



NO WORRIES: Architect Terry Boon in the dress circle of the New Plymouth Opera House.

Photo: MAARTEN HOLL

Opera House passes earthquake test

By MARK BIRCH

GOOD news for the \$5 million project to enlarge and redevelop New Plymouth's Opera House — up to half a million dollars in additional costs have been avoided.

The Opera House Trust had feared that an earthquake-risk survey might reveal weaknesses that would need expensive repairs. But the survey proved exactly the opposite — the theatre passed its strength tests triumphantly, and only a few thousand dollars will be needed to bring it up to standard.

"The Wellington engineer who inspected the building was astonished," said Opera House Trust architect Terry Boon yesterday. "He kept on saying 'I can't believe this!'"

"The Opera House won't fall down. It's very strong."

The report by the engineer, Peter Johnstone of the Holmes Consulting Group Ltd, said the building was a very good example of an early reinforced-

concrete structure, and was well ahead of its time. It had been modified very little over the years, and had a substantial future life.

Mr Boon said the sturdiness of the 71-year-old building was a tribute to architect Tom Bates.

"It's all in reinforced concrete, which was unusual for the period, so this was quite an advanced building by New Zealand standards. It was well built, and the structural concept and the theatre design were excellent; the sight lines are perfect."

By contrast, three other old New Plymouth buildings had not measured up well to modern strength standards — the State Theatre in Devon St East could not be used any more for public assembly, the Regent Theatre had needed to be strengthened with a new concrete frame inside when it was converted into the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 25 years ago, and the Mayfair Theatre could not now be made to comply with current regulations without great cost.

Twenty years ago, said Mr Boon, the city council had waived any upgrading of the Opera House's seismic loading when it refurbished the theatre as a borough centennial project, on the grounds that the building wasn't used enough to warrant it.

But the current planned redevelopment — which would double the size of the facilities and the number of people that could be accommodated — had to comply with a new Building Act.

Mr Boon predicted that the redeveloped Opera House complex would be "pretty fantastic."

It would become the only provincial complex in New Zealand to incorporate a choice of three theatres (the existing large theatre, plus a new one at basement level and two ground-level function rooms which could quickly be converted into a theatre).

There would also be an extension of the main theatre's backstage area, a huge foyer with bars, and new toilets.