

# Oxford Australia Word of the Month

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**dress circle** – ‘an area of prime real estate, esp. one situated at some height and with impressive views.’

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# dress circle

## The story behind the Word of the Month

The standard sense of the term *dress circle* derives from the traditional structure of the proscenium-arch theatre, and from the social niceties of somewhat old-time theatre attendance. The dress circle is immediately above the floor or stalls of the theatre. The physical structure of the dress circle is a curved half circle, but the first part of its name alludes to its class structure: people who sat in this section were required to wear 'dress' or evening clothes. Most theatres had a second circle, higher up and therefore further away from the stage, and sometimes called the *family circle*. Any third tier came to be ironically called *the gods*—it was so far from the stage that it seemed very close to heaven, and those who sat there were like the classical gods overseeing the theatre of the mortals. The view of the stage, however, was terrible, underlining the fact that these were seats for very impecunious mortals indeed.

At least in Australia, where you would not be entirely surprised to find someone in shorts, white socks, and sandals sitting next to you in the dress circle at a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the term *dress circle* as a theatre term is probably doomed to obsolescence.

But if it is largely dead as a theatre term, the surprising thing is that it has taken off in Australia as a real-estate term. Consider the following quotations from newspapers:

Located in an elevated position, described as the 'dress circle' of Gisborne, families living in

Sunnyacres will have breathtaking panoramic views across the town of Gisborne and the surrounding countryside to Mt Macedon in the distance. (*Age*, Melbourne, 1996)

The eight-year-old dwelling is set in a dress circle position among other executive houses. (*Advertiser*, Adelaide, 1996)

New owners rejoice outside the crumbling bungalow at Bronte where they paid \$4.25 million for a dress circle position looking across Waverley Cemetery and out to sea. (*Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 2003)

Beautifully renovated means this elevated Nightcliff home in a dress-circle location is in demand. (*Northern Territory News*, 2008)

As with the dress circle in the theatre, there appear to be three salient features of this extended sense of dress circle in Australia. First, the real estate is in a prestigious position, with the obvious implication that it exudes wealth (the modern version of evening dress). Second, just as the dress circle in the theatre is at a height above the lowly ground-floor stalls (the domain of Shakespeare's 'groundlings'), so dress-circle real estate is usually at a height, above the mass of fibro-dwelling bogans; third, just as those in the theatre dress-circle have the best view of the stage, as they look down on it from their dress-circle superior seats, so dress-circle real estate has wonderful scenic views.

Thus Australia has given new life to a seemingly dying term!

metrosexual  
weapon  
of mass destruction  
karrack  
glycaemic  
burka  
index  
barbecue stopper  
senior moment  
Sudoku  
hornbag  
dishlicker  
witlof  
cyberstalking  
Naltrexone  
pear-shaped  
yakitori  
Bioterrorism