

GEELONG CITY 'C' CITATIONS

Site Name: Former Telephone Exchange (now Office)

Project File No: 0946

Address: 50 Gheringhap Street Geelong 3220

Approx. Date: 1939

Integrity: High

Significance Level: C (Local)

Photograph No: 08.06

Survey Date: March 2002



History

This site at 50 Gheringhap Street, Geelong, between the former Post Office and Old Court House, is located on Lot 2 of subdivisional plan PS344283, which is in Section 55A, otherwise Section 56, of the 1881 Geelong Town Plan - a section designated for public offices, including post office.

Following the first successful telephone call in Victoria that was made in Geelong in 1877, and a promise of a government grant when 33 subscribers were enrolled, a Geelong Telephone Exchange was established in the old Post Office in September 1888. A connection with the Melbourne Exchange was made in 1889 in the same year as the old post office was demolished, making way for a 2 storey building with clock tower.

The first automatic telephone exchange in Australia was opened in Geelong on 6 July 1912, using equipment manufactured in America by the Automatic Electric Company of North Lake, Illinois. This system remained in place, with the Exchange occupying the first floor of the new post office until 1939.

It was in 1939 when, at an estimated cost of 15,000 pounds, builders J. C. Taylor & Sons Pty. Ltd. were contracted to erect a new 3 storeyed building (with basement) to house an

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automatic exchange. The building had been designed by the architects of the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways under the leadership of the Edwin Hubert Henderson, Director-General of Works, and Horace John Mackennal, State Works Director for Victoria. The new structure was constructed with steel frame, with exterior walls faced with pressed cement and cream brick. Internally, the basement was initially to contain cables, and the ground floor a battery room and power room. On the first floor was a luncheon room, stores department and form room, and the second floor was for the switchboard, other technical equipment and offices and stores. Lifts, a concrete stairway and fire escape at the rear were also included. The new building was built with a tile roof and a chimney to remove air-conditioning fumes. A separate brick garage, including housing for bicycles, was also constructed, south of the new Exchange.

Work was completed within the year and in November 1939, Electrical Engineering and Construction Co., Pty. Ltd. of Burnley, Victoria, were accepted by the Works Branch of the Department of the Interior as the successful tenderer to supply and install the main switchboard in the new Exchange.

In late 1964, a new communications centre was completed in Little Ryrie Street at a cost of 210,000 pounds. This new building was to house a modern automatic exchange, signaling the impending relocation of most of the operations of from the Gheringhap Street building.

The Gheringhap Street Exchange building remained under Government ownership until 1993. It continued to operate as an exchange until that time, although only servicing the central Geelong area. The building was decommissioned in 1993-94 and sold to Kempe Engineers in 1995. It was completely restructured internally in 1997-89 and the rear garage was demolished in c.2000.

Description

The former Telephone Exchange building, 50 Gheringhap Street, Geelong, takes up a substantial proportion of the site and is situated on the front boundary. There is a narrow side setback of approximately 2500 mm on the north side, together with steel gates and unpainted brick piers. On the south side is an early solid cream brick fence.

The symmetrical, three storey, face cream brick, interwar rectilinear Stripped Classical styled building is characterised by a parapeted hipped roof form clad in terra cotta tiles, and the cement pressed ashlar block vestigial colonnade at the front, with projecting V-shaped steel framed windows that span the three storeys. Centrally located is a steel framed and glazed entrance doorway, with flanking steel grilles and a metal sculptural motif directly above (the winged symbol of the Commonwealth Postmaster-General's Department in 1939). Pressed cement block dado walls flank the vestigial colonnade, which also has fluted reveals, the inscribed title "Geelong Telephone Exchange" above, and a crowning recessed and moulded parapet.

Flanking the pressed cement colonnade are broad cream brick corners with incised bands forming a geometric rustication. Above the cement dados are single steel framed windows with decorative steel grills. At the front are also projecting cubic pedestals that support introduced standard lights.

The side facades are also characterised by rectilinear vestigial colonnades with steel framed windows between. Apart from the eastern-most vertical windows that rise from near ground level, the base of the colonnades are level with the upper reaches of the pressed cement dados on the front facade.

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Comparative Examples of other interwar rectilinear Stripped Classical buildings:

- * Former High Court of Australia, Melbourne, 1925-28;
- * General Store (building 11), Maribyrnong Defence site, Maribyrnong, 1935;
- * Commonwealth Bank building, Rockhampton, Queensland, c.1929;
- * Commonwealth Bank building, Wollongong, N.S.W., c.1929;

Statement of Cultural Significance

The former Telephone Exchange building, 50 Gheringhap Street, Geelong, has significance as an externally intact example of the interwar rectilinear Stripped Classical style designed by the architects of the Works Branch of the Commonwealth Department of the Interior. Built in 1939, the building appears to be in good condition when viewed from the street.

The former Telephone Exchange building, 50 Gheringhap Street, is architecturally significant at a LOCAL level. It demonstrates original design qualities of an interwar rectilinear Stripped Classical style. These qualities include the parapeted hipped roof form clad in terra cotta tiles, and the cement pressed ashlar block vestigial colonnade at the front (with fluted reveals), with projecting V-shaped steel framed windows that span the three storeys. Other intact or appropriate qualities include the symmetrical composition, three storey height, centrally located steel framed and glazed entrance doorway with flanking steel grilles and a metal sculptural motif directly above (being the winged symbol of the Commonwealth Postmaster-General's Department in 1939), pressed cement block dado walls that flank the vestigial colonnade, "Geelong Telephone Exchange" inscription above the colonnade and the crowning recessed and moulded parapet, broad cream brick corners flanking the pressed cement colonnade with incised bands forming a geometric rustication, single steel framed windows with decorative steel grills above the pressed cement dados, projecting cubic pedestals at the front, and the rectilinear vestigial colonnades at the sides with steel framed windows between.

The former Telephone Exchange building, 50 Gheringhap Street, is historically significant at a LOCAL level. It is associated with Commonwealth infrastructure developments in Geelong and Australia prior to the second world war. In particular, this building has associations with Geelong's second telephone exchange from 1939. It has further associations with the Commonwealth Works Branch architects, under leadership of Edwin Hubert Henderson (at a national level) and Horace Mackennal (at a State level).

Overall, the former Telephone Exchange building, 50 Gheringhap Street, is of LOCAL significance.

References

- "Geelong Post and Telegraphic Office: History Notes", 1965, Geelong Historical Records Centre.
- Geelong Advertiser 20 February, 1939, 19 February, 1939, 11 March, 1939, 14 November, 1939.
- Reports and Drainage Plans, Barwon Water profits system, 1939, 1962, 1993.
- D. Rowe, 'Building a National Image: The Architecture of John Smith Murdoch, Australia's First Commonwealth Government Architect', PhD (Architecture) Thesis, Deakin University, 1997.
- Norman Houghton, Geelong Historical Records Centre, personal comment, July 2002.
- Information on E.H. Henderson courtesy of Prof. P. Goad and Dr J. Willis, Nationalism and identity: government architecture in Australia 1901-1951 (work in progress), University of Melbourne, 2002.
- Helen Lardner Conservation & Design, HLA Envirosiences, D. Rowe & C. Kellaway, 'Built Heritage Assessment of the Maribyrnong Defence Site, Victoria' (in progress, July 2002).