



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 1937 addition of *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind* is a fine example of the Inter-War Stripped Classical style. It is one of the few examples of a prominent Western Australian government institution which features strong abstract geometric (Art Deco) detailing. (Criterion 1.2)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The construction of the 1937 building demonstrates a commitment by the government, and community, to increase the vocational opportunities for the blind in Western Australia in the early twentieth century. (Criterion 2.2)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind, has performed an important social function since the turn-of-the-century, by providing a section of disadvantaged people in the community with vocational training and educational opportunities that would have otherwise been largely unavailable. (Criterion 4.1)

The 1937 building has social value in the community as the 'public face' of *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind*. An image of the building is used on the Institute's letterhead and various promotional material, including the Institution's annual reports. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

In the late 1930s, the use of abstract geometric details was common in the design of new commercial buildings in Western Australia, but it is rare to find this style of detail featured on a prominent government institutional building. (Criterion 5.2)

The 1937 addition to *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind* is one of the few designs by PWD architects in the Inter-War Stripped Classical style; the former *Perth Girls' School* (1936), in East Perth, is the other major example. (Criterion 5.2)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind is a good example of the Inter-War Stripped Classical style of architecture and displays the major characteristics of the style. (Criterion 6.1)

12.3 CONDITION

The 1937 building shows signs of weathering: render is crazed and some spalling has occurred. The building facade requires maintenance and repainting, but generally *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind* is in sound condition.

12.4 INTEGRITY

Although some spaces in the 1937 addition are now used for different functions, most of the building is still used for its original purpose. Overall, the integrity of *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind* is high.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

Little of the fabric and few of the Art Deco details of the 1937 building have been altered over the last fifty years. *The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind* is intact and retains a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind, constructed in 1937, is a two-storey addition to an earlier factory complex. It was built to provide additional workshop and showroom facilities.

This building facing, Whatley Crescent, is the focus of this assessment.

The Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind (previously known as the W. A. Institute and Industrial School for the Blind) was founded, in 1895, by a

group of prominent Perth citizens.¹ At the official opening ceremony it was noted that the Institute would be a permanent memorial to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.² The primary objective of the Institute was to provide employment for people, in receipt of a blind pension, who were able to work.³ The type of work carried out at the Institute involved the production of cane products, brushes, basket making, and matting.

From its establishment the Institute was successful, the number of students and workers increased and the original facilities were soon inadequate. A brush factory was constructed in 1902. In 1903, construction of new baths and toilets at a cost of £80, were carried out coupled with the purchase, by the Institute, of the two remaining blocks of land on the existing site. In the following years a new north wing was constructed. A new storeroom abutted the new wing, and the total cost of the improvements was £2,000. The new wing included a library, boys room and a portico on the ground floor, and dormitories and bathrooms on the upper floor.

By the 1930s, conditions had again become cramped and outdated; however, although the Depression had made it difficult to secure the finance required to keep the Institute open, the generosity of the community allowed the Institute to progress. In 1937, extensive additions and alterations were carried out by the Public Works Department (PWD). This major addition was designed by PWD architects, under the Principal Architect, Mr. A. E. Clare.

The additions were made necessary by an increased number of people at the Institute and an improvement in the production methods of the various industries.⁴ The following passage outlines details of the new administration and showroom block:

The tender of Messrs. Finlay and Stoneman has been accepted for extensive alterations and additions to the West Australian Institute and Industrial School for the Blind at Maylands. The work will cost £13,389. The plans which were prepared by the architectural division of the Public Works Department, provide for a two-storey brick building (136ft. by 140ft.) containing showroom, office suite and large general and furniture stores on the ground floor, and cane, wicker, paint, upholstery, and fitting shops on the first floor.⁵

¹ *West Australian* 5 December 1967, p. 8. The name change was agreed to on 4 December 1967. The royal prefix was granted by the Queen and the Institute was to under a Royal Charter.

² Henfry, T., 'The History and Care of the Blind of Western Australia', (unpublished, Claremont Teachers' College thesis, 1962), p. 1.

³ Henfry, p. 1.

⁴ Henfry, p. 14.

⁵ *Building and Construction* 30 April 1937, p. 4.

In the 1930s, the Modernist Movement had challenged many of the established principles of architecture. Architects were trying to find a new architectural expression; one that reflected the twentieth century machine age. The surface of buildings became more planar, traditional historical details were replaced by geometric patterns and overall the decoration was more simple. Frequently, walls and windows, together, formed a flat surface and the sculptural effect of light and shadow given by the modelling of the older styles were gone.⁶ The 1937 Administration and Showroom Building tried to address these architectural issues by a combination of a stripped classical form and Art Deco detailing.⁷

In addition to the construction of the two-storey brick building, extensive alterations were made to the pre-existing adjoining factory buildings. Alterations to the factory building included rooms for wood-working, light brushes, and heavy brushes, a bulk store on the ground floor, and separate shops upstairs for roll matting, binding and finishings, and mats. An existing wood and iron building was converted to contain large matting and cane stores. Other work included alterations and additions to the buildings used for cleaning, sorting and teasing of hair, the provision of an electric lift, a two-storey latrine block, water supply, sewerage and drainage, roads, fencing, fire service, and electrical installations.⁸

The years following World War II were comparable to those of the Depression and finance was difficult to obtain. However, the Institute progressed and, in 1952, the number of workers at the Institute had reached 100.⁹ There was insufficient suitable accommodation available, so a fundraising drive was made for additional buildings. Drawings, dated 1954, indicate the location of a proposed two-storey extension to the southern end of the main 1937 building. In 1955, a contract was let to erect further factory buildings, at a cost of £107,000.¹⁰ The southern extension completed the Whatley Crescent elevation establishing a strong classical symmetry.¹¹

Further building work was undertaken, in 1961, to erect a building that provided a training centre for pre-school blind children, additional accommodation and training facilities, and a hall for cultural and recreational purposes.¹²

⁶ Pitt Morison, M. and White, J., 'Builders and Buildings' in Stannage, C. T., (ed) *A New History of Western Australia* (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1981) p. 545.

⁷ Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989), pp. 164-167.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Henfry, p. 14.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 15.

¹¹ PWD Drawing 34058, dated March 1954 (BMA Plan Room).

¹² Henfry, p. 15.

As the Institute is still the only such facility in the state, a large number of men and women from country districts have been employed there over the years.

In 1994, the Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind (Inc) received a substantial grant from the Lotteries Commission to undertake the refurbishment of the exterior and internal lobby and the installation of a burglar and fire alarm system of the 1937 building. This is to be carried out in preparation for the Institute's centenary celebrations in 1995.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The 1937, two-storey alteration and addition at the corner of Whatley Crescent and Sixth Avenue, Maylands, is part of a complex of buildings that makes up the Royal W. A. Institute for the Blind, on a large block bounded by Whatley Crescent (north-west), Sixth Avenue (north-east), Guildford Road (south-east) and Central Avenue (south-west).

The building has a wide frontage, set back from Whatley Crescent, with a driveway and provision for several parking bays in front. Low brick walls stands either side of a central pathway, enhanced by a well maintained garden.

The dominant architectural characteristic of the building is its classical symmetry, with the central tower, topped by a flag pole, drawing attention to the main entry. An important element of 1930s architecture is the use of 'stepped' massing and this is incorporated in the stepping from the central tower to the two wings, and then to the paired porticos over the secondary side entries.

The building is constructed from load bearing brickwork, rendered to simulate large blockwork. The low, wide plane of the front facade is broken by deeply recessed double height vertical bands of windows. The main entrance is emphasised by a double storey geometrically decorated architrave and a precast cement spandrel above the doorway is decorated with a lively geometric pattern. Adjacent ventilation grilles repeat this motif. The classical elements of the design have been replaced with stripped abstract details. Simplified pilasters have geometric capitals, and a geometric precast cement frieze near the top of the building breaks the mass of the flat wall, and creates the illusion of there being a cornice and parapet. The recessed lower and upper, thin metal framed, windows are separated by a patterned precast cement spandrel. The use of chevrons, fountains, zig-zags and other abstract geometric (Art Deco) patterns was typical of the contemporary desire to break away from traditional, detailing.¹³

¹³ National Trust Assessment Exposition.

The reception area is within the prominent central tower and leads into what was originally the retail showroom, but is now a general display area. All the interior spaces are flooded with natural light from the large, vertical paned, windows.

A jarrah staircase leads to the upper floor work area where cane goods are produced. Large vertical paned windows also flood the work space with natural sunlight.

Art Deco details are noticeable in the internal public spaces. Symmetrically arranged columns display the fountain motif on their capitals, and the same motif is repeated on the adjacent wrought iron balusters. Jarrah doors are embellished with chrome handles featuring a 'stepped' design. Ventilators are sculptured with geometric patterns.

Following the construction of the southern extension, in 1955, there were some changes to the ground floor public spaces. The administrative office, with a fireplace and jarrah mantelpiece providing a focal point of interest, is now used as a Boardroom. Subsequently, the retail showroom was relocated in the building facing Guildford Road and the space used for general display. More recently, the secondary entry area in the northern wing has been converted to a Workskill office. This required alteration to the door. Generally the fabric of the building has been little altered.

13.3 REFERENCES

Henfry, T., 'The History and Care of the Blind of Western Australia', (unpublished Claremont Teachers' College thesis, 1962).

National Trust Assessment Exposition, December 1990.