



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

Atlas Building is a fine example of an Inter-War Free Classical commercial building of the 1930s. (Criterion 1.1)

Atlas Building is important for the range of quality of its architectural detailing, craftsmanship and use of local materials. (Criterion 1.2)

Atlas Building makes an important contribution to the streetscape of The Esplanade in its grand and massive form. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Atlas Building is historically important as one of the few commercial buildings that were constructed in Perth during the early depression years and it demonstrates that although times were economically difficult, there was still a level of development. (Criterion 2.1)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

Atlas Building is a rare example of a commercial building of the 1930s in the Inter-War Free Classical style, utilising Wunderlich's architectural terracotta cladding, which survives in good condition. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Atlas Building is representative of commercial building of the 1930s the Inter-War Free Classical style in its Palazzo facade and Art Deco decorative themes incorporated throughout the building. (Criterion 6.1)

12.3 CONDITION

The overall condition of the *Atlas Building* exterior is sound. The general condition of the interior spaces is good, with most of the spaces remaining intact.

12.4 INTEGRITY

The building fabric is intact and the place continues to be used for its original purpose, *Atlas Building* therefore retains a high level of integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

Minor alterations have occurred in the interior of the third floor level, which can be easily removed. *Atlas Building* retains its original external and internal detailing and therefore retains a high level of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Atlas Building is a four-storey building, with a basement, constructed in the Inter-War Free Classical style in 1930-31 and opened on 28 April 1931, to provide office and leasing space for the Atlas Assurance Company and its tenants. The Atlas Company was a successful insurance company founded in Britain in 1808, with branches in other countries where demand necessitated.¹ Their building in Perth was designed by Mr. F. G. B. Hawkins, architect, and was erected at an approximate cost of £30,000.²

Mr F. G. B. Hawkins (1885-1956) was born in South Africa and came to practice in Australia after World War I. In 1929, Hawkins arrived in Perth to supervise the construction of the Victoria Insurance Co. in St George's Terrace and decided to return to practice. Within Perth he was also responsible for the Yorkshire Insurance building (c.1930), and the Mercantile Mutual Insurance building (1939) as well as carrying out a considerable amount of domestic and industrial works in the city and suburbs. He entered into partnership with Desmond Sands in 1951.³

Commercial buildings constructed in Perth during the period 1920-49, while limited to a certain extent by the economic climate, had a certain quality about them. These buildings were less flamboyant than those of the opulent gold-rush years, and the best of them achieved a refinement in detail and a quiet elegance that was a high point of urbanity for Perth.⁴ However, there are few survivors of these years; some examples being, *Newspaper House*, the *WA Trustees Building* and the *Royal Insurance Building*, on the south side of the Terrace, west of William Street, as well as the *Atlas Building*. At the opening ceremony of the *Atlas Building*, the Governor made particular mention that although Perth was experiencing difficult times, there was still some progress: ... In spite of the fact that we are not suffering from affluence, buildings continue to go up. This is the third occasion recently upon which I have been privileged to declare a fine new building open.⁵

Atlas Building, which was constructed by contractors, Messrs. Todd Bros., employed up-to-date fire proofing construction techniques with the most modern firefighting appliances being installed on each floor. In fact, the flat roof was designed as such so as to allow firemen to fight fires in adjoining buildings. All windows were steel framed and strongrooms were provided for all suites. Natural lighting was a conspicuous feature, with about 75% of the outside walls being occupied by windows.⁶

¹ *West Australian*, 29 April 1931, p. 10.

² *Building and Construction Journal*, 1 May 1931, p.18.; a list of the other ten tenderers for the job is found in *Building and Construction*, 14 March 1930.

³ *Architecture in Australia*, (April-June 1956), p. 56.

⁴ Seddon, G and Ravine, D., *A City and Its Setting: Images of Perth, Western Australia*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press), 1986, p. 176.

⁵ *West Australian*, 29 April 1931, p. 10.

⁶ *West Australian*, 2 February 1931.

The detailed description of the facade provided in the *West Australian* illustrates the innovative design and decorative use of materials: The whole of the facade, with the exception of the steel windows, is a Wunderlich production. It is faced with Wunderlich architectural terra cotta of a graduated salmon brown tone, mottled with black and white with a tooled surface, with an attractive matt semi-glaze finish. The company's emblem is also modelled and produced in architectural terra cotta, with a nice ivory finish, the figure supporting the globe, being heavy sheet copper. Wunderlich architectural terra cotta of modern design has also been used by the architect for the dadoes and panelling to the entrance halls and corridors. ... The massive bronze entrance doors, 9 feet wide, by 16 feet high, sheathed and studded, the bronze grills, the lift cage, the mail box, the bronze lift doors, the ornamental copper cornice, and the attractive spandrel panels are also of Wunderlich manufacture. Another interesting feature is the Wunderlich Wunderglaze, a new process of window treatment in copper electro-glazing.⁷

In a later article, particular mention is made as to the significance of one of the materials used: Architectural terra cotta has been employed internally in the wall dado, to the entrance lobby, the entrance hall and the passages on the ground floor. This dado is of modern design, and this is the first occasion where this material has been used for such a purpose in Western Australia.⁸

The involvement of the Wunderlich Ltd company features prominently with regards to the materials chosen in the building's construction and decoration. Founded and based in Sydney 1887, Wunderlich Ltd. had branches Australia-wide company, with branches also in New Zealand and the Far East. They specialised in the importation and subsequently manufacture of roof tiles and decorative metal materials for use in ceilings, walls etc.⁹ In the *Atlas Building*, the use of architectural terracotta was an important design element. The introduction of steel framed buildings and electric lifts (in 1923) had seen the rapid development of city centres in most states. To cater for this growing commercial market, Wunderlich established in Victoria a works for the manufacture of architectural terracotta. When the erection of the terracotta facing to this building [Commonwealth Savings Bank in Sydney] began in 1926 it won immediate approval from architects and others, resulting in the rapid expansion of this aspect of Wunderlich enterprise.¹⁰

During construction, the architect made a feature of the utilising local labour and Australian-made products, the majority of which were also Western Australian.¹¹ Electric lighting and power was installed by L. H. Deague and Co. Ltd, and main feature of the system being the switchboard which used highly polished Zelemite, an Australian product. Other firms involved in the construction were: Arcus Ltd. who were responsible for the door fittings which involved the incorporation of a figure of Atlas into the door knobs; Messrs. A. T. Brine and Sons ; the glazing was done by Clarkson Ltd and the fire doors, steel cabinets and shelving by Wormold Bros.¹²

⁷ *West Australian*, 2 February 1931.

⁸ *Building and Construction*, 1 May 1931, p. 14.

⁹ For further information on the history and activities of the company, refer to Bures, S., *The House of Wunderlich*, (Kangaroo Press Pty. Ltd., 1987)

¹⁰ Bures, p. 106.

¹¹ *West Australian*, 2 February 1931.

¹² *Building and Construction*, 1 May 1931, p. 14.

Surmounting the facade was a life-size figure of Atlas supporting the globe. This was also modelled in Architectural TerraCotta and finished in an ivory colour, the globe being of sheet copper. In 1968, Frederick McCardell was commissioned by the Atlas Assurance Co. to design a new roof for the building. Resulting from this, in February 1969, the builders reported that one of the arms of the statue of Atlas was loose and as the company did not wish to repair the statue, it was removed and taken into possession by the architect.¹³

The Atlas Assurance Company was the main tenant, occupying the ground floor, until they sold the building and the name of the building was changed to the Phoenix Building. The ground floor and the office space has been leased to a variety of professional firms, mainly insurance agents and solicitors and architects.

Minor alterations have been carried out on the third floor in recent years to accommodate modern office requirements and a side entrance has been closed. Today, there are tenants on each floor, though the building is not occupied to full capacity.

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Atlas Building is a four-storey commercial building of Inter-War Free Classical style, sited on the north-west corner of the intersection of The Esplanade and Sherwood Court.

Its principal facade and main entrance is located on The Esplanade with a secondary private entrance to Sherwood Court.

The building is steel framed with reinforced concrete floors and walls, rendered and painted, covered with a flat roof and sits on a granite plinth. The appearance of the building's principal facade suggests traditional construction, however the Wunderlich architectural terracotta cladding conceals the structural use of steel and concrete. No attempt was made to replicate the main elevation as the east elevation fronted a right-of way, until Sherwood Court was cut through from St. George's Terrace to The Esplanade in 1932.¹⁴ The side elevation is rendered and painted as an economic measure.

The principal facade is derived from buildings and publications of Palladio, in its typical elements of columned screen juxtaposed with the elegance of its openings with fine steel glazing bars, against the heavy mass of the building. The facade is symmetrical with semi-circular arched windows on the ground floor level with emphasised keystones, and square headed windows on the upper levels, an interpretation of a Palladian motif. The openings are divided into three lights with a wider central light. Panelled and oxidised metal spandrels decorate the facade.

The central portion of the facade is unified by giant superimposed classical columns, spanning two storeys with ionic capitals and located either side

¹³ Letter from Frederick McCardell, architect to Brand Deykin & Hay, 5 September 1989 (provided by PCC); *Daily News*, 10 March 1969.

¹⁴ Seddon, G and Ravine, D., *A City and its Setting: Images of Perth, Western Australia*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1986)

of the windows. The end bays are quieter in their detailing with attenuated pilasters abutting an ionic pilaster. The facade also features an unclassical entablature, a curved pediment and an ornamental copper cornice.

The entry door is constructed of a metal frame with a metal transom with a cast bronze plate bearing the building's name and patera located above. A glazed fanlight contains decorative tracery. Two glazed, single panelled doors made of sheathed and studded bronze also contain decorative tracery. The original directory board on its marbled panel is set into the front facade immediately above the plinth to the left of the entry. A list of tenants is located either side of the entry in original glass faced and extruded metal casings fixed to the facade at eye level. The secondary entrance located on Sherwood Court was originally protected by a canopy. The doorway was replaced by a window possibly by the request of the Solicitors who rented the ground floor.¹⁵ The date of the enclosure is unknown.

The entry hall is approached by marble clad stairs. The hall is paved with marble with a boarder pattern in coloured inlay in an Art Deco style. The Art Deco decorative themes continue through the interior with coloured and patterned terracotta tiles surrounding the lift doors; lining walls below the dado line of the stairwell and entry hall. The dado rail is capped with a boarder tile. The terracotta tiles decorate the ceilings and the dentils to the corner pilasters of the entry hall. The entry hall also features a carved timber seat in an Art Deco style, oxidised copper pendant light fittings with frosted glass, and a decorative metal mail box, now ornamental.

The typical floor of the interior contains uninterrupted office space. The amenities and service core are located the length of the building along the western face separated from the office space by a passage with a glazed partition with a wainscot of jarrah to some areas. An escape stair is located at the northern end of the passage, leading to the right-of-way at the rear. A light well breaks the western facade which shares the wall of the stairwell. A metal framed fixed window with a top swing casement (common in service areas), is located in the stairwell at each floor level.¹⁶ The stair is clad in marble with a polished metal balustrade and cast iron infill. Wall mounted light fittings similar in treatment to the pendant lights are installed at each landing in the stairwell.

The lift doors are decoratively glazed to match the entry doors and are decorated with copper surrounds. The doors open manually and retain the original button board.

Carved timber doors decorate distributing boards at each level. All other doors have timber frames and architraves. Timber skirtings are used throughout. Most door handles are original, some are decorated with the figure of Atlas.

¹⁵ Interview conducted by Brand Deykin & Hay, 11 July 1994.

¹⁶ Brand Deykin & Hay Architects Drawing No. SD 11 series for site plan and measured drawings.

The design of the building minimises fire risk. Fire extinguishers are installed on each floor, considered a new appliance at the time of construction.

The cracked terrazzo floor tiles to the toilets were replaced in c.1988, and the toilets were generally upgraded including, the installation of vanity benches.¹⁷

The third floor is occupied by Brand Deykin & Hay Architects. In 1989, the architects remodelled the third floor passage, enclosing the stair landing with a glazed entrance, installed a reception desk and created seating space along its length. They installed new lighting including to the stairwell at the third floor level. An area of the passage partition has been replaced with fabric lined plasterboard and is used for display. Timber doors to the Boardroom have been painted, and some skirting boards replaced due to the redirecting of electrical wiring during the removal of partitions. Some repair work has been carried out to the appearance of the timber doors, frames and architraves.¹⁸

13.3 REFERENCES

Rusli, S., "Atlas Building", (Student report, Curtin University: Architecture and Culture unit, 1993)

National Trust Assessment Exposition

Building and Construction, 1 May 1931, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ Interview conducted by Kelly Aris with Archie Telmelcos, Brand Deykin & Hay Architects, 11 August 1994.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 11 August 1994.