

ARCHITECTURE



MODERN APPROACH

Left: Vanessa Carswell wears an Odd Molly “Myway S/S” blouse, \$399.90, from Kimberleys. *Above:* Plaster craftsmen fit a new ceiling in the dress circle recreated from the original moulds. *Below:* The auditorium dome is just one of the landmark’s original pieces Carswell has repaired and reinstalled for the reconstruction.

SPACE INVADER

Architect Vanessa Carswell shares her grand plans for the rebuild of Christchurch’s Isaac Theatre Royal.

WORDS LEE SUCKLING

PHOTOGRAPHY STEPHEN GOODENOUGH

Vanessa Carswell’s future was laid out in her primary school years. “My mum still has the plans I was drawing when I was seven,” says the 36-year-old architect. “By 15, I was looking at other options but they were all variations on architecture. It’s always been my fate.”

Carswell studied in Auckland before moving to Christchurch, where she landed her first job at Warren and Mahoney. She would return to that firm six years later, after a stint in London. Today, she is the lead architect on the redevelopment of the category-one heritage-listed Isaac Theatre Royal – the first heritage site to be rebuilt since the earthquakes hit Christchurch in 2010 and 2011. ▶





PRESS START

Left: Bordering the original canvas work from 1908 in the foyer is a renewed gilded plasterwork frame. *Below:* On the building's façade, new carved lettering has been positioned on the authentic Oamaru stone escutcheon salvaged from the building.



Carswell worked at London firm Grimshaw Architects, before moving to Allies and Morrison Architects. “A lot of what I learned in London, I’ve brought back with me to Christchurch,” she says. Her work on the Grade-II listed Great Northern Hotel in King’s Cross is the most notable example. “With heritage architecture, you need to delve into the amenity value of the building and uncover what makes it mean something to people,” she says. “When you understand a building’s civic function, only then can you identify the specific elements you need to work with.”

Before embarking on the Isaac Theatre Royal, Carswell completed design work on two new builds: the Kaiapoi Library and Museum (under construction) and the University of Otago Plaza Building One (complete). Now her passion for heritage architecture is being tapped into again. “The Isaac survived the September 2010 quake. Then February 2011 came and every aftershock after that destabilised another section of masonry. I remember my first trip into the building: there was plaster all over the seats. Had the earthquakes happened during a performance, I’m confident the [fatality] statistics would have been a lot higher.”

After the quake in December 2011, the best option was to deconstruct and rebuild the theatre. Carswell admits a new building would have been cheaper, but the restoration (costing \$40 million) represents a commitment to Christchurch’s history.

“People see cultural value in this building,” she says. “It evokes feelings for those with memories here. None of us were happy just to repair it; what was unsafe was the structure underneath.” Elements of the theatre have been saved, such as its dome from 1908, the 1928 marble staircase, architraves and mouldings, poppy leadlight windows and much of the façade. “We’re doing a reinforced structure that puts everything back where it belongs,” says Carswell. “In a safe and modern way, we’re going to return it to its values.” 

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