

# Conservation Comments

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**To:** Matt Prendergast  
**From:** Malcolm Elliott  
**Date:** 14/03/2003  
**Re:** Heritage Referral – Proposed Alterations and Additions to Heritage Item  
at 105-153 Miller Street, North Sydney

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## Background

This file has been referred for heritage comment in relation to proposed alterations and additions to the MLC Building at 105-153 Miller Street, North Sydney.

The subject property is listed as a state significant item in Schedule 3 of NSLEP 2001 (NSHS No. 0854) and hence the potential heritage impact on the item arising from the proposed changes must be considered.

## Proposal

The proposal for alterations and additions comprises three distinct elements:

- Relocation of existing plant areas on Level 13 of the Miller Street wing and construction of new office space within the existing roof structure on that level,
- Construction of six additional levels on the Denison Street wing and associated plant and staff facilities. Also incorporates new lift to all levels using an unused shaft in the existing services core and a new roof terrace on the uppermost level of the addition, and
- Demolition of the existing steel awning around the retail base of the building and its replacement with a more shallow glass and steel awning structure.

## Documentation

The applicant has submitted Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the proposed works (Drawing Nos. DA1.001, DA2.000-2.009, DA4.001, DA5.001-5.003, DA6.001-6.003, DA7.001-7.005 contained within a Development Application Architecture Report) prepared by BatesSmart Architects together with a Statement of Environmental Effects prepared by same and a Statement of Heritage Impact, prepared by Jackson Teece Chesterman Willis, Conservation Architects.

## Comment

The subject site was inspected on 21 January 2003 (externally only).

It is noted that BatesSmart is the contemporary architectural firm evolved from Bates Smart McCutcheon, the authors of the original scheme from 1957. In this regard, any potential concerns

arising from the recent Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) legislation should be addressed by the continuity of architectural firm used for the project. Although Sir Osborn McCutcheon (the design architect for the MLC Building) is no longer alive, his original design methodology for the building is probably best reinterpreted for the proposed additions by the modern incarnation of his firm.

The proposed reconfiguration of Level 13 of the Miller Street wing involves the relocation of existing air-conditioning plant to the northern and southern ends of the building and the creation of an enclosed open plan office space in the area between. The new office space and the relocated plant areas are to be situated within the existing roof structure with a shallow, perimeter terrace area skirting the outside edge of the building. It is considered that the limitation of the ceiling height to 2700mm and the 2.1 metre inset of the glazed wall will significantly reduce the visibility of the new upper level offices from the immediate Miller Street surrounds. The retention of the skillion roof form and supporting (blue) fins/blades will ensure that the appearance of this element remains close to that of the present configuration. As such, the overall form of the Miller Street block will be relatively unchanged by the proposed changes and they are therefore considered to be acceptable.

The proposed additions to the Denison Street wing of the building will be the most visible and potentially controversial component of the scheme. BatesSmart have provided a highly detailed Architectural Report to document the design development process for this element; outlining a comparison of possible locations of the required additional floorspace, the development of the form and details of the addition and a comparative analysis of the facades in compositional and constructional terms. It should be noted that the demonstration / documentation of the design development process in this manner is rare even for brand new buildings so the provision of this material for an addition is testimony to the commitment of the architects to this scheme.

Upon review of the supporting architectural documentation, it is difficult to imagine a more appropriate design solution to this particular situation, either in heritage or general architectural terms. The proposed addition is essentially a “doubling up” of the existing Denison Street wing in overall form and number of levels but the façade treatment at either end has been inverted in respect of solid and void to clearly identify the new element. This approach is consistent with the Burra Charter principles (Article 22) where new work is to be clearly recognisable as such. The plant level at the top of the existing Denison Street wing is retained with the blue fins and open form of that level creating a visual separation between the original and new sections of the building. The general form of the plant level is also repeated on Level 12 and a recreational deck space for staff is also incorporated at that level.

The façade treatment for the new section utilises contemporary glazing technology to maximise solar control and environmental efficiency in a manner not dissimilar to the revolutionary façade design of the original building. The patterning of glazing tint will ensure that the new addition is not another anonymous glass box of commercial office space and also reflects the structural grid of the building. Many of the services required for the new addition are already located at the eastern end of the central core, in anticipation of some future expansion of the Denison Street wing as is proposed here. The design even incorporates the retention of the distinctive tiling finish of the services core as an internal finish in the foyer area of the new floors.

It is considered that the proposed addition to the Denison Street wing of the MLC Building is acceptable in heritage terms, as documented.

The proposed removal of the existing metal awning at street level and its replacement with a glazed awning element is also considered to be acceptable. The existing awning is not an original element of the building and its replacement with a glazed element will visually lighten the streetscape interface of the building, marginally increase the natural lighting of the public space on the perimeter of the building and increase the visibility of the building from these areas.

## **Conclusion**

The MLC Building is considered to be a landmark commercial building in Australian architecture for its introduction of (then) revolutionary curtain wall design by Sir Osborne McCutcheon as well as many other overseas construction technologies. It is an excellent example of mid-century Modernism (International Style) and also has an iconic status as the first large-scale commercial development in the North Sydney centre. This building was the “flagship” for the MLC Insurance Company in Australia with several similar buildings (of smaller scale) being built in other states.

The building is highly regarded as the vanguard of many architectural innovations, which became the accepted standard in contemporary office building design. For many years, the MLC Building has been the benchmark against which other commercial buildings were judged. In more recent times Bligh Voller Nield significantly redesigned the interior of the building for Campus MLC and these interiors have been recognised for their design innovation with several architectural awards. It is considered that this proposal has the potential to continue this architectural pedigree through the demonstration of an innovative architectural solution in a heritage situation, which may well result in further design awards in the future.

It is concluded that the proposed works are acceptable under the provisions of Clause 48 of the NSLEP 2001 (Heritage Items). As such, there are no specific heritage-based impediments to the approval of this proposal in the form presently documented.

**Malcolm Elliott**  
**Conservation Planner**