33

St Kilda Town Hall
Brighton Road (corner Carlisle Street), St Kilda

St Kilda Town Hall, 2002

St Kilda was one of Melbourne's first clutch of suburban municipalities, proclaimed in 1855, but it was not actually established until 1857. First council meetings were held in the police station at the Junction, then in 1859 a town hall (with police station, watch house and court house) was built at the corner of Grey and Barkly Streets. In 1890 this became the court house and mechanics' institute. After 1930, it was replaced.

In 1863, St Kilda became a borough and in 1890, a city.

The triangular St Kilda Market Reserve was bounded by Brighton Road, Carlisle Street and Chapel Street, gazetted as a reservation for town hall, court house and offices in 1883. In 1887, a vote by ratepayers selected the present site for the Town Hall over others. Although a gift of a thousand pounds from former councillor, James Mason if it were to be the

present site may just have tipped the scales. A design for a new town hall was commissioned from the fashionable Boom architect, William Pitt, selected from a limited competition, which produced designs from five architects. A building contract was signed in May 1888.

Pitt (1855-1918) briefly served articles from 1875, but by 1879 was already practising alone. That year he won first prize for his design of the Melbourne Coffee Palace, Bourke Street (now substantially demolished, it became the Victoria), Melbourne's first temperance hotel, entirely alcohol free.

In 1893, Pitt won another competition, promoted by a friend of his father (artist and hotelier, William Pitt, Snr), for the design of theatrical entrepreneur George Coppin's Our Lodgings (now Gordon House), Little Bourke Street. Pitt's architectural practice began booming just in time to ride the economic boom of the late 1880s. In 1886-87 he designed the luscious new Princess' Theatre, whose ceiling slid open to reveal the stars.

Another coffee palace followed, the 500 room Federal (with Ellerker & Kilburn, architects of the Priory (**28**)), now demolished. In Collins Street, Pitt designed the former Stock Exchange at 376-380 (1888-91), the Olderfleet at 417 and the Rialto (now Le Meridian) at 497-503, both in 1889, and the Safe Deposit Building, 88-92 Queen Street, the next year. As well as St Kilda Town Hall, designed in 1887, he went on to design Brunswick Town Hall in 1889.

By 1891, when the financial crash came, he had leapt into another career, by successfully standing for the Victorian State Parliament, (1891-1910). As the economy recovered, he returned to architecture, designing several theatres and grandstands at Victoria Park (1892), Flemington and Caulfield Racecourses, and at the MCG (1905, now demolished).

Pitt could turn his hand, with exuberance and eclectic invention, to many architectural styles. His Boom commercial palaces exhibit ever richer and more sophisticated overlays of Mannerist manipulations and effusive virtuosity. Yet St Kilda Town Hall is not his best work. It appears to be a meaner, more compressed version of Charles Webb's masterly design for Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) Town Hall ten years earlier. When it opened in 1890, to coincide with St Kilda's declaration as a city, it was still unfinished. It remained exposed as raw brick, un-rendered and undecorated.

Construction was slow and the economic crash intervened. Pitt's portico, capitals, distinguished steeply pitched slate roof with oculi and high corner mansards, were never built. Nor was his spectacular and inventive 54 metre high open tower, which would have been unique in Melbourne. No wonder the Council disguised the exposed brickwork with creeper. Pitt's original watercolour perspective view of his design is held by the Council.

In 1892, rather than spend money completing the building, a three-manual Fincham and Hobday organ was purchased. In 1961 this was enlarged and modernised. In 1903, the significant architect, Charles d'Ebro designed a new portico and west wing for the Town

Hall. This also went no further. Then in 1925, another competition was held and rather pedestrian architects Sale and Keague's design for portico and foyer was selected and built. Wrought iron gates made by Bayliss of London salvaged from some Toorak mansion were installed.

Of the 1938-39 additions, it is thought that B.S.W. Gilbertson designed the Supper Room interiors. Local architect and member of the Town Hall Committee Cr. Harry Raymond Johnson (1892-1954, **43**), may well have acted as honorary architect for all of these additions, working in conjunction with the City Engineer's Department. Plans were adopted and tenders called at a Council meeting in December 1938. Cr. Johnson moved all matters relating to these works at council meetings and no other designer was mentioned.

The works included the large new supper room, (probably replacing an earlier timber one), Council chamber, Town Clerk's suite (subsequently the Blue Room), and another office. Land was purchased to enlarge the grounds and the ornamental gates, fence and hedge removed, the gates went off to another house in Toorak, it is said. In 1956, the St Kilda Town Hall was the venue for the fencing events of the XVIthe Olympiad, held form 23 November to 6 December. In 1957, the Town Hall exterior was rendered in a plain, abstracted way, without Pitt's Classical detail. Internal renovations included the Mayor's office (the St Kilda Room) and marble stair. In 1971 a major wing was added along Carlisle Street, in a design influenced by Scandinavian Modernism.

Then, in April 1991, fire gutted the Town Hall. Arson was suspected. The municipal art collection then valued at $800,000 was lost, including Rupert Bunny's *The Forerunners*, itself valued at $250,000. Community support was immediate for Mayor Melanie Eagle and her team, and a foundation stone for rebuilding was laid only a year later by Sir Zelman Cowen.

Because of the onerousness of the fire regulations within Building Control in Victoria, the destruction of any building by fire is rare. Useful debates resulted from the St Kilda Town Hall fire as to the best protection of historic buildings from fire. It was almost ten years before another public building was as seriously damaged by fire, at the GPO, Elizabeth Street.

Architects for the major redevelopment of the complex in 1992-94, after the fire, were Ashton Raggett McDougall (ARM), who were simultaneously designing a major addition to Enrico Taglietti's Library, over Carlisle Street (1992-93, **32**).

A spectacular central arcade, lit by natural light affords a central spine, which resolves circulation between the previously disparate components of the complex. The cavernous town hall was divided into two functioning spaces by a glass screen, yet remains perceptibly a grand civic space.

Most architectural restoration in Victoria leaves no traces of the building's historic development, rather recreating the old building anew. In the St Kilda Town Hall,

restoration and replication is minimal and the loss of plaster exposing bare brickwork in the fire, even the smoke damage and charring, remains to tell this tragic chapter in the development of this complex building's saga.

ARM's Post-modernism burgeons into a veritable cornucopia of visual references, for the architectural cognoscenti to unravel. Both the rear elevation and an internal façade copycat the Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Conference Centre and Concert Hall in Helsinki (1962-75). Philip Johnson's elegant Tifereth Israel synagogue, Port Chester, New York (1956), donates its ceiling of silhouetted stars and scalloped edges. Facing Carlisle Street, sculptor Richard Serra's twisted curves are adopted, painted brilliant green to enliven disabled ramps and visually link the municipal elements gesturing across Carlisle Street, as if a small piazza.

The Town Hall's surprising interior is now one of the most exciting and richly meaningful spaces in Melbourne: at last realising the potential of William Pitt's vision for the St Kilda community. In 1994, St Kilda became subsumed into the City of Port Phillip, and its Town Hall became pre-eminent in the new municipality

In 1995, ARM's design won two Royal Australian Institute of Architects awards: commendations for both architecture and interior architecture.

References

Bick, David with Wilson Sayer Core Pty.Ltd. *St Kilda Conservation Study. Area Two.* (Undated).

Evans, Doug, Executive Editor. *Aardvark. A Guide to Contemporary Melbourne Architecture.* RMIT. Melbourne (1990) 1997. G18.

Evans, Doug. 'The Secret Life of Contemporary Melbourne Architecture'. *B.* No 52/53. Arhus, Denmark 1995/96. Pp.123-154.

Goad, Philip. *Melbourne Architecture.* The Watermark Press. Sydney 1999. pp 55-57, 66-68, 71, 226, 237, 242, 258, 260 & 261.

Mathews, E.N.. *Colonial Organs and Organ Builders.* Melbourne University Press. Carlton 1969. p151.