

INFORMATION

The significance of the MLC Building in North Sydney

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Completed in 1957, the MLC Building in North Sydney was Australia's most significant modern building at the time and remains one of the most significant buildings of the early modern era.

ICI House in Melbourne's CBD, designed in the same spirit by the same architect and completed in 1959, is included on the state and national heritage lists, while the MLC Building is on neither (it is listed in the North Sydney local environmental plan). Does this failure to recognise the building's aesthetic and cultural significance reflect the ethos of NSW, or simply that it is located in the wrong part of the 'Harbour City'?

Its claims for recognition are strong.

- It was radically new, establishing modernist architecture in Australia at a scale not previously attempted.
- The MLC Building was the first and most significant example of Bates Smart and McCutcheon's project to design a contemporary office block, with a glazed linear expression. It introduced curtain walls using the latest technology and end walls of European-influenced glazed tile. It had a separate lift and stair block, the height of modernist chic. It was and still is a building of outstanding aesthetic qualities.
- On completion, the MLC building was the largest office block in Australia, accommodating 3000 workers.
- It demonstrated many significant historical trends:
 - The increased scale of Australian-owned financial firms and capital markets.
 - The rise of the mutual ownership model for finance, including insurance, savings and annuities.
 - The use of the modern style of the building as part of a marketing effort.
 - A commitment to providing progressive working arrangements and better staff conditions.
 - Establishing the North Shore as the home of modernism in Sydney.
- It's our last chance to retain this historical record.
- Very few buildings survive that were designed by Walter McCutcheon, the architect most often credited with designing the building, indicative of our failure to understand their cultural significance.

McCutcheon decisively rejected the UK models adopted by most Australian architects of the time. He was clearly well aware of similar modernist buildings in the US, Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands. Bates Smart and McCutcheon produced a number of notable modernist buildings following this building.



Max Dupain's 1957 photo of the new MLC Centre shows some of the context, the street widening, the ramp to the first-floor entrance and the public plaza.

The building offered its host city a generous planted public plaza adjoining the street.

Like many modernist architects, McCutcheon was committed to incorporating art into buildings, evidenced here by placing in the plaza seven shaped sandstone rocks sculpted by Gerald Lewers and by the bronze bas-relief sculpture 'Strength in Unity' by Andor Mészáros.

The siting of the building, behind a widening of Miller Street and a public space, is emblematic of optimistic planning and urban design in the 1950s.

The engineers for this, Australia's largest office building, were the leading Sydney firm of Julius Poole and Gibson.

It was built by Concrete Constructions Pty Ltd, engineers and construction contractors, a firm founded in the 1920s that specialised in the use of reinforced concrete rather than steel structures.

A creative turning point, in business and in architecture

The MLC Building is well documented on the website DOCOMOMO¹ and the website of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (see below).

The MLC Building in North Sydney (1954-1957) is one of very few significant early modern buildings left in Australia. Without it, we could not understand how something as modern as the Utzon Opera House was selected to be built on Bennelong Point or why in the 1950s and 1960s the North Shore of Sydney became the centre of modernism in Sydney as architects and their clients 'discovered' Sydney's climate and topography.

It is a building that must be kept because it helps us understand the history of modern architecture in Australia and because it is a demonstration of the profound social and economic changes underlying the emergence of post-war Australian society.

The year after Bates Smart and McCutcheon's design for the MLC Building began construction in North Sydney, their design for ICI House began construction in Melbourne. The significance of ICI House has been recognised and it has been conserved and protected.² It is included on the Victorian State Heritage Register and it is one of only three buildings in the Melbourne CBD on the Australian National Heritage List.

In Sydney, the value of the MLC Building has never been formally appreciated. This is an appalling misunderstanding of both the significance of the building and the reasons that societies preserve buildings that explain their heritage.

When it was completed in 1957, it was as if something from outer space had landed in North Sydney. The building was officially opened by Prime Minister Robert Menzies on 22 August 1957, who was quoted as saying 'The view [from the top floor] gives me such a new conception of Sydney that quite frankly I'm beginning to like the place.'³

For the client, the MLC building was an opportunity to demonstrate that they were a progressive company, rejecting the stuffy social mores of the 1950s and the boring buildings that went with them. Life insurance MLC-style was, if not hip, at least modern.

The Mayor of North Sydney observed that, 'The northern side of the harbour will eventually develop into the commercial centre of Sydney.'⁴ Of course, this didn't happen, although the Lower North Shore became the epicentre of television, advertising and other creative industries, including architecture. Maybe the MLC Building would be better recognised if it were one of the landmark buildings of the Sydney CBD, but then again, maybe it would have been demolished, just like the State Bank building.

The 1958 AMP Circular Quay building was a notably less ambitious echo of the MLC building. Nevertheless, there is now little question that the

AMP Building will be conserved – it's in the Sydney CBD.

Compared to the AMP building, the MLC building was crisp, modern and ambitious. It was designed by a firm that was committed to modernism, not one satisfied with following trends. The *statement of significance* from the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage presents the facts.⁵

The first high rise office block in North Sydney and the largest for a number of years after its construction, the MLC Building in North Sydney is a seminal building on subsequent high-rise design in Sydney and utilised construction and structural techniques not previously used in Australia. With the first use of a curtain wall design and the first use of modular units in Australia, its use of exceptional modernist building materials in the curtain wall facade and terracotta glazed bricks (sic) are representative of the Post-War International style of architecture that predominated in these early commercial high-rise buildings. The architect, Walter Osborn McCutcheon's desire for his buildings to integrate modern art within the fabric of the design is demonstrated by the inclusion of significant artists such as Andor Mészáros and Gerald Lewers. As a result, and despite subsequent modifications, the interior, exterior and landscape setting are of high aesthetic, technical and representative significance. The building is also of historical, associative and aesthetic significance as an important work by a significant firm of architects Bates Smart and McCutcheon, and master builders Concrete Constructions, and as a landmark site at North Sydney which signified the transformation of the centre of North Sydney from Nineteenth Century town to the second commercial hub of metropolitan Sydney from the late 1950s.

Regarding the building's historic and aesthetic significance, its potential for research and its rarity, the careful and technical assessment of NSW Environment and Heritage is more explicit. The assessment of the significance of the MLC building found that it:

- is a seminal work in the development of high-rise buildings in Australia;
- used construction and detailing techniques not previously seen in Australia;
- is considered to be one of the first true high-rise buildings in Australia, making the MLC Building of national significance;
- was the largest office building in Australia on its completion in 1957 and in its design, construction and approach, it is a most influential and important piece of architecture of national significance;
- is a significant piece of modern architecture of rare quality, ...a rare example of its size, scale and age statewide.



The MLC Building is a key element in the national story

The decision by the MLC to build cutting edge modern buildings in many Australian capital cities was driven by a marketing opportunity as much as their intellectual commitment to modern architecture, but the architectural firm they selected, Bates Smart and McCutcheon, was the real deal. They believed in modernism and the modernist ideal. The buildings they produced during this period were extraordinary, but only a few of them still survive. Nevertheless, the ones that do survive demonstrate something profound about the way that Australia was developing in the late 1950's.

The announcement of its construction even made the papers in Melbourne, where it was important enough to be seen primarily as a symbol of modern Australia rather than an object of Sydney-Melbourne rivalry; it was OUR giant building (my emphasis).⁶

The MLC Building helps to explain why Sydney got an Opera House from outer space. Although the Opera House was not finished until 1974, the competition was contemporaneous with the design and construction of the MLC building and shared the same spirit of post-war optimism.

With relatively few other buildings of the period, the Opera House and the MLC buildings around Australia represent a new post-war Australia; modern, experimental and with a flavour of

Continental Europe. While McCutcheon's contemporaries were avidly reading the English architect F. R. S. Yorke and churning out pale imitations of his dull 'New Town' style, McCutcheon was looking for inspiration in New York and Europe. A generation of Sydney architects, from Syd Ancher down, came to embrace modernism.

For McCutcheon, the North Sydney MLC and the Melbourne ICI buildings were a rejection of the watered-down modernism of post war Britain and an embrace of the European and US architects that were developing progressive modern architecture. Whereas the Royal Festival Hall, completed in 1951, was the nearest that Britain could come to the modern world ('You could almost imagine yourself on the Continent', one awestruck outdoor diner remarked to the *Architectural Review* in 1951), Sydney had got the real thing, to both the delight and dismay of the locals.

The link to Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in New York is often cited, but really the closest link is to office buildings of the period in Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands. No wonder we got a Danish-design Opera House.

We should not erase the building and with it our memory of such a significant chapter in our history.

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¹ DOCOMOMO [documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement] <https://docomomoaustralia.com.au/dcmmlc-building-1954-1957-nsw/>

² 'As one of the nation's most stylish commercial buildings, [ICI House] represented the most refined example of Bates Smart and McCutcheon's efforts to perfect high-rise office design. Raised on pilotis, the blue glazed linear slab of open-plan offices, with its lift core expressed as clearly separate, broke the city's 132-foot (40 m) height limit and changed Melbourne's previously consistent skyline forever. It was the provision of the garden at ground level, designed collaboratively by the architects, the sculptor Gerald Lewers and the landscape architect John Stevens, which enabled the height limit to be exceeded.' "ICI House 1955-1958 Vic" <https://docomomoaustralia.com.au/dcmmlc-ici-house-1955-1958/> , accessed 18 August 2020.

³ "P.M. Sees New View of Sydney". *The Cumberland Argus* (3899). New South Wales, Australia. 11 September 1957. p. 15. Retrieved 8 September 2018 – via National Library of Australia.

⁴ "Twin Cities On The Harbour?". *Construction*. New South Wales, Australia. 31 March 1954. p. 4. Retrieved 8 September 201 – via National Library of Australia.

⁵ The documentation of the building on the website of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage is comprehensive and informative: <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageltemDetails.aspx?ID=2180854>, accessed 18 August 2020.

⁶ "OUR GIANT BUILDING". *The Argus* (Melbourne). Victoria, Australia. 13 May 1955. p. 3. Retrieved 8 September 2018 – via National Library of Australia.]