

TOP TOWN CINEMA 4

The final leap of change for the New Plymouth Cinema Industry, I am to cover is the development and opening of the city's latest picture theatre complex, namely Top Town Cinema 4.

PLANS FOR CINEMA COMPLEX...The plan to open a cinema complex was conceived prior to October 1992. A man called Graham Linsay, from Palmeston North, Axis Consultants, started thinking about developing a complex, knowing that the Mayfair was soon to lose its temporary licence to remain open, deemed to be an earthquake risk. Mr Linsay, became interested in the old Farmers Co-op building and after 'crunching' some numbers, that said 'Yes, it could work,' he contacted various people who he thought might be interested... Including these people was the old mayor of New Plymouth Mr. David Lean and Mr. John Coxhead. The team then started interesting some local investors. The owners of the Mayfair Theatre, Taranaki Amusements were approached, but for whatever reason, they declined the offer. They did however gain the interest of one of the major film distributors, Village Road Show, Force Corporation, mostly however, the investors were all local. After making an unconditional offer on the Farmers Co-op building (committing to do something with it) the development of Top Town Cinema 4 began, late 1992.

DEVELOPING... To make this 5.4 million venture successful was to be no easy task. The Farmers Co-op building is one massive building, occupying 800,000 square feet on four levels, equivalent to sixty average size houses. The building was purchased for \$850,000 even though it still had a Government evaluation of 2.8 million on it, with previous ventures to buy the building twice at 3 million and once at 6 million. When a former local businessman, Mr Bob Paton announced plans to build a cinema complex in Powderham Street, (I will cover this in more depth later) things got pretty hectic for the Top Town crew. Firstly the Top Town Contractor, Fisher Construction went off with the opposition. This threat of a competing cinema complex getting off the ground made potential investors nervous and many pulled out. This left Top Town swinging, having started demolishing the building, with a contractor on site. The rivalry was to such an extent that Mr. Lean's office in Radio Taranaki was broken into, with the briefcase with the Top Town information inside, the only thing which was taken. A thirteen year old was arrested for the incident, but within a few days the opposition could quote back information from the file. Luckily for the Top Town entrepreneurs their opposition pulled out and Top Town could get back on track with a new contractor from Auckland. Architects and planners estimated the building of Top Town would take 36 weeks till completion, work which would include the first and second floors at the Gill Street end to be demolished, allowing for the eight metre high stud for the cinemas. However the Auckland team were contracted for 27-weeks with a guaranteed maximum price. (i.e no matter how long it takes them they will be paid the same amount of money) subsequently the building was completed in 18 weeks and thus the Cinema 4 complex was able to open in Labour weekend 1993.

OPENING... The opening was a gala opening on October the 22nd 1993. The special guest was Taranaki's own opera singer Dame Malvina Major, who officially opened the complex. The first movie shown was the New Zealand premier of Clint Eastwood's new movie 'In the Line of Fire.' Proceeds went to the hospital appeal.

FACILITIES... The complex was planned to accommodate four cinemas on the second floor, to be shared with a restaurant. Developer, John Coxhead said at one stage, "The theatre will compliment the neighbouring restaurant, as parents could dine while their children watched movies next door." However now the movie theatres share the second floor with a food court, snack bar, ticket booth and office, video game corner, sweets corner and public toilets. There were also plans for speciality shops on the ground floor, with the Gill and Devon Street

entrances to undergo upgrading and a 52 car park was proposed to be built in the basement, all of which went ahead. The elaborate idea of building an air bridge, made of a tunnel of glass to be a pedestrian crossing didn't. Suspended over Devon Street at first floor level, it was to connect at the other end with an altered Golden Harvest restaurant, developed into a glass piano shape over existing planter boxes. This was to link Top Town with the TSB Bank, Centre Court and would provide ready access with those parked on Courteney Street, especially as the New World Supermarket was being developed at this time. Unfortunately Top Town and the TSB Bank couldn't agree about this so the proposal was dropped. The third floor contains a board room, offices, the projection room and a children's playland.

LOLLIPOPS PLAYLAND... Prior to Christmas 1992 a man called Allen Grant, who used to be general manager of Kentucky Fried Chicken (N.Z) had come up with an idea that fitted right in with the entertainment theme of Top Town. His idea was to develop a children's playland. This idea interested developers of Top Town. Mr. Grant took the idea away, looking at similar ventures run in the States and came back with ideas of how to pull it off. 'Lollipops Children's Playland,' planned for the third story, now meant adults could watch a movie while their children were supervised under trained employees while having a ball with the wide range of amusement activities, ranging from climbing and swinging on the constructions to being supervised on a computer, or whizzing around in an electric car. 'Lollipops,' aimed at children under 11 also offers facilities for hosting children's birthday parties and entertainment seven days a week.

TOP TOWN CINEMA 4... The movies run on a timetable from Friday to the following Thursday. The four cinemas accommodate around 150 screenings per week (around 20 per day) with a variety of up to 10 movies. Top Town Cinema 4 is open 7 days a week from 10 in the morning till 11 at night.

PRICES... Even though every new cinema complex can make up their price list however they like, the distributors will basically dictate the price. 50% of the ticket box takings in the first two weeks of a film's screenings is paid to the distributors, dropping after that. With what is left over, wages and rates etc... have to be paid.

The admission fees everyday before 5 pm and after 5pm on Monday and Tuesday ...

ADULTS.....\$6.50
STUDENTS.....6.50
SENIOR CITIZENS.....5.00
CHILDREN.....5.00

The admission fees Wednesday to Sunday after 5pm...

ADULTS.....\$9.00
STUDENTS.....8.00
SENIOR CITIZENS5.00
CHILDREN.....5.00

FILMS...Being the only cinema complex in New Plymouth, all the suppliers are potential suppliers. A man called Mr. Joseph Moodabe, an ex-manager of Hoyts Film and an investor in Top Town is contracted to hire all the films. The main suppliers are...

Road Show Cinemas AUSTRALIA (joint with...)
Village and Road Show, Force Corporation AUCKLAND

*

Hoyts
International Independent Pictures (Timothy Ord)
Everard

This means Top Town at least has the chance to get all movies. Sometimes independent players may bring a one off film to New Zealand. Even though all suppliers will supply, because Top Town is independent they may get films later than other places but that doesn't seem to be the case so far. Although New Plymouth basically has the same tastes as Metropolitan New Zealand, our area does have some some different tastes that need to be taken into account.

How long any one film will remain screening depends on how popular it is. Because Top Town Cinema 4 has theatres of different sizes...

CINEMA 1 - 110 seats

CINEMA 2 - 180 seats

CINEMA 3 - 220 seats

CINEMA 4 - 200 seats

TOTAL 710 seats

...this means that the films can be shuffled around to match their popularity and predicted audiences. The most popular film Top Town Cinema 4 has seen so far is 'The Piano,' by Jane Campion, which ran for 23 weeks, and was viewed by 21,747 people. Its success is put down to that it was shot here in Taranaki, its viewed as a New Zealand movie, (patriotic.) Also the international acclaim (Em-my Awards) make it very popular. Other popular films have been, Schindler's List, Mrs Doubtfire and the majority of children's movies have been also.

RATINGS... Top Town has a policy to be adhere to ratings. Largely to do with the fact that if caught letting minors in to rated movies, Top Town can be fined a minimum of \$1000. Thus staff are strict on seeing I.D.etc...

TOP TOWN COMPLEX... The Top Town Complex is owned by the company Top Town Shopping Complex, a group of private investors who own the building. They have a 50% shareholding on Top Town Cinema 4. All the shops, cinema, lollipops etc.. pay rent to the company. Managed externally by Graem Linsay, who pays Mr. Lean to look after his interests. The complex has four custodians who look after security, do odd jobs and watch for vandalising. The other 50% of Top Town Cinema 4, with a managerial team of two, (Top Town Cinema 4 ltd.) run the cinema operation, with a team of staff of about 27. The Trading Flicks Cafe and Bar is owned by a private company called Rahuti Dairy Ltd. 'Flicks' was built in the spare time of building the rest of the complex, actually being finished first.

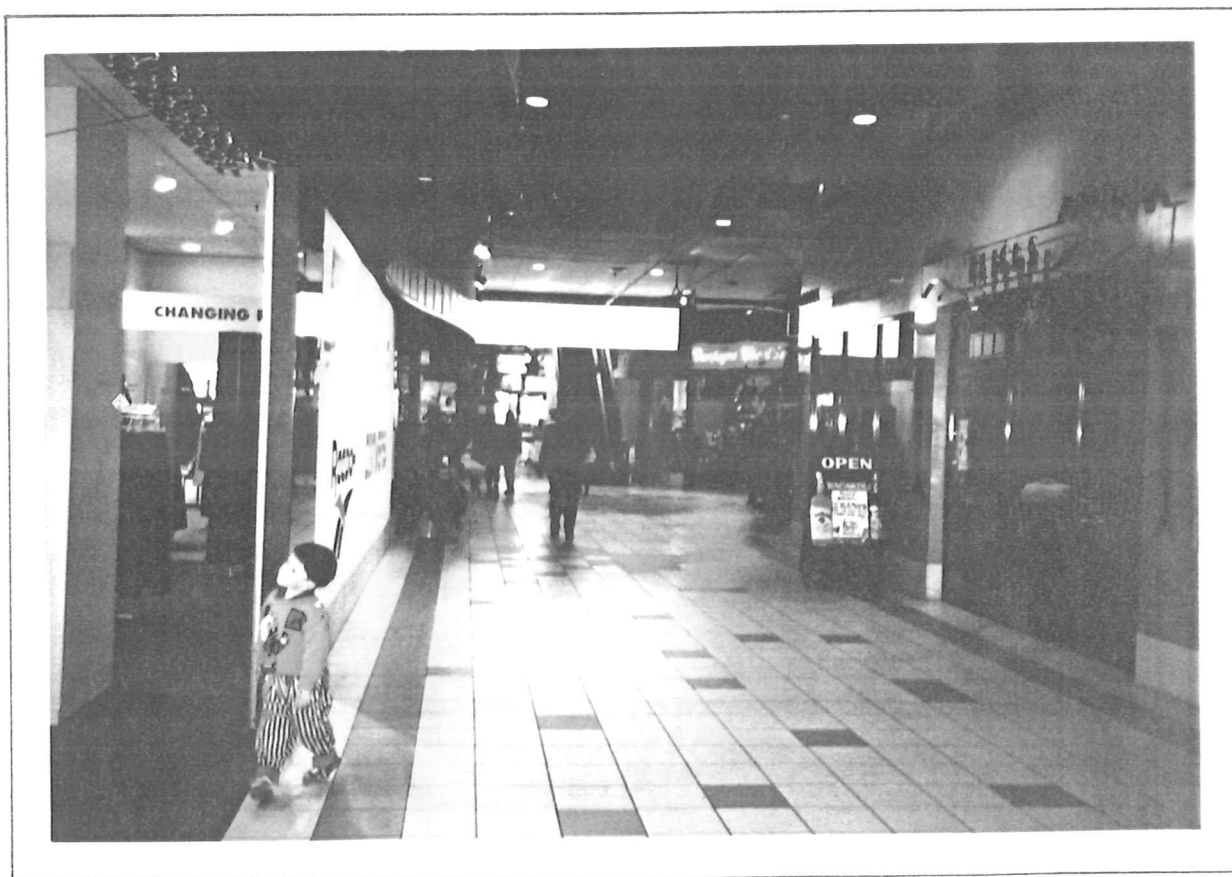
FINANCIALLY... Financially Top Town Cinema 4 is doing well, obviously any profit made at the moment is paying back the contractors etc..., but Top Town has caused the number of people going to the cinema to increase by 400% in 12 months. The Mayfair was doing 80-84,000 seats a year with a population of 48,000 which meant every person in New Plymouth was going to the movies an average of 1.7 times a year. With 300,000 sittings in the first year of Top Towns opening the people of New Plymouth are going 6.25 times per year. This high number is also due to Top Town influencing the rural sector to come in and make a night of it... i.e come and have a meal in flicks, watch the movie, have a coffee afterwards and then go home. The wide choice of movies available, all screening close together, means a party don't all have to go to the same movie, they can realistically split up.

EQUIPMENT...The Top Town Cinema 4 complex has one projection room situated in the third story directly above the two East facing cinemas and the two West facing cinemas. Thus only one projectionist is needed to run the four movies at any one time. The Projectors were imported from Italy, and work was done around the clock in order to put them together. The equipment is modern and technical, the set up is such that the same film can screen in two cinemas at the same time, with the film running through a pulley in the ceiling. With a little more equipment they could screen one movie in all four at once, except Mr. Lean enlightens me that they would be unlikely to do just that, as, if a person came to see a movie and it was sold out, there is a good chance that they would go to their second choice movie and come back another time to see their first choice. (Marketing Techniques!) As I said earlier the movie week goes from Friday to Thursday, so before the week starts, the projectionist will punch into this highly advanced calculator look-alike thing all the start times of the movies for the cinemas. Allowing for hiccups, this means the films will start automatically. (If you ever get the chance to have a look in the projection room I highly recommend it, it's delightfully space-age.)

THE FUTURE... It seems unlikely that any competition will open up against Top Town Cinema 4. Based on the fact that to get even half the market a large amount of capital expansion would have to be done. Mr. Lean is wary about the fact that Top Town is a monopoly, and wants to promote community ownership. He says that in the 1950's the

Cinema Industry was its own worst enemy. The cinemas were owned by exclusive families who 'grabbed the cash, didn't reinvest and wondered why they fell over, milked dry.' As soon as the debts have been paid Top Town Cinema 4 is going to become Top Town Cinema 5. The provisions for a fifth cinema have been left specially on the advice of people in the industry who said four cinemas won't be enough. They were right, Mr. Lean says they need another cinema now, to stop having to turn people away. However, despite Top Town's obvious success Mr. Lean says people still come up to him and tell him it won't work. The first annual "It won't work party," is scheduled for later this year. Mr. Lean also believes there may still be hope for the continuation of the building of an air bridge across Devon Street and also, the veering into extended video screenings for corporate presentations and seminars looms in the future.

The development and opening of Top Town Cinema 4 has had a very large effect on New Plymouth. Reviving interest in cinema again and encouraging the rural community to flock to the city to immerse in movies. Top Town is a far cry to the old Farmers Co-op building and has introduced a certain degree of 'freedom' to movie watchers. They no longer have to go to a choice of one movie at one time, (these days have well and truly gone.) Top Town offers much more variety, and is definitely proving to be a community asset! It looks set to stay put, and will inevitably be an influential part in the changing of the city of New Plymouth for years to come.



INSIDE - THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE
TOP TOWN SHOPPING COMPLEX
1994.