

Manchester Unity Building

Address 91-107 Swanston Street, Melbourne

Practice Barlow, Marcus R

Designed 1929

Completed 1932

History & Description The Manchester Unity Building was constructed 1930-2 by Walter Cooper Pty Ltd to meet the corporate needs of the Manchester Unity Group, a friendly society then with over 28,000 members. The twelve storey building, located prominently on the corner of Collins Street and Swanston Street, has a concrete encased steel structure and is clad with moulded terra cotta faience. The overall effect is one of a modern commercial Gothic style. The structure is crowned with a corner tower of soaring, diminishing buttresses in a style was inspired by Raymond Hood's competition-winning design for the Chicago Tribune Building, which received worldwide publicity when completed in 1927.

The exterior facade is clad in biscuit coloured terra cotta faience. The faience is intricately moulded to produce continuous narrow columns and shafts rising up the facade, serving to emphasise the verticality of the building. The bulk of the building extends to 40.2metres, which was the height limit for central Melbourne at the time. Prominence is given to the corner by the tower, which soars above the main bulk. Towers were permitted to break the city's height limit as long as they did not contain occupiable rooms. Internally there is extensive use of various Australian marbles as cladding to the walls. The ground floor lobby ceiling and cornices have high-relief depictions of Aborigines, Australian flora and fauna as well as transport, building and primary industries. Cornice plaster panels in the corridors of all the floors carry depictions of the friendly society's role in welfare provision. (VHR Citation #H0590)

Statement of Significance The Manchester Unity Building is important example of Inter-War Skyscraper Gothic. With its soaring vertical emphasis, it was a daring break from the conservative palazzo architecture of the 1920s, which was typified by large and dominant cornices.

The Manchester Unity Building is aesthetically significant for its intact Art Deco interiors. The intricate plaster panel cornices and ceilings, the use of marble, and the inlays to the lift cars and sliced timber veneers in the boardroom all display a high standard of artistic workmanship that is without par for a building of this period.

The building is architecturally significant as the most important achievement of noted architect Marcus R. Barlow (1890-1955).

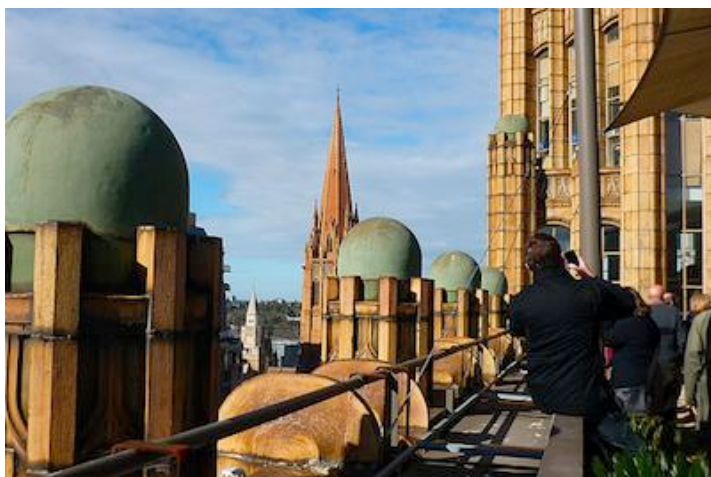
Criteria Applicable N1 - Significant heritage value in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or period of design.
N2 - Significant heritage value in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.
N5 - Having a special association with the life or works of an architect of significant importance in our history.



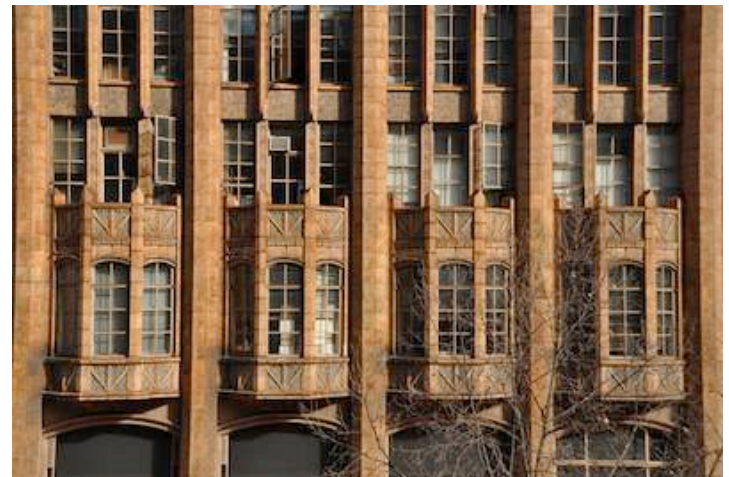
Swanston Street view in 1935, Rose Series [SLV]



Tower detail 2008, photo by syam C [flickr.com]



Symbols of fertility at roof level 2009, photo by tismselfstorage [flickr.com]



Detail of 2nd storey bay windows 2010, photo by Philip Holgate [flickr.com]