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modern movement

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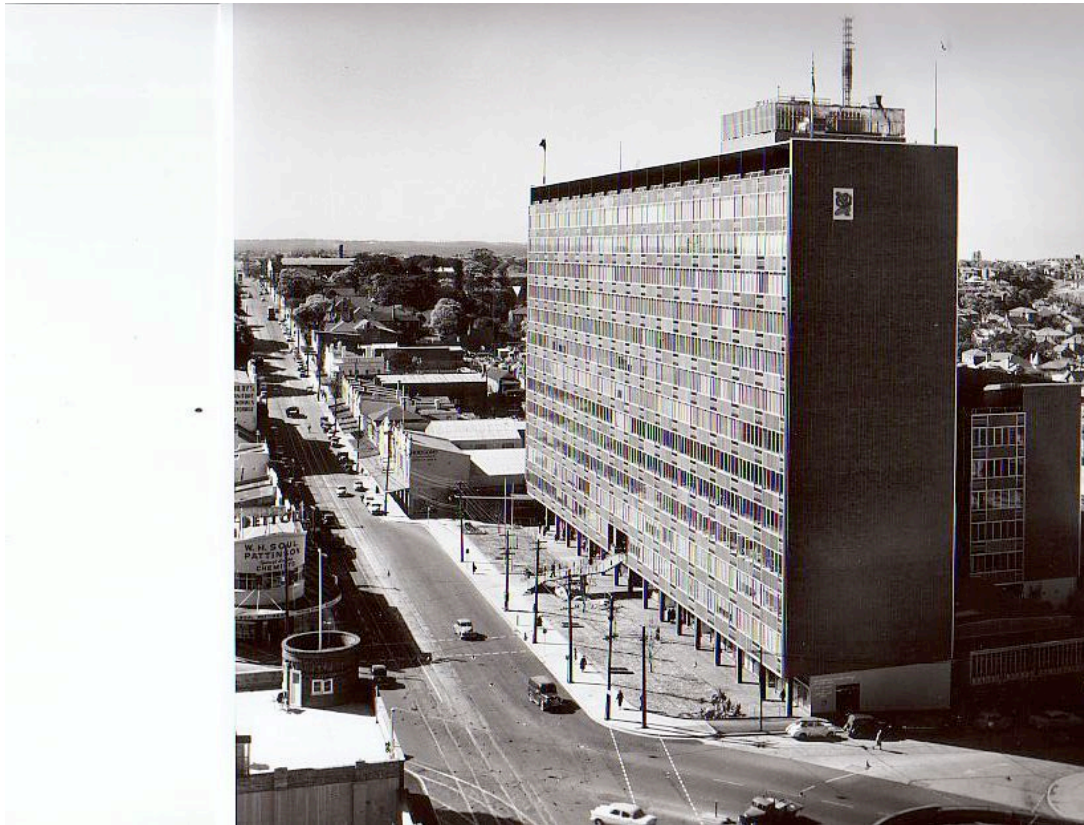
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- | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Identity of
building/group of
buildings/urban
scheme/
landscape/garden | MLC Building, North Sydney |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|



View of the MLC Building from south-west (September 1957)
Photo: Max Dupain & Associates

1.1	current name of building	MLC Building
1.2	variant or former name	n/a
1.3	number & name of street	105-153 Miller Street
1.4	town/suburb, city	North Sydney, Sydney
1.5	state	New South Wales
1.6	post code	2060
1.7	country	Australia
1.8	national grid reference	AMG: 3 34 E, 62 54 N
1.9	classification/typology	Office building & shops
1.10	protection status & date	North Sydney Local Environmental Plan NSW Heritage Council – State Heritage Inventory RAIA NSW Chapter – Register of 20 th Century Buildings of Significance National Trust of Australia (NSW) - Register

2 History of building

2.1 original brief/purpose Background

The MLC Company originated in 1886 in New South Wales and Queensland, and it prospered to the extent that in 1935 it held a National Architectural Competition for a new headquarters building to be erected in the place of its existing building in Martin Place within the Sydney CBD. The competition was won by the Melbourne architects Bates Smart and McCutcheon. The building still stands, considerably altered, now opposite Harry Seidler's 68 storey MLC Centre completed in 1978.

After World War 2 the MLC Company made strategic use of new buildings designed in the International Modern Style as a means of publicly projecting its own modern corporate philosophy. Between 1952 and 1958 it erected 18 such office buildings throughout Australia, most of which were designed by Bates Smart and McCutcheon. The flagship building was the new Head Office in North Sydney.

In 1952, Bates Smart and McCutcheon was the oldest and one of the two largest architectural practices in Australia. It traced its origins back to 1852 when Joseph Reed migrated from England and commenced practice in Melbourne. Reed quickly established a dominant position within the profession and over the next 40 years largely shaped the Victorian character of Melbourne. In the years after World War 2 the driving force in the practice was Osborn McCutcheon who had joined as a partner in 1926. After service

during the War as Chief Architectural Consultant to the US Army in Australia, then as advisor to the Australian Government, McCutcheon undertook study trips to Scandinavia, then to the USA where he worked in the New York office of Skidmore Owings and Merrill.

In the post-war period the Bates Smart and McCutcheon office was in the forefront of technical innovation, a philosophy which saw it produce modernist multi-storey office buildings throughout Australia for major corporate clients including ICI, AMP, Prudential Assurance, NZI and MLC.

In 1971, the noted Australian architectural critic and writer, Robin Boyd, nominated McCutcheon on a list of the 10 most influential Australian architects along with Harry Seidler, John Andrews, Peter Johnson and Colin Madigan.

Planning And Design

Design of the MLC North Sydney building commenced early in 1954 and by mid-1955 Council approval had been obtained for an office building that comprised a 15 storey high west office block, an 8 storey high east office block and an interlinking services tower. The two long thin office blocks rose from a one storey high podium, and with a gross area of 450,786 ft² (41,880m²), it was on completion the largest office building in Australia.

Both office blocks are set back from the street boundaries, creating an open public landscaped space along Miller Street, the principal street frontage. Shops were provided within the building on two of the street frontages; staff amenities, a cafeteria and recreational facilities were incorporated at ground floor level; and extensive carparking was incorporated in the lower ground floor.

In a letter to North Sydney Council, McCutcheon compared the disadvantages of the traditional approach to design of office buildings to the advantages of his proposal.

The traditional design *"would have been to cover the whole site with a building.....with no special contribution to town planning development"*; the building would have an inefficient and confusing floor plan, *"be subject to street noise"*, and *"two thirds of the office space would look into light areas (wells)"*. By contrast, the preliminary form of building he outlined, based upon precedents in New York, London and elsewhere, would have:

- setbacks from boundaries resulting in open garden and public park at ground floor level, and *"upper floors..... (that) could..... never be built out"*, *"have a high standard of outlook"*, and a high standard of *"natural light and ventilation"*;
- *"shops.....within the main building.....on the Miller and Mount Street frontages"*;
- staff amenities, restaurant and recreation facilities at the rear of the ground floor;
- underground car parking.

Overall, the quality of the *"office space (would be) equal to any in Sydney."*ⁱⁱ

The design owes its origins to the Berlin projects of Mies van der Rohe (Freidrichstrasse, 1921 and Reich Bank competition, 1933), and le Corbusier, in particular Centrosoyus in Moscow (1928-33) and

the Ministry of Agriculture in Rio de Janeiro (1936-42). Characteristic of these buildings were the office slabs on a pilotis, with glazed curtain walls on the long facades terminated by narrow masonry-faced end walls, all set within landscaped open space.

In addition, during his work in the office of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, McCutcheon would undoubtedly have come into contact with two of the most influential and widely publicised New York office buildings of the time, both of which directly involved partners of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, namely the UN Secretariat (Louis Skidmore-1950) and Lever House (Gordon Bunshaft-1952).

The MLC North Sydney building adopted prefabricated, lightweight construction both for speed of erection and for cost saving. Its fully rigid steel frame with hollow steel pan flooring was designed in-house at Bates Smart and McCutcheon by structural engineer Harvey Brown; this aspect assured economy of structural design and facilitated integration of services and fire protection systems. Layers of vermiculite plaster rather than heavy concrete encasing were used to fireproof the steel structure and flooring system. McCutcheon worked with the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station to develop and test innovative, lightweight fire protection measures, often drawing upon North American experience.

The office blocks were clad on their east and west elevations with lightweight, anodised aluminium and glass curtain walls. To deal with the heat load and to make internal working conditions tolerable, two skins of glass were provided with adjustable venetian blinds in the air gap between, together with a zone-controlled, fully ducted airconditioning system. The scale and complexity of the airconditioning installation made it a milestone in the development of sophisticated systems for high-rise office buildings in Australia. The outer faces of the blades of the venetian blinds were finished in a peach colour, chosen by McCutcheon to complement the green colour of the outer skin of heat absorbing glass.

The opening of the building in August 1957 by Robert Menzies, the Prime Minister of Australia, was a major news event. Thereafter its dominant position on the North Sydney skyline, projecting the power and prestige of one of Australia's most respected institutions, assured that the MLC Company was recognised as the "way of the future", perhaps best symbolised by the MLC Weather Beacon whose coloured flashing lights could be seen even from distant Sydney suburbs.

2.2	dates: commission/completion	1954/3 August 1957
2.3	architectural designers	Bates Smart and McCutcheon
2.4	others associated with building	Engineers: Bates Smart and McCutcheon Artists: Gerald Lewers [sandstone sculpture at entrance] and Andor

Meszaros [bas-reliefs]

2.5 significant alterations with dates

Since 1957 the MLC Company has remained in occupation and the building has undergone a succession of major changes many with the purpose of adapting the building to the ever-changing commercial needs of the company. Up until the mid 1990's the most significant of the changes were:

- Loss of prominence and commercial identity due to progressive envelopment by surrounding taller office developments;
- Reconfiguration of the principal Miller Street entrances, including dispersal of the sandstone sculptures by the prominent sculptor Gerald Lewers, and removal of the stepped ramped entrance bridge;
- Alterations to the Miller Street shops;
- Alterations to the Miller Street colonnade and landscaped forecourt;
- Almost complete stripout of the original fabric on all floors;
- Internal reconfiguration of the spandrel back-up walls at the curtain walls;
- Substitution of "slimline" venetian blinds for the original wide blade blinds within the glazed cavity of the curtain walls;
- Addition of intrusive awnings over the footpaths on the side and rear streets;
- Alterations to the Ground Floor staff facilities;
- Removal of the MLC Weather Beacon.

In the mid-1990's the MLC Company determined to revitalise the building. To keep the building viable as offices for the contemporary workplace substantial changes were needed to the internal spaces and facilities, communications, services, and fire safety measures. The spaces within the MLC Building proved well suited and adaptable to the requirements of the late 1990's IT- based workplace, subsequently identified as Campus MLC.

The most prominent of the changes as an outcome of the revitalisation were:

- New internal stairs that provide open links between the office floors in the west block;
- The manner of the introduction of new services and fitout into the office floors;
- Refurbishment of the toilets where "samples" of the best of the original design were retained and restored;
- Construction of a new entrance;
- Reinstatement of the Lewers sculptures at the new entrance;
- Opening-up of the forecourt, to regain some of the lost linkage between the building and its surroundings;
- Repairs to and refurbishment of the curtain walling.

current use

Office Building and shops

current condition

The building is in good condition

3.0 Description

3.1 general description

West Elevations

The West Block is set back from Miller Street by 45' (13.7m). At

ground level a pedestrian concourse is present with shopfronts being set back from the face of the office slab by 9' (2.7m). This offset exposes the structural columns thereby creating a sheltered pedestrian colonnade along the concourse adjoining the landscaped area. The columns, originally clad with Australian black granite and Italian porcelanite mosaic tiles, were reclad in 1987 in stainless steel and the shop fronts are not original.

The remainder of the elevation except for the top is clad in an aluminium framed glazed curtain wall formed into 17 bays each about 6.0m long related to the structural column grid. Within each bay the vision panels are further sub-divided into four. In order to express the column behind the spandrel, the panel is sub-divided horizontally into a top and a bottom sub-panel of opaque blue coloured glass with a mid sub-panel of ribbed anodised aluminium. Where a spandrel occurs between column centres it is clad with an anodised aluminium ribbed panel fixed vertically.

The top of the building is terminated by a thin-edged 'parasol' roof supported on fins on the same bay layout as below which forms a cover for the continuous roof terrace. The roof, called a "shelter roof" on the construction drawings, does not project over the building line below; its principal function is decorative - it terminates the sheer rise of the solid, blank end walls and it caps the glazed curtain walls.

Originally the entrance to the upper ground floor Foyer and Lift Lobby, which served as MLC's entrance, was achieved via a prestressed reinforced concrete ramped stepped bridge which spanned from the footpath to the building face. This bridge was not roofed and met the building at the Upper Ground Level; it was tiled with a pattern of Italian vitreous floor tiles. The bridge was removed as part of the major reconfiguration of the entrances in 1987.

The landscaped setback to Miller Street is central to the concept of the building as it allows the form of the dominant West Block to be perceived as a freestanding 3 dimensional volume, rather than as a continuation of the street frontage. When originally completed the area was described as follows:

The landscaped area in front of the West Block is basically a couch lawn overseeded with N.Z. Browntop to improve winter colour. Six well developed plane trees (Platanus orientalis) provide focal points in the lawn. Near the centrally placed entrance ramp to the upper ground floor is a rock-garden, largely of stone outcrop with a limited amount of shrub and hardy rock plant development. This area features large units of sculptured sandstone, the work of Mr. Gerald Lewers, a sculptor of distinction, with grouped large river gravel and flat stones.

Three of the plane trees survive, but the rock-garden was removed in 1987.

The west-facing facades of the East Block are clad in an aluminium framed glazed curtain wall identical to the West Block; the curtain wall returns onto the north and south facades of the East Block.

South Elevations

From Mount Street the tri-component composition of the building is clearly evident. The West Block, built on the Mount Street boundary, is clad in 300 x 150mm blue/grey terra cotta tiles which extend to the roofline. Fixed to the top left hand corner of this facade is a bas-relief sculpture.

Set back from the Mount Street boundary by 7 bays (about 136' or 41.5m) is the Services Tower. The top storey is articulated by translucent glass sheeting through which obscure views of the structure and plant can be obtained. The remainder of the tower is clad in terra cotta tiles of the same colour as the West Block. Horizontal rows of small square windows arranged in triplets are provided on the north and south faces to provide light to the toilets and other facilities inside.

The East Block is set back from Mount Street by 4 bays (78' or about 23.8m). The end walls are divided vertically into two approximately equal width bays consisting of a solid, tiled wall and transparent glazed curtain wall, projected forward of the plane of the tiled wall. This differs from the simple arrangement on the West Block and has been done so that the geometrical proportion of the solid end wall is the same as that on the West Block. Presumably this geometrical imperative was also used to define the width of the East Block, it being 10 feet narrower than the West Block. In addition, by introducing glass on the end walls, more light and better views are provided at the corners of the floors which otherwise would only face directly the curtain wall of the West Block opposite. The zone along Mount Street contains shops with a staff amenities building and an adjoining roof garden constructed on top of the single storey high podium. The shops have been refurbished recently together with the construction of an awning over the footpath along the length of this facade; however, some of the original Italian porcelainite mosaic tiling and the Dromana granite facings remain.

East Elevations

The East Block and the podium are set back from the Denison Street alignment by 16 feet (4.9m). Carpark access, loading docks, a pedestrian entrance to the lift lobby and retail shops are located at the lower ground floor street level. The shops, associated terrace and the footpath awning are part of recent refurbishment work; however, remnants of the original porcelainite mosaic tiling and the Dromana granite facings remain.

The east elevation of the East Block consists of the office slab atop a pilotis on the podium, the office slab being terminated at its north and south ends by the rectangular boxes of the twin stairs. As originally designed, glazed aluminium-framed walls enclosed the various facilities provided for the use of MLC staff including:

- Dining Room
- Lounge
- Billiards Room
- Staff Canteen

Glazed walls partially filled the open volume between the podium and the office slab and facilitated direct connection with the two outdoor roof gardens and the covered recreation space.

Subsequent major alterations and additions have been made to these spaces.

The arrangement of the curtain walls on the east elevations of the East and West Blocks is the same as that on the west elevation of the West Block.

Large windows are provided in the east wall of the Services Tower above the roof of the East Block, each lighting the lift lobby. The wall is faced with terracotta tiles of contrasting colour to the north and south walls; a diagonal geometric pattern of projecting tiles, the same colour as the north and south walls, subtly decorates this face. The weather beacon, a major feature of the North Sydney skyline until it was enveloped by the surrounding high-rise development in the 1980's was removed from the roof of the Services Tower in 1987.

North Elevations

This elevation is essentially a mirror image of the south elevation except that at the lower levels the northern neighbour 'Tower Square' abuts the building along the common boundary.

3.2 construction

The West and East Blocks are composite framed structures with the Services Tower being constructed as a reinforced concrete shear core.

Both the West and East Blocks are composed of I-section steel beams and columns assembled by rigidly bolted connections to form a series of repeated structural bays. The West Block is 2 bays deep by 17 long; the East Block is 9 bays long by two bays deep but narrower than the West Block.

The West Block end walls are formed up as continuous reinforced concrete shear walls two bays deep. The East Block is restrained by reinforced concrete shear walls; however, they are only one bay deep. The Services Tower, being a reinforced concrete tube, serves to restrain both blocks in the middle. Many of the main floor beams have locally reinforced service penetrations. The steel columns bear directly on reinforced concrete pad footings.

The steel structure is fire protected by a combination of light-weight lath and plaster casings and vermiculite plaster.

3.3 context

See description above

4 Evaluation

4.1

technical

The building is of Technical Significance:

- As Australia's first building with a large lift capacity designed to cope with a high level of inter-floor traffic resulting from the head office operations of a single tenant.
 - In association with the state office buildings for the MLC in Adelaide and Perth, for the ground-breaking aspects of its
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construction including: use of light-weight materials; materials testing leading to evolution of building regulations; prefabricated steel structural framing and flooring system; incorporation of modular design and fitout of the interiors; adoption of 'fast-track' construction methods;

- For its potential to store and reveal information about construction techniques, construction materials, internal finishes and services then being introduced into Australia, and all of which were part of a deliberate shift away from the conservative approach to construction taken before the war; this potential is supported by the existence of a comprehensive archive of construction documentation;
- For the exceptional quality of the curtain wall as scarce evidence of the best available 1950's curtain wall technology;
- For the exceptional quality of the surviving original exterior and interior finishes and fittings, which incorporate a consistency controlled by the modular concept of the design; this quality is supported by the existence of a comprehensive collection of photographs by arguably, Australia's foremost photographer, Max Dupain.

The building is of Social Significance:

- As Australia's first office building provided with major recreational facilities for the sole benefit of the building tenant's staff;
 - As a large employer of people in the post-war community, not only during construction, but also more importantly in an on-going role once it was operational.
 - As a symbol of the growth and increasing importance of North Sydney as a major commercial district.
 - As the first large-scale commercial office development built in Australia after the easing of both financial constraints and post-war materials shortages brought about by the pressing need to overcome housing shortages;
 - Because it was designed by Sir Osborn McCutcheon whose architectural practice Bates, Smart & McCutcheon was in the forefront of the introduction of large-scale commercial office developments in the capital cities and major country centres throughout Australia in the 1950's and 60's, not only for MLC but also for other major corporations.
 - For its association with a major company who chose to raise their national market profile by construction of a group of "International Modern" office buildings whose genre was recognisable different from those that preceded;
 - Because it was the "flagship" national headquarters from which MLC's purposeful expansion into its nation-wide market was directed;
 - As an essentially intact example of an office floor configuration that demonstrates a style of commercial office space that has been overtaken by the evolutionary changes in work practices, particularly those associated with the PC;
 - As a rare, essentially intact example of a commercial office development provided with large-scale social and cultural facilities for use by the staff, as part of the developing trend towards increased leisure time in contemporary society.
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4.2 social

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- Because it instigated the development of North Sydney as an acceptable and viable commercial office area, as an alternative to Sydney CBD.
 - Because, by the provision of a shopping concourse along Miller Street and shops along Mount Street, it continues the street-level retail tradition of the area;
 - As the first example of a large-scale site amalgamation for commercial purposes in North Sydney.
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The building is of Aesthetic Significance:

- As Australia's first 'freestanding' office building, with setbacks from boundaries creating landscaped spaces at street level;
- As Australia's first office building incorporating two office slabs separated by a services tower, with a podium, pilotis and roof gardens;
- As Australia's first example of a deliberately decorated curtain wall;
- 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 the USA and Europe;
- As Australia's first large-scale commercial office development utilising large areas of glazed curtain walls in association with large capacity, sophisticated-control air conditioning for comfort conditions;

4.3 cultural & aesthetic

The building is of Iconic /Canonical Significance:

- 4.4 Iconic/canonical As Australia's first large-scale commercial office development embodying the sleek, modern, recognisable, rectangular glazed prism so recently embraced by US corporations, as exemplified by the UN Secretariat and Lever House;

- 4.5 general assessment The MLC Building is the largest and the best one of a series of buildings around Australia constructed by the MLC insurance company to project a modern image and to house its workers in open plan, modern office buildings with up-to-date facilities for work and leisure.

5 Documentation

Graphic Sources

- 5.1 principal references Max Dupain and Associates (Eric Sierins) at Milsons Point, Sydney: archive of 175 (mostly 5"x4") black and white negatives of the interiors and exteriors, principally from 1957-1958.

Refer to the *Conservation Plan - MLC Building North Sydney* below.

Written Sources

Conservation Plan - MLC Building North Sydney, May 1998.

Peter McKenzie, Jackson Teece Chesterman Willis Consultants.

5.2 visual material attached
5.3 rapporteur/date

Peter McKenzie, September 2004