

# CENTURY BUILDING



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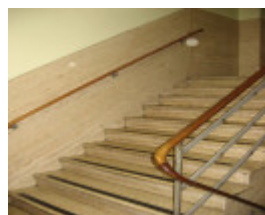
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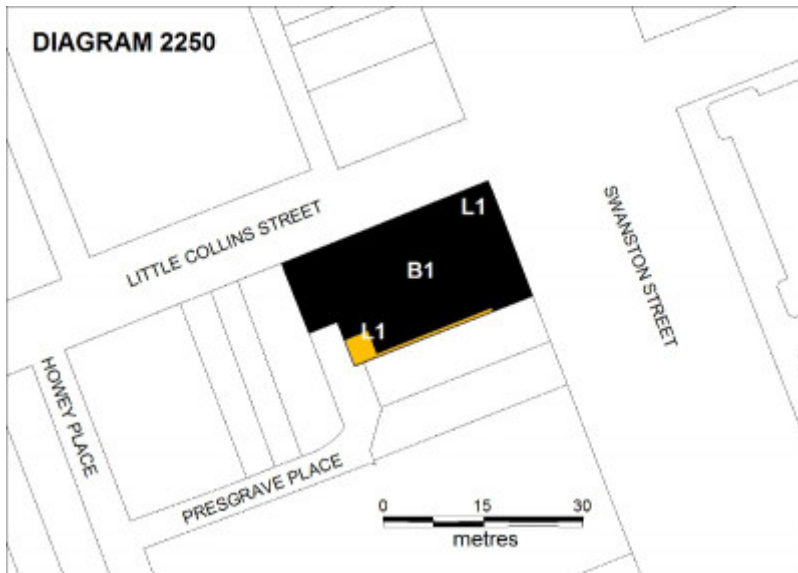
Century Building



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century building plan.jpg

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### Location

125-133 SWANSTON STREET MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

### Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

### Level of significance

Registered

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2250

### Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO748

### VHR Registration

July 8, 2010

### Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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### Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is significant?

The Century Building was designed by the prominent Melbourne architect Marcus Barlow and constructed in 1939-40 by the Swanson Brothers. It was built for the Howey Estate, which owned the site from the first Melbourne land sales in 1837 until 1970, and Barlow had been the Estate's official architect since 1930. The building had shops on the ground floor, a newsreel theatre in the basement and offices and showrooms let out to various tenants on the upper levels. It was the first building in Melbourne to be fully-air-conditioned. The building was designed so as to span the whole basement to provide the open space for the cinema, called the Century Theatre, also designed by Barlow. Wunderlich supplied the terracotta faience cladding on the building and the aluminium alloy cladding for the verandah canopy, and for some years featured the building in its advertising. From 1940-41 most of the building served as temporary headquarters for the Royal Australian Air Force, and part of it continued to be used as their finance offices for some years. The building was sold in 1970. The theatre remained in operation until the 1970s, but it has now been gutted and is used as a live music venue. The rest of the spaces continue to be used for their original purpose, as shops on the ground floor and offices and workrooms on the upper levels.

The Century Building is a twelve-storey steel and reinforced concrete office building in the vertical Streamlined Moderne style. It is faced with faience-glazed terracotta tiles, white on the vertical ribs and grey in the window spandrels, and has metal framed windows. The building has an extraordinary vertical emphasis, with closely-spaced rows of projecting fin-like faience-clad piers that run continuously from the first to the eleventh floors, culminating in a corner tower with a belvedere and crowning lantern. The ground floor, separated from the rest of the facade by a prominent aluminium-clad cantilevered and stepped awning, is faced with travertine marble slabs and incorporates five shops, although only one (127 Swanston Street) retains remnants of its original metal-framed showcases. In recent years the ground floor shopfronts have been largely replaced, the ground floor lift lobby has been refurbished, the lift cars replaced and the original flagpole removed from the tower. The stairwell and timber-panelled corridors remain substantially intact. The tenancies on the upper levels are laid out around U-shaped corridors at each level, of which all but one retain their original timber veneer panelling, reeded cornices and recessed rubber skirtings.

This site is part of the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people.

How is it significant?

The Century Building is of architectural and technological significance to the state of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Century Building is architecturally significant as an outstanding example of a commercial building in the vertical Streamlined Moderne style, and is particularly notable for its starkness and expression of verticality. It is architecturally significant as a fine design of Marcus Barlow, one of Victoria's most prominent architects of the inter-war period. Together with Barlow's Commercial Gothic style Manchester Unity Building (1932, VHR H411) and Walter Burley Griffin's Capitol Building (1925-26, VHR H2119), it forms one of Melbourne's most distinctive city blocks. It is significant for its use of high-quality materials, including terracotta faience, Travertine, Sycamore veneer and stainless steel, which are strongly evocative of the luxuriant era of the late 1930s.

The Century Building is technologically significant as the first fully air-conditioned office building in Victoria. It is also the first building in Australia to use off-white terracotta faience cladding, which was in stark contrast to the wide range of coloured faience that had first become fashionable in the mid-1920s.

## **Permit Exemptions**

### **General Exemptions:**

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### **Specific Exemptions:**

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. General Conditions: 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan endorsed by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it. Note: The existence of a Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan endorsed by the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. General Conditions: 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions. General Conditions: 5. Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authorities where applicable. Minor Works : Note: Any Minor Works that in the opinion of the Executive Director will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place may be exempt from the permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage values of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is required, it is recommended that the permits co-ordinator be contacted.

Interior works: In accordance with the permit policy the following works are exempt:

1. All non-structural internal works to the ground floor shops other than where they impact on original shop fronts;
2. All non-structural works to the office interiors, provided they did not encroach on window areas and were not visible from outside the building;
3. All non-structural works the former basement theatre that did not involve any original features.

|                         |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Construction dates      | 1939,             |
| Architect/Designer      | Barlow, Marcus,   |
| Heritage Act Categories | Registered place, |
| Hermes Number           | 2966              |
| Property Number         |                   |

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## History

[Information from nomination report]

### CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

In the first land sales in Melbourne in 1837 the land along Swanston Street between Collins and Little Collins Street was purchased for £120 by Captain Henry Howey. Howey died shortly after, and the property was inherited by his brother Captain John Howey, and was subsequently passed down in the family. A number of buildings were constructed on the land over the years, including shops, offices and photographic studios. During the first four decades of the twentieth century the estate was transformed, with an intensive programme of building and redevelopment, most carried out by the same architects, a firm descended from the mid-nineteenth century practice of Nathaniel Billing (later known as Billing, Son & Peck, then Billing, Peck & Kemter). Howey House, a shopping arcade and office block at 244-6 Collins Street, was built in 1920-21; the Talma Building at 119-21 Swanston Street in 1923-24; and the adjacent Aeolian House at no 123 in 1926. The firm of Peck & Kemter also were architects-in-association with Walter Burley Griffin on the design and construction of Capitol House in the centre of the block at 113 Swanston Street in 1921-24 (a collaboration between the Howey Estate and others). The link with these architects was broken when in 1930 the architect Marcus Barlow was commissioned to design a new building for the family, Howey Court at 234 Collins Street. Barlow was also retained to design the twelve-storey Albany Chambers at 230 Collins Street (1935), the five-storey Presgrave Building at 273-79 Little Collins Street (1935-6), and some renovations to Howey House and the adjacent Lyric House on Collins Street (both 1936). By 1935 it was reported that the Howey Estate had spent more than £900,000 on building works over the previous three decades, with seven new buildings on the site since 1916. The only part of the Howey land not redeveloped was the south-west corner of Swanston and Little Collins Streets. This was still occupied by a cluster of low-rise Victorian buildings including Hewitt House at 125 Swanston Street, Craigie's Building on Little Collins Street, and on the corner the Exchange Hotel.

The architect: Marcus Ronald Barlow (1890-1955)

Barlow began his professional career in the office of John Grainger in the firm of Grainger & Little in about 1913 and in 1916 was elevated to partner in the firm, which became known as Grainger, Little & Barlow. Grainger and Little died the following year, leaving the 27-year old as partner-in-charge. In the early 1920s he was joined by the South African born architect Frederick Hawkins and from 1924 the firm was known as Barlow & Hawkins. Among the firm's projects at this time were the Public Benefit Bootery in Bourke Street and Temple Court in Collins Street (both 1923-4). Following Hawkins' departure for West Australia in 1929, the firm became Marcus R Barlow & Associate. The firm designed a number of major projects, most notable large commercial buildings in central Melbourne. Barlow did much work for the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows (MUIOOF), including a vast office building on the corner of Swanston and Collins Streets (1930-33), a smaller office building further up Swanston Street (1940), a hall in Kilmore, and the organisation's convalescent home in Woodend (1940). He had a similar enduring relationship with the Howey Estate, which provided him with a number of commissions until the onset of WWII. In 1930 he designed an experimental prototype house of strawboard construction at Seaholme.

After WWII Barlow prepared schemes for a series of small housing estates sponsored by the philanthropist Sol Green intended for returned servicemen, in Sandringham (1946) and East Brighton (1947). Barlow relocated his offices to the inner suburbs in about 1948, and also acquired and remodelled a former nineteenth century corner hotel at 360 King Street, West Melbourne, which was written up in the *Australian Home Beautiful* in March 1949, but was his last major work. He died in 1955 and the practice was carried on until the 1980s by his son, Marcus Robert Barlow.

### HISTORY OF PLACE

It was reported in the *Argus* in April 1938 that the Howey Trustees were proceeding with a new building on the corner of Swanston and Little Collins Streets, of eleven storeys to cost £150,000, to be designed by the architect M R Barlow. It was to have two shops along Swanston Street and four in Little Collins, a theatre in the basement and offices and showrooms above, and a complete system of air-conditioning was to be installed, the first building in Melbourne to be fully air-conditioned across all levels.

Construction began at the end of January 1939. A year later the ground floor shops had been completed and were tenanted, while work continued on the remainder of the building, which was completed by May 1940, with the finishing touches being the cantilevered verandah and electric signs on the fascia underneath. Photographs of the new building were published in the October 1940 issue of the journal *Building*. Singled out for particular praise were the coloured floodlighting that illuminated the building at night, the Roman travertine cladding around the ground floor entrance, the and the 30,000 square feet of Wunderlich terracotta faience, 'of an off-white colour, with grey-blue inserts'. Wunderlich had also supplied the aluminium alloy verandah cladding, and for some time featured the building in its advertising.

The basement theatrette, also designed by Barlow, was designed as a newsreel cinema to seat nearly five hundred. It was known as the Century Theatre, and was expressly designed for the screening of sound film, with careful planning of acoustic details. A staircase and lifts led down to a spacious foyer, where cloak rooms and parcel accommodation were provided. Ross Thorne, in *Cinemas of Australia* (p 110), notes

It was evidently required as part of the original building programme for the building's columns did not, as is usual, continue to the basement foundations. The superstructure of office floors is supported upon beams 6 feet deep and 4 feet wide spanning the whole site. This allowed a clear basement almost 66 feet wide which was easily capable of housing a cinema. (*Building*, 24 October 1940)

The ceiling of the cinema was stepped with indirect lighting strip at each step; the walls were sound absorbing fibre board and hard fibrous plaster while the lower portions were finished in washable rubber. The illuminated ceiling steps curved into a "U" shape some distance from the side walls, then the legs of the U returned to meet the walls at right angles. This allowed a lower ceiling over each side bank of seating in which air conditioning ducts could be housed.

The side wall plaster detailing was the epitome of Art Deco design as mentioned by Bevis Hillier [in *Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s*, London 1968]. Here swept a curve of decorative bands culminating in a volute out of which leapt two balletic figures, every limb of each in parallel precision, symbolising Aryan youth.

From May 1940 the upper levels (second to eleventh floors) of the still incomplete Century Building began to be taken over as temporary headquarters for the Royal Australian Air Force, while their new headquarters were being built at the Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road. The RAAF vacated the building in the following year, but their finance offices took over. The top floor was occupied by the Austin Optical Company, a firm of medical instrument dealers, Renee Rose Pty Ltd and The Maypole (both of which had ground floor shops) leased space on the first floor for a workroom and storage, while the second floor was taken over by the London baby Carriage Manufacturers Pty Ltd. Most of these early tenants would stay for many years, with the Renee Rose shop remaining until the 1990s.

The Century Building remained in the ownership of the Howey Estate for several decades, but the Howey Estate was dissolved following the death of Captain Howey in 1963. Their remaining buildings in Melbourne were sold off during 1970, with the Century Building sold for \$1,550,000. The Howey family retained ownership of the last vestige of the Estate property, the laneway known as Howey Place, until 1985, when it was sold for 1,000.

Few changes were made to the building from the 1940s to the 1960s. Most of those that did occur were either partition alterations at the upper levels, or new illuminated signage at the shopfronts or verandah. A number of minor changes were made to the theatrette during the post-war period, including a new kiosk (1950) and ticket box/turnstile (1952). In 1964 major changes costing £10,000 were made to it, and it remained in operation until the 1970s, but it now been partially gutted and converted into a live music venue, the Hi-Fi Bar.

In recent years the ground floor shopfronts have been replaced, the ground floor lift lobby has been refurbished, the lift cars replaced and the original flagpole removed from the tower. The office tenancy fit-outs have been altered and re-partitioned to varying degrees although the stairwell and timber-panelled corridors remain substantially intact.

## **Assessment Against Criteria**

a. Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history

- b. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.
- c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history.
- d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.

The Century Building is an outstanding example of a commercial building in the vertical Streamlined Moderne style, and is particularly notable for its starkness and expression of verticality. It is significant for its use of high-quality materials, including terracotta faience, Travertine marble, Sycamore veneer and stainless steel, which are strongly evocative of the luxuriant era of the late 1930s.

- e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

The Century Building, together with Marcus Barlow's Commercial Gothic style Manchester Unity Building (1932, VHR H411) and Walter Burley Griffin's Capitol Building (1925-26, VHR H2119), forms one of Melbourne's most distinctive city blocks, which has been described as the 'Chicago End' of Melbourne.

- f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

The Century Building was the first fully air-conditioned office building in Victoria. It is was also the first building in Australia to use off-white terracotta faience cladding, which was in stark contrast to the wide range of coloured faience that had first become fashionable in the mid-1920s.

- g. Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.

- h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

The Century Building is a fine design by Marcus Barlow, one of Victoria's most prominent architects of the inter-war period.

## **Plaque Citation**

This outstanding example of the vertical Streamlined Moderne style with unusual white faience cladding was designed by the architect Marcus Barlow and built in 1939-40. It was the first fully air-conditioned office building in Victoria.

## **Extent of Registration**

1. All the land marked L1 on Diagram 2250 held by the Executive Director, being all of the lots on Plan of Subdivision 436062
2. All the building marked B1 on Diagram 2250 held by the Executive Director

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

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