

# Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter

## Register of Significant Architecture

**RSA No: R 145**

**Name of Place:** 17-21 University Avenue

**Other/Former Names:** Colonial Mutual Life Building  
CML Building

**Address:** 17-21 University Avenue CANBERRA 2601  
Block 2 Section 5 of CITY

Listing Status:	RSA Listed	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	July 2023	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation No:	1 (K Charlton)	Category:	Commercial
		Style:	Late 20th C International

Date of Design:	1967	Architects:	Towell, Rippon and Associates
Construction Period:	July 1967 to Sep 1968	Client/Owner:	Consultants to Civil & Civic
		Builder:	Lend Lease Corporation
			Civil & Civic Pty Ltd

### Statement of Significance

The former Colonial Mutual Life Building is a significant building in the history of mid-century architecture in Canberra. It is not only important for the way it exhibits characteristics of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style of Australian Architecture, it also demonstrates a most creative and unusual way of arranging the fenestration of an office building. The extensive bands of windows sloping outwards under encircling concrete sunshades are a remarkable achievement. These ribbon windows, a roof garden and sturdy concrete pilotis-like supports forming colonnades comply with three of the five principles of Le Corbusier's new architecture post WW2. Here they demonstrate the creativity of the consultant architects Towell, Rippon and Associates.

The building is also important for its association with the company Civil & Civic, which was responsible for its design and construction. After constructing nationally significant buildings in Sydney and the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra (1959) the company made significant contributions to Canberra's built environment during the city's rapid commercial development by the National Capital Development Commission in the 1960s.

### Description and Condition

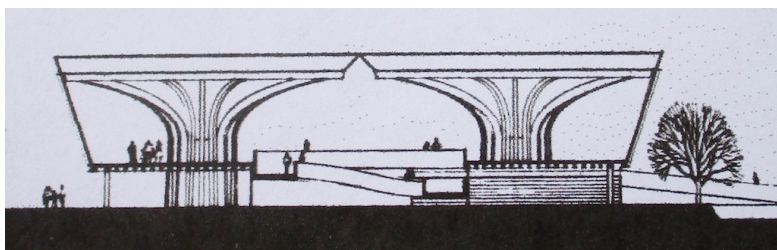
The former Colonial Mutual Life building is located at 17-21 University Avenue, Canberra, between Marcus Clarke Street and Darwin Place, covering block 2, Section 5 City. It was completed in 1968 by Civil & Civic Pty Ltd for the Lend Lease Corporation, to be the Canberra premises of the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society Ltd.

The main block of the building has a ground floor, seven upper floors and plant rooms on the roof. A side wing along Marcus Clarke Street has three floors with a roof garden. The structure is of reinforced concrete and the walls are clad in manganese bricks. White concrete sunshades form horizontal bands at each floor line and contrast in texture with the brickwork. Paired square columns line colonnades along University Avenue and Marcus Clarke Street, in the manner of pilotis. Long ribbon windows, a roof garden and these supports, prominent in Unite d'Habitation, Marseilles (1952) were three of the five points of Le Corbusier's new architecture of the post WW2 era. <sup>1</sup> These modern architectural principles were later used in many buildings and influenced countless architects. The paired columns add to the sculptural quality of the former CML Building. The building's exterior is in near original condition, but interiors have been updated to suit the needs of tenants.

The building exhibits characteristics of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style of Australian Architecture, which was mainly used for commercial and institutional buildings. The exterior indicators of this style exhibited are its cubiform overall shape; large sheets of glass; contrasting texture; overhangs for shade and external sun-control devices.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant attribute of the building is the way upper floors are enhanced by bronze-coloured glass windows that slope outwards at 45 degrees, under the concrete sunshades which reduce glare most effectively. In late 1968 the building was the subject of a two-page report in *The Canberra Times*.<sup>3</sup> It was described as “One of the best buildings architecturally and in terms of practicality to be erected in Canberra in recent years.” and “The feature which makes the building so outstanding is the sloping windows which not only give the building a striking appearance viewed from the outside, but reduce glare – and importantly – increase air space within the offices.” As the building is fully air conditioned, the glass is fixed. For outside cleaning along walkways runners are built into window heads with strong metal eyes to which safety cables can be attached. Further praise for the building was for what was said to be Canberra’s first large roof garden and for the handsome main lobby of the building, enclosed with frameless armour plate glass screen walls “constructed to a new technique.”<sup>4</sup> Also, the stairwells have fire doors which can be held open by magnetic hold-open devices connected to the alarm system, so they shut in case of a fire.<sup>5</sup>

Windows sloping out and up are most uncommon, but the Australian Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal had glazed walls sloping out.<sup>6</sup> The designers of the former CML Building were possibly influenced by that pavilion when they inventing the innovative windows.



Australian Pavilion, Expo '67 Montreal, in *architecture in australia*, Sept 1966 p 124. Architects: Commonwealth Dept of Works Canberra in Association with John B. & John C. Parkin, Toronto Canada. Pavilion architect James Maccormick. Sloping glazed walls surround the pavilion.

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## Background/History

The National Capital Development Commission conceived the idea of Hobart Place, Canberra’s civic square commercial precinct, in 1959 and prepared control drawings as a model to guide architects employed by the nine lessees. The Commission aimed for an integrated complex which had grace and space and overall architectural merit. The Colonial Mutual Life building was one of two buildings in Darwin Place, the extension to Hobart Place planned in 1966 in the same manner.<sup>7</sup>

The site for the building was bought by the Lend Lease Corporation in May 1966 for \$400,000.<sup>8</sup> Civil & Civic and its consultant architects Towell, Rippon and Associates progressed with the design to comply with control drawings prepared by the NCDC, which defined the building’s height and bulk. In June 1967 a photo of a model of the building was published in *The Canberra Times* shortly before construction began.<sup>9</sup> Completion was timed for September 1968, but tenants moved in over several months.

In 1996 the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society Ltd. demutualised and was acquired by the Commonwealth Bank in 2000. The building was bought by the Balun Group in 2018.

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## The Architects

Gerald Rippon FRAIA (1931–2011) graduated from Sydney University in 1958 with a degree in architecture, then a diploma in town planning.<sup>10</sup> After a few years of employment in various Sydney firms, he formed his own company and remained self employed for the rest of his working life. His work covered everything from modest cottages to multi-residential and commercial buildings in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Gold Coast and various rural towns.<sup>11</sup> Little is known about Eric Towell. His name has not been found in RAlA Membership Directories. He and Gerald Rippon practised separately and as Towell Rippon & Associates Architects in Sydney in the 1960s and later. They opened a Canberra office in the CML Building in June 1968.<sup>12</sup> After winning a limited design competition, they were consultants to Civil & Civic for the Manufacturers Mutual Building, at 78 Northbourne Avenue Canberra in 1969. Now demolished.

## **The Builder/Developer**

Civil & Civic was an Australian construction company. Founded in 1951, it was acquired in 1961 by Lend Lease Corporation. The Civil & Civic business merged with the former Bovis business in 1999. In its early years Civil & Civic built some nationally significant buildings in Sydney, such as Caltex House (1957), Sydney Opera House podium (1962), Blues Point Tower (1962), Australia Square (1967) and the MLC Centre (1977).<sup>13</sup> After building the Australian Academy of Science (1959) in Canberra, Civil & Civic built, and sometimes designed, other important Canberra buildings during the city's rapid growth in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Examples of these, in addition to the former CML and MMI Buildings, are:

Monaro Mall (1963) Petrie Street. A Lend Lease shopping centre. Altered  
Reserve Bank of Australia (1963), Legal Precinct, London Circuit.  
Tasman House (1963), Marcus Clarke Street, Hobart Place. Designed and Built.  
Derwent House (1965), University Avenue, Hobart Place. Designed and built.  
City Mutual Building, Hobart Place (1967)  
Moresby House (1967) London Circuit and Akuna Street. Designed and built. Altered  
Braddon Offices of NCDC (1967) 220 Northbourne Ave. Designed and built. Demolished  
Commonwealth Bank Building (1967) London Circuit & Ainslie Ave.  
Macarthur House (1968) Northbourne & Macarthur Aves Lyneham. Designed & built. Demolished

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## **ANALYSIS AGAINST THE HERITAGE CRITERIA ADOPTED IN THE ACT**

### **d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects.**

The former Colonial Mutual Life Building is important for the way it exhibits characteristics of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style, which was mainly used for commercial and institutional buildings. The exterior characteristics of this style exhibited are its cubiform overall shape; large sheets of glass; overhangs for shade and external sun-control devices, the last being unusually prominent in this building.

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

The former Colonial Mutual Life Building is important for demonstrating a most creative and unusual way of arranging the fenestration of an office building. Extensive bands of bronze-coloured windows that slope outwards at 45 degrees are under encircling concrete sunshades which reduce glare most effectively and provide walkways for window cleaning. The building thus has a striking appearance externally and airiness within offices. Paired square columns in the manner of pilotis add to the building's sculptural quality. These, the ribbon windows and the roof garden were creative achievements inspired by three points of Le Corbusier's new architecture post WW2.

### **h. Has a special association with the life or work of a person, or people, important to the history of the ACT.**

The former Colonial Mutual Life Building is important for its association with the company Civil & Civic, which was responsible for its design and construction. After constructing nationally significant buildings in Sydney and the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra (1959) the company made significant contributions to Canberra's built environment during the city's rapid development by the National Capital Development Commission in the 1960s.

The building is appropriately sited to demonstrate this association, on a key corner between Canberra City's western commercial offices precincts Hobart Place and Darwin Place and the Australian National University. The building's heritage value has increased in recent years, due to the demolition of several important office buildings Civil & Civic had built in the 1960s.





Photos:  
Ken Charlton July 2023



## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://archeetect.com/5-points-of-architecture/>
- <sup>2</sup> Apperly, Irving & Reynolds, Identifying Australian Architecture, A&R, 1989, p234
- <sup>3</sup> <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page15953155>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page15953155>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page15953156>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.naa.gov.au/blog/future-past-australia-expo-67>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107884080?searchTerm=Darwin%20Place>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/131775089?searchTerm=Darwin%20Place>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/131659452?searchTerm=Darwin%20Place>
- <sup>10</sup> RAlA Directory 1988
- <sup>11</sup> <https://architectureau.com/articles/rippon-house/>
- <sup>12</sup> The Canberra Times 19 June 1968 p 32
- <sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil\\_%26\\_Civic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_%26_Civic)
- <sup>14</sup> J.R. Conner *A Guide to Canberra Buildings*, A & R & RAlA, 1970