

Identification and location

Name of Place: **Mechanics Institute**

Other Name

Address 209 Nicholson Street

Footscray

Place Identifier 8802

Heritage Significance city

Creation date(s): 1913 c.

Map (Melway) 42 C5

Boundary description The extent of the current allotment

Local Government Area: City of Maribyrnong

Ownership Type Private

Description

Site Type: mechanics institute

Physical Description

This Queen Anne style building is comprised of two linked half-timbered and gabled wings with ridge lines parallel to Nicholson Street. The walls of the ground floor are exposed red brick and the upper walls are rough-cast stucco, while the roof, with its wide eaves and projecting line over the gables, is covered with Marseille pattern terra-cotta tiles. The facade is symmetrical around a gabled entrance porch (despite the asymmetrical domestic examples which are typical of the style) decorated with shaped timbers after Eastern motifs (brackets, shallow segment-arched bressumer and notched detail on the upper face of each post) as are the exposed roof rafters, here and elsewhere. Its floor is paved with red quarry tiles. Another typical attribute is the multi-pane obscured glazing in most window top-lights. A row of Cypress trees which provide a backdrop to the building are part of contemporaneous civic landscaping relating to the Town Hall precinct across the railway line.

Condition

Although altered internally, the building is in good condition.

Integrity

The main doors have been renewed, a new door and screen to the south of Nicholson Street have been inserted and the brick chimneys shafts open on the south have been painted. The roof and guttering of the adjoining building on the north is intrusive, and new walling has been built between the buildings.

Context

Located within a commercial precinct with the Polain-designed corner shop row at Buckley Street (derelict?) and the contemporary Mitchell's Building opposite. A row of cypress trees provide a backdrop and the building is prominent on its island site.

Threats

While not immediately effected, the Polain buildings are abandoned and present a rather sad looking streetscape and air of dereliction to the whole block.

History

The first Footscray Mechanics Institute and Free Library was commenced around 1855 by James Young in Pilgrim Street on a small scale. It moved to Austin St. in 1861 thanks to a grant from the Footscray Council, and then to Nicholson St. opposite this site. A more permanent site was found on Railway land at the end of Napier Street (the present Post Office site) where a school of design under secretary R. Bennett, along with leased overflow accommodation for the Hyde Street government school.

The triangular block bounded by Napier, Nicholson and Buckley Streets was the institutes next acquisition, being permanently reserved for their use in 1886, but the 1890s financial recession prevented construction of a new building for 27 years. The old timber institute was transplanted there in the interim and local architect Charles Polain, leased for 21 years, part of the block on the Nicholson and Buckley Street corner for a commercial development (215-219 Nicholson St.), despite the obvious clash with the reserve's prescribed purpose. This group of two storey shops became the institute's property at the end of the lease and the improvements were used to finance the new building, aided by donations from Dr. C.L. McCarthy and James Cuming among others

In November 1913 the foundation stone for this new substantial building had been laid by Cr. Alex McDonald (Mayor) while C.W. Vanheems provided the design and the Stahl Brothers carried out the construction. Several members of the Johnstone family have served as librarians for extensive periods. the building has been renovated internally.

Thematic context

Australian Principal Theme

PAHT Subtheme:

Local Theme

Cultural Significance

The Mechanics Institute is of historical and local architectural significance to the City of Maribyrnong. Historically the building is important as the city's main library for many years and a physical reminder of the mechanics institutes which dominated male social life and adult learning in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Victoria.

The progress of Victoria in arts, education and industry owes much to the role of the mechanics institutes as venues for self education and learning, particularly among the working classes in industrial suburbs, of which the Footscray institute was a key example. (Criteria A4 & G1)

The mechanics institutes have been subsumed or replaced by municipal libraries and other educational institutes and so where they survive they represent the nineteenth and early twentieth century phenomena. (Criterion B2) Architecturally a simple and typical example of the Queen Anne style adapted to an unusual building type (for the style). (Criterion F1) The associated Cypress trees form an important landscape element.

Comparative Examples

Few buildings present the same combination of use and style, but a number of large Queen Anne houses in Footscray (such as 8 Geelong Road, 49 Nicholson St.) show the domestic versions of the style.

Recommendations

Heritage Victoria Register

Register of the National Estate

National Trust Register

Other Heritage Listings

Planning Scheme Protection

External Paint Controls Apply?

Internal Alteration Controls Apply?

Tree Controls Apply?

Included on the Victorian Heritage Register under the Act

Are there Outbuildings or Fences not Exempt?

Prohibited Uses may be Permitted?

Recommendations

The following objectives relate to the Statement of Significance and the cited fabric or contributory elements.

- To conserve and enhance the significant elements of the place.
- To conserve and enhance the public view of these elements.
- To conserve and enhance the visual relationships between the contributory elements.
- To ensure that new or altered elements within the place are visually recessive and related to the contributory elements.
- To prepare a conservation management plan which embodies the above objectives.
- To encourage continuation of the original use of the place.

Australian Heritage Commission Criteria

A4 Importance for their association with events, developments or cultural phases which have had a significant role in the human occupation and evolution of the nation, state, region or community.

The progress of Victoria in arts, education and industry owes much to the role of the mechanics institutes as venues for self education and learning, particularly among the working classes in industrial suburbs.

B2 Importance in demonstrating a distinctive way of life, custom, process, land-use, function or design no longer practised, in danger of being lost, or of exceptional interest.

The mechanics institutes have been subsumed or replaced by municipal libraries and other educational institutes and so where they survive they represent the nineteenth and early twentieth century phenomena.

F1 Importance for their technical, creative, design or artistic excellence, innovation or achievement.

The mechanics institute demonstrates both the application of the Queen Anne style to a non conventional building, and the role of the institute in fostering excellence in cultural activity.

G1 Importance as places highly valued by a community for reasons of religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.

As the main library in Footscray for many decades, the mechanics institute has an important association with the City's cultural and educational life.

Documentation

References

Butler Footscray Conservation Study, 1989.

Footscray's First Hundred Years

Sands & McDougall Directories.

Data recording

Assessed By

Assessed Date: