

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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MARIBYRNONG TOWN HALL



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2008



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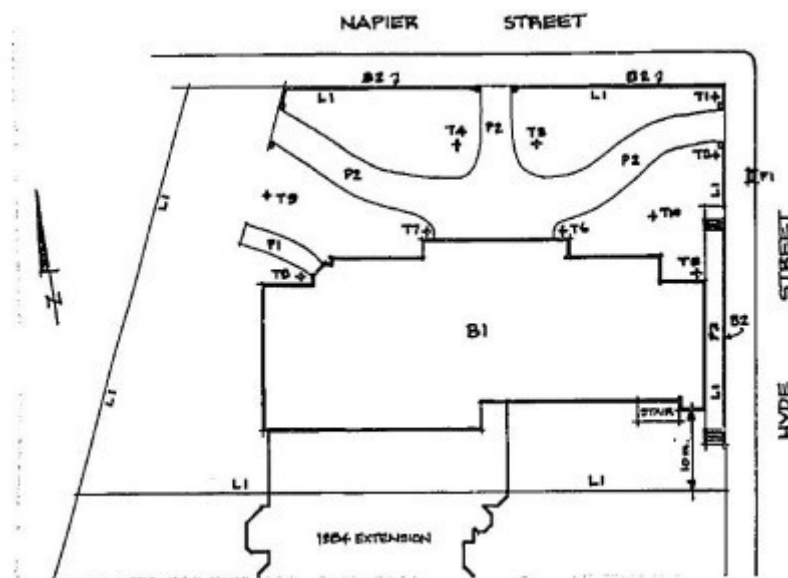
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1 footscray town hall hall napier street
footscray front view 1996



h01218 plan h1218

Location

61 NAPIER STREET FOOTSCRAY, MARIBYRNONG CITY

Municipality

MARIBYRNONG CITY

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1218

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO54

VHR Registration

November 21, 1996

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - May 11, 1999

What is significant?

The Former Footscray town hall was designed by Joseph Plottel, architect, and erected by day labour under supervising contractors ARP Crow & Sons in 1936, to replace the first town hall built in 1875. The two storey American Romanesque building, having a terracotta tile mansard roof, contains offices on the ground floor and the council chamber and reception hall on the upper level. The exterior, which incorporates a finely detailed entrance loggia with Corinthian columns, has variegated brown brickwork highlighted with intricately modelled buff faience work. The contrasting interior, designed in the Streamlined Modernist manner, also includes the large World War One honour board and three council chamber chairs from the former town hall. The site retains its original landscaping reputedly laid out by David Matthews, the City of Footscray's Superintendent of Parks & Gardens (1916-64), and its associated external fencing and lighting. A commemorative granite drinking fountain and horse trough, outside the site on the Hyde Street footpath, designed by local monumental mason James Taylor & Sons, was a gift by Mayor James Cuming to celebrate the achievement of "City" status in 1891.

How is it significant?

The Former Footscray town hall is of architectural, aesthetic, social and historical significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Former Footscray town hall is architecturally and aesthetically important as the only known example of the imposing American Romanesque style applied to a civic building in Victoria. The highly sophisticated external ornamentation demonstrates American design influence and includes Art Deco, Moderne, Celtic, Spanish and Medieval motifs. The faience work, particularly around the dominant entrance loggia is exceptionally fine. The

interior, which contrasts markedly with the exterior, is a relatively intact and fine example of a civic interior designed in the Streamlined Moderne style. Notable internal features include the entrance lobby with mosaic tile floor (now partly obscured), which is one of the best inter-war examples in Melbourne, the suspended elliptical staircase and bronze balustrade with nickel plated handrail, unusual black marble columns, ornamental plasterwork, Queensland maple panelling, and the Moderne timber screen and clock behind the mayoral chair in the council chamber. The former town hall building is historically, architecturally, and socially important as a design that successfully merges progressive ideas in municipal office building and planning with the civic confidence of a community.

Standing at the top of the main staircase, the huge polished timber honour board is architecturally and aesthetically important for its unusual floor to ceiling design and for its sheer size. The honour board, which was transferred to its new, imposing position from the old offices, is of historical importance for commemorating some 2000 local citizens who served in the Great War, and for linking the continuity of civic association from nineteenth to twentieth century buildings. The mayoral chair and two hall chairs from the original town hall are also important for their historical associations.

The Former Footscray town hall is architecturally and historically of interest for its association with Joseph Plottel, architect for two landmark Footscray factories and a number of notable Melbourne buildings, including the nearby Williamstown Town Hall.

The Former Footscray town hall is architecturally, historically, and aesthetically important for its symmetrical forecourt design which complements the formal qualities of the building. The coloured concrete paving, the brick and iron boundary fence to Napier and Hyde Streets, ornamental lamps, and the formal arrangement of the garden and trees, which includes examples of, *Juniperus virginiana cv.*, *Cedrus deodara*, *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Aurea', *Cupressus sempervirens*, *Cupressus torulosa* and *Lirodendron tulipifera* trees, are features which combine to reinforce the symmetry and cultural integrity of the town hall building and forecourt. The principal pair of ornamental lamps is socially important for their connection with the Australian Natives' Association, an organisation that took a strong stand on matters of national importance, and which on occasion led or stimulated public thought along lines which ultimately became an accepted point of view.

The Cuming commemorative drinking fountain and horse trough is historically and architecturally important as a rare example of a combined public drinking fountain and horse trough which illustrates the once necessary importance of horses on our streets. It is historically important for its continuous association with the town hall precinct since 1891, when Footscray gained city status, and for its ability to demonstrate the earlier civic tradition for mayors to donate a utilitarian gift to the municipality upon their retirement or for commemorating a special event. It is also of historic interest for its association with James Cuming (1835-1911), long time Footscray councillor, mayor, patron of local charities, and co-founder of the large and successful chemical and fertiliser works, Cuming Smith & Company, which had its factory in Yarraville, and as a work of stonemason James Taylor, who is reputedly the pioneer of the granite industry in Australia.

Construction dates	1936,
Architect/Designer	Plottel, Joseph,
Heritage Act Categories	Heritage place,
Other Names	FOOTSCRAY TOWN HALL,
Hermes Number	4926
Property Number	

History

Contextual History:History of Place:

On 25 February 1859 a public meeting of Footscray householders approved forming their township and neighbourhood into a municipality. Boundaries were adopted and a committee was appointed to prepare the necessary petition and obtain signatures. In April a petition containing the signatures of 172 householders, including three women, was presented to the government, and on 10 June the new municipal district was

proclaimed. The first council election was held on Saturday 2 July, where a local population of 400 male voters elected nine councillors from ten candidates. Council meetings were initially held in a galvanised iron building in Moreland Street near the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River.

Having progressed in revenue and population, the district was proclaimed a borough in 1863. It was from this time onwards that Footscray's industries became particularly important to the wealth of the municipality. For many years the district had been the centre for meat preserving, manure processing, tallow melting and tanning, the manufacture of chemicals, and the preparation of stone. A sugar boiling house and woollen mills followed. Footscray's first town hall, consisting of municipal offices and council chambers, with attached court house and post office, was built to reflect the prosperity of this leading manufacturing district. Designed by architect A. T. Kelly, and opened in February 1876, the two-storey, Italianate building was constructed in bluestone from local quarries. Speaking at the opening, Mayor Gamon said the councillors and citizens of the municipality

had reason to congratulate themselves on the progress of the borough. Five years ago the rateable land was valued at £1,600, now it was £3,300; the population was a few years ago 1,900, now it was 4,200. (Cheers.) Five years ago, there were 400 houses in the borough, now there were about 900. That was not so bad for Footscray. (Cheers.) There could be no doubt that they owed their prosperity to a great extent to the fact of its being the manufacturing centre.

The civic complex was Footscray's first substantial public building, and the site chosen, near the main railway station and in the most prestigious street, confirmed Napier and Hyde streets as the civic and commercial centre. A grand clock tower and reception hall included in Kelly's original drawings for the building were never constructed.

In celebration of Footscray's achievement of city status in 1891, Mayor James Cuming presented a stone drinking fountain and horse trough as a gift to the people of Footscray. It was crafted by local monumental mason, James Taylor & Sons, and stood in Napier Street, in front of the old town hall.

History of Place:

Footscray's first town hall served admirably for sixty years. In August 1935 the Footscray City Council passed a resolution approving the final plans and specifications for a new complex of municipal offices. Occupying the site of the old civic buildings, the new brick structure presented the latest thought in municipal office planning, and its progressive design symbolised the faith of the Footscray people in the future of their municipality. Footscray was the 'Birmingham of Australia', with the largest revenue of any city in Victoria, excepting the City of Melbourne itself, and the new town hall would establish Footscray's claim to leadership of Melbourne's Western Suburban Districts. Things were indeed looking up for Footscray; the economic outlook was brightening, and the council was about to restore salaries and wages to pre-depression levels.

The foundation stone for the new building was laid by Mayor, Councillor W. H. Anderson, J.P., on 22 February 1936. Later in the year, on 19 November the Governor, Lord Huntingfield and his wife came to open the new £40,000 town hall in front of 5000 people. Compared to the new edifice the former civic building was sombre, its bluestone staid and grey, and its entrance small and unimpressive. In its place, architect, Joseph Plottel had designed an imposing Romanesque structure of grand civic proportions. Historian, John Lack aptly captures the mood of the new architecture:

Designed for a community emerging from a depression, Plottel's Town Hall amalgamated the suburban cinema with the moderne office block, and merged the Hollywood Mediaeval of Errol Flynn's *Adventures of Robin Hood* with the suave interiors of Fred Astaire's *Top Hat*.

It was constructed of specially selected bricks of variegated warm colours ranging from browns to red. Buff architectural terracotta featured in the main portico, columns, balconies, arches and elsewhere where accents of colour were necessary. Under the portico of Corinthian columns there was a barrel vaulted ceiling. The bronzed front doors led to a large entrance lobby embellished with a mosaic floor that incorporated the City's coat of arms as a centrepiece. With more than 16,000 pieces of tile, the Age described it as 'one of the best examples of mosaic to be seen around Melbourne'. The patterned floor extended under the revolving door to the main stair hall containing black marble columns. Extending to the right and left the main corridor gave access to the counters of the electrical supply department, the rates office and the town clerk's general office.

A black and white marble elliptical shaped stairway with bronze handrailing led to the first floor level. The city's huge honour board commemorating some 2000 local citizens who served in the Great War, stood floor

to ceiling at the top of the stairway. It had been transferred to its imposing new position from the old municipal offices, and was illuminated by the decorative stairwell windows as well as by the soft tones of the amber-coloured lighting in the upper corridor. On this level the council chamber, the Mayor and Mayoress's suites, committee rooms as well as the surveyor's and engineer's offices were to the west end, while the supper room with associated facilities and its own separate stairway could be found at the east end. Most of these rooms faced the front of the building and opened on to a balcony faced with terracotta.

The council chamber had been designed with a special ceiling and acoustically treated walls. Like other parts of the building it was lined with flush wood panelling of selected grain. At the other end of the corridor the banquet hall, which was to be let for dances, socials and weddings had its own terrazzo staircase paved in marble effect. This room was entered by wide doors of ornamental frosted glass inset in polished maple frames. The walls were covered in beige in a sand paper finish, and decorated with a raised ornamental frieze in green and gold. Subtle, overhead, indirect lighting was used. To one side was a little alcove for small orchestras, to the other a kitchen.

The town hall forecourt driveway had been laid by the Anglo-Italian Granolithic Co. using a new type of coloured cement gravelling and Cementone colouring. Other subcontractors and suppliers of material included: A.R.C. Engineering (steel reinforcement), Wunderlich (metal letters and architectural terracotta), W. H. Brilliant (pressed cement and fibrous plaster), Charles Heath & Sons (marble work), Hoffman Bricks (special face bricks), Genoa Terrazzo (ironite and terrazzo), Goldman (panelling and doors), Brooks Robinson (revolving door and glazing), Barnet Glass Rubber (rubber flooring), Newton & Gray (special light fittings), Bunting & Tickell (office furniture), the Australian Tessellated Tile Company (mosaic floor) and William Bedford (door furniture and bronze grilles). were the supervising architects. The building was constructed by day labour under supervising contractors, A. R. P. Crow & Sons. All materials were Australian.

The elegant pair of double lamps which stand in front of the building were donated by the Footscray Branch of the Australian Natives' Association to commemorate their jubilee 1886 - 1936. They are similar to another pair of lamps which stand at the east (Hyde Street) entrance. The new civic arrangement saw the 1891 drinking fountain and horse trough moved from the centre of the Napier Street frontage to the east side of the new town hall in Hyde Street.

In 1984 a \$1.5 million extension to the town hall including offices and ancillary services was completed by local architects, Lawrence Atley and Associates. The town hall became the municipal head office for the newly created City of Maribyrnong in 1993.

Architect, Joseph Plottel

Born in Middlesborough, England in 1883, of orthodox Jewish parents, Joseph Plottel trained in England then emigrated to South Africa and worked in Capetown, Johannesburg and Pretoria. He left in 1906 for San Francisco expecting work after the earthquake, travelling via Melbourne and New Zealand. He reached Melbourne penniless and took a job as draughtsman with the Victorian Railways Engineering Department for four years. He then worked with Nahum Barnet for a few months before setting up his own practice in Queen Street in 1911. He married Dr Rachel Gross in 1915, lived in Evans Court, Toorak, and was a Mason, and member of the United Australia Party. He was elected fellow of the RVIA in January 1927.

Plottel's work includes: Brash's, Elizabeth Street (late 1920s); the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation synagogue, Charnwood Cres. St Kilda (1926); the Victoria Club, Queen Street, Melbourne, (1930); residence for H. V. Nathan, Trawalla Ave, Toorak, (1932); factories for Kayser in Richmond, (1930/1933); A. W. Allen's, South Melbourne; Maize Products, Footscray (1933); Barnet Glass & Rubber, Footscray; Mount Royal Hospital; factory, Roden Street, North Melbourne (1935); hotel at Hepburn Springs (1934); eight flats, Alma Road St Kilda (1937); Temple Beth Israel, Alma Road, St Kilda (1937); Burwood Boys Home (1937); house, Palm Grove, Deepdene (1937); Fink Brothers factory, East Brunswick (1937).

COMPARISON:

The following town halls are included on the Heritage Register:

PLACE DATE DESCRIPTION

Geelong 1855 Two storey, Classical
Dunolly 1862 Single storey, Classical Revival
Portland 1864 Single storey, Classical bluestone
Melbourne 1867 Two storey with tower, Victorian Classical

during the 1860s and 1880s, and large two storey buildings with towers built in urban areas. Except for the Eaglehawk town hall there are no buildings included on the register which were constructed after the turn of the century, and there are no town halls of the style of the Footscray town hall.

Over a dozen town halls and municipal office complexes were built in Victoria during the 1930s, a number being designed by Leith & Bartlett architects. Of these buildings, Andrew Ward recommends that the Footscray and Heidelberg town halls be added to the register. The Heidelberg town hall (1936) is a large two storey complex with clock tower in the European Modernist manner, designed by A C Leith & Associates with Peck & Kempter. Ward also recommends that the buildings at Swan Hill (1934), designed by A C Leith & Associates in the Classical style, and that at Warracknabeal (1939), designed by Seabrook & Fildes in the European Modernist style be further investigated for possible registration. As the design of the Footscray town hall is quite different from the design of all these buildings, it is a unique example of the American Romanesque style applied to a town hall complex.

Joseph Plottel, who designed the Footscray town hall, also designed the Williamstown town hall in association with H E Bennett. This imposing inter war building with facade in Classical Revival manner displaying Palladian symmetry was commenced in 1918 and opened in 1927. Ward does not recommend this building for registration. Plottel also designed the Byzantine style Synagogue in Charnwood Crescent, East St Kilda.

The Footscray town hall can also be compared with the earlier Equity Chambers, Bourke Street, Melbourne (1931), designed in the same style by Oakley & Parkes.

Extent of Registration

NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the Heritage Act, I give notice under section 46 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including the Heritage Register Number 1218 in the category described as a Heritage Place:

Former Footscray Town Hall, 61 Napier Street, Footscray, Maribyrnong City Council.

Extent:

1. All of the building including the external stair in the south east corner marked B1, the brick and iron boundary fence to Napier and Hyde Streets, marked B2, including the associated post light fittings and the isolated complimentary post light fitting on a circular brick base at the west end of the main driveway (P2), and all the concrete paths, steps and driveways north and east of building marked P1-P3 inclusive on Diagram No. 607285 held by the Executive Director, Heritage Council.
2. All of the land marked L1 on Diagram No. 607285 held by the Executive Director, Heritage Council, being part of Crown Land permanently reserved as a site for Town Hall, Court House, Post and Telegraph Office, and known as Crown Allotment 1, Section 9A, City of Footscray, Parish of Cut-Paw-Paw (vide Government Gazette 1878, page 2442).
3. The mayoral chair and two council chamber chairs from the 1875 town hall located in building B1.
4. The two *Juniperus virginiana* trees marked T1 and T2; the two *Cedrus deodara* trees marked T3 and T4, the three *Cupressus sempervirens* trees marked T5-T7 inclusive, *Cupressus torulosa* marked T8, *Liriodendron tulipifera* marked T9, *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Aurea' marked T10 on Diagram No. 607285 held by the Executive Director, Heritage Council.
5. The commemorative drinking fountain and horse trough situated in Hyde Street, marked F1 on Diagram No. 607285 held by the Executive Director, Heritage Council.

Dated 7 November 1996

RAY TONKIN
Executive Director

[Victoria Government Gazette No. G46 21 November 1996 p.3002]

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 1995. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place data owner.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>