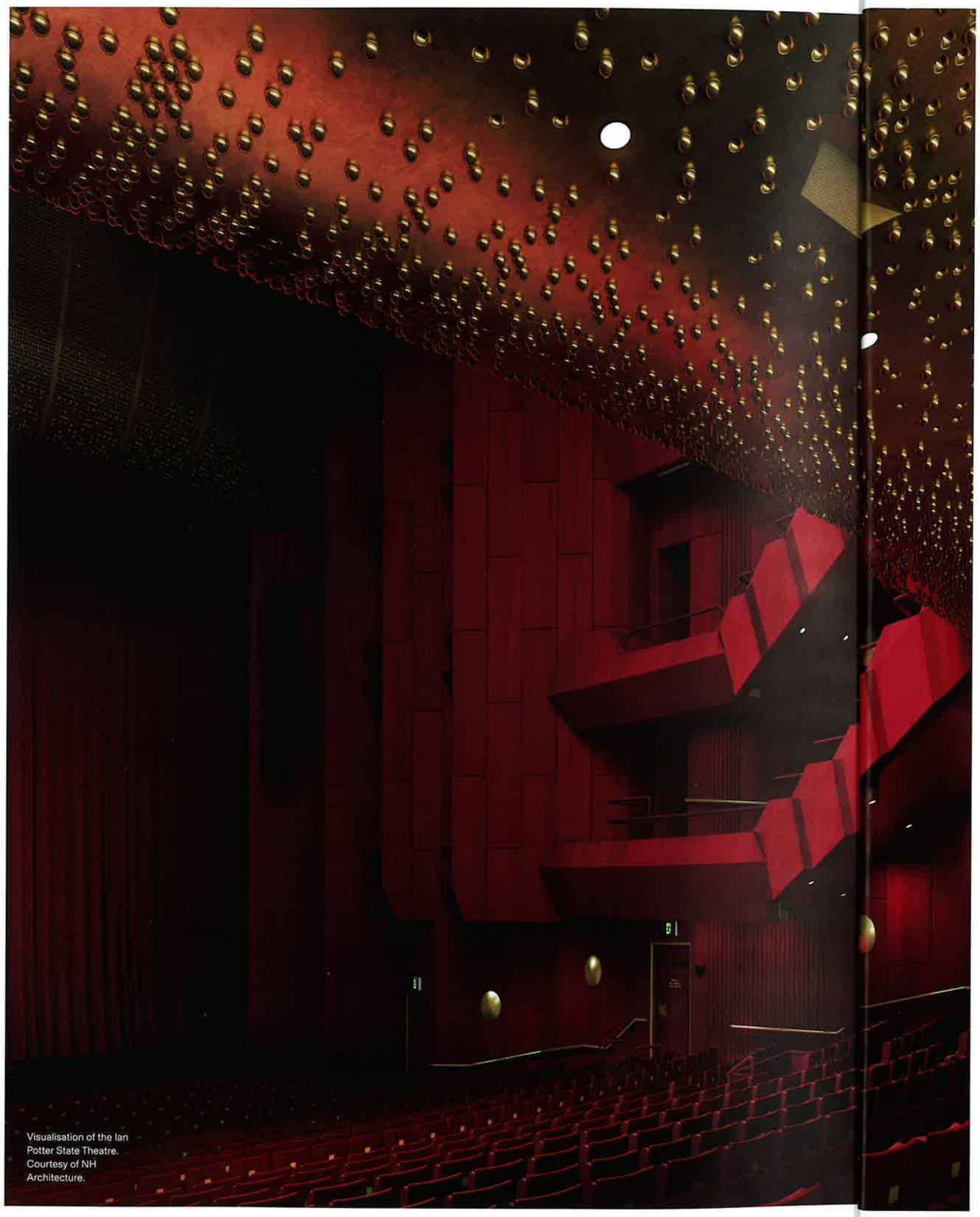
STAGE



The Day of the Diva

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Featuring — DIVA: A Melbourne exclusive
50 years of the Australian Performing Arts Collection
AMPA: Making a new museum



Visualisation of the Ian Potter State Theatre. Courtesy of NH Architecture.

The devil is in the details:

Enhancing a heritage theatre

Words by **Ella Dann-Limon** and **Ash Collins**

A performance in the State Theatre can take your breath away. From the moment you walk into the auditorium and see the plush red velvet alongside glistening gold, you're primed for a magical evening.

Yet, like all the best events, it's not just the soloist in the spotlight who makes a show a success. Instead, there are a multitude of small and large decisions made and details considered that work together in harmony to deliver a world-class performance, night after night.

Since March 2024, the State Theatre has been closed to undergo a major refurbishment as part of the Reimagining Arts Centre Melbourne project. Working closely with NH Architecture, the project team is preserving the heritage characteristics of this iconic venue while enriching the space with modern elements that enhance the entire theatrical experience.

More than a thousand individual decisions on materials and finishes have been made for the auditorium alone. While individually they might seem small, each one has cumulative impact on the venue's comfort, acoustics, accessibility and longevity.

Emily von Moger, Principal Architect at NH Architecture, is one of these many decision makers. For von Moger, one of the greatest rewards of working on this project lies in honouring John Truscott's original design, while ensuring its modern elements will awe audiences upon reopening.

"Every colour and texture in the State Theatre was bespoke, so we went through hundreds of samples to match the red velvet seats. It was important to us that we found materials that feel luxurious, are sustainable and stay true to that unique colour that Truscott designed," von Moger says.

After 40 years of use, the original velvet seats were worn and had lost their plushness and comfort. Von Moger and her team worked with Italian manufacturer Poltrona Frau to design new seats that not only honour the originals, but are also more accessible, more comfortable and even enhance the acoustics of the space.





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"Because all of the seats are velvet, to improve the acoustics we have included reflective materials such as timber on the front and back rest," she says. "Some timber flooring is also being introduced for acoustic enhancement. That flooring is sustainably and locally sourced Tasmanian oak, which will be stained a red colour to align with the new red carpet in parts of the auditorium."

As there are eight different styles of seats, with variations to allow for greater flexibility and accessibility, the seating plan itself required careful consideration. Some seats have fold-up arms on the ends of rows, so patrons with mobility aids can access them more easily. Some are bariatric with a heavier weight capacity, while others have higher backs for safety and compliance reasons. For the first time, select seats can be removed to create bariatric or wheelchair positions in prime positions in the Stalls.

But some of the most transformative work has taken place behind the scenes, where history and innovation converge.

"We have undertaken an extraordinarily detailed process to carefully remove and conserve the original timber wall linings that adorn the side walls of the auditorium," says David Harvey, Design and Technical Director for Reimagining Arts Centre Melbourne.

"Behind those panels, we've integrated a new immersive surround sound system using state-of-the-art technology designed to elevate the audience experience without compromising the aesthetic integrity of the space. The system is almost completely invisible to the eye, yet it will dramatically improve the clarity and dynamic range of the sound in the auditorium."

The same sensitivity extended to the auditorium lighting. The original solid brass lighting fittings were all completely re-engineered in collaboration with Aglo Systems, a Melbourne-based lighting specialist.

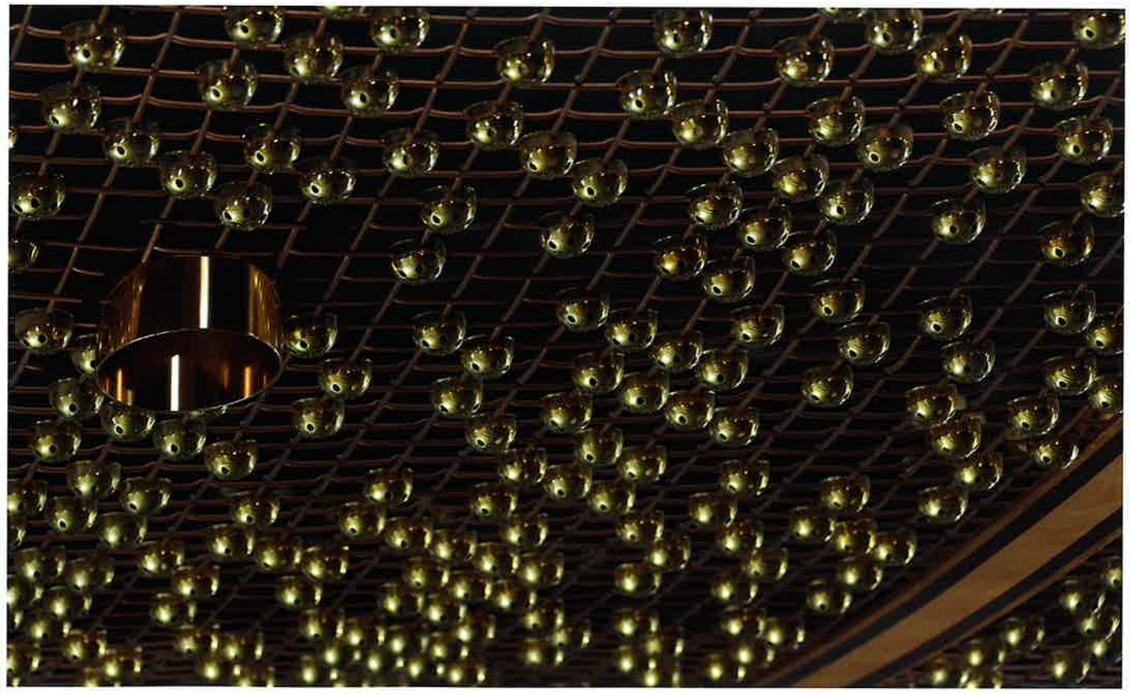
"Each of the original fittings was removed and reworked to incorporate an LED light source. The upgrade replicates the warmth, tonal quality and dimming of the original lamps, so they still cast the familiar golden glow that Truscott intended. It was important that the lighting not only honoured the original design but also delivered sustainable, future-ready performances," Harvey explains.

When you take your seat in the refurbished auditorium, it will be hard to miss the iconic Truscott brass sphere ceiling featuring 75,000

Above left: Gold leaf foil trimmings. Photography by Mark Gambino.

Above right: Gilders from Walkley Art applying gold leaf foil to new ceiling panels for the Ian Potter State Theatre. Photography by Mark Gambino.

Right: The John Truscott brass sphere ceiling. HiVis Photography, courtesy Development Victoria.



> “When the house lights shine again in the beloved venue [...] audiences will step through the doors and be met with the glistening gold ceiling and red velvet they’ve always loved.”

brass spheres. The opulent design is also ingenious. Comprised of 69 individual mesh panels that cascade down the ceiling, the ceiling design is a particularly sumptuous way to hide the air conditioning and sprinkler systems. While the spheres may appear random, their positioning was delineated with meticulous precision to minimise any acoustic disruption.

In October 2024 Lendlease, the project’s construction partner, carefully removed, cleaned and stored the Truscott ceiling panels to access the services they hide and enable an upgrade to the auditorium’s air conditioning. Once works were complete in June 2025, Truscott’s ceiling was carefully reinstated in its original place with artisan gilder Marcus Walkley applying Dutch gold leaf to each panel so they align and appear seamlessly as one to the audience’s eye.

“It really is meticulous work, and it takes a specific person to do this intricate and hyper-focused gilding. It requires so much concentration, repetition and care,” Walkley says.

In addition to restoring the original fixtures, Walkley and his team are also individually hand-gilding new ceiling panels that will sit underneath the balcony, circle and stalls. The new panels have been created to fit fire sprinklers and LED lights and have hundreds of convex and concave shapes to enhance the auditorium acoustics.

“The concave shapes are the most challenging,” Walkley says. “It’s very delicate work to keep the gold foil from creasing or tearing.”

“What I love the most is how in the centre of the concave shape you can see a dark small circle surrounded by a lighter circle, which really makes the shape glow. And for the convex shapes, it’s the opposite. You can imagine that once show lights reflect on these panels, it will be truly stunning,” he says.

Stunning isn’t the half of it – that’s only the details that audiences can see. Because when the house lights shine again in the beloved venue, which will reopen as the Ian Potter State Theatre, audiences will step through the doors and be met with the glistening gold ceiling and red velvet they’ve always loved. However, a subtle lattice of modern upgrades will be quietly working behind the scenes, above the ceiling and in the seats to ensure visitors experience the highest standards of live performance well into the future.

The iconic State Theatre is being upgraded as part of the Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation, delivered by MAP Co, Creative Victoria and Development Victoria, together with partners Arts Centre Melbourne and the National Gallery of Victoria.

We are honoured by the generosity of the donors who have supported Reimagining Arts Centre Melbourne, including the landmark gift of the Ian Potter Foundation.

For the latest on the project, including details on the Ian Potter State Theatre’s reopening, visit artscentremelbourne.com.au/reimagining



Above: Image from the original construction of the State Theatre in 1984. Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.