



**HERITAGE
COUNCIL**
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES – ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

PRINCIPAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC THEME(S)

- 3.2 Constructing capital city economies
- 4.6 Remembering significant phases in the development of settlements, towns and cities
- 7.6.1 Developing local government authorities

HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA THEME(S)

- 107 Settlements
- 112 Technology and technological change
- 401 Government and politics

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

The building is significant in exhibiting aesthetic characteristics of polished, hard textured, industrial building materials for the external finishes, the reduction of structural mass and the refinement of details resulted in a transparent 'glass box', unlike any other office building in Perth, and matched by few office buildings elsewhere in Australia. (Criterion 1.1)

The building is a prime demonstration of the principal modernist architectural ideals admired in Australia in the early sixties. (Criterion 1.2)

Council House, Perth is an architectural landmark in the streetscape of St George's Terrace. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2 HISTORIC VALUE

The building is significant for having introduced to Perth office buildings both a new level of purity in modernist architectural design and a consistency of minimalist detailing. The uninterrupted floor to ceiling glazing introduced a degree of transparency previously unseen in a commercial office building in Western Australia. (Criterion 2.4)

11.3 SCIENTIFIC VALUE

The building demonstrates an innovative use of contemporary building technology and structure, particularly with respect to the large expanses of uninterrupted floor to ceiling sheets of double-glazing. (Criterion 3.3)

11.4 SOCIAL VALUE

The building has a clear value not only as an acclaimed architectural landmark in its own right, but also as the focal point over three decades for newsworthy and often controversial decisions and social events involving many prominent people - Western Australians and visitors alike.

The civic identity of Perth has been bound up with that of *Council House, Perth*. As the public setting for the administrative, ceremonial and political activities of the premier - and oldest - municipality in Western Australia, Council House has held symbolic and practical meaning for a wide spectrum of metropolitan residents.

The image of Council House, of course, is not identical in the mind of each member of the community in general. Instead, the place is cherished among certain 'communities of interest' as being of special significance to them. In this regard, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (WA Chapter) has written to the City of Perth in support of retention of the place on architectural, historic and social grounds, while 42 members of the RAlA have made individual submissions in similar terms. (Criterion 4.1)

The building is also symbolic of the Perth's transformation into a modern city of the second half of the twentieth century, and contributes much to the 'sense of place' which people retain in the continuum of an evolving city. The building continues to appear frequently in tourism promotions, reflecting not only its architectural landmark status but also the community's identification of Council House with 'Perth' as a place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1 RARITY

The building is a rare intact example of an early 1960s modernist office building in Perth. The MLC (1957) and R&I Bank (1961) buildings represent an earlier generation of modernist buildings, the T&G (1960) and SGIO (1958) buildings have had their external cladding replaced, and the Commonwealth Bank (1962) in William Street and the ANZ Bank (1965) on St George's Terrace have been demolished. Dumas House (1964), although not dissimilar in character, does not display the same refinement of detail, or dazzling transparency. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Council House, Perth stands out amongst Australian office buildings of the 1960s as a fine example of minimalist modern architecture. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

Like many buildings of its period *Council House, Perth* suffered from the use of asbestos insulation, which was removed between 1995 and 1996. A major refurbishment was undertaken between 1997 and 1999. The place is now in good condition.

12.3 INTEGRITY

Council House, Perth continues to be used for the purpose it was originally built, namely, as an administrative centre for the City of Perth. The city library has been moved to the basement of the Law Chambers. Levels 2-4 have been leased out for private office accommodation. Level 11, which was an additional floor of accommodation obtained in the refurbishment (previously a plant level), now contains Civic Reception and Mayoral administration. The use of level 10 is solely for elected members' offices and dining facilities. Level 9 remains as

Council Chambers. Levels LGF, 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 are used for administration, with the CEO located on level 8.

Council House, Perth has a moderate to high degree of integrity.

12.4 AUTHENTICITY

The 1997-99 refurbishment campaign made significant alterations to the fabric of *Council House, Perth*. Certain basic design elements of the original building were incorporated, including the total reinstatement of the Facade T sun hoods, recreation of Ground Floor ceilings and marble facings, retention of original lift cars (modernised) and granite podium and entry foyer floors. Original paint colours to lift doors of Ground Floor Foyer and Level 9 were duplicated.

The Council Chamber level (Level 9) had the timber mosaic border and original colour carpet T Pattern (which was specially woven) reinstated. The circular Chamber outer walls were reused (although extended to accommodate larger patronage at Council Meetings), and the timber grooved ceiling was reinstated. The intention was to create a 'Memory Floor'.

The position of the lifts at the eastern end and the structural layout of the building were retained. Above-ground car parking at the rear of the building was relocated to an underground basement level car park with interconnecting access within the building.

Planning of all other floors should be considered as new, only retaining the standard module imposed by the external glazing for locations of internal partitioning and work station layout.

The entrance to the building from the terrace, passing the renovated original water fountains and ponds, is now on grade to meet access code requirements, doing away with the original steps. Access is now also available from the foyer level down to the rear LGF garden level.

Council House, Perth has a moderate degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The wording of this document has been adapted from Council House St Georges Terrace Perth Conservation Plan November 1993 by Schwager Brooks and Partners Architects and Heritage Consultants with amendments and additions by HCWA staff and the Register Committee.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The design of *Council House, Perth* was the result of a national architectural competition conducted by Perth City Council in 1960 - *the Perth Town Hall Competition*. Perth was scheduled to host the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1962 and civic leaders were inspired to construct a modern administrative building, to reflect the city's growing stature. The brief for the competition required two principal elements, Administrative Offices for the Council and a Public Suite, comprising Banqueting Hall, Auditorium and Town Hall, to replace the colonial Town Hall in Hay Street.

The winning design, one of 61, was submitted by architects Jeffrey Howlett and Don Bailey, who worked in the office of the renowned Melbourne architectural firm Bates, Smart and McCutcheon.¹ The assessors were Professor Brian Lewis, Albert Ernest Clare (Principal Architect, PWD), Leslie M. Perrott Jr. and Harry Seidler (architect of international renown). They described the design as

a direct and satisfactory solution. Detailed examination established it as being capable of development into a most dignified and efficient Town Hall.²

Howlett and Bailey subsequently moved to Perth to set up practice in partnership for the design and construction of the administrative building, the first stage of the project. The builder was J. Hawkins and Son Pty. Ltd. In 1962, the cost of construction was reported to be £1,500,000.³

As is often the case with architectural competitions, the winning design was not constructed as shown. Originally, the major part of the ground floor of the administrative offices (*Council House, Perth*) was to be unenclosed, providing the principal approach to the Public Suite, immediately to the south, which was linked by a bridge. The Public Suite component of the competition design was never built. The auditorium element, a major music facility now known as the Perth Concert Hall, was designed later by Howlett and Bailey and constructed on another site further east along St George's Terrace.⁴

Work on the excavations for the building commenced in October 1961 and in November, the pouring of the concrete foundations commenced.⁵ The ceremonial accommodation of *Council House, Perth* was completed in time for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1962, however the fit-out of the remainder of the building continued until March 1963. The building was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, on 25 March, 1963.

At the opening ceremony, the Queen unveiled a 2.4 metre high sculptural plaque set on a slim two-metre base.⁶ The base, a piece of granite from London's old Waterloo Bridge, carries the unveiling inscription. The granite was brought to Perth in 1939 when the bridge, opened in 1817, was demolished.⁷ The granite was stored in Perth for 23 years awaiting an appropriate opportunity for its use

1 *The Architect (WA)*, September 1960, p.18.

2 *ibid.*

3 *Daily News*, 1 December 1962, p.40

4 Bodycoat, R. "Statement of Architectural Significance", November 1992

5 National Trust of Australia (WA), "Council House", 9 May 1968, (Battye Library PR11359, p.3)

6 *West Australian*, 19 March 1963, p.11

7 *ibid.*

and much of it was used in *Council House, Perth*. The plaque, designed by Perth artist Geoffrey Allen, is copper gilt and bronze, with a design incorporating swans supporting a crown.

A 1963 article in *The Architect (WA)*, provides a description of the physical layout of the building.

In detail, public access to the Treasury and Parklands Department is direct, as is that to the library. The administrative block, by its wide extension and comparative lowness, gives an almost maximum working space in relation to its gross area. In view of very recent proposals for high neighbouring buildings, it would seem that distinction may be achieved by moderation rather than by competition in height.⁸

There were a number of details incorporated in the design that attracted particular attention at the time of construction. The area on which *Council House, Perth* stands is floored with local grey Mundaring granite.⁹ The building was designed so that natural and artificial lighting has maximum visual effect, both internally and externally. The uninterrupted floor to ceiling double glazing provides the building occupants with spectacular views of the city and the river, while the building has a unique semblance of transparency, particularly at night, prompting one journalist to write that 'it has the effect of a glittering diamond in the city when night falls.'¹⁰ The tiled T-shaped sunshades quickly became the subject of comical references to a particular Lord Mayor. Located at floor level on each storey and installed like stage lights, concealed illumination lights up the drawn venetian blinds and gives stark dramatic treatment to the sun hoods and fins which seem to stand end-on-end up the four walls of the building.

Prior to its opening, the construction of *Council House, Perth* received a great deal of attention in the press, the majority of comments being favourable. *Council House, Perth* was seen as a prestigious new building that would contribute to the attraction of Perth. This is reflected in a comment in a major article in the *Sunday Times* published on *Council House, Perth*,

Already hundreds of visitors have praised the architectural qualities of the building and its garden environment. *Council House* had become the envy of other cities. And already Perth people were proud of the building which will soon be the centre of the city's administration system.¹¹

The first seven floors provided office accommodation for various city council departments. The eighth floor was reserved for the Lord Mayor's suite and civic reception areas, and the ninth floor accommodated the Council chamber, Councillors' lounge and meeting rooms. The tenth floor housed dining facilities for staff and a private dining-room for Councillors.

The purpose built design of the eighth floor suites received particularly favourable comment in the contemporary press.

The eighth floor of *Council House* has given Perth a finer setting for creating good public relations than any other setting in the Commonwealth. ... The new reception centre, like most other parts of *Council House* commands a magnificent view of the Swan River and city foreshores. ... The whole set-up ensures a picturesque, smooth-running and hospitable welcome which few visitors would be able to forget.¹²

Local artisans, including David Foulkes Taylor, Helen Grey-Smith and Geoff Allen, were commissioned to design furniture and furnishings for the civic suites of *Council House, Perth*, providing both a stimulus and showcase for West

8 *The Architect (WA)*, June 1963, p.25

9 *Daily News*, 1 December 1962, p.41

10 *ibid.*

11 *Sunday Times*, 5 May 1963, p.46

12 *Sunday Times*, 5 May 1963, p.47

Australian designers. The warmth and texture of crafted timber fixtures and furniture of the internal spaces stood in sharp contrast to the cold hard shiny external finishes.

At the end of 1992, Perth City Council announced its intention to move out of Council House in order for asbestos contamination to be removed. This announcement ushered in five years of controversy and extensive public debate over the future of the building. In October 1993, the State Government released the Perth Central Precinct Area Policies Review, which featured a 'Civic Precinct' or 'Central Perth Heritage Precinct'. This proposal called for the demolition of *Council House, Perth* and the establishment of public gardens on the site.¹³

The Western Australian media prominently covered the public debate that ensued. Those opposed to the demolition focussed primarily on the perceived ugliness of the place, and its supposed intrusion into a 'heritage' precinct of nineteenth century structures and gardens. Those in favour of retention spoke of the importance of the place as a fine demonstration of Post-War Modernist architecture, evidence of the continued civic use of the site since 1839, and the place's association with the 1962 Commonwealth Games. In 1995, a newly elected Perth City Council reviewed the demolition order, and in 1996 it approved the refurbishment of the building. Despite the support of this Council, professional organisations including the Royal Architects Institution of Australia (WA), and many individual members of the public, in May 1997 the Minister for Heritage decided not to enter the place onto the State Register of Heritage Places.¹⁴

From 1997 to 1999 *Council House, Perth* was subject to an extensive refurbishment campaign with a major part of the works comprising asbestos removal, the creation of a new underground car park to the rear, revisions to the forecourt, and a complete internal re-fit to satisfy the operation of the City's government in the late twentieth century and the City's changing operational requirements. In 2006, *Council House, Perth* continues to maintain its original function as the city council's administrative centre.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The siting of *Council House, Perth* was very much a reflection of its time. Set back from St George's Terrace, with its ceremonial forecourt and fountains, *Council House, Perth* was designed to stand apart from its surroundings, to be viewed as a splendid isolated object set in the landscape of the surrounding gardens. Little attention, and no formal recognition, was paid to the historic buildings which surround the site, which reflects the modernist architectural values of the early 1960s.

The ground floor areas of *Council House, Perth*, the administrative offices of Perth City Council, were designed and constructed to be accompanied by a suite of public halls, but as is often the case with two stage projects the second stage was never built, and eventually the Perth Concert Hall was built further along St Georges Terrace. This resulted in the ground floor areas of Council House having the appearance of being unconnected to its immediate surroundings, particularly at the rear of the building. The revised setting from the 1997-1999 work has made an improvement to the presentation of the rear of the place, and substituted an urban park space for a car park.

Council House, Perth is a building of rectangular plan form constructed with a concrete encased steel frame and clad with uninterrupted floor to ceiling panels

¹³ Kelly, I, 'Council House, Perth: Caught between competing heritage values', Australian ICOMOS 20th Century Heritage Conference Paper, November 2001.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

of fixed double-glazing, set in aluminium frames. The floor to ceiling glazing introduced a radical change in safety regulations, as well as aesthetics. (Previously, fire regulations had required a solid spandrel panel separating floors to prevent the spread of fire.) A strong expression of T-shaped projecting sun screens clad in white mosaic tiles provide external sun protection, while natural light is internally controlled by full length, adjustable venetian blinds. Thin blue spandrel panels externally mask the construction height between the suspended ceiling and floor level of successive storeys. The same exterior detailing is applied to all faces of the building. Lifts and service rooms are located at the eastern end of the building and air conditioning to all areas is distributed through ducting above suspended ceilings, generally of natural wood finish with acoustic properties.¹⁵

Of particular architectural interest is the consistency of the design detailing throughout *Council House, Perth*. The MLC Building (1957), also designed by Bates, Smart and McCutcheon, had introduced modernist aesthetics and construction technology to Perth, however Howlett and Bailey's design for *Council House, Perth* introduced a cleaner, more purist, image of detailing. A minimalist aesthetic, inspired by the German-American architect Mies van der Rohe, is clearly evident in the design. Wherever possible an uninterrupted floor to ceiling plane is maintained, be it in the glazing, lift doors or internal partitions. The emphasis is on the horizontal floor and ceiling planes, with vertical elements appearing to 'hover' between the two. This effect is achieved by the use of 'negative details' at the floor and ceiling. The front staircase, steel cantilevered entry awnings and fountains in the ceremonial forecourt of *Council House, Perth* are also evidence of the influence of Mies van der Rohe (Farnsworth House and Seagram Building, respectively).

The later enclosure of the western half of the ground floor has diminished the original impression of the building hovering above its podium, and the brightness of the building's polished appearance has dimmed with age. However the original concept of the crisp modernist design is still very evident.

Following the 1997-1999 refurbishment, Levels LGF, 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are used for administration, with the CEO located on level 8. Levels 2-4 have been leased out for private office accommodation. Level 9 remains as Council Chambers. The use of level 10 is solely for elected members' offices and dining facilities. Level 11, which was an additional floor of accommodation obtained in the refurbishment (previously a plant level), now contains Civic Reception and Mayoral administration.

The rear car park is now a park-like setting set above an underground car park and the front entrance setting comprises a ramped lawn, central axial path, and a series of fountains and ponds that are part of the original concept.

13.3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

The State Register of Heritage Places contains five examples of buildings of the Post War International architectural style. The Register is still developing and it is expected that more examples of Post War and Late Twentieth century style architecture will be included in the future. There are three comparable examples of places of these styles and prominence included in the Register, *Port of Fremantle Passenger Terminal, Dumas House, Perth* and *Western Australian Police Service Complex, Perth*.

Port of Fremantle Passenger Terminal is a steel framed two storey structure constructed in the Post-War International style in 1961 -2 and located hard up to

the timber quay on Victoria Quay at Fremantle and was entered into the State Register of Heritage Places on a permanent basis in 2000.

Dumas House, Perth is a fourteen-storey government office building constructed in the Post-War International style in 1966 and was entered into the State Register of Heritage Places on a permanent basis in 2000.

Western Australian Police Service Complex, Perth a nine storey administrative building and attached three-storey police station and lock-up, constructed in the Late-Twentieth Century International style in 1965 and 1975 and was entered into the State Register of Heritage Places on a permanent basis in 2003.

Buildings of this period to have been placed on heritage registers in other states include the following:

Historic Buildings Council (Victoria)	ICI House, 1958
Central Sydney Heritage Inventory (NSW)	Liner House, 1961 AMP Building, 1962 Australia Square, 1966

A number of Sydney buildings from this era have been demolished, including Unilever House and ICI House, part of the East Circular Quay development.

Council House Perth is considered one of the finest examples of the Post War International style in Perth.

13.4 REFERENCES

The Architect (WA), September, 1960

Bodycoat, R., 'Statement of Architectural Significance', November 1992.

Brew, P. and Markham, M., *Howlett Architectural Projects*, Perth: UWA, 1992

Kelly, I., 'Howlett and Bailey: the major designs', in *Architecture Australia*, June 1991.

Schwager Brooks and Partners, *Heritage Assessment and Conservation Plan for Council House, St Georges Terrace Perth* (for the City of Perth, 1993).

13.5 FURTHER RESEARCH

The details of the 1997 - 1999 refurbishment could be added to the physical evidence.