

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’: Assessing the architectural merits of the former Bank of NSW (later known as WESTPAC) – King William Street, Adelaide -

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Picture that building on the southeast corner of King William Street and North Terrace, the former Bank of New South Wales – now the Westpac Bank. You either like it or you don’t. Ask most people what they think, and I bet they wouldn’t mind if it disappeared tomorrow. Indeed, I used to think that myself until about eight years ago when I became involved in the heritage field. I slowly changed my mind about this building as I understood its role in the architectural development of the city. The Lord Mayor’s Heritage Study in 1982 and the State Heritage Branch in 1985 both rejected its importance. But in 1985 the National Estate thought otherwise and acknowledged its uniqueness by nominating the building for their own register.

There is no doubt that this austere building does take a lot of understanding, so I was quite excited when during Heritage Week of September 1989, the building was made part of the activities by being put on trial in a ‘hypothetical’, nicely called ‘trial of a building’. It was not for real – but was it? Prominent judges, (our own governor no less) lawyers, architects and public historians gave up their time to be part of the proceedings. After wonderful acting to the delight of the spectators, the verdict was that the building was ‘not guilty’ and therefore could remain to grace the streets of Adelaide. It was only a hypothetical, mind you, but who would have guessed that just two months later away from public scrutiny, such a hypothetical would become a reality when the building was literally put on trial again, but this time it was for real.

When the time came for Westpac to consider either upgrade or redevelop the bank building’s site, they wanted to do the right thing.

Understandably, they were confused by the report of the National Estate that found the building unique, while both the City Council and State Heritage Branch had previously rejected it for their respective registers. What does an owner of a building do in a situation like this? In this case, Westpac commissioned an independent assessment to be undertaken by a team brought together by Woods Bagots Architects. It included one of Sydney’s well-known conservation architects, Clive Lucas, myself as historical researcher and Adelaide conservation architect from Woods

Bagot, Mark Butcher. The brief was to assess the building's heritage value once and for all, with Westpac giving full support to whatever the findings might be.

The job in hand was a challenge. When I came to study the existing reports by the three agencies that had been undertaken years before, I found that the most crucial question, of why it had been built at all, had never been examined. I asked the Westpac Archives to see if files existed with regard to the Bank of New South Wales' strategy during the Depression and whether there was ever a file on this bank building's construction. The response from the Westpac's Archives was a researcher's jackpot, for what I asked for did exist. The find by one of Westpac's very competent archivists meant a more confident interpretation of the building's historical and architectural significance.

What was revealed from the material was that thoughts of renovating the former building of 1888 dated back to 1933 when architect Philip Claridge quoted over £25,000 to renovate it. But no action took place. In 1937 the Bank decided a new structure should be built because renovation costs were so high. As it happened, the Bank had constructed a new building in Collins Street, Melbourne in 1935 that was designed by Norman Seabrook of Godfrey & Spower. The design was so impressive that the bank wanted the same 'architectural character' for its Adelaide head office. Philip Claridge was invited to be involved in the new project. The Bank also specified that the 'outstanding architect' Laybourne Smith of Woods Bagot be included for his engineering skill and controlling of costs. Jack Hobbs McConnell, a lifelong friend of Seabrook, and who was also involved in the Melbourne bank building design, came to Adelaide as design architect for the project. He has been here ever since and claimed 'this building made me a South Australian'. McConnell will tell you there is no similarity of design between the Melbourne and Adelaide premises but there is no mistaking the visual likeness of both.

When plans were underway for a new building, Australia was recovering from the crippling Depression. Holder in his worthy two volume history of the Bank of New South Wales stated that 'late 1929 and 1930 proved to be the worst period of the Bank's experience', but it was still able to embark on a rationalization program under the capable management of Sir Alfred Davidson. The carefully planned program saw a retrenchment of staff, early retirements and a cut in wages for staff in NSW. Yet according to Holder, the Bank experienced a degree of expansion, with the opening of ten new branches in Victoria, Western Australia and New Zealand and a merger with the Australian Bank of Commerce in November 1931 in which it acquired 150 branch offices.

On 17 July 1937, the *Advertiser* revealed that the Bank of New South Wales was planning to replace its existing Adelaide building with a new structure which 'shall maintain the high prestige of the bank which is the oldest and largest institution of its kind in Australia'.

It was another eighteen months before there was an announcement that tenders for contractors would be called for in early 1939. But it was August 1939 before tenders were called, and less than a month later on 3 September, the Second World War broke out.

McConnell stated that Laybourne Smith wanted to build the new bank of Hawkesbury stone. Laybourne Smith spoke from experience having designed the AMP building in King William Street using that stone which was completed in 1936. Of three different stones examined for the new bank building program, the Murray Bridge stone was faulty and Hawksbury stone was not procurable in white tints, which left only the Stawell stone from Victoria.

The building may well have ended up being of this stone but the matter of material being quarried from outside of South Australia was raised in parliament. Questioning from this quarter prompted the architects to restrict their search for suitable stone within South Australia.

Early in 1939 Standard Quarries investigated the properties of Waikerie stone as a possible substitute and samples were submitted to the Geology Department of Melbourne University. The company was informed in March 1939, that 'the stone tested very well and you should be gratified with the results'. Not surprising, the positive analysis of the stone's properties resulted in it being used for the new bank premises. 'The Bank's faith in pioneering this limestone from the Waikerie district was well rewarded by the finished result' it was later claimed.

The Sydney edition of *Building* for 24 April 1942 described the new structure as 'one of Australia's most outstanding buildings'. Visiting American architect, Frederick Larkin, Chief of the Foreign Buildings Office, Washington, USA, told the *News* of 23 December 1941, 'the Bank of New South Wales is a most outstanding example of a big building and ... in design and quality of finish that building compares with anything ... anywhere - yes, even in America'.

Several years after its completion *Architecture*, January 1948, wrote that 'the main facades have been faced with Waikerie freestone, a South Australian stone of warm cream colour with an attractive texture, while polished Dromana granite from Victoria, which possesses a beautiful greenish bronze colour, has been utilised as a base course and as a surround to the main entrance. The windows and doors are of bronze. A

fresh note of colour contrast has been introduced by the metal sun shutters, which are painted turquoise blue'. Can you imagine that colour on the building today?

The former Bank of NSW building, constructed in wartime Adelaide, is an important example of how an international disaster (in this case the Second World War) can affect events at a local level. One consequence for Adelaide, as it was throughout Australia, was a major disruption of the building trade, when the federal government imposed severe building restrictions to take force from mid 1942. This resulted in a major standstill in the industry, with the cessation of all major building projects until well after the war. Because of this, the new 'Modern' Bank of NSW (and to a lesser degree the Savings Bank of South Australia building, also of Waikerie stone) which could have been the first of other buildings of similar character to follow in Adelaide, as may have happened in the normal course of events, became the first and last of their type.

When building restrictions were lifted in 1947, building material continued to be scarce for several years to follow, so that major building works – mainly for new housing in the suburbs – were given priority, while building in the city was at a virtual standstill. Nothing of any architectural merit was built in the city until 1957, (apart from the Adelaide High School) in which time, a revolution in architectural design and construction had taken place isolating the Bank of NSW building between two specific design periods. The MLC building in Victoria Square, erected in 1955-57, heralded a new design period in Adelaide's architectural history as the first post-war skyscraper with curtain wall design.

Look around, there is not another building like the Westpac Bank in the city. The Melbourne building has long been demolished and the Adelaide building is now unique for Australia – whether you like the building or not.

Now that the building's heritage value has been re-assessed, plans are now underway to renovate it. I wonder whether we will see it in its true turquoise colours?