



# REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES- ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

## 11. ASSESSMENT OF 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

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is a significant example of the Inter-War Beaux-Arts style of architecture, of which there are few examples in Perth. The building is characterised by a well controlled and confidently handled exterior facade. The interior of the building is light filled, elegant, airy and gracious. The architectural qualities of the building contribute a refined, sensitive but strong ambience, in keeping with its purpose as a government financial institution. (Criterion 1.1)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is significant for its use of steel frame construction, allowing monumental construction characterised by large open spaces inside the building. (Criterion 1.2)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth*, in association with the *General Post Office* and the more recent *Albert Facey House* defines the western side of Forrest Place by providing an unbroken line of Commonwealth and State Government buildings to one side. Together with the *Railway Station* to the north these buildings create the civic ambience of Forrest Place. *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is a significant building in the creation of this ambience. (Criterion 1.4)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* defines the southern end of Forrest Place and, with its strongly modelled facade and well defined corners, gives a sculptural quality to Forrest Place and contributes a vital streetscape element to the Forrest Place Precinct. (Criterion 1.4)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is closely associated with the provision of Commonwealth Government and banking services in Western Australia. (Criterion 2.1)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is closely associated with the Commonwealth Government's programmes of employment, during the Depression of the 1930s, through public building and infrastructure programmes. (Criterion 2.2)

### **11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE**

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#### **11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE**

That *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is valued by the community is illustrated by its listings and classifications with the RAIWA (WA), Perth City Council, National Trust (WA) and Australian Heritage Commission. (Criterion 4.1)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* contributes to the community's sense of place through its banking activities, and as a locale for civic activities in the forecourt and Forrest Place. (Criterion 4.2)

### **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

#### **12. 1 RARITY**

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is one of only a few Inter-War Beaux-Arts buildings in Perth. It is the only bank in Perth with such a substantial head office. Its relationship to the *General Post Office* next door, emphasises its architectural qualities and importance in the architectural stock of Perth. (Criterion 5.1)

#### **12. 2. REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is highly representative of the Inter-War Beaux-Arts style of architecture. It demonstrates all the major characteristics of the style. (Criterion 6.1)

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was representative of the architectural style used for banking head offices in the early twentieth century. It is also representative of the changes in styles of banking practice and technology in the late twentieth century. (Criterion 6.2)

#### **12. 3 CONDITION**

The building has undergone renovation in 1987 which reinstated the architectural features for which it is significant. The building currently undergoes regular maintenance and upkeep. Ongoing work is done in consultation with registered architects, including the architect responsible for the restoration, Barry Robinson.

#### **12. 4 INTEGRITY**

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* has a high degree of integrity. The building was designed as a bank and continues to be used for that purpose.

#### **12. 5 AUTHENTICITY**

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* has had major, unsympathetic interventions to the banking chamber in the 1970s which resulted in a diminution of the authenticity of this area. Renovations, undertaken in 1987, incorporated new technology, air conditioning, computer wiring and other modern amenities while renovating the original fixtures and design intent of the 1933 construction. Recovery and replacement of the original fixtures has increased authenticity of the fabric, while new work matches as closely as possible the style and design of the original.

## 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

### 13.1. DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is a six storey stone clad building (with basement) built in 1930-1933 as a state head office, banking chamber and associated offices. It was built for the Commonwealth Government of Australia.

In 1911, Perth town lots V10 to 16, between Murray and Wellington Streets, were acquired by the Commonwealth Government for the accommodation of government instrumentalities in one centre - General Post Office, the head office of the Commonwealth Bank and Customs Department.<sup>32</sup>

In 1916, plans were made to create a street running between Murray and Wellington streets and to create a civic precinct at a point directly facing the gateway to the city: the Railway Station. The new buildings would face this new street and all were preferably to be of a similar design.<sup>33</sup> Despite initial problems in ceding land for the new street and creating an area of suitable width, Forrest Place was finally created in 1924.<sup>34</sup> By this time, the General Post Office, begun in 1914, had been insitu a year. It took another six years before *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was begun. The Customs Department building was never built.

Plans for the bank building were drawn up in 1929, shortly after the construction of the Commonwealth Bank Building in Martin Place, Sydney (1928).<sup>35</sup> The Perth building was designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works under the direction of John Smith Murdoch, Commonwealth Government Architect. The plans carry the signature of Thomas Hill, the Director General of Works.<sup>36</sup>

Murdoch designed the bank in the Beaux-Arts style, which not only responded to the design principle in the similarly styled *General Post Office*, next door, but was also in the same style as the head office of the Commonwealth Bank in Martin Place in Sydney which had been completed the year before.<sup>37</sup> Murdoch was responsible for the design of all three buildings and also had a 'leading connection with the design of practically all Commonwealth built works during the above period [1904-1928].'<sup>38</sup> The style was ebullient and self confident and expressed prosperity - a quality sadly lacking in Australia at the time of its construction. Australia was suffering

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<sup>32</sup> Pitt-Morison, M. "Settlement and Development: The Historical Context" in Pitt-Morison, M. and White, J. (eds) *Western Towns and Buildings* (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1979) pp. 61, 67.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p.131.; Plans dated 14 October 1929.

<sup>36</sup> Plans dated 14 October 1929.

<sup>37</sup> 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. 162-3.

<sup>38</sup> Murdoch's application for registration with the Architects Registration Board of Victoria cited in Rowe, D. *John Smith Murdoch., Early Commonwealth Government Architect of Australia: Toward the Design of Provisional Parliament House.* (S.A.H.A.N.Z., Conference, Perth, 1993) p. 7.

from a four year depression in the economy. This depression was very severe, with many out of work and hardship in the community. The confidence of the business community had failed, particularly the financial sectors and the building of *Commonwealth Bank, Perth*, by the government, was seen to have a dual purpose - to create jobs during the construction and to symbolise the strength and reliability of the Commonwealth government and the Commonwealth Bank. By choosing the style, Murdoch metaphorically harked back to the earlier Depression-free years while underpinning the symbolism of strength, success and security of the Government.

Construction commenced in April 1930 under the direction of R.M. Baxter.<sup>39</sup> The local timber firm of Bunnings supplied the jarrah timber. Stone was quarried from the Greenmount Quarry and transported by dray to the site.

Finished in 1933, *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was officially opened on 22 March 1933, by The Governor of Australia, E.C. Riddle, Esq. and the Chairman of Directors, Sir Robert Gibson.<sup>40</sup>

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was the Perth head office of the Commonwealth Bank and consequently the design of the building reflected the latest technologies that a modern, head office should have had. The building was fitted with a night safe, 'a new feature of banking practice in Perth.'<sup>41</sup> Safety designs included an automatic fire alarm, multiple locks on doors and the door to the safe deposit was, 'constructed to resist all known methods of attack.'<sup>42</sup> As well as all these safety features, the building aimed to provide for the comfort of its customers and staff. As a government bank, the bank's philosophy was to be a "bank for the people" and to provide financial leadership in time of depression. The bank was a savings bank providing banking facilities for pensioners, servicemen, the disabled and the general public.<sup>43</sup>

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* proved an handsome addition to the City. The work it provided for many during the Depression instilled a sense of pride and gratitude for the bank that gave some hope to the community during a period of national crisis.<sup>44</sup> No other bank at the time, or since for that matter, has had as impressive a building as its head office. Aesthetically pleasing, the building was often used by street photographers as a backdrop to photographs.

In 1978, the Perth branch of the bank was under pressure to modernise its image to compete with the rapid growth and expansion of the newer banks in

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<sup>39</sup> Forrest Place Study Group, *Forrest Place: Urban Design Study*, part 2, Perth, July 1980, p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Information obtained from the foundation stones on either side of the Forrest Place entrance to the Commonwealth Bank.

<sup>41</sup> *West Australian*, 22 March 1933, p. 10e.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Chew, C, "A Conservation Case Study of the Commonwealth Bank, Forrest Place, Perth" (Curtin University, Department of Architecture, Student Report, September, 1988) section 1.5.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

Perth. The banking hall underwent major changes to its interior with replacement of many of the original features with modern materials, the installation of air conditioning and carpeting of the marble floors.

1986 saw the commencement of a redevelopment of Forrest Place to create a civic square to match the grandeur of the two Commonwealth buildings which faced onto it. The redevelopment, though primarily to create a public area and highlight the civic nature of the buildings and create a civic centre for Perth (akin to Martin Place in Sydney, upon which was also located a Commonwealth Bank) served to emphasise the architectural and aesthetic qualities of the buildings. The redevelopment renewed the sense of importance of both *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* and the *General Post Office*.

1986 also saw the emergence of a new banking policy in which the functions of the branch were changed to that of a Development Bank which meant that it was considered appropriate to change the ambience of the bank to be more relaxed and friendly. This was to be achieved by providing a more open-plan design and cutting back the solid barrier between customer and bank staff, without jeopardising security. The decision proved the impetus for renovating the banking hall to its original state. Mr James, the Bank Manager, was given permission to proceed, provided the budget did not exceed \$750,000.

The brief for the architect was to recreate the banking hall as closely as possible to its original setting of 1933, while making provisions for air conditioning and the introduction of computer based banking facilities. The firm Barry Robinson Architects Pty. Ltd., was appointed. Robinson aimed to achieve a balance and compatibility between the banking hall's heritage and cultural significance, and its modern usage.<sup>45</sup> He was limited by the constraints of time and budget. While there were few plans of the building, there were extensive photographic records of the building and some of the mezzanine had not been altered in the 1970s and contained original material.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the original timber suppliers, Bunnings, were able to assist with information about the original timber types used.<sup>47</sup> The job was completed in six months, on time and on budget.

## 13. 2. PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is a six storey stone clad building (plus basement) built in 1930-1933 as a head office, banking chamber and associated offices. It was built for the Commonwealth Government of Australia.

The building is sited on the corner of Murray Street and Forrest Place, next door to the *General Post Office* (1923) and, although less complex, sits well beside it, as an equally impressive building. The building is a modest version of the Commonwealth Bank building in Sydney (1928) which was built the year before *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was designed. It is in the Inter-War Beaux-Arts style, a style which was primarily reserved for "prestige"

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* section 6.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* sections 5.1-5.4.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* section 5.9.

buildings and exhibits a largeness of scale, symmetry, the use of classical motifs, and steel framed construction.<sup>48</sup>

*Commonwealth Bank, Perth* is built with mushroom columns and flat plate floors.<sup>49</sup> The proximity of the site to the drained Lake Kingsford, involved driving clusters of karri piles 9.0m long upon which to build.<sup>50</sup> Granite from Greenmount quarry faces the building up to the springing points of the arches with free-stone above that.<sup>51</sup>

The building features an unadorned base which is impressive in both its scale and its severity. The base supports a giant order of ionic columns which rise through three storeys, dividing the Forrest Place facade into three strongly modelled bays. On the Murray Street facade, the columns are grouped in pairs and divide the facade into five bays. Above the base, the stone work is rusticated with a smooth finish, and supports a cornice which visually defines the upper edge of the building. Above this is another storey which is set back and is very plain in decoration. This upper storey balances the effect of the heavy base.

The building has well defined edges and sits squarely on the site. The strongly modelled facade gives the building a strong plasticity. Because of its simplicity the base emphasises the verticality of the building by drawing the eye upward and increasing the impact of the scale of the building for the viewer.

Over the years, there has been no change to the exterior of the building, except for the inclusion of automatic teller machines on the Murray Street side of the building and in the foyer of the main entrance in Forrest Place. Most of the alterations, additions and modernisations have occurred within the banking hall of the building.

Internally, the building comprises six storeys: at ground level there is a large two storey-high banking chamber with a mezzanine at first storey height around the perimeter, above this there are three more storeys of office space. By using steel framed construction, the architect was able to create large spaces free of supporting walls within the building. Floors are supported by structural columns which run through each floor of the building, giving the interior spaces an 'open plan' feel.

The banking hall was formal and conservative but the moulded timber, plaster detailing, richness of solid jarrah, carefully detailed bronze and brass finishes together with the larger elements of columns, writing slopes, marble flooring, staircase, and well-proportioned windows provided a rich ambience. Jarrah panelling, high ceilings, marble floor and an elegant symmetry all bespoke integrity, and good management. The columns, six on either side of the banking chamber, rose to the first floor uninterrupted. They were

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48 Apperly, Irving, & Reynolds, pp. 162-163.

49 National Trust Assessment Exposition.

50 Pitt-Morison, M. "Settlement and Development: The Historical Context", p.68.

51 National Trust Assessment Exposition.

structurally supportive of the floors above and although thick and solid were proportionally tall, thus appearing well-proportioned and majestic and imparting an important design element to the banking chamber.

Teller boxes with single width, solid polished jarrah tops and curly grained jarrah infill panels to the counter fronts were located between the column bases.<sup>52</sup> Where each column met a counter top, a dado of timber was applied to the column to maintain continuity and balance in the use of the timber.

The plaster mouldings on the balcony walls of the mezzanine were a series of geometric grooves in squares and circles. If one looked closely the letter "c" for "Commonwealth" was discernible amongst the circles and square as a feature element, depicting the bank's status and importance.

The centre of the chamber featured brass and bronze writing slopes. Each slope was equipped with its own ink wells and calendar and the writing surface was covered in plate glass. The calendar was detailed in bronze and embossed glass, and the supporting undercarriage of the slopes were made of cast and extruded bronze. The slopes were slim and simple in form but carefully detailed.<sup>53</sup>

The floors were of natural off-white marble with grey detailing to the periphery of the teller boxes, centre and vestibule areas.

A staircase from the western end of the hall provided access to the mezzanine and the manager's office, which had a tall, internally glazed window that opened out and overlooked this staircase, permitting the manager a view into the chamber below.<sup>54</sup>

The banking chamber of *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* was a reflection of the exterior of the building, reiterating the strength and security of the bank's image. The use of quality materials contributed to this effect while evoking a sense of timelessness, tradition, stability and strength - all important metaphors during the financial upheaval at the time of construction.

In 1978, *Commonwealth Bank, Perth* underwent a number of modifications. The main banking hall was modernised, with the timber counters and teller boxes replaced by laminate and washable fabric. The jarrah wall panelling surrounding the columns was replaced by a hardboard backing, faced with matching fabric. The uncluttered line of columns at ground floor and mezzanine level were straddled by polished jarrah ply boxes, with planted jarrah cover battens to conceal duct work. Anodised registers were symmetrically inserted in the facing and fluorescent lights with continuous diffuser panels, provided light. Jarrah signage and partitioning was replaced by plastic and the bronze and brass writing desks were replaced by black,

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<sup>52</sup> Barry Robinson Architects Pty. Ltd: *Report on Restoration Works to the Forrest Place Branch, Commonwealth Bank of Australia* cited in Chew, Appendix.

<sup>53</sup> Chew, section 5.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* section 2.



laminated fixtures.<sup>55</sup> The original ceilings were hidden by suspended ceilings which concealed air conditioning duct work. The graceful bronze, open stair connecting the banking chamber with the mezzanine floor was removed and replaced by air conditioning with anodised aluminium supply and return air grilles. The plant room was located in the light well behind the staircase, completely destroying the translucency of the hall and excluding all natural light from the light well.<sup>56</sup> The marble flooring was stripped in some areas and the Banking Hall was carpeted for acoustic and maintenance purposes.

In 1986, the restoration of the Banking Hall was undertaken. As the requirements of the banking chamber had changed with the move towards being a Development Bank, and with computerisation, there was no longer a need for a large number of teller boxes. This allowed for the reinstatement of more open space in the centre of the Hall, as had been the original intention. In keeping with the more low key requirements, and assisting the original open plan intent, low brass grilles were used at the counters instead of the original high glass panels and the number of teller boxes was reduced and concentrated on one side of the hall and customer services and some processing on the other. The original writing slopes were re-instated.<sup>57</sup>

Air conditioning was accommodated unobtrusively by dropping the ceiling 900 mm. The new ceiling was based upon original ceiling details found in the Assistant Manager's office and finished it in a manner identical to the original.<sup>58</sup> The original light fittings were not reinstated, instead the 1970s lighting was changed to direct and indirect uplighting in brass wall-mounted fittings, with additional mood lighting in wall mounted venetian crystal chandeliers to both create adequate lighting and the appropriate atmosphere.

All synthetic finishes were replaced by curly grained jarrah panelling and polished jarrah counter tops, as close possible in interpretation to original jarrah work in the mezzanine and that shown in early photographs. Buffed brass was used for security grills, handrails, signposts, signage, ashtrays, planter boxes and capping. The budget did not enable the architect to replace the carpet and therefore it became necessary to merge the new colour schemes, with its colours and pattern design. A light blue fabric was used for the partition walls, and a variety of murals were placed on the walls of the banking hall and the vestibule. These murals were additions to the original fabric but added colour and texture while providing a pictorial story board of the past events that were associated with the banking chamber.<sup>59</sup>

The redevelopment of Forrest Place, in 1986, and the creation of a pedestrian precinct in both Forrest Place and Murray Street has altered the context of the building to its advantage. Today, the area is a civic mall and the building

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<sup>55</sup> Barry Robinson Architects Pty. Ltd: *Report on Restoration Works to the Forrest Place Branch, Commonwealth Bank of Australia* cited in Chew, Appendix.

<sup>56</sup> Chew, section 3.5.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* section 7.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* section 5.5.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* section 7.

provides a background for various social, civic, commercial and entertainment activities.

### **13. 3. REFERENCES**

National Trust Assessment Exposition

Australian Heritage Commission Data Sheet

Barry Robinson Architects Pty. Ltd: *Report on Restoration Works to the Forrest Place Branch, Commonwealth Bank of Australia*

Chew, C., "A Conservation Case Study of the Commonwealth Bank, Forrest Place, Perth" (Curtin University, Department of Architecture, Student Report, September 1988)