



Standing tall

Famous for its innovative design, the Manchester Unity Building was once the tallest in Melbourne. Eighty years on, it's still an iconic feature in the heart of the city's CBD.

PROMINENTLY LOCATED on the corner of Swanston and Collins streets, the Manchester Unity Building stands out as a sparkling example of old-world charm and ingenuity.

The building's history is just as fascinating as its intricate design. It all began in 1928 when Manchester Unity, the mutual aid society that merged with the Australian Natives' Association (ANA) in 1993 to create Australian Unity, secured the city site and commissioned a building to serve as its head office.

On completion in 1932, it was regarded as a modern marvel, designed around a concrete-encased steel structure that was innovative for the time. It was home to Victoria's first escalators and an early adopter of automatic cooling and rubbish and postal chutes.

Construction of the building was completed in just 11 months and 12 days, achieved by commissioning twice the normal number of building workers in round-the-clock shifts. Melbourne's media exploded with photographs and stories on the building's progress – with a new floor completed each week, there was plenty to discuss.

Designed by Melbourne architect Marcus Barlow, the building's distinctive Commercial Gothic Modern style was partly inspired by the award-winning Chicago Tribune Tower (1927). At 215 feet (64 metres), the Manchester Unity Building challenged the then 132-foot (40.2-metre) height restriction in Melbourne.

The public's interest was immense – for good reason. Not only was it the tallest building in Victoria at the time but, according to the National Trust of Australia, it was also a project aimed at lifting the spirits of a city languishing in the depths of the Great Depression. With shops, kiosks and a basement café, the building soon became a fashionable meeting place, second only to Flinders Street Station.

With the expansion of the aid society, building upgrades were required to keep pace with growth. However, as the building was placed on the Victorian Register of Historic Buildings in 1975, there were tight restrictions on any alterations, and a feasibility study was commissioned to estimate costs of the upgrade. According to Bill Hitchings, author of *Grand Dreams and Grand Men: the intriguing story of the Manchester Unity building*, the study revealed the upgrade would cost as much as \$2 million (the equivalent of about \$11.7 million today). As a result, the building was sold in 1979 to Melbourne Gateway Pty. Ltd. for \$5.25 million.

The new Singapore-based owner had grand plans for renovations but they never got off the ground and the building's future was left in limbo until it was again sold in 1986 to the Liberman family for \$13.7 million.

With its future assured, the interior of the Manchester Unity Building was then transformed into a number of commercial and residential apartments. It's just another indication of a building that has stood the test of time and continues to hold a special place in the heart of Melburnians. 🏡

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