
Unity Hall



B4692 Unity Hall

Location

636 - 638 Bourke Street,, MELBOURNE VIC 3000 - Property No B4692

Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

Level of significance

Regional

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-1409

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 29, 2005

What is significant?

The building known as Unity Hall was the headquarters of the Australian Railways Union for over eighty years from 1916 - 1999. It contained union offices and a meeting hall. Designed by the architect A.E.H. Carleton, it is reputed to have been built with the assistance of voluntary labour. Located at the West end of Bourke Street, it is near to, and, has a close association with, the significant transport interchange of the Spencer Street Railway complex.

Unity Hall is a narrow fronted, four storey building described as "Neo - Baroque" or small scale "Palazzo" in style. The facade of the building is in good and largely original condition with the exception of a heavy security shutter

at the entrance and a broken projecting sign.

The lettering on the facade on the ground floor level and upper storey balcony and the commemorative plaque are a significant connection to union activity in Australia.

How is it Significant?

Unity Hall, the former headquarters of the Australian Railways Union (Victorian Branch) and other unions, is of historical, social and architectural significance at a Regional level. It also forms part of an architecturally significant streetscape.

Why is it Significant?

Unity Hall was one of the earliest substantial buildings designed for a single union. It was a significant centre of the trade union movement and played an important role in the development and consolidation of the transport unions in Victoria. Meetings held within the hall were instrumental in achieving substantial improvements in the working conditions and wages of the railway workers and, subsequently, other related union members. Members were able to come to Unity Hall for both advice and assistance in lodging claims for injury or wrongful dismissal. During the 1950's classes in the English language were organised within the building to facilitate the assimilation of migrant workers.

The historical value of the building is enhanced by its proximity to the major transport interchange of the Spencer Street Station and Railway Yards and other significant centres of communication such as the Mail Exchange building (1917). It is an integral part of the history of the Australian Railway Union (Victorian Branch) and the other unions who have operated from its offices.

Architecturally the building contributes significantly to the varied and historical streetscape at the West end of Bourke Street. The facade of the building is also a notable example of a Baroque Revival style within the city.

Classified: 19/06/2004

Hermes Number 64411

Property Number

Physical Description 1

The facade of the building has been described as "Neo-Baroque" (C.B.D. Historic Buildings Preservation Council). It contains other eclectic elements with Art Nouveau details such as the leadlight windows on the ground and upper floors and the curved "ox-bow" pediment over the entrance. It has reference to the Neo - Classical "Palazzo" style buildings first popularised by architects such as Louis Sullivan in Chicago in the late nineteenth century but is of a much smaller scale.

This building represents an early example of a style more common in the 1920's and usually applied to much larger buildings.

The building is described as a four floor "narrow fronted office building" with an elevator serving all the floors. The frontage to Bourke Street is 9.7 metres. The building extends for 56.5 metres back and is bordered on its right by a narrow laneway, Langs Lane. To the left it abuts a large modern building, City Power House.

Constructed in brick, the Bourke Street facade is cement rendered to imitate stone on the upper floors and has the appearance of "rugged basalt construction at the ground level". "It is as much an expression of its working class origins as it is one phase of the style" (M.C.A.D.C.S. Building Citations). The citation continues:-

Unity Hall commences with a dominant bracketed cornice moulding and progresses down through an arched attic-storey, over a deeply bracketed balcony and down two floors via a giant pilaster trabeation, to the ground or podium level. Exaggerated tripartite keystones are hallmarks of the style as are the deep consoles, swagged balustrading and the ox-bow arch over the entry.

The title "Unity Hall" is written in bold seraph lettering across the middle upper balcony, and, "Victorian Railways Union" is rendered in brass letters above the ground floor window. A carved stone commemorative plaque below the window contains the following inscription:-

VICTORIAN RAILWAYS UNION

UNITY HALL

THIS STONE WAS LAID BY W. L. MORRISSEY GENERAL PRESIDENT
AND FRANK HYETT GENERAL SECRETARY

29 AUGUST 1916

The leadlight windows at the ground floor and upper level have small, curvilinear abstract floral motifs. They appear to be original and add charm to the austere facade of the building. Substantial modifications were made to the interior of the building during the 1970's and 80's and very little remains of the original fit-out except for the terrazzo flooring of the entrance lobby. This has a decorative central lozenge motif containing the initials A R U.

Intactness

The facade is largely intact and unaltered since its construction apart from a heavy security shutter on the main entrance. The Art Nouveau glass windows, commemorative plaque, and both the brass and stone fascia lettering are in good condition and worthy of preservation. Currently the building is heavily screened by a large tree. Very little survives of the original interior following substantial re modelling in the 1970's and subsequent alterations. The terrazzo floor with ARU insignia in the entry hall is in reasonable condition and should be preserved.

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/>