



THE CENTRE IVANHOE



THE HISTORY OF
THE CENTRE IVANHOE

THE IVANHOE CENTRE

In 1948, Melbourne was abuzz with talk about the visit of Sir Laurence Olivier and his wife, Vivien Leigh as they ventured to Australia with the Old Vic. Theatre Company. The tour of the famous couple almost took on the status of a "Royal Visit", and one of the places they enjoyed visiting was the Heidelberg Town Hall. Fittingly, they were filmed regally descending the broad stairs to the foyer.¹

Eleven years before, in April 1937, the Governor of Victoria had opened the Town Hall, watched by over 2,000 people. Three months later, the municipal offices were opened by the Mayor, Robert Reid. The City of Heidelberg now had a completely operational centre for the civic and social life of its residents.

WHY THE BUILDING WAS NEEDED

As Melbourne enjoyed expansion following WW1, changes to legislation in 1924 resulted in local government taking responsibility for functions such as zoning and building controls. As a result, Councils required more office space, generally grouped around a Town Hall. Existing Town Halls throughout Melbourne were generally inadequate, and were either updated and extended, or replaced by new structures.

Heidelberg had been expanding through the 1920s, aided by the construction of a bridge over the Yarra River at Burke Road in 1924. The continued push for a Town Hall reached its peak in 1934, when Heidelberg was proclaimed a city. Signs were also emerging of economic recovery from the worst of the Depression. The prevailing ethos of the time was that a Town Hall provided a symbol of progress and demonstrated the substance of a city. As a result, councils were



seeking the latest and largest buildings, even if they had to borrow heavily to finance construction. The new Council of the City of Heidelberg wasted no time in appointing two firms of architects to collaborate on the buildings.

¹ Recollection by Bruce Skeggs, MP

WHO WAS TO DESIGN AND BUILD THE TOWN HALL?

The architects were *Leith & Bartlett*, a firm with extensive experience in design and construction of new or updated Town Halls in Melbourne and country towns. Bartlett had just returned from Europe, and it is likely that he was heavily influenced by the latest building styles in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany. The other firm was *Peck & Kemter*, who had worked with Walter Burley Griffin on Capitol House in Swanston St. The construction was to be undertaken by a local builder, *George Gay*, providing employment for workers and tradesmen from the district. But a start on the building was delayed while the Council deliberated on the costs and site for the building. It took over a year to agree on the level of borrowing that the Council could sustain, and to settle on the elevated Upper Heidelberg Road site. This turned out to be an inspired choice, as the new building, with its tower and neon clock faces, could be seen from the whole district and served as a prominent landmark.

THE BUILDING AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

What would the new building look like? Should it be in a traditional style, like some other new Town Halls in Melbourne suburbs, or should it be a bolder design? The Council wanted a building that was “architecturally progressive and unconventional” and they took a bold step in “embracing modern architectural idioms, in a climate where other municipalities were employing established neo-Classical forms”²

By the mid-30s, significant changes had occurred in building design, originating from Europe and the USA, and typologies such as Modernist, Functionalist, Bauhaus, and Streamline were being used. (At a later time, many of these styles came to be referred to under the umbrella of Art Deco). The emphasis was now on function with a minimum of decoration, rather than applied ornament. Many Australian architects embraced the style and were influenced by architectural journals and overseas tours.

² Falkinger Abdronas Pty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002, p. 26

DESIGN OF THE BUILDINGS

The building followed the latest trend of separating the business functions of the Council from the social, and consisted of three interlocking sections - municipal offices, a Town Hall (consisting of a number of rooms named after Heidelberg School artists), and a clock tower.

The design emphasised verticality, simplicity and austerity and symmetry, and was heavily influenced by European modernism. The final commendation and approval for the innovative and distinctive design came from the architectural profession when the architects were awarded the prestigious RVIA Street Architecture Medal for 1939.³

THE THREE COMPONENTS

The three components are characterized by similar features. The Australian Heritage Commission citation of 1999 notes that plain buff-coloured bricks were used on the exterior, with decoration limited to the restrained brick quoining at the corners. Original light fittings, signage and door furniture have been retained, and Australian woods such as Queensland maple are used extensively in the function rooms and council chambers.

1. The Clock Tower

The ninety foot high clock tower serves as a focal point for the City of Banyule and surrounding districts. Each side of the tower contains a green neon illuminated clock face. The use of neon lighting became popular during the 1930s and was used extensively on commercial buildings, such as the Skipping Girl factory in Richmond, but there are few examples of its use on civic buildings. The design of the tower has a vertical emphasis, with little decorative detail which would detract from the clock. In the 1960s, the original stucco ribs on the clock tower were replaced by neon, followed by the addition of even more neon lights during the 1980s upgrade. The top of the tower is reached by climbing 117 steps followed by a short, steep ladder. But the climb is worth it, as the views of Melbourne's suburbs are spectacular, in all directions.

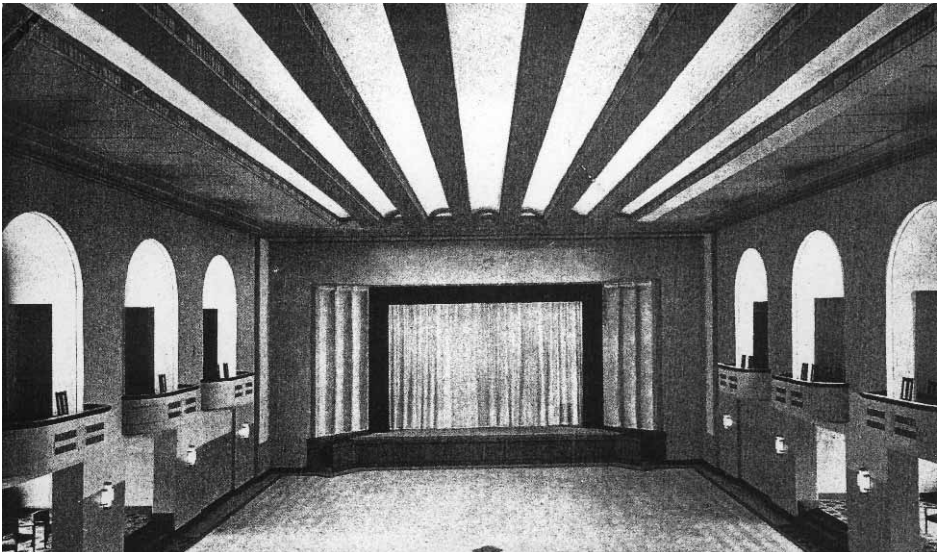
³ Decoration & Glass, December 1940, p. 29

2. The Town Hall

"Heidelberg Town Hall" reads the lettering incised into the wall in the largest part of the Centre - The Town Hall. Above the doors are three windows, covered by decorative metal tracery grilles, whilst a series of rectangular windows with "large vertical bands of linenfold stonework detailing between them"⁴ are located between ground level and the first floor. The front doors are flanked by cypress trees, a fitting selection as their tall, thin shape blends with the verticality of the building.

Beyond the "crush foyer" is the **GREAT HALL**, accessed through three sets of double doors, now stripped back to the original timber after being painted. Designed as a civic auditorium to seat 1000 persons, it has been used continually since opening day for dances, weddings, balls, and other community functions. Former local MP Bruce Skeggs recalls being involved in live radio broadcasts of variety shows during the 1950s, sometimes attended by over 1000 people.

The interior design features (such as clocks, lighting, walnut and Queensland maple dados with plaster decoration) echoed the restrained logos and decoration of the exterior, and the interior had a general theme of decoration of "pale autumn tints".⁵



4 Australian Heritage Commission citation, 1999

5 Decoration & Glass, August, 1937

Beneath the corrugated roof, the innovative welded steel construction methods enabled multi-level wide spans in the hall. The resultant absence of columns was appreciated by dancers as they glided (or shuffled!) across the parquetry floor of Victorian polished hardwood, laid out in a herringbone pattern, with a central inset of cubist design. The ceiling is panelled and recessed for electric lighting, provided from long central ridges with concealed lighting. Like that provided in the foyer and reception rooms, the lighting was diffused rather than direct. In the 1986 update, incandescent lighting was installed in the ceiling. Other lighting in the Hall is provided from original fittings of chrome and opal glass.

Guests enter a "crush foyer" by passing over a terrazzo floor, past stylized lights, brass-famed ticket windows and through large bronze doors. Internally, the doors of Queensland maple were painted over at some stage but have recently been restored. They also originally contained a small telephone booth. The foyer features original signage and built-in clocks, together with concealed lighting to provide a diffused glow which served the twin purpose of allowing for the highlighting of the architectural detailing and ensuring that guests were not subjected to harsh direct lighting. The foyer is now fully carpeted, but the original flooring consisted of burnished red and brown tiles.

On both sides of the dance floor are raised areas used for lounge seating or for additional table seating. Originally these areas provided a "sitting-out" zone, leaving the hall floor free for dancing, and were described in *Decoration and Glass* magazine as "a smoke lounge with raised carpeted floor and furnished with comfortable lounge suites". Above these sections on the first floor are a number of parallel rows of balconettes, running from the stage to a rear Gallery balcony, able to seat 150. The big bands that played at dances in the Great Hall belted out a lot of sound, but the architects were able to minimize the noise in this area by the use of sound-absorbing tiles and acoustic plaster.⁶

At the other end of the Great Hall is the stage, sitting beneath a large in-built clock of stylized design. The stage was extended in the 1980s to make it easier to reach from the main floor by guests such as award recipients, but it retains its original parquetry flooring and original metal grates on the walls to the side of the stage.

⁶ Falkinger Abdronas Pty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002, p. 39

Streeton Room

A fall of 16 feet at the rear of the site provided space for another room and a further 70 tons of steel was added to enable the construction of the Streeton Room. Originally known as the “Lower Hall” or the “Supper Room”, it was finished in warm browns, buffs and creams, with flush lighting panels in the ceiling. Like the Great Hall above, it has no columns on the dance floor, and has alcoves to the sides, guarded by a series of columns capped with original black and tangerine tiles. The wooden (Walnut) stage was extended and given a mirrored front in the 1980s, and is flanked by the original figured walnut grilled columns, which are “hollow to allow discharge of temperature controlled air”.⁷

Conder Room

This ground floor room originally served as the rear of the building and was primarily used for meetings of citizens groups, like the Heidelberg Garden Society, auxiliary groups, and small receptions. The original parquet dance floor was replaced during the renovations in 1980s, and the clocks, mirrors and wall lights are not original but are in Art Deco style.⁸

McCubbin Room

Added to the rear of the building in the 1980s, the Art Deco interior treatments of other rooms is matched by inclusion of stylized wall mirrors and wall lights. Withers Room and Wither Room Foyer The Withers Room is located on the first floor and has traditionally operated as the main function room for both the Mayor and Lady Mayoress. Key features of its design are curved fluting of the wood on the walls of Queensland Maple, full length windows, a bulkhead down the middle of the room to provide concealed/diffused lighting, and original fittings such as clocks, wall-mounted lights and heater vents. Outside this room is a foyer with an interesting triangular niche, featuring etched glass on the east wall. The foyer also contains doors to the Council Chambers, an outdoor entertainment area, and access to the Clock Tower, dedicated to the memory of King George V, who died in 1936, the year before the Centre opened.

⁷ Falkinger Abdronas Pty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002, p. 13

⁸ Falkinger Abdronas Pty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002, pp. 24,39

3. Offices for Municipal Business

The offices for transaction of business for the City are located on the ground floor, beneath rooms for the Council and the Mayor. Since the creation of the City of Banyule in 1994, council meetings rotate between venues owned by the City. From 1937 the Heidelberg Council met regularly in these chambers. Heavily carpeted and furnished handsomely, the chamber features an original square ceiling mounted light, supplemented by newer fluorescent lights. Next to the Chamber is the Mayors room, called the "Nellie Ibbott Room" after the first elected female Mayor in Victoria, and the "Tom Roberts Room", named after a leading artist of the Heidelberg School. Both retain their original timber veneer doors, with gold lettering, and their original timber veneer and plaster finishes. They open onto a circular foyer, now carpeted but floored with rubber floor tiles in a geometric pattern at time of construction. The original chrome and etched glass wall lights and wall clocks remain, and a large circular light etched with the City of Heidelberg emblem was installed in the 1980s.



THE BUILDING AND THE COMMUNITY

Despite the fact that the Council wanted a building that was “architecturally progressive and unconventional”⁹ Not everyone liked it - for some, It was too severe, functional and authoritarian, but it was the latest and demonstrated that the City of Heidelberg was progressive. Other citizens expressed concern at the cost and the level of borrowing required to finance the building. However, the district grew quickly and the council was able to easily service the loan.

“THE BERG”

Whilst the Civic Centre was important to locals for a variety of reasons, for many people in Melbourne it meant only one thing - the Saturday night dances at what came to be known as “the Berg”. In 1945 the City of Heidelberg Patriotic Fund was established to raise funds for “patriotic purposes”. The main source of the funds came from a regular 60/40 dance held from 1946 to 1969. In its heyday in the 1950s, over 2,000 dancers would pack the Great Hall to dance, although the Health Department regulations only allowed for 800. They came from all over Melbourne, some via a special bus that ran from Batman Avenue in the city of Melbourne, and packed in to dance to music from big bands and singers such as Bill Glennon. He cut a dashing figure - immaculately dressed in tuxedo and hair slicked down, but many would have been surprised to know that during the week he toiled as a meatworker.

Such a large turnout meant that many dancers had difficulty in moving, which probably suited some, and it was also thirsty work. There was no liquor license, so beer was often stashed in bushes outside. The dance was kept trouble-free by local off-duty police, who were strict about drinking and any man detected with liquor on his breath would only be admitted if a lady vouched for him.

A smaller dance was held in the Streeton Room below. Upstairs cost more to enter and had a stricter dress code some regarded it as a place for the “toffs”, whilst the room below was for the “riff-raff”. However, they claimed that the “riffraff” had much more fun! Others saw the Streeton Room as a place to practice their dancing until they were confident of going upstairs.¹⁰

⁹ Falkinger Abdronas Pty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002, p. 26

¹⁰ Anecdotes from residents attending walks conducted by Art Deco Society Inc., 2002-2004

CHANGES OVER THE YEARS

Naturally, certain alterations have occurred over the years, both inside and outside. Some changes were made to services to comply with new regulations and to provide modern facilities, such as lifts, fire protection, and heating (the gas fire furnaces were converted to electricity in the late 1950s).

Structural changes also occurred, such as additions to the rear of the Municipal offices in 1970, the construction of the McCubbin Room in 1986 and provision of an entry from the car park to the Conder and Streeton Rooms.

Existing rooms have also been upgraded by re-painting, carpeting over tiled or rubber floors, stripping back painted doors, improving the lighting in the Great Hall, improving access to staged areas, and the addition of wrought iron gates at the bottom of the stairs on either side of the "crush foyer".

Perhaps the most controversial changes were those made to the exterior. Whilst the replacement of vertical stucco ribs with neon lighting on the clock tower in the 1960s was well-received, the addition of a covered entrance to the Town Hall aroused strong feelings. The cover of "Home Beautiful" in January 1944 shows a beautifully symmetrical building with an unimpeded entrance, featuring three striking vertical window and door sections. In 1957, a small porch with a wavy roof was added, followed in the 1980s by a larger porch with a central canvas awning. In 1994; it was replaced by the current large porte cochere. The design (by Tony Iseppi) caused great controversy. Although it provides cover for people alighting from cars, it effectively blocked from sight the architectural features of the front of the building and is felt by many, including the National Trust, to have seriously compromised the architectural integrity of the building.



The upgrade design work in 1986 was by Charles Steinic and H A Schroeder, and generally was sympathetic to the simplicity and elegance of the original design. In addition the complex has been well-maintained and cared-for by Council staff over its history.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

The Centre is regarded by the Art Deco Society Inc. as the best civic structure in Australia, largely due to its intactness and the quality of its maintenance. The buildings are protected in the City of Banyule Heritage Overlay (HO77), and are cited as being “of considerable local historical, social and historical significance”. They are listed on the Register of the National Estate, and are currently being assessed for inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register.

Funding has been provided by the Council for renovation work in recent years, and the Manager of the Ivanhoe Centre, Devona Downs, has undertaken a highly successful series of updates, as well as initiating a Conservation Management Plan prepared by Falkinger Abdronas, Architects and Heritage Consultants.

There is now certainty that future changes will be managed by heritage architects. The Centre continues to be a popular venue for wedding receptions, balls, and other functions, and “walking tours” of the Centre are popular with the locals - particularly amongst those who danced at the Berg, and those who want to climb the tower!

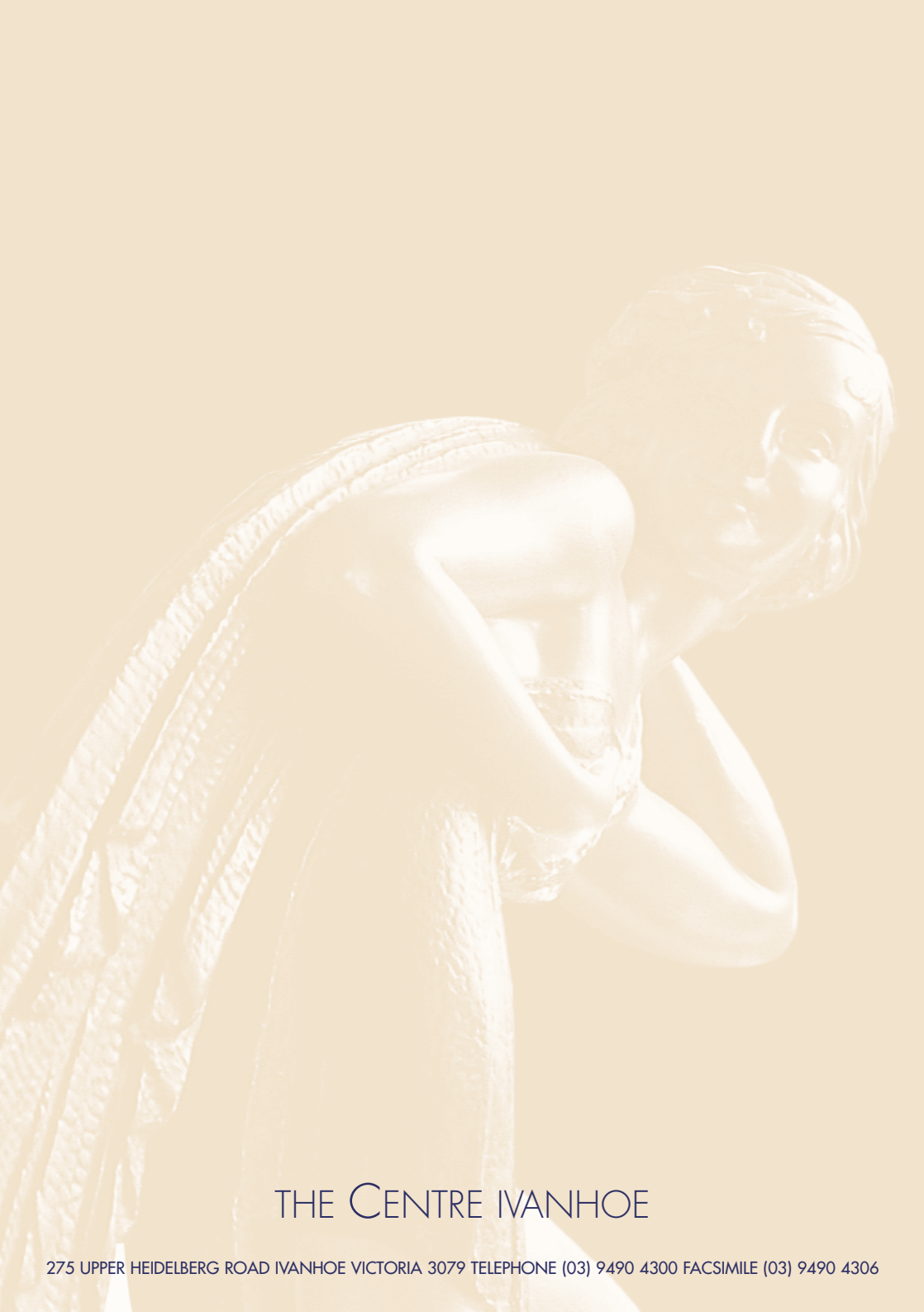
The City of Banyule is indeed fortunate that the Centre has maintained its flagship building whilst retaining its status as an outstanding example of interwar civic architecture.



Sources

1. Falkinger Abdronas Oty Ltd., Conservation Management Plan for Former Heidelberg Town Hall and Municipal Offices, February 2002
2. The Australian Home Beautiful, January 1944
3. Decoration & Glass, 1937

Text and photographs by Robin Grow, 2005



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