



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

P&O Building is significant for the aesthetic qualities of its facade imparted by the rhythm and grouping of the arches balanced about the centre piece under the dominant pediment and the bold treatment of the arcades. (Criterion 1.1)

The place is significant as contributing to a streetscape of historic buildings of the same period and similar architectural style. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The place is significant as one of the several shipping offices erected following the opening of the deep water port at Fremantle in 1897 and reflects national investment in the growing prosperity of the State as a result of gold discoveries. (Criterion 2.1)

The place is significant as a fine example of the architectural design of prominent architect C Lancelot Oldham. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

As a prominent element in the Phillimore streetscape the place is valued for its contribution to the mercantile identity and historic character of Fremantle's West End. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

P&O Building is representative of the numerous shipping office buildings constructed around the turn of the century following the construction of the deep water port at Fremantle. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

The condition of the building is sound.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The place retains its integrity. The building remains in use as commercial office space on the ground floor, with the upper floor utilised by Notre Dame University for commerce studies.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The place retains a high degree of authenticity. Suspended ceilings, stud partitions and fluorescent lighting have been introduced into some areas, however the building fabric is substantially intact, with most of the original materials and details, ie pressed metal ceilings, plaster cornices, moulded timber skirting and architraves, etc., still evident.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary and physical evidence has been compiled by John Pidgeon Architect from material in the files of the National Trust of Australia (WA)

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

P&O Building was originally built for the Australian Union Steamship Navigation Company in 1903, and illustrates the wealth of Fremantle during the days of the gold rush.

The boom established Fremantle as a major trading port. Shipping beforehand had been spasmodic. There was no real harbour because the mouth of the Swan River was blocked and the colony had few people. The ports of Albany and Geraldton took most of the agricultural shipping.

A mail service run by a British shipping company was not profitable and the Company used the Crimean War as the loophole to break its contract. Local shipping was given a subsidy to service Fremantle. Most east coast companies left the west alone, preferring the shorter, more lucrative coastal runs between New South Wales and South Australia.

By the late 1880s, even that trade was struggling with cut fares, low cargo tariffs and strong competition. The gold rush in W.A. saved most of these ship-owners from financial ruin. Suddenly people from all over the world were clamouring for a ship to take them to Fremantle and cargo ships carrying goods and foodstuffs were not far behind.

Demand for berthing facilities led to the inner harbour being opened in 1897, allowing Perth to take its proper part in the rapidly expanding marine trade. Shipping companies which once ignored the port now rushed to build offices there.

In 1893, at the outset of the immigration to the west the Australian Union Steamship Navigation Company initiated a regular service between the eastern states and the west with the *Bulimba*. This service was augmented with other ships and, in 1897, the company established an agency in Fremantle. Their offices occupied various addresses in the port town until C. L. Oldham was engaged in 1903 to design the Phillimore Street building. S. B. Alexander was the builder.¹

The Australian United Steam Navigation Company (A.U.S.N.C.) was the oldest of the major Australian coastal steam navigation companies. It started as the Hunter River Company in 1839 to meet the demands of the New South Wales settlers. Initially it enjoyed the wool, beef and lucrative passenger trade.

Keen to capture W.A. trade, A.U.S.N.C. built several ships for the Fremantle-Sydney route, among them, the *Kanawana*, which was wrecked on a reef in Bass Strait.

Despite the initial boost, the gold rush was not enough to keep the growing Western Australian shipping industry afloat. Within ten years,

¹ 'The W. A. Mining, Building and Engineering Journal', 30 May 1903.

the industry was back to its price-cutting and under-the-counter tactics, which was to finish the system of a totally free enterprise.

With Federation, came a decision to form a regulatory shipping body. An agreement was eventually reached between major coastal shipping companies which led to a widespread upgrading of vessels.

A.U.S.N.C. flourished for a while, enjoying a monopoly of trade routes in both the Eastern States and Western Australia.

A decision of the Western Australian Government to form the State Shipping Service and the eroding of its east coast monopoly led to its decline and takeover by P & O in 1914.

Over the intervening years the building has continued to be used for mercantile office space. In 1996 the ground floor houses Maersk West Australia Line and the Danish Consul, and the upper floor is occupied by the University of Notre Dame (Australia)'s College of Business.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The two-storey building presents a wide frontage to Phillimore Street. The base of the building, to the height of the ground floor window sills is rockfaced granite stones set in rectangular pattern. Above the stone base the facade is worked in cement render with rustication at ground floor level and moulded into string courses and arch voussoirs at first floor level. The facade is divided into three sections and topped by a heavy cornice and entablature. The central section projects slightly and is surmounted by a prominent pediment, in the spandrel of which, are the initials A.U.S.N.C. entwined on a shield. Underneath the pediment, between two horizontal mouldings, is the name "P & O Building" in block lettering. The centre section of the facade is punctuated with three round arched openings at the ground floor and first floor levels. At ground floor level the arches lead onto an arcade with similar arched openings behind, leading into the building. The first floor level has a repeat of the three arches also fronting an arcade which stretches across the full width of the first floor. The flanking wings each side of the central section of the arcade also have three arched openings on each floor level.

The central bay and western wing of the ground floor is a large open commercial office. A staircase in the eastern wing rises from the ground floor to the first floor, where there are a series of rooms used for administrative and staff offices, tutorial rooms, and staff amenities. Suspended ceilings, stud partitions and fluorescent lighting have been introduced into some areas on both floors, however the building fabric is substantially intact, with most of the original materials and details, ie pressed metal ceilings, plaster cornices, moulded timber skirting and architraves, etc., still evident.

13.3 REFERENCES

National Trust of Australia (WA) files.