

Australian Capital Territory

Heritage (Decision about Registration of The former MLC Building, City) Notice 2015

Notifiable Instrument NI2015—259

made under the

Heritage Act 2004, s40 Notice of decision about registration

1 Revocation

This instrument replaces NI2014—592.

2 Name of instrument

This instrument is the *Heritage (Decision about Registration of The former MLC Building, City) Notice 2015*.

3 Registration details of the place

Registration details of the place are at Attachment A: Register entry for The former MLC Building, City.

4 Reason for decision

The ACT Heritage Council has decided that The former MLC Building, City meets one or more of the heritage significance criteria at s 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*. The register entry is at Attachment A.

5 Date of registration

4 June 2015

Pamela Hubert
A/g Secretary (as delegate for)
ACT Heritage Council
4 June 2015



ACT Heritage Council

**AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
HERITAGE REGISTER
(Registration)**

For the purposes of s. 40 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, an entry to the heritage register has been prepared by the ACT Heritage Council for the following place:

The former MLC Building

Block 1 Section 14, City

DATE OF REGISTRATION

4 June 2015 Notifiable Instrument: 2015–

Copies of the Register Entry are available for inspection at ACT Heritage.

For further information please contact:

The Secretary
ACT Heritage Council
GPO Box 158
CANBERRA ACT 2601
Telephone 13 22 81

This statement refers to the location of the place as required in s. 12 (b) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

LOCATION OF THE PLACE

The former MLC Building (Bright Consulting Building as at 2014), 161 London Circuit, block 1 section 14, City.

This section refers to the description of the place as required in s.12(c) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE

The former MLC Building (currently Bright Consulting Building; other former names include: State Bank Building, Colonial Building, and CPA Building), consisting of the following attributes:

The existing exterior of the Post War International style building, demonstrating:

- a true curtain wall;
 - expressed structural columns on the ground floor;
 - plain smooth areas of wall and contrasting textures expressed in the large areas of glazing panels contrasting against the large areas of brick wall; and
 - rectangular and cubiform shapes used throughout
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This statement refers to the heritage significance of the place as required in s.12(d) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The former MLC Building from 1958 is the ACT's best example of a Post War International style office building. It marked the start of the rapid post-war growth of the city and became a landmark for progress and economic growth as a new way of designing and constructing buildings. *[Criteria (a), (c) and (h)]*

The series of MLC buildings constructed in the 1950s around Australia, and specifically the ACT's former MLC Building, were radically new for their time. With its tall sleek metal and glass exterior it was unmistakably modern juxtaposed against the squat, decorated brick buildings of the Federal Capital period architecture that had dominated the city skyline up to that date. More importantly was the new 'system building' approach that was introduced with the MLC buildings which used modular design and pre-fabricated elements to quickly and economically erect structures. These structures were flexible for internal fit outs and tenancy options and were even flexible structurally, allowing for relatively easy extensions to the building. *[Criteria (a), (c) and (h)]*

The former MLC Building is an important example in the ACT of a Post War International style building and an example of one of the series of 1950s MLC buildings that helped to introduce the Australian public to modern architecture. The Post War International style was symbolic of progress and modernity after the shortages during, and immediately after, World War II. The former MLC Building contains the first true curtain-wall in the ACT. It has been influential as an example of modern building practices that today are considered standard practice. *[Criteria (c), (f) and (g)]*

CONSERVATION OBJECTIVE

The guiding conservation objective is that the former MLC Building shall be conserved and appropriately managed in a manner respecting its heritage significance.

The ACT Heritage Council may adopt heritage guidelines applicable to the place under s25 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

For further information on guidelines applicable to the place, or for advice on proposed works or development, please contact ACT Heritage on 13 22 81.

REASON FOR REGISTRATION

The former MLC Building has been assessed against the heritage significance criteria and been found to have heritage significance when assessed against four criteria [(a), (b), (d), and (f)] under s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

The Council's assessment against the criteria specified in s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004* is as follows.

In assessing the nomination for the former MLC Building, City, the Council considered:

- the original nomination and documentary evidence supplied by the nominator;
- information provided by a site inspection on 14 November 2013 by ACT Heritage; and
- the report by ACT Heritage titled, *Background Information former MLC Building June 2015*, containing photographs and information on history, description, condition and integrity.

Pursuant to s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, a place or object has heritage significance if it satisfies one or more of the following criteria. Future research may alter the findings of this assessment.

(a) importance to the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history;

The former MLC Building, City, meets this criterion.

The building has a strong association with post-war development in the ACT. Post-war development was quite slow and mostly led by government projects and it was not until the early 1950s that labour and materials shortages that followed the Second World War started to ease. There was very little in the way of private development within the city area and it was not until 1958 that the former MLC Building marked the first private development of a high rise building.

It was a building that was radically different from anything that had been seen in the ACT before. Its tall metal and glass skin was unmistakably modern when juxtaposed against the squat brick and tile buildings of Federal Capital period architecture that had previously made up the bulk of the central business district.

MLC found itself in an excellent position to expand its property holdings and establish itself in major growth areas across the country. It did this by engaging the architectural firm of Bates, Smart & McCutcheon to design its new series of buildings in such a way that they would become

synonymous with the company and evocative of the new era of progress for which the glass skyscraper was the ultimate symbol.

The success of the building was so strong that it prompted the National Capital Development Commission to recreate its mirror image in Moresby House (today Eclipse House) in 1964 (completed 1967).

(b) has uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history;

The former MLC Building, City, meets this criterion.

The building is a rare, intact example of a Post-War International style building in the ACT and the only ACT example of the 1950s series of MLC buildings constructed across the country at the time.

Post-War International style buildings are rare in the ACT, particularly large commercial multi-storey office blocks which epitomise the style. There are only two represented in the ACT: the former MLC Building and its twin, the former Moresby House (Eclipse House, 2014). Of these, the former MLC Building better represents the key attributes of the style and has the strongest link to post-war development in the ACT. Although the two buildings were supposed to be mirror images of each other, there are subtle differences in the execution of the style and finishes which makes the former MLC Building a stronger example than the former Moresby House. The former MLC Building has lightweight coloured exterior finishes that are neatly divided by modules that align with each other, creating a high quality exterior that expresses the sleek, glossy, rectangular prism form of the style. This exterior is a curtain wall that is hung from the overall cubiform shape of the building and sits above the ground floor's selective expression of the structural system with the supporting columns forming a shallow arcade. The former Moresby House has concrete facade units with a pebblecrete finish set in alternating strips, with sections that do not align, against dark tinted strip windows. It also has less clearly defined structural expression of the columns on the ground floor, but it does have larger areas of glazing in its strip windows, however the reflective surfaces of the former MLC building are more in line with the external aesthetic of the Post-War International style.

The building is also a rare example in the ACT of the group of MLC buildings. During the 1950s MLC embarked upon a major building program across the country with the idea of creating a distinctive series of buildings in all the major towns and centres that would be instantly recognisable as an 'MLC building'. This led to the construction of ten buildings: Geelong (1953), Ballarat (1954), Brisbane (1955, extended in 1959), Wollongong (1956 has recent major alterations), Adelaide (1957), North Sydney (1957), Newcastle (1957 significantly altered or replaced), Perth (1959 non-extant), Shepparton (1959), and Canberra (1959, extended 1963). These buildings are a symbol of post-war expansion of MLC and mark a new style of modern architecture that this series of buildings helped to spread throughout the country.

The MLC buildings are the epitome of the Post-War International Style in Australia. They are more than just an aesthetic variation on standard building techniques; they were a new way of thinking about buildings: how they were constructed as well as how they were to be used. The construction followed a 'system building' style that used repetition and modular planning with lightweight economical materials, and design that allowed buildings to be erected quickly and efficiently. The design of the buildings changed the tenancy options as there were no set rooms, and the space could be rearranged easily to suit any tenant. The spaces were light, open, airy and were fully air-conditioned, an un-common feature at the time. Aesthetically, they were a major departure from anything that came before. Their highly finished, yet simple facades were a fresh, clean look that was unmistakably 'modern' at the time.

(c) potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the ACT’s cultural or natural history;

The former MLC Building, City, does not meet this criterion.

There is no evidence before the Council that the building has the potential to yield information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT. Any information the place may provide has already been obtained from the documentary and physical evidence and it is unlikely that any further significant evidence could be gained from the physical fabric of the place.

(d) importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects;

The former MLC Building, City, meets this criterion.

The building is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of the Post War International style of architecture and, in particular, the style as applied to the series of 1950s MLC buildings across Australia. It is the strongest example of the Post War International style in the ACT, exhibiting key characteristics such as:

- Sleek, glossy, rectangular prism forms with uninterrupted surfaces – the curtain wall has large areas of glazing and glossy infill panels which provide the rectangular prism form;
- Precision, sharpness and transparency considered appropriate to urban settings – the glazing and the aluminium frames provide a sharpness and precision to the facade with the glazing concentrated on the north and west facades;
- Cubiform shape clad with curtain walls;
- Large glass areas – the infill panels continue the effect of the glazing to achieve this characteristic while providing high levels of sun control;
- Plain smooth wall areas with areas of contrasting textures – the juxtaposition of the curtain wall with the large areas of plain rendered brick walls on the southern and parts of the eastern facades provides the contrast; and
- Steel frame supporting curtain walls.

Another important aspect of the style can be found in its structural system. The lightweight steel frame and modular design was an important aspect in the emergence of the style and the spread of its popularity. It demonstrated how a building of its size could be erected quickly and economically and it was the first time that this new style of design and construction had been used in the ACT.

The building also contains the ACT’s first true curtain wall. The curtain wall is an aluminium frame, stretching the length and breadth of the building, which hangs off the main structure. The aluminium frame of the curtain wall supports the glazing, infill panels and glazed metal spandrels that make up the facade pattern that is immediately recognizable as an ‘MLC Building’ from the 1950s.

As well as being the strongest example of this style in the ACT, across Australia it is important as the only example located in the National Capital of the notable series of 1950s MLC buildings. During the 1950s MLC embarked upon a major building program across the country with the idea of creating a distinctive series of buildings in all the major towns and centres that would be instantly recognisable as an ‘MLC building’. This led to the construction of ten buildings: Geelong

(1953), Ballarat (1954), Brisbane (1955, extended in 1959), Wollongong (1956 has recent major alterations), Adelaide (1957), North Sydney (1957), Newcastle (1957 significantly altered or replaced), Perth (1959 non-extant), Shepparton (1959), and Canberra (1959, extended 1963). These buildings are a symbol of post-war expansion of MLC and mark a new style of modern architecture that this series of buildings helped to spread throughout the country.

(e) importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT;

The former MLC Building, City, does not meet this criterion.

The building is an excellent example of Post-War International Style architecture that was valued by the community in the past as a landmark building in the central business district, as a tourist attraction and a sign of post-war progress showing that Canberra was maturing as a city. It was also the venue for several small spectacles such as choir performances, television events, and stunts. However, in relation to its design and aesthetic qualities, its current value to the ACT community or a cultural group has not been demonstrated.

The Council note that the place is valued by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) which has included it on its Register of Significant Twentieth-Century Architecture. The Council's *Heritage Assessment Policy*, interprets a cultural group as a 'group of people within a society with a shared ethnic or cultural background' or 'a group of people connected through the same way of living, which has been transmitted from one generation to another'. The Council therefore does not consider the AIA to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion.

(f) importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period;

The former MLC Building, City, meets this criterion.

The building demonstrates a high degree of technical achievement by introducing new design and construction techniques unseen in the ACT in the post-war period. System building techniques were used, taking advantage of modular precast elements, a light steel frame and dry joined sections. The system was quick and economical to construct, which made it relatively easy for the 1963 extensions to be added without major disruptions to the existing occupants. This system of design and construction was quickly adopted as standard practice in large commercial buildings. This system was introduced into the country by Bates, Smart & McCutcheon and its success is demonstrated through their series of MLC Buildings, of which the ACT's former MLC Building was the last.

The building also demonstrates a high degree of creative achievement by being a particularly fine example of the Post-War International Style. It incorporates all key features of the style; including a curtain wall, selective expression of structural elements, plain smooth areas of wall and contrasting textures, as well as the overall cubiform shape. It is the ACT's strongest example of this style and is equal in many ways to some the best of this style across the country, i.e. the other MLC Buildings. The building was so influential in the ACT that it encouraged the NCDC in 1964 to make a mirror image building, Moresby House (today Eclipse House), completed in 1966.

(g) has a strong or special association with the ACT community, or a cultural group in the ACT for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;

The former MLC Building, City, does not meet this criterion.

Although the building has been the location for several business and services in the ACT, including the first office of the National Capital Development Commission, there is no evidence that it has a strong or special association with the ACT community, or a cultural group in the ACT for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

The Council note that the place is valued by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) which has included it on its Register of Significant Twentieth-Century Architecture. The Council's *Heritage Assessment Policy*, interprets a cultural group as a 'group of people within a society with a shared ethnic or cultural background' or 'a group of people connected through the same way of living, which has been transmitted from one generation to another'. The Council therefore does not consider the AIA to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion.

(h) has a special association with the life or work of a person, or people, important to the history of the ACT.

The former MLC Building, City, does not meet this criterion.

Sir Walter Osborne McCutcheon has an association with the MLC Building as the overall guiding architect of the series of MLC buildings, where he guided design and was responsible for introducing the radical new materials, approaches and systems building approach that were new to the country at the time. He is one of the most influential Australian architects of the 20th century and his contributions to architecture have been recognised in a knighthood as well as various other awards, appointments and honours. However, regardless of his importance to architecture and cultural history, his association with the Canberra MLC Building has not been shown to be any greater than what any architect would have with any place they have designed. There is no evidence to suggest that he was directly involved in the Canberra building or had an interest in it that was greater than any of the other MLC buildings across the country.

SITE PLAN



MLC Building

Legend
 former MLC Building boundary



ACT Heritage Council

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Image 1 The former MLC Building provisional registration boundary (note: the boundary is based on the block outline and contains the entire building footprint).