

The MLC Building in 2040

While the MLC Building has been called (by a developers' lobbyist) an 'ugly box private sector office building', many people celebrated the qualities of the building when it was built and have done so ever since, agreeing with the Heritage Council that it is 'seminal' and 'iconic', a 'landmark in the International Modern movement in Australia.' Others ignore it as just part of the landscape. Others again regard it as passé, lacking the appeal of a new office building such as the one in the next block at 100 Mount Street.

Styles of all kinds lose their appeal for a generation or three and are revalued. It happened to Georgian buildings, then Regency, then Victorian. Victorian exuberance was despised during the middle of the last century. It has been the same with houses: Federation, Californian, moderne; or red brick, magnesium brick, tapestry brick, salmon brick etc – all have their time in disgrace before regaining their charm and respect.

Therefore a thought experiment might help us appreciate the MLC Building.

It's 2040. We are at **Victoria Cross**, once the central six-way-intersection of North Sydney. What strikes us at once is that it is green – flowerbeds, Bangalow palms and red cedars mark out what used to be literally acres of bitumen. Most of it is planted, paved and furnished as pedestrian-friendly spaces with the occasional kiosk, market stall and pop-up activity. The roads have shrunk to become a simple crossroads of Pacific Highway and Miller Street, both of them now civilised two-lane city streets.

What also strikes us is that the traffic on those streets has changed. All vehicles are electric, of course. Their emissions are either zero or H₂O. They are quiet, safe, smart and use the roads intelligently, most likely autonomously. The decision to save Berry Street in 2021 means that traffic is either local – deliveries, services, etc – or public transport, including taxis and shared cars, in the form that public transport takes in 2040.

The six buildings surrounding the large and attractive space at Victoria Cross all seem somewhat venerable, even Northpoint (1980) and diagonally opposite 60 Miller Street (1987) and the former Optus Building (1992). Admittedly these three may be in their out-of-favour period, but as long-term fixtures they belong. The other three corners are occupied by the Post Office, the former Bank of NSW, and the former MLC Building.

Of these six buildings, the MLC Building stars.



It's 2040 and North Sydneysiders are proud to have in the centre of their city one of Australia's most notable modern buildings, a building of many 'firsts'. Once the building was added to the State Heritage Register in 2021, and to the National Heritage List in 2024, appreciation of the building rapidly increased, making it the prime landmark that defines the heart of the city. By 2040 it has become the icon of North Sydney. As a result, space in the building is eagerly sought after, particularly by creative, design and new-economy businesses.

Of all the buildings at Victoria Cross, this is the one that defines its own public space. It is the building that adds most to the life of the city. The big changes that happened in 2022-2025 not only saw a major new office tower added to the eastern half of the MLC site behind the Miller Street wing but also a comprehensive re-think of the way that commercial buildings should contribute to the life of the city centre. The new life in the MLC Building complex includes pedestrian links, pedestrian spaces, an occasional market, a branch library (resource centre), cinemas and a multifunction city hall.

By 2025 the complex had been reintegrated with the surrounding streets. The space in front of the MLC Building is now both wider and more significant. It is the prime space for interaction and interchange, where rail, metro, buses, taxis, shared cars and shared bikes all intersect with good public spaces, organised and spontaneous activities, and adjacent civic functions.

In 2040 it is impossible to imagine the North Sydney city centre without the MLC Building.