

Architects up the (glass) wall to save MLC marvel

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One of Australia's most architecturally significant buildings could be demolished under a plan to redevelop North Sydney's commercial centre, spurring calls to save it.

For Bates Smart architect Philip Vivian, whose company was behind both the lauded original and the proposed new design of the MLC building on Miller St, the bittersweet decision comes after almost two decades of being personally involved in trying to keep the modernist structure.

"You're between a rock and a hard place," Mr Vivian, a director of the firm and the architect leading the project to replace it, said.

"I talk excitedly about the new, but I spent 19 years thinking about the ways to save it, and I'd love to save it."

The firm says the building needs major refurbishment, with its glass curtain wall facade, end-wall glazed ceramic tiles, fire rating, utilities and lifts all requiring replacement.

Investa property group has lodged an application with North Sydney Council to demolish the 1956 office block and replace it with a tapered, 27-storey building touted to become the area's first climate change-ready structure.

The proposed building will have a naturally ventilated atrium, terrace gardens, and be raised from the ground

level to create a public space that connects to Brett Whiteley Place, which will benefit from increased sunlight.

The council is facing calls from residents and architects to retain the original, post-war building – notable for its early use of a glass curtain wall – which is listed as nationally significant by the Australian Institute of Architects, and as an item of local significance by the council.

A motion to have the council write to

Heritage NSW seeking urgent action to list the MLC building on the State Heritage Register this week was lost.

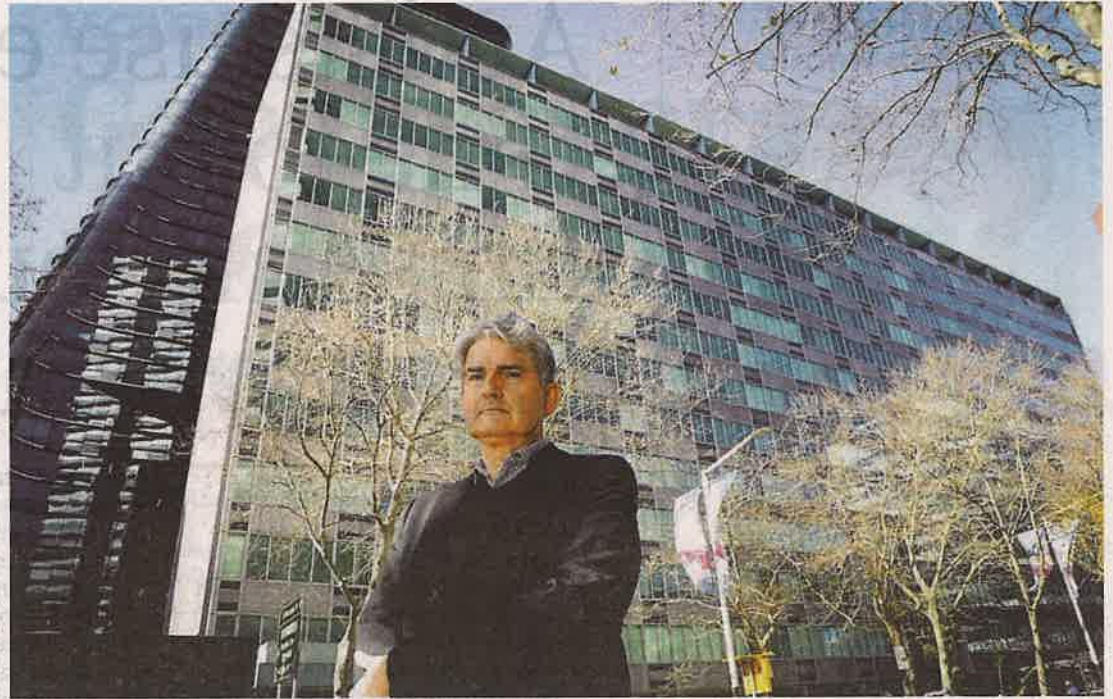
However, late yesterday, Heritage NSW said it was investigating whether to put an interim heritage order in place.

Scott Robertson, president of

architectural conservation group Docomomo Australia, has launched a change.org petition to save it.

"The MLC building is architecturally important as Australia's first large-scale commercial office development in the international modern style, incorporating, at all levels from conception through finishes to furniture, the contemporary architectural influences of USA and Europe," he said.

Architect and conservationist Louise Cox said the building was a North Sydney landmark, similar in vintage and style to Lever House in



Scott Robinson, top, is trying to save the MLC building from demolition. Main photo: Renee Nowytarger

New York, and described the proposed demolition as "appalling".

Comedian and design enthusiast Tim Ross, whose Modernister social media account has a major following, is also supporting the petition.

"Its Melbourne sibling, ICI house by the same architecture firm, is heritage listed and a much loved and admired part of the city," Ross said.

Investa's head of commercial development, Mark Tait, said he appreciated the sentimentality but the building has reached the end of its life cycle. He said the new building would provide a pedestrian connection to the proposed Victoria Cross station and the Greenwood Plaza tunnel, with 6600-square-metre floor space.

"North Sydney Council has been trying for years to reactivate the CBD, and they can't do that if these major pieces aren't contributing," he said.

There have been several investigations to save the building. Mr Vivian said the studies failed because of unsympathetic impacts on heritage, overshadowing of Brett Whiteley Place or not being commercially viable.

"We got to the point where we were producing a facsimile of what was there. There's very limited heritage material left," he said.

"You're replacing an automobile with a Tesla."



The MLC building before it opened in 1957. Photo: Allan Hedges