

Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter
Register of Significant Architecture

Prepared by:	Anna Leeson and Kenneth Charlton		
DRAFT DATED:	1 October 2021		
RSA No:	R143		
Name of Place:	Former Commonwealth Bank Building		
Other/Former Names:	Bank House		
Address/Location:	187 London Circuit Canberra City		
Block:	2	Section:	13
Listing Status:	Nominated	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	August 2021	Level of Significance:	Territory
Date of Citation:	October 2021	Category:	Commercial
Citation Revision No:		Style:	Modernist Post-war International style
Citation Revision Date:		Designer:	Peddle, Thorp and Walker
Date of Design:	1966	Client:	Commonwealth Bank
Construction:	1967	Builder:	Civil and Civic

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Former Commonwealth Bank building, or Bank House, was designed by Peddle, Thorp and Walker for the Commonwealth Savings Bank, and completed in 1967. Located on the prominent corner of London Circuit and Ainslie Avenue (formerly known as the Moresby Block) the Commonwealth Bank building is one of the fine modernist buildings on London Circuit. It contributes to the visual setting of Civic Square and specifically, the Legislative Assembly Building, which it sits directly opposite.

Architects Peddle, Thorp and Walker had completed a number of successful civic, sporting, industrial and hotel buildings prior to this commission. The employment of this important firm demonstrates the Bank's respect for the prominent London Circuit site, and an appreciation of sophisticated design.

The building's façades feature nine decorative panels of copper-coated cast concrete by the artist Silvano Mariti. They demonstrate the Bank's understanding of the building's prominent location, its aim to successfully contribute to the streetscape and its appreciation of art and design.

The building is characteristic of the Late Twentieth Century International Style and is a successful visual component of London Circuit. It was one of the early Modernist buildings in Canberra.

The building importantly contributes to the setting of London Circuit, Ainslie Avenue and the Civic Square. The strong verticality of the building façade and the Mariti panels are integral to the building's overall character.

Description

The building is characteristic of the Late Twentieth Century International Style as identified by Apperly, Irving and Reynolds.¹ It is three storeys above ground and has two basement levels. The bank occupied the ground and basement floors, and the upper levels were leased for office use. There is a corner entrance to

the former banking chamber, under a prominent semi-circular cantilevered awning. A side entrance from Ainslie Avenue leads to the basement and upper levels.

The building employs materials and finishes associated with banking buildings such as granite, marble and bronzed elements, but employs them with a modernist sensibility. Externally, the building is clad in white marble, relieved by external columns clad in reconstructed polished russet coloured granite. Between the columns are vertical and horizontal pre-cast concrete fins for sun control, with a polished reconstructed granite finish. The windows are bronze-anodised aluminium. The building is a successful visual component of London Circuit.

On the façade, the building features nine decorative panels of copper coated cast concrete, created by the artist Silvano Mariti. These panels were commissioned by the Commonwealth Bank in 1967 and were designed to complement the building's architecture. They demonstrate the Bank's understanding of the building's prominent location and an aim to successfully contribute into the streetscape.

The setting of the building, addressing the corner of the site, enables the human scale and articulated form to be appreciated from the public realm. It also importantly contributes to the setting of London Circuit, Ainslie Avenue and the Civic Square. The strong verticality of the building façade and the S Mariti panels are integral to the buildings' overall character. The Late Twentieth Century International style was typically used for commercial and institutional buildings. Key characteristics of this style employed in the building include 'traditional' materials such as polished granite and marble, cubiform overall shape and sun control devices. Peddle Thorp and Walker was a key practitioner of this style.²

For the first time in Canberra,³ the upper floors of the building utilised a structural system of cellular steel decking, or Celdeck.⁴ This system allowed for the services and wiring to be contained within the cell cavities of the floor.⁵ The ground and basement floors are solid, reinforced concrete slabs.

Condition

For a 54 year old building, the exterior is generally in good condition, due to careful maintenance. Its intactness has been lessened by the need for some changes, but they have been sympathetic to the building's architectural character. Those changes include:

The sun control devices on both façades have been made more effective. A 1980 photo shows two vertical brown columns per fin.⁶ Today each fin has six grey columns, to cast greater shade over the windows.

The copper covering of the cast concrete panels has been painted over in a beige colour since 1980. The panels completed in 1967 could not be expected to last in good condition, and they show their age.

The 1981 NCDC publication states there were ten relief panels, copper coated concrete, signed and dated, 183 cm x 152 cm each. No signatures or dates are visible, so they must be hidden on the backs of the panels. The photo in it shows the second panel from the north in London Circuit has a design which is not on any of the panels extant in 2021. There must have been a second panel in Ainslie Avenue where there is now black sheeting. That tenth panel must be the one now where the odd one was in the 1980 photo.

The original shown there may have been removed because of damage or much deterioration.

The 1980 photo shows glass walls beside and above the panels on both façades, which allowed visibility into the building. There are now boxed structures above the panels and solid black sheeting where offices have been created inside the former banking chamber.⁷

Internally, the Modernist spiral staircase has been replaced, to meet building code requirements, by a staircase with three straight flights, awkwardly arranged to lead from the ground to basement levels. Other internal changes have been made to suit various tenants.

Background/History

The building was commissioned by the Commonwealth Savings Bank and designed in 1966 by architects Peddle, Thorp and Walker. The bank was the sixth Commonwealth Savings Bank branch in Canberra,⁸ and was the second 'full-time' bank in Civic.

Peddle, Thorp and Walker had received the John Sulman Award in 1952 for the Royal Swedish Legation. The award recognises excellence in public and commercial buildings in either NSW or ACT. While they were known for their 'skyscrapers' in Sydney, including the 1962 AMP building at Sydney's Circular Quay, they had successfully completed a range of civic, sporting, industrial and hotel buildings.

In the 1960s the firm were commissioned by the Commonwealth Bank, which demonstrates the Bank's respect for the prominent London Circuit site, and an appreciation of sophisticated design.

The tender was open from 10 May 1966 and closed 7 June 1966, it was won by Civil and Civic. Construction commenced in October 1966 and the building was officially opened in November of 1967.⁹

The building was owned and occupied by the Commonwealth Bank from its opening until the branch was relocated in c2020.

Silvano Mariti was an Italian-born industrial chemist and interior decorator, who began making decorative panels by hand in a small Marrickville factory in 1957.¹⁰ In 1963, prior to the Commonwealth Bank commission he completed interior decorative artwork panels at the Menzies Hotel in Sydney, also designed by Peddle, Thorp and Walker.¹¹

The first major Modern Movement–inspired building in Central Sydney to feature sculpture was the Commonwealth Bank at 46 Market Street, completed in 1956. There were three sculptures, one being an aluminium panel by Lyndon Dadswell representing a concourse of people entering a bank and receiving attention.¹² The Commonwealth Bank's decision in 1966 to have sculpted panels on the façades of its major branch then being designed for Canberra appears to have been inspired by this artwork. However, the Silvano Mariti panels are abstract, with none of the figurative forms seen in Lyndon Dadswell's panel.

Comparable Buildings in Canberra

The Former Commonwealth Bank Building is comparable to the ANZ Bank Building (former ES&A Bank) in Canberra City. Constructed in a similar time period (1961-1963) for the same use as a commercial bank building, the ANZ Bank Building is included in the ACT Heritage Register. Both buildings have bold, sculptural compositions, of horizontal or vertical design elements.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA IN THE HERITAGE ACT 2004

a. Importance in the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history

The Former Commonwealth Bank building, along with the ANZ Bank Building in the City, helped to introduce modernism into Canberra City. The Civic Square buildings, the Former MLC Building and the Former Commonwealth Bank Building form a cohesive group of buildings that demonstrate and reflect the change of architectural styles in the mid-century period.

The employment of established and prominent architectural firm Peddle, Thorp and Walker demonstrates the Bank's respect for the prominent London Circuit site, and an appreciation of sophisticated design.

b. Has uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history

The Former Commonwealth Bank building utilised—for the first time in Canberra—the structural floor system of cellular floor decking. This system allowed for the services and wiring to be carried through the long channels in the decking system. This was a novel structural solution in the 1960s and introduced its use in Canberra. It allowed for rapid construction and the ease of connecting additional services when needed, into the channels.

The nine Mariti art panels on the exterior of the Former Commonwealth Bank building are understood to be some of the few surviving examples of his work and the only examples of his work in Canberra.

c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of ACT's cultural or natural history

While the building does contribute to an understanding of mid-century architecture, specifically Late Twentieth-Century International style, it is unlikely to meet the threshold for this criteria.

d. Importance in demonstrates the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects

The Former Commonwealth Bank building is a fine example of a class of commercial, multi-use office buildings of the mid-century period. Principal characteristics include the careful siting on the block, architectural form and the effective inclusion of art within the façade. It is characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century International style as described by Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, 1989. A style that was typically used for commercial and institutional buildings, the Former Commonwealth Bank building features characteristics of the style, including contrasting texture, traditional, high quality materials and expressed structural frame with external sun control devices.

The building contributes to the understanding of the bank as a particular class of commercial building, and demonstrates the movement away from classical bank architecture towards modern styles.

The setting of the building, addressing the corner of the site, enables the human scale and articulated facade to be appreciated from the public realm. It also importantly contributes to the setting of London Circuit, Ainslie Avenue and the Civic Square. The strong verticality of the building façade and the S Mariti panels are integral to the buildings' overall character.

The inclusion of nine, large decorative art panels by artist Sivano Mariti, at the instruction of the Bank, demonstrate the Bank's appreciation of the building's prominent location and its aim to successfully contribute into the streetscape.

e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT.

The Former Commonwealth Bank building demonstrates excellent design qualities, complementary to the Civic Square buildings and appropriate to the prominent London Circuit address. The vertical columns and fins appear to have been designed to respond to the Civic Square buildings and provide a cohesive visual link across the group of buildings on London Circuit.

The Mariti decorative panels are visually striking, set between the expressed vertical columns. The panels are documented in several Canberra art and culture publications as important piece of public art.

The aesthetic characteristics are valued and acknowledged by the Institute of Architects, ACT Chapter, as a professional body. No research is available to substantiate such value to a community or cultural group.

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

The Commonwealth Bank building utilised—for the first time in Canberra—the structural floor system of cellular floor decking. This system allowed for the services and wiring to be carried through the long channels in the decking system. Now a common system of construction, this was a novel structural solution in the 1960s and introduced its use in Canberra. It allowed for rapid construction and the ease of connecting additional services when needed, into the channels.

The nine decorative panels of copper coated cast concrete, created by the artist Silvano Mariti were designed to complement the building's architecture and demonstrate the Bank's understanding of the building's prominent location and an aim to successfully contribute into the streetscape. They display a high degree of creative achievement, not seen often on the façade of civic buildings in this period.

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.

While many Canberrans would have had contact with the bank building, there is insufficient evidence to confirm that this criterion is met.

h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.

The building was designed by, and is associated with, Peddle Thorp and Walker, who at the time were well known for their commercial and bank buildings, having designed the AMP Building in Circular Quay. They had also recently received the John Sulman Medal for the Royal Swedish Legation in Canberra.

The commissioning of this notable firm by the Commonwealth Savings Bank demonstrated the significance the bank placed on the design of this branch, in a prime location opposite the recently completed Civic Square.

REFERENCES

-
- ¹ Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, *Identifying Australian Architectural Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. A & R 1989, p 232
 - ² *ibid.*
 - ³ Homes and building New bank building (1966, October 3). *The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)*, p. 8. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106938945>
 - ⁴ Advertising (1966, April 20). *The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)*, p. 30. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128654264>
 - ⁵ Civil Engineering, Retrieved April 18 2021, from <https://www.civilengineeringx.com/construction/cellular-steel-floors/>
 - ⁶ *Works of Art in Canberra*, NCDC, Second Edition, 1981
 - ⁷ External inspection by Ken Charlton, 25/9/2021
 - ⁸ Bank tender result soon (1966, June 9). *The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)*, p. 20. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article136926615>
 - ⁹ No title (1967, November 28). *The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)*, p. 3. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106984900>
 - ¹⁰ Silvano F. Mariti Getty Image 30/6/1961
 - ¹¹ TDK Architects, *Modern Movement Architecture in Central Sydney*, Heritage Study Review, 2019, p 75.
 - ¹² *Ibid.* p 102.