



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FORMER MLC BUILDING, 161 LONDON CIRCUIT

(Block 1 Section 14, CITY)

At its meeting of 4 June 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the former MLC Building was eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the former MLC Building against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Company (MLC)

Starting in 1886 MLC has been insuring Australians for over a century. It has gone through several name changes over the years (e.g. Citizens Life Assurance Company Limited, Mutual Life & Citizens Assurance Company Limited, City Mutual Life Assurance Society Limited, MLC Lifetime Company Limited), but has continued through as a single entity. It is currently owned by the National Australia Bank (NAB) after it was acquired in 2000.

Bates, Smart & McCutcheon (BSM)

The Melbourne based architectural firm of Bates, Smart and McCutcheon (today Bates Smart) has been operating in Australia since 1853. Initially operating as Reed and Barnes it has had several name changes to reflect new principal partners. It has been responsible for many important Australian buildings such as the Melbourne Town Hall, ICI House, Federation Square, and the series of MLC Buildings from the late 1950s.

The principal partner at the time and the architect credited with the overall design of the MLC buildings and their innovative modular construction techniques was Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon. McCutcheon's work is highly regarded and has resulted in him being awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1965 as well as becoming a Life Fellow in 1970, among many other honours. He was awarded a knighthood in 1966 for his services to architecture. McCutcheon's then modern designs and revolutionary management practices, influenced by his time with the United States Army Corps of Engineers, helped BSM to become one of Australia's most successful architectural firms.

Development of the ACT city area in the 1950s and 60s

The development of the ACT was hindered by both World Wars and subsequent materials and labour shortages. By the mid-1950s there was very little in the way of major permanent buildings in the capital. It was described by Robin Boyd, a prominent architectural critic, as "...an enormous sprawling suburb without a centre." (cited in Sparke, E. 1988. p.5). The civic centre was comprised of a few two-storey buildings with shopping arcades, such as the Sydney and Melbourne Buildings, and there was very little in the way of major private enterprise. Sparke (1988 p.125) notes that until the arrival of the Monaro Shopping Mall in 1963, the MLC Building was "...the most tangible evidence of private enterprise interest in the city centre."

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This arrested state of development made many people disparaging of the new city as lacking in services, amenities and a sense of civic pride. Prime Minister Menzies was initially one of its detractors, but after realising that the seat of government was an inevitable reality he became a staunch supporter and set about using his influence to spur on development and turn it into something he could be proud of. This resulted in an inquiry being held in to the progress of Canberra, which in turn led to the creation of the NCDC as a single power to take control of progress. During the NCDC's first seven year term, "...between mid-1958 and 1965, Canberra changed from a semi-rustic town to an integrated, if still small and incomplete, national capital." (Sparke, E. 1988 p.103). By 1963 Canberra was Australia's largest inland city with over 86,000 people and a growth rate of 11.8%.

The MLC Buildings of the 1950s

MLC expanded rapidly after WWII and started increasing their property portfolio with a series of buildings that would be "...distinctly recognisable as being owned by MLC." (Montagnana-Wallace, 2012 p.79). Planning for the series of buildings started in 1952 and 1953 saw the first of the 'modern' BSM designed MLC buildings with the International Style MLC building in Geelong. This was quickly followed by a succession of similar buildings, the epitome of which was the North Sydney MLC building. This was Australia's biggest building at the time with the biggest air-conditioning system and even had its own power plant. It also included the first of the MLC weather beacons that became a signature of the buildings and led the way for future weather systems that now appear on several buildings.

Revolutionary at the time, the building used a lightweight construction system that used prefabricated sections that could be dry-connected in a modular system, allowing the building to be quickly and economically erected. This paved the way for a series of buildings across Australia based on the same design with McCutcheon overseeing the projects which sometimes used local firms to sort out the site-specific details. MLC buildings were erected in Geelong (1953), Ballarat (1954), Brisbane (1955, extended in 1959), Wollongong (1956), Adelaide (1957), North Sydney (1957), Newcastle (1957), Perth (1959), Shepparton (1959), and Canberra (1958, extended 1963). Arguably the most significant of these is the North Sydney MLC Building which was the largest building in the country at the time and, in reference to the lightweight modular systems introduced by McCutcheon, "the most impressive exposition of BSM's newly acquired expertise." (Goad 2004, p164). Ogg (2001, p165) lists the main MLC buildings to be Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney and Perth with the others noted as "...multistorey buildings of a similar kind but smaller in scale...". While these smaller scale MLC buildings use the same techniques and design, they are often overlooked for the more impressive large scale buildings and are rarely covered in much detail in architectural journals, books and histories. Ogg (2001, p.165) goes on to say that,

"Now largely lost among clones or mutations of a different and varied kind, this family of MLC buildings can now be looked upon as pivotal in the dramatic post-war shift towards a different way of designing, contracting and constructing inner-city buildings. To herald the change, these buildings looked quite different from commercial buildings which had preceded them. They presented an office environment which was comparatively open, light and airy as well as being fully air-conditioned."

The Canberra MLC Building 1958

Joining the BSM team was the Canberra firm of Moir, Ward and Slater with the consulting electrical engineers Julius, Poole and Gibson of Sydney. Consulting mechanical engineer was David H Youl of Melbourne. Builders were Simmie and Co. Pty. Ltd. "...who have been responsible for so many of Canberra's large buildings during the past 30 years." (*The Canberra Times*, 2 September 1957 p6).

The building started in 1956 with preliminary drawings endorsed by the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC) (RSTCA 123). The foundation work started in July 1957 with piles being driven in to the underlying limestone with construction proper starting in September 1957. Due to its modular nature the lower internal fittings were being installed while the upper framework was still being erected and by July of 1958 the first tenants were moving in. It was also noted in *The Canberra Times* (3 December 1957

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p2) that several building techniques, new to Canberra, were being used in construction such as the black adhesive material used to join a/c ductwork and the premade spandrel walls.

A public relations exercise during construction involved what was termed, “footpath foreman” or “armchair engineers”. The general public were kept up to date on the building progress via bulletins that were made available to onlookers in the street. This was a part of MLC’s building program throughout the country with the larger projects going as far as having viewing platforms and seating for the public. When the building was complete the owners held an open day so that interested members of the public could inspect the new building.

The MLC Building was seen as an attraction in the capital. The roof was host to a live outdoors broadcast, the first time this had been attempted outside of Sydney or Melbourne, including interviews and a panorama of the city. The roof was also used as the setting for a daredevil stunt for a visiting circus at the start of 1962 and on several occasions played host to a choir during Christmas to sing carols that would be heard by holiday shoppers below.

Attesting to its attraction at the time, the building was also featured – along with other ‘iconic’ Canberra places such as the Academy of Science building, the War Memorial, local hills and other places – in the designs printed on J. B. Young’ Ltd store’s (a forerunner to the current Myer stores in the ACT) wrapping paper during the early 1960s.

The Canberra MLC Building 1963

Plans were announced at the start of 1962 to extend the building up a further four floors, with a fifth floor housing a caretaker’s apartment and plant and store rooms. The original plans lodged with the NCPDC in 1956 were for a five storey building with provisions to extend to eight. The new building height was estimated at 116 feet at a cost of £330,000. It took less than a year from the announcement of the extensions to their practical completion at the start of 1963.

It was noted in *The Canberra Times* (5 September 1962, p.15) that although there were taller buildings in the ACT, the raised site of the MLC Building made it the highest point in the city, combined with its prominent position, offered the best view at 2,210 feet (646m, Black Mountain is 818m) above sea level. This was taken advantage of by the owners, who opened up the top floor as a viewing platform for tourists and interested locals between 2 and 3pm daily.

The Later Years of the Canberra MLC Building

The success of the building encouraged the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in 1964 to release a mirror block to the south across Ainslie Avenue, Block 1 Section 13 City, to create a sister building, later called Moresby House. The land sold for a record £250,000 and the total development was to be over £1million in a joint venture between MLC and Lend Lease. The building was designed to be a mirror image of the MLC Building with most of the work done by Civil & Civic Pty Ltd based on their previous work on the original building and was completed ~1967.

In the mid-1960s MLC applied to the NCDC to be allowed to erect one of its signature illuminated weather stations on the building, similar to the one they had installed on their North Sydney and other buildings. The beacon was denied on the basis of existing building regulations dealing with ‘sky signs’. MLC appealed the decision, the first appeal against an NCDC decision allowed under a new ordinance, but the decision to not allow the weather beacon was upheld. The value of such a service was recognised as shortly after a weather bureau information office was set up across the road.

In December 1982 the building was thoroughly inspected and repairs and upgrades were made as necessary. The architect for the upgrade project was Geoff Butterworth from the Canberra firm of McConnel, Smith and Johnson. They left it largely unchanged as a “good example of 60s office building” and to lend a “sense of timescale” to the area. Exterior cladding was checked and replaced as necessary. The top 9th floor was

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enclosed and used as an extra storey. Also upgraded were the air-conditioning services, window tinting and “other energy conservation measures.”

In a *Canberra Times* article titled “City landmark sold for \$5m”, it was noted that the building would be sold to C and N Properties for \$5.1million and would then be strata-titled and marketed as individual commercial units and sold. Also noted was that the company would spend up to \$3million on renovations internally (including the removal of asbestos) and that the naming rights for the building would also be sold. The ground and first floors as well as the naming rights to the building were purchased by the State Bank in 1986.

The building has been home to several tenants over the years, with the naming rights going to the various major tenants over the years, starting with MLC and then Colonial, CPA and most recently Bright Consulting.

Key Dates	
1952	MLC starts planning national building program
1957	Plans approved by NCPDC
1957	Work starts on building
1958	Tenants move in
1963	Extensions completed
1982	External renovations by MLC
1985	Sold to C and N Properties and major internal refit undertaken
1986	Renamed State Bank Building
1994?	Renamed Colonial Building
2008	Renamed CPA Building
2014	Renamed Bright Consulting Building

Table 1 former MLC Building Timeline

DESCRIPTION

The former MLC Building is constructed in the Post-War International style. It has a cubiform overall shape, surrounded by a curtain wall with extensive glazing on the north and west elevations, as well as part of the east elevation. The rest of the east elevation and the entirety of the south elevation are rendered brick.

The ground floor is enclosed by glass wall shopfronts to just inside the expressed structural columns. There are two ground floor entrances with cantilevered canopies along the west elevation; the northern entrance is to a lobby area with access to lifts for the upper levels, the southern entrance leads into a bank.

The curtain wall is an anodised aluminium frame inset with tinted glazed windows and glazed cover panels. Between the ground floor shopfront windows and the enclosed top floor the windows are tinted dark grey and fixed in a square of four panels. Between the windows are rectangular infill panels of the same height, but half width, glazed in a light green. Above the windows and infill panels is a line of transom panels in a pale olive green. Below the windows is a dark green glazed, ribbed metal spandrel that runs uninterrupted across the length of the curtain wall. The effect is of alternating bands of glazing and coloured surfaces.

The enclosed top floor has dark windows set back slightly from the face of the curtain wall, aesthetically referencing the original open balcony.

The south wall is brick that has been rendered and painted grey. The east wall is a mix of the same grey rendered wall and the alternating bands of glazed metal, windows and infill glazing.

The whole of the exterior of the building portrays a mixture of plain wall surfaces in contrasting textures.

Physical condition and integrity

The external visual condition of the building is commensurate with its age, but it generally appears to be in good condition. The colour of the glazing appears to have faded. The spandrel panels appear to have deteriorated slightly with age.

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The place has retained many features integral to the style and maintains its heritage significance. The original colours have been retained as well as the overall external aesthetic. The signage for naming rights has previously been located on the blank wall surfaces of the southern facade, but the current holder of the naming rights has elected to locate their signage on the western side of the plant room on the roof, which is not considered a significant change to the heritage values of the place. The top floor has been enclosed, but the set back dark strip windows sympathetically reference the previous rooftop terrace and could be removed, reinstating the previous open form of the rooftop. The three flagpoles have also been removed from the upper west facade, but the fittings have been retained so that they can be reinstated. The internal fit out has been significantly altered, but this does not affect the heritage values of the place from the public realm.

SITE PLAN



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Image 1 former MLC Building provisional registration boundary.

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IMAGES



Image 2 former MLC Building 1959 before the extension (Cross-Section, 1959)



Image 3 MLC Building extensions c.1963 (Sparke, E. 1988, p.123).



Image 4 former MLC Building through arches of East Row 1963 before the top floor was enclosed (NLA A1500 K10217)



Image 5 former MLC Building north and west facades (ACT Heritage, 2014)



Image 6 former MLC Building east and south facades (ACT Heritage, 2014)

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