

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R123

Name of Place: 161 London Circuit

Other/Former Names: MLC Building, State Bank, Colonial Building

Address/Location: 159-173 London Circuit CITY 2601

Block 1 Section 14 of City

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	1986	Level of Significance:	Local
Citation Revision No:	3	Category:	Commercial
Citation Revision Date:	November 2004	Style:	

Date of Design:	1967	Designer:	Bates Smart and McCutcheon
Construction Period:		Client/Owner/Lessee:	
Date of Additions:		Builder:	

Statement of Significance

The MLC Building is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. It is a very good example of the Post-War International style (1940-1960). The design incorporates many of the features which are specific to the style including cubiform overall shape, curtain wall (modified form), large sheets of glass (not original) and structural frame expressed, the latter two at the ground level. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon.

The following design features are of additional significance; overhang for shade, (the original 1964 top floor roof overhang); plain smooth wall surface, and contrasting texture, (the wall tiles and spandrels).

The MLC Building was the first multi-storey office building in Canberra and is one of a group of innovative commercial office buildings designed by the nationally significant architect Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon in the late 1950s in Australia: others included the MLC Building North Sydney, 1955, and the ICI Building, Melbourne, 1957.

The design of the building was advanced and technologically innovative for its time, incorporating modular grid planning, a structural system with lightweight floors on steel frame and curtain wall façades with its alternate bands of aluminium windows and ribbed spandrels.

The 'modern' design of the office building demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the 1950s in Australia. This new International style won acceptance during the 1950's through multi-storey curtain-walled office blocks and the radical, flat-roofed, glass walled private house. The MLC Building is a very good early example of this new radical development.

The office building is important for its association with the talented architecture firm of Bates, Smart & McCutcheon and in particular Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon who played a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects to practise in Australia. McCutcheon was awarded the RAI Gold Medal in 1965 and was knighted in 1966.

The office building was instrumental in demonstrating the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments. It occupies a dominant site on a key corner block in Civic. The building demonstrates the stage in Canberra's post federal planning history of development of the commercial centre of Canberra. This stage was coincident with the influence of the Modern (International) style, when building design adopted modern functional approaches.

The architecture of this office building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Post-War Architectural styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories.

Description

The MLC office building at 161 London Circuit, City, 1959 & 1964, by Bates Smart and McCutcheon in association with Moir Ward and Slater, is a very good example of the Post-War International style (1940-60) with its cubiform overall shape, curtain wall (modified form), large sheets of glass (not original) and structural frame expressed. The latter two displayed at the ground level.

The office building is located on a prominent site in the city centre; on a corner site formed by London Circuit and Petrie Plaza. The plaza was originally a street but now is part of the extensive network of pedestrian malls that have at their centre City Walk.

The ten-storey rectangular office building takes advantage of the site with the glazed and panelled curtain wall façade wrapping around the corner.

Since its construction there have been the following main changes:

- The original five-storey office building was extended to a ten-storey office building in 1964.
- The recessed top floor with its overhanging roof was enclosed.
- The ground level, lift lobby and banking chamber have been altered and re-fitted out.

The office building is an open plan concrete encased steel framed structure elevated over the ground floor banking and lobby level. The typical floor plan is designed on a module of seven columns in the north south direction and three columns in the east west direction with a lift and service core to the rear. The floor plate extends along the southwest fronting onto London Circuit with the northern end extending out beyond the service core. The southern façade is a plain painted and rendered wall. The east (rear) elevation consists of two rendered solid ends, the northern end being the wider, with the curtain wall extending between. The ground level still retains what appear to be the original glazed wall tiles. The tiles are laid horizontally in a stack bond.

The columns of the office building and the first floor perimeter edge beams are expressed at the buildings ground level along the two street facades. They are rendered and painted white. The full height glazing is inset from the columns. Photographs taken when the building was first constructed appear to show that the columns and edge beams were lined with mosaic tiles.

There are two entries facing onto London Circuit. These are set symmetrically on the façade, placed in the second column bay in from each end, and have cantilevering canopy hoods. The northern entry opens into the lift lobby that is lined with Carrara marble tiles. The other entry opens into the banking chamber, now occupied by the Bendigo Bank.

The curtain wall consists of a plain anodized aluminium framed system with continuous enamel coated steel ribbed spandrel cladding. The glazing includes three separate **parts**: the office windows that are a rectangular shaped double hung and fixed window combination; the vertical coloured fixed glazed cover panel between the windows, and the coloured glazed transom panel set across the top of the windows as well as the fixed glazed panel. The whole reads as horizontal bands of alternate glazed and enamel panels to the façade. There are two windows placed between each column with the coloured fixed glazed cover panels placed over the columns and centrally between each column. The coloured glazed top transom panels are fixed 'highlights' placed over both the windows and the cover panels. Except for the central mullion to the windows the aluminium jamb frames extend up through the transom highlights.

The corners of the curtain wall are well detailed with a recessed joint, so that the spandrel and glazing frame abutt at an anodized aluminium angle frame, while the base of the curtain wall

spandrel is finished at the slab edge with a neat anodized aluminium angle frame. The spandrel enameled metal tray paneling is face screw fixed to the sub-frame.

Internally the curtain wall façade is lined with plasterboard and an inner powder coated aluminium window has been fitted to the windows providing a cavity for insulation.

The MLC Building was the first office building in Canberra to utilize system building, combining repetition and modular planning with the lightness of steel framing and an aluminium framed curtain wall that provided a thin lightweight economical external façade. Its design was contemporaneous with the MLC Building North Sydney, it followed developments in international modernism and represents the development of high-rise curtain wall office buildings in Canberra.

The other architectural elements of the Post-War International style (1940-60) displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- Overhang for shade, (the original 1964 top floor roof overhang);
- Plain, smooth wall surface, and
- Contrasting texture, the spandrels and the original wall tiles.

Bates, Smart & McCutcheon is considered a key practitioner in the Post-War International style in Australia.

The office building is well maintained and in good condition, although much of the original interior has been altered. The enclosing of the top floor has had an affect on the architecture by removing the open feel at the roof level that was later to be associated with the following Late -Twentieth Century International style. This open form could be reinstalled when its heritage value is more appreciated. The ground level large areas of glazing, while not in keeping with the original, are a change that impacts on the architectural significance to a lesser degree.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

The MLC Building was the first multi-storey private office building designed and built in Canberra. It was constructed for The Mutual Life and Citizens' Assurance Company Limited. At the time it was one of a series of MLC buildings in Australia in the late 1950s, of which the most significant is the one in North Sydney, 1955, all by Bates, Smart McCutcheon.

The design for the office building began in early 1956 with the NCPDC endorsing the preliminary working drawings in May 1957. The early proposal was for "...a ground floor and 4 upper floors. A basement principally for plant requirements but with some accommodation for record storage..." The original proposal stated "The building generally will be of steel frame construction suitably fire protected, and will be built generally with lightweight off-site prefabricated components. The external walls generally shall consist of aluminium frame with glass and spandrel infill panels either fused glass, aluminium or Vitreous enameled steel sheet". It was proposed that the office would be 127' x 60'; 38.7m x 18.3m.

The proposed and approved materials and colour were: spandrels - Pittsburgh chargrey (altered from ICI 4 Aubergine); fused glass strip – charcoal blue; ceramic veneer – charcoal blue (as for MLC North Sydney); columns – C435 PELV glass mosaic, slate blue.

The estimated cost of the 1957 design was 375,000 Pounds.

In 1961 drawings were submitted to extend the building by adding five additional levels. The process of approval was made easier at the time by the "discovery" of a letter on file with the NCDC having approved an original nine-storey office building on 9.12.1960, even though at the time only five storeys were built to begin with. The upper levels were approved by the NCDC in September 1961, approval authorized by R B Landsdown, Secretary and Manager of the NCDC (subsequently Associate Commissioner).

The upper most level was designed to accommodate a caretaker's flat, mechanical plants, cooling towers and the lift over-run. The top floor originally included a recessed façade allowing the roof to over-sail forming an open 'verandah' roof overhang element

Internally there have been various fit-out changes with the ground level being altered on a number of occasions. Entry revolving doors were proposed in 1962, however, the both entries have automatic sliding glass doors.

While originally built for the MLC and named the MLC Building the office building has had many occupants and name changes: including the State Bank Centre, Colonial Building and is now the CPA Australia building.

A number of large high-rise office buildings with curtain walls were constructed internationally during the late 1940's and through the 1950's, predominantly in the USA. Possibly the first, but not a true curtain wall, was the Equitable Life Insurance Building, 1947, Portland, by Pietro Belluschi. The true curtain wall buildings included the United Nations Secretariat, New York, 1950, Le Corbusier and others; Lake Shore Drive Apartments, 1951, Mies van der Rohe; Lever House, New York, 1952, Skidmore Owings & Merrill; Seagram Building, New York, 1958, Mies van der Rohe; Inland Steel Building, 1958 and Chase Manhattan Bank, 1961, both by Skidmore Owings & Merrill.

"In Australia, modern architecture won acceptance during the 1950's through two building types: the curtain-walled office block and the radical, flat-roofed, glass walled private house. Office buildings designed by Bates, Smart & McCutcheon for the MLC insurance company exemplified the former;...What were at that time radical modern buildings were distinguished by their extensive use of steel, reinforced concrete and glass, ".

Bates, Smart & McCutcheon designed the first curtain wall office buildings constructed in Australia for the MLC Company Limited. In addition to these buildings having facades constructed with curtain walls they were also the first office buildings "in which lightweight construction and a modular system were employed." The first was the MLC Building North Sydney, 1955, which has in principle the same systems as the Canberra MLC Building. The main difference being that the clear windows in the North Sydney building extend the full width between columns while the Canberra building has an infill glazed panel centrally between columns that repeats the panel over the columns. The North Sydney building is a few storeys higher and is a long narrow building. Its upper level has the open overhanging roof the same as the Canberra building had in the 1964 extension prior to it being enclosed.

The most significant of all the curtain wall towers designed by Bates, Smart & McCutcheon was the ICI Building, Melbourne, 1957, which was at that time "a revolutionary curtain wall building and Melbourne's tallest (building)". This was a 'true' curtain wall system where the supporting lightweight frame was expressed and extended as a continuous vertical element to the whole façade, housing both the glazing and the spandrel panel.

Both the ICI building in Melbourne and the MLC building in North Sydney are listed by Heritage Councils as places of cultural significance. The RAI has placed both on their national heritage registers and the ICI building is placed on the UIA (International Union of Architects) register. The ICI building was considered at the time to be the most accomplished glass tower in Australia.

"In the 1960s Canberra suffered from the addition of several Commonwealth office blocks mostly dowdy, even awkward and ill proportioned. These were often on key sites, such as the 1964 buildings of the Bureau of Mineral and Natural Resources on Anzac Parade...Among the better buildings were Bates, Smart & McCutcheon's MLC Building, 1959 and 1964, and the ES&A Bank by C K McIntosh, 1963."

During the 1950s and 1960s there were few true curtain wall high-rise office buildings constructed in Australia. In Sydney, other than the North Sydney MLC Building: the steel framed Qantas House, 1957, by Rudder, Littlemore & Rudder, with its curved 46 metre high curtain wall façade with double glazing and enameled steel spandrels; Unilever House, 1957, Stephenson & Turner, Liner House, 1961, by Bunning & Madden (a low rise building with projecting shading devices); AMP Building, 1962, and the Sun Alliance Building, 1962, both by Peddle Thorp & Walker.

At the time these buildings were the “epitome of progress”. Later to be greatly criticized for the energy inefficiency due to their reliance on air-conditioning and predicted to be short lived as a building type, the curtain wall is now relatively common as a façade to office buildings with the advent of special glazing and two-skinned glazed walls, allied with computer technology to allow the building to ‘breathe’, provide both a cooling system in summer and a warming system in winter.

In a report prepared for the present owners of the office building at 161 London Circuit the engineer states that “The original curtain wall is one of the earliest examples of this façade type in Australia.”

The MLC Building can be compared and contrasted with the following later office developments in Canberra.

The ground floor columns with their wide spacing contrasts with the Civic Offices (North & South Buildings), London Circuit, City, 1961, by Yuncken Freeman Architects for the NCDC, with its colonnade at street level made up of closely spaced columns supporting the first floor over. The closely spaced structural columns and narrow windows, emphasizing the vertical, contrasts with the curtain walling and horizontal emphasis of the spandrels in the façade of the MLC Building. The ceramic tile lined columns of the Civic Offices repeated the original ceramic tiling of the MLC Building street level columns and perimeter edge beams, now removed.

The sophisticated proportions of the cantilevering horizontal planes of the façade of the ANZ Bank building, 1964, by C K McIntosh, that were designed using the ‘golden mean’, and the concealment of the structure behind the façade can be compared with the flush curtain wall of the MLC Building with its horizontal emphasis with regular spaced spandrels.

The curtain wall façade can be contrasted with the concrete horizontal patterned sunhoods and glazing of the Electricity House, 1968, Peddle Thorp & Walker. It can also be contrasted with the precast concrete facades of the CAGA Centre, 1974, by Fowell Mansfield Jarvis & Maclurcan and the Canberra House and Canberra Club. These two buildings have in common the horizontal expression of their concrete spandrels with the vertical expression of the columns clearly read as a secondary element in the façade. The heavy structural system of these three buildings contrasts with the lightweight horizontal aesthetic of the curtain wall of the MLC Building.

It is of interest to note that the most recent commercial office buildings being constructed in Canberra, including the buildings replacing the Benjamin Offices in Belconnen and the building replacing the Silverton Centre in City, have curtain wall facades. The commercial office design now utilizing the technology of special glazing would appear to have come full circle from the first multi-storey building in Canberra, the MLC Building, with its very early form of curtain wall façade.

Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon (1899-1981)

Bates Smart, as the firm is known today, is the oldest architecture firm in Australia and has been one of the largest. McCutcheon was articled to the firm prior to completing his studies in 1927 and soon became a partner, with the firm’s name changing to Bates, Smart & McCutcheon (BSM). In the 1930s his designs for the AMP Building, 1931, and the Buckley & Nunn’s men’s store won the major architecture award, the RVIA Street Architecture Medal. He was Director of the School of Architecture at RMIT, 1935-42. During WWII McCutcheon was Chief Architect of the Corps of Engineers of the US Army, South Pacific Area and it was during this period it is believed he was influenced by and learnt the understanding of repetitive building systems, prefabrication, dry systems of construction and the co-ordination of specialist teams. He brought this knowledge to his firm where he introduced office teams with architects and engineers combining within the firm on the new major projects. ICI is considered his curtain wall masterpiece. He shared his knowledge of office organization with his peers which lead to the formation of the practice group (committee) within the RAI A.

McCutcheon was awarded the RAI A Gold Medal in 1965 and was knighted in 1966.

The structural engineer Harvey H Brown, who signed the 20th March 1956 letter to the Department of Interior setting out the design proposal, also was a key BSM member of the design team for the

ICI building in Melbourne which was under construction at that time. He was an associate of the firm and was responsible for the engineering as well as the construction techniques utilized.

Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991

(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time

The creativity of the architecture firm Bates, Smart and McCutcheon is apparent in the design of the MLC Building, 1959, which was innovative when compared with other private and public office buildings built in Canberra. It was the first multi-storey office building in Canberra and is one of a group of innovative commercial office buildings designed by the nationally significant architect Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon in the late 1950s in Australia: others include the MLC Building North Sydney, 1955, and the ICI Building, Melbourne, 1957.

The modular grid planning, structural system with its lightweight floors on steel frame, as well as the curtain wall façade with its alternate bands of aluminium windows and ribbed spandrels were innovative.

The 'modern' design of the office building demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the 1950s in Australia. This new International style won acceptance during the 1950's through multi-storey curtain-walled office blocks and the radical, flat-roofed, glass walled private house. The MLC Building is a very good example of this new radical development: Bates, Smart and McCutcheon exemplify the design with the use of lightweight structures incorporating steel framing and curtain wall facades.

(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group

The MLC Building is a very good example of the Post-War International style (1940-1960) with its cubiform overall shape, curtain wall (modified form), large sheets of glass (not original) and structural frame expressed. The latter two displayed at the ground level. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architecture firm of Bates, Smart & McCutcheon.

The following design features are of additional significance; overhang for shade, (the original 1964 top floor roof overhang); plain, smooth wall surface, and contrasting texture, (the wall tiles and spandrels).

The office building is highly valued by the RAIAs as an excellent example of this style of architecture by a leading nationally significant architect.

Bates, Smart & McCutcheon is considered a key practitioner in the Post-War International style in Australia.

(iii) A place which demonstrates a distinct way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost, or is of exceptional interest;

The design of the office building demonstrates an important development in architectural style that began after WWII. Modern architecture, including the International style, was the most important architecture of the 20th Century. Multi-storey glass façade buildings had as their origins the work of Mies van der Rohe. Bates, Smart McCutcheon introduced to Australia post-war international style office buildings of radical designs, featuring the extensive use of steel and glass. Canberra is one of the few 20th Century designed cities in the world. The combination of modern architecture and urban design is of exceptional interest.

(v) A place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type;

The MLC Building is the only pre 1960 multi-storey office building in Canberra. The curtain wall façade system is the first and would appear to be the only intact example of this type of modified curtain in Canberra, where the system expresses an independence of the façade from the structure through an emphasis on the horizontal incorporating unbroken alternate bands of glazing and spandrel panels bestowing a sleek simplicity upon the facade. The curtain wall façade plays no structural role, the structure is not expressed and there is no masonry element exposed.

(vi) A place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principle characteristics of that class;

The office building is a notable example of the class of commercial multi-storey buildings of its time (1950s) designed in the Post-War International style. It contains the key elements of the style in an economic form and it has features that demonstrate the principle characteristics of the class; its size and form, location within a commercial precinct and internal design that accommodates multiple tenants with functional space to cater for reception and interaction, general offices, communal staff areas and service areas.

The design resolves its urban setting with an accomplished methodology through the use of the curtain wall facades turning the street corner. The design and choice of materials typify the adoption of modernity and internationality in Australia. It demonstrates a design response to the Canberra planning authorities and building industry at the time.

The MLC Building is a notable example of a collection of office buildings designed by Bates, Smart & McCutcheon for the MLC insurance company in Australia. **With reference to the ACT, the building is the first is the only identified commercial building designed by the firm.**

(vii) a place which has strong or special associations with person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history

The office building is important for its association with Bates, Smart & McCutcheon and in particular Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon who played a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects to practice in Australia.

He shared his knowledge of architecture practice and office organization with his peers, which led to the formation of the practice group (committee) within the RAIA.

McCutcheon was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1965 and was knighted in 1966.

The MLC Building is featured in an important study, 'Post WWII Multistoried Office Buildings in Australia (1945-1967) undertaken by Jennifer Taylor for the AHC, 1994, in which she states: "Among the better buildings were Bates, Smart & McCutcheon's MLC Building, 1959 and 1964, and the ES&A Bank building by C K McIntosh, 1963."

The office building was instrumental in demonstrating the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments.

The office building occupies a dominant site on a key corner block on London Circuit and Petrie Plaza in Civic. It is a part of a precinct of commercial buildings and is diagonally opposite the North Building, which is a part of Canberra's most important urban plaza, Civic Square. The building demonstrates the stage in Canberra's post federal planning history of development of the commercial centre of Canberra. This stage was coincident with the influence of the Modern (International) style, when building design adopted modern functional approaches.

The multi-storey office block as a type of commercial development reflects national and international trends of increased post war economic prosperity. Similar developments occurred in cities throughout Australia and worldwide and are characterized by buildings of increased height.

The building also has associations with the insurance industry. It was designed specifically as premises for the MLC insurance company as well as commercial office rentable space by the

architect who was designing all their major offices in Australia, and continued to be used as offices and as a bank following the sale to the State Bank and the Colonial Bank. It demonstrates the development of the insurance office building as a commercial institution located within the Central Business District in Australia.

(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site

Through its architectural style, planning and urban form this building is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners. Its architecture is characteristic of the Post-War International style.

The architecture of this office building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Post-War Architectural styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. This building is a very good example of the style. Its innovative planning and structure contributes to its significance and educational heritage.

It contributes to the understanding of the insurance office building as a particular class of commercial building and demonstrates developments in the characteristics of that class. It demonstrates the adoption of modern forms of architecture by insurance institutions. It also contributes to an understanding of Canberra's commercial development in the late 1950s.

The MLC Building can be compared and contrasted with the following later office developments in Canberra.

The ground floor columns with their wide spacing contrasts with the Civic Offices (North & South Buildings), London Circuit, City, 1961, by Yuncken Freeman Architects for the NCDC, with its the colonnade at street level made up of closely spaced columns supporting the first floor over. The closely spaced structural columns and narrow windows, emphasizing the vertical, contrasts with the curtain walling and horizontal emphasis of the spandrels in the façade of the MLC Building. The ceramic tile lined columns of the Civic Offices repeated the original ceramic tiling of the MLC Building street level columns and perimeter edge beams.

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References

Other Information Sources

