



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

The stripped classical style, and the quality of detailing at the place creates a building of significant interest. (Criterion 1.1)

The strongly modelled facade and overwhelming vertical scale of *Commonwealth Bank* ensures an imposing presence in the streetscape of the Northam business district, reinforcing the notion of a stable institution. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The first floor living quarters built to accommodate the manager and his family represent a way of life no longer practised. (Criterion 2.1)

Commonwealth Bank is significant for its association with the Commonwealth Government's programme to create employment during the depression years of the 1930s. (Criterion 2.2)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Commonwealth Bank contributes to the community's sense of time and place with the association of the role Northam experienced as a garrison town and later as a migrant centre. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

Commonwealth Bank is a comparatively rare example of a transitional style of architecture applied to a rural branch of the Commonwealth Bank and demonstrates the development of a "house" style of architecture. The inclusion of residential accommodation, whilst not common practice today, was usual in the period in which the bank building was constructed. (Criterion 5.2)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Commonwealth Bank is representative of a sturdy architectural style adopted by the Commonwealth Bank to symbolise the stability of the institution. The formal monumentality and imposing grandeur of the facade, in a rural branch, emphasises the importance of the town of Northam at the time. The introduction of stylised features of the Inter-War Art Deco period signifies a transition from the earlier, Inter-War Beaux-Art style. (Criterion 6.1)

12.3 CONDITION

Commonwealth Bank is in very good condition. Past programmes of refurbishment have ensured that the building has been well maintained. The first floor rooms are substantially empty, but intact. There is some evidence of environmental damage to the areas not in constant use.

12.4 INTEGRITY

The original intention of the banking function is intact although the upper floor residential function has been superseded. This could be reinstated as there has been little structural alteration but it is unlikely to suit current accommodation requirements. *Commonwealth Bank* retains its integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

The upper floor of *Commonwealth Bank* retains much of the original form and fabric and, overall, the building has a moderate degree of authenticity. The alterations to the proportions of the ground floor, particularly the banking chamber, and current surface finishes are markedly different from the original space.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Carolyn Denham-Shade, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Katrina Chisholm, Graduate Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Commonwealth Bank is a two-storey, cement-rendered, brick building constructed in 1934 to provide increased banking facilities for the town of Northam. A single-storey addition (in keeping with the original building) providing extra banking area was constructed between 1951 and 1952.

The town of Northam is situated 100 kilometres east of Perth, in the Avon Valley. This fertile valley, explored by Ensign Dale in 1830, attracted settlers, interested in agriculture, of the Swan River Colony who were eager to obtain large grants of land. Between 1830 and 1870, Northam developed as an important agricultural area and service centre for other Avon Valley towns.

In 1879, Northam was established as a municipality and in the 1890s when Northam became 'the point of departure for the railway to the Western Australian goldfields ...'¹ the town prospered as miners purchased stores and equipment for their journey. Between 1905-1910, much more of the land in the Avon Valley and the surrounding area was acquired by farmers who used new methods to increase and improve agricultural yields from their properties.

In 1911, '... The Commonwealth Bank of Australia was created in terms of the Commonwealth Bank Act of 1911. The Act empowered the Bank to conduct both savings and general (trading) bank business, with the security of a Federal Government guarantee.'² Until this time Australian savings banks had been privately owned. On 13 January 1913, the Commonwealth Bank commenced business in Western Australia and '... the 164 Post Offices throughout the state including Northam ... commenced acting on behalf of the Commonwealth Bank.'³

Northam prospered and grew during the early to mid-1920s, however this expansion came to an abrupt halt at the end of the decade, After the crash of the stock market in 1929, and the subsequent collapse of Australia's rural export markets unemployment was widespread.

On 31 October 1931, the State Savings Bank amalgamated with the Commonwealth Bank and on 2 November 1931, the Northam Branch of the Commonwealth Bank '... commenced operations as a Savings Bank only Branch, in the ex-State Savings Bank of Western Australia's office ...'⁴

¹ Garden, Donald S. *Northam - An Avon Valley History* (Hesperian Press, 1979) pp. xiv, 288.

² Banking Operations, Group Support, 'History of the Commonwealth Bank's Representation at Northam WA 1931-1953' (courtesy of the Commonwealth Bank Archives Section, Sydney), p.1.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2.

The premises were shared with the Lands Department and The Agricultural Bank.

This was not a satisfactory situation and so in December 1931, a shop in Fitzgerald Terrace was leased to be used only by the Commonwealth Bank for their operations. This independence resulted in the Northam bank being given Branch status. In order to establish more permanent premises land next to the leased premises was purchased for £600.

The Commonwealth Government in an attempt to alleviate unemployment instigated a number of projects including expansion of public works and construction of Government buildings. Amongst these were the erection of substantial bank premises for the Commonwealth Bank throughout Australia. By 30 November 1933, plans for a new bank in Northam were drawn up. These plans were amended on 9 January 1934 and showed the ground floor with front entry that led to public space and service counters. A manager's office was shown on the left of the entry and a room and store to the right. Working space was situated behind the service counters. A w.c, store, strong room and laundry were shown at the rear of the place. On 28 January 1934, the plans were altered again. The final plans showed the working space and laundry reduced in size. The first floor plan showed a manager's quarters which included a sitting room, living room, kitchen, hall, two bedrooms, bathroom, toilet and sleep-out.⁵

In 1934, Todd Bros of West Perth began the construction of *Commonwealth Bank* it being described as:

... a distinctive double-storey cement rendered brick building, in the familiar Commonwealth Bank style of the time comprised ground floor banking chamber with upstairs manager's residence ... Fluted columns guarded the steps to the central entrance vestibule porch at ground floor level and extended through the verandah immediately above at the first floor level ... completed at a final cost of £4,484/1/5 ... and was opened on 11 February 1935.⁶

During World War II a military camp was set up in Northam with the result that thousands of soldiers brought money and business into the town. In addition to banking services *Commonwealth Bank* was, '... involved in raising funds on behalf of the Commonwealth Government in the form of Commonwealth Bonds (and) ... also acted as an agent for the meat and clothing rationing authorities'.⁷

After the war ended in 1945, despite military forces vacating the town, the population increased with the influx of migrants and refugees that were housed in camps in and around the Northam area. The extra people, the expansion in the surrounding agricultural areas, and a boom in wool production meant more facilities were required in the town. Accordingly, many business premises at the time expanded to meet the demand.

⁵ Plan 4650, Plan 4723, Plan 303, courtesy Commonwealth Bank Property Department, Perth.

⁶ Photo 1-3, courtesy of the Commonwealth Bank Archives Section; Banking Operations, Group Support, 'History of the Commonwealth Bank's Representation at Northam WA 1931-1953' courtesy of the Commonwealth Bank Archives Section, Sydney, p. 3.

⁷ 'History of the Commonwealth Bank's Representation at Northam WA 1931-1953', p. 3.

In 1947, land adjoining *Commonwealth Bank* was purchased and when in 1949-50 ' ... work and public space ... was limited and was found to be severely taxed ...' it was decided that additions should be made to the place.⁸

Plans drawn between July 1950 and July 1951, show proposed alterations to *Commonwealth Bank*, noting that:

all new work to match existing work in every respect ... Lateral extensions were carried out ... providing increased work space ... a new counter housing three tellers boxes, installation of fluorescent lighting in a new acoustic ceiling ... carried out by W. Fairweather & Son at a cost of £11,664/8/10. During alterations the branch operated from temporary premises ... operations returned to the renovated branch ... on July 1952.⁹

Between the 1960s and 1980s, Northam continued to grow and develop as a major regional service centre for the surrounding farming communities. Commercial premises, recreational facilities and community services expanded, extensive demolition of old buildings took place, especially in the town centre. Many businesses built new premises or extended present ones.

Plans drawn up in 1985, show proposed alterations and renovations to *Commonwealth Bank* including: the installation of an air cooled condensing unit, new drainage system, and new roof sheeting to the 1951 extension. Further upgrading works in 1992 including new counters, demolition of the wall parallel to the strong room, removal and bricking up of the existing rear door and additions to partitions on the ground floor.¹⁰

In 1996, *Commonwealth Bank* continues to be used as a bank. The upper-storey rooms, built as the living accommodation for the manager and his family, are now used for storage. The exterior fabric of the place remains much the same as when built in 1934, the additions made in 1951-52 are sympathetic to the original design.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Commonwealth Bank at 181-183 Fitzgerald Street is a two-storey commercial building located in the central business district of Northam. A narrow laneway separates *Commonwealth Bank* from neighbouring buildings to the north-east and a single width driveway provides access to the rear of the site to the south-west. A single-storey brick garage with a tiled roof is located behind the main building and is the only other structure on the site.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Plans 199, 199A, Plan 205, courtesy Commonwealth Bank Property Dept, Perth; 'History of the Commonwealth Bank's Representation at Northam WA 1931-1953', p. 3; Photo 4-7 courtesy Commonwealth Bank Property Dept, Perth; & the Commonwealth Bank Archives Section, Sydney.

¹⁰ Parry and Rosenthal Architects, Drawing H.S. 1, October 1985; Plan, Barry Robinson, Architects and Assoc. Pty Ltd, May-June 1992, courtesy Commonwealth Bank Property Dept. Perth.

The formality and robust monumentality of *Commonwealth Bank* makes an impressive and contrasting contribution to the streetscape reflecting the stability of the nature of the institution. Plans were prepared in Canberra by the Department of Interiors Works and Service Branch and develop the common house style of the Commonwealth Bank. The verticality and overwhelming scale of the gently curved entrance portico composed of double height, fluted columns with Corinthian capitals dominates the street elevation which was originally symmetrical and is representative of the Inter War Beaux Arts style.

This facade also presents stylistic elements of the Inter War Art Deco period including the stepped roof parapet which reaches a central apex; the zigzag frieze in the entablature; the string coursing beneath the windows and the first floor balcony and the decorative ornamentation formed by the window bars.¹¹ This dichotomy of styles presents an interesting transitional period in the development of the Commonwealth Bank style. The remaining elevations are less imposing and more domestic in scale and nature.

The building is constructed with cement rendered load bearing brick, a timber upper floor and hipped, tiled roof. The ground floor houses banking facilities and what was originally the manager's residence on the first floor now provides staff kitchen, toilets and storage space. Some of the upper floor rooms remain predominantly empty.

The building was not constructed according to the early drawings, which show the manager's office to the left of the central public space and the stair hall on the right. The office area is shown occupying the central portion of the building and the strong room with reinforced walls, toilets and a laundry for the upstairs residence are located at the rear. Upstairs, the bedrooms and bathroom of the manager's family are shown along the south-west wall, with a passageway separating the kitchen, living and sitting rooms located along the north-east. A sleepout of lightweight construction extends from the rear. Drawings for the extension of the building in 1951 show that the location of the manager's office and stairwell, the rear rooms and the first floor planning had been reversed around the central, longitudinal axis.

The lateral, single-storey addition to the south-west of the building is in keeping with the original construction, continuing the same surface finishes and window treatment. The new work is distinguishable from the earlier portion of the elevation, establishing a new building line set back from the original.

Subsequent refurbishments of the banking chamber have seen the loss of many of the original features and detailing at ground floor, although much of this detailing is evident and intact at the first floor and in the stairwell. An early photograph, c.1935, shows timber panelled counters, glazed screens and significant interest in the ceiling detailing and

¹¹ Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989) pp. 162, 163 & 188-191.

ornamentation of the expressed beams.¹² It is uncertain whether this level of ornamentation remains, obscured by a lower ceiling level.

The first floor rooms are substantially intact and of the original proportions, although the central room on the north-east has been refurbished with the introduction of partitions to provide staff toilet facilities. The original timber joinery in the picture rails and internal doors and windows which include decorative glazed panels have been retained. Also significant are the ceilings which are noteworthy for the stylised Art Deco plaster mouldings displaying a different pattern in each of the main rooms. The staff kitchen houses a large ceramic tiled, fireplace although the opening has been boarded up. An external timber staircase provides access to the kitchen and upper floor from the rear courtyard.

Tighter security measures have necessitated the placement of metal grilles over the ground floor windows and the glass louvred panels of the rear sleepout. Black anodised metal sections, fitted internally, across the boarded windows, provide additional security in the sleepout.

The building is in good condition having been in constant use since construction. Changing technology and the public face of the bank have instituted occasional refurbishments. Regular maintenance has been applied to those areas in constant use whereas some environmental effects are evident where the rooms are underutilised.

13.3 REFERENCES

National Trust Assessment Exposition, 15 January 1980.

¹² Photo 1-3, courtesy of the Commonwealth Bank Archives Section.