A grand nineteenth century
dining room revealed

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PROJECT Dining Room, Windsor Hotel,
Spring Street, Melbourne

CLIENT Oberoi Hotels
Government of Victoria

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In 1883 builders Cochram and Comely constructed the then Grand Hotel for
shipping agent, George Nipper, at a cost of 50,000 pounds. Designed by
architect Charles Webb, the building boasted a 90 foot frontage to Spring
Street and a 120 foot frontage to Little Collins Street. "The Age" (1)at
the time described the facade as 'plain but neat', and noted that the
building contained 'every accommodation in the shape of lavatories,
lounges, reading, public, dining, smoking, sitting and billiard rooms'
(Fig.1)

In 1886 George Nipper sold his interest in the enterprise to a syndicate
that included James Munro and James Balfour. In line with the new owners'
desire for total abstinence the hotel's liquor licence was ceremoniously
destroyed, and the Grand Hotel became a temperance establishment, the
reportedly even grander Grand Coffee Palace. Over the next two years the
hotel underwent a major program of extension and alteration, increasing its
capacity from 140 to 359 rooms, capable of accommodating 500 guests. It is
not known whether Webb designed the building on the basis that it was to be
built in two stages, although this appears unlikely given the massive
internal rearrangement that occurred in the original section during the
extensions. (Fig.2)

It was as part of these works that the hotel's present dining room was
created. No drawings from this phase of construction have been located,
however it has been established from later drawings that the room was
originally flanked on the north and south by open lightwells providing
natural light to the arched stained glass windows. Access to the room for
guests was by one of three identical double doorways located in the east
wall, and kitchen access was by a central door in the west wall.

Probably the most important contemporary resource used in the
reconstruction work is a photograph of the room just prior to completion,
contained in Charles Webb's own photograph album.(Fig.3) This shows the
room fully furnished and with undecorated walls. The only clue that the
room is not yet complete is the lack of bracket lights to the circular
panels on the pilasters, although each has a black spot in the centre
indicating the gas and electrical outlets. It is the extraordinary detail
and clarity in this photograph that enabled reconstruction to even be
considered.

Historic Environment, 1V, 2 (1985)
Fig. 1 The Grand Hotel, circa 1883
Fig. 2 The Grand Hotel, circa 1888
The dining room of 1887–88 appears to have remained substantially intact until the early 1920s, when the hotel was acquired by Melbourne Hotels Limited. Before this, the hotel's architects were Robertson and Marks, later Robertson and Marks and H.H. Kemp, a Sydney firm which was responsible for the design and construction of the entrance canopy in 1921, and for numerous minor works. Their successors were Sydney Smith Ogg & Serpell, a Melbourne firm responsible for the major works carried out by Melbourne Hotels Limited. This company spent more than 100,000 pounds refurbishing the entire hotel including massive relocation of rooms and corridors. In the dining room there were major changes. The central pendant lights were removed, the domed skylights were concealed by curved leaded layoffs; and the mantelpieces and highlight windows on the west wall were taken out. Any vestige of Victorian decoration was painted out and the furnishings were totally replaced. The Australian Brewing and Wine Journal described the newly renovated room in an article in December 1923.

'In the Hotel Windsor dining room the light is filtered through large circular translucent skylights, and by a system of dimmers can be given three degrees of brilliancy. The result is that a mellow golden glow is evenly distributed over the room, the effect of which should be much appreciated by ladies who like to display their complexions under favourable conditions. To break any monotony, handsome renaissance candle sconces are fitted in the centre of each panel in the walls'(2)

The 1920s work pulled the hotel out of a major decline and once again brought it into prominence. At the same time its name was changed in 1923 to the Hotel Windsor.

The second phase of alteration to the dining room occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the hotel again underwent major refurbishment. At the same time the Old White Hart Hotel was demolished and a new addition constructed on the Bourke Street corner to a design by architects Harry A. and Frank L. Norris and Associates.

The changes made to the dining room during this period further reduced its nineteenth century character, and attempted to present the room in a modern idiom. The arched windows to the north and south ends were bricked up, and blind windows complete with pelmeted curtains constructed in their place. The central arched entry to the room was widened to a large rectangular form, and the entries either side blocked off. Possibly most devastating of all was the construction of a kidney-shaped dance floor in the centre of the room, and the raising of the floor levels on either side up to dado height. The impact of these and other changes to the original room only became apparent during the course of the 1980s demolition work, when it was possible to establish the extent to which the original ornate plaster moldings had been removed to accommodate the modernisation programmes.

The decision to restore and reconstruct the dining room in the form it took during the late 1880s and early 1890s stemmed from a conservation policy prepared for the State Government as owners, by the Government Buildings Advisory Council in October 1980. In relation to the room, the policy stated that it was 'to be fully restored to its 1880s form as shown in surviving early photographs, as as described in contemporary records'.

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Fig. 3 The dining room as seen circa 1888.
Fig. 4 The dining room as seen circa January 1901.
Fig. 5 The dining room, circa 1923
policy went on to outline in quite specific terms the major elements required in the restoration, including removal of the laylights. It concluded: 'the restoration of the room (is) to extend to furniture, tableware and napery to reproduce the opulence of its period.' (3) The ramifications of this policy were substantial particularly in terms of the extent of investigation required, the scale of the work and the costs.

The investigation and documentation of the works was an ongoing process that continued over the full period of the building works from November 1980 to September 1983. As noted, the only documentary materials of any assistance were the Webb photograph of c1888, and the Leader photograph of 1901. (Fig.4) These were used as the basis for reconstructing missing plasterwork, lighting and carpet design, restoring the domed skylights and furnishing the room. Great detail was obtained by enlarging various sections of the photographs to highlight particular elements.

The project was not, however, totally dependent on these photographs for information, as much of the information required was revealed by the room itself, since the various stages of alteration had involved a tendency to cover up rather than to remove. For instance, the highlight windows in the west wall were found to be intact, including their obscured glass and frames, behind a skin of brickwork. On the east wall the south end doorway had been closed off with the original door and fanlight frame still in place. The iron frames of the domed skylights remained in six of the seven ceiling openings, and the fireplace opening on the west wall was intact. This type of evidence provided a very sound basis for reconstructing missing detailing.

But other elements had not survived the ravages of refurbishment. The arched windows to the north and south walls and their plaster surrounds had been totally removed or destroyed. Similarly there was no physical evidence of the fanlight sashes above the doors, or the marble mantlepieces. Lights, curtains, carpets, mirrors and the like had long disappeared. This meant reconstructions both from painstaking examination of the photographic evidence, and from the fragments of on-site evidence that were present.

Possibly the most time-consuming aspect of the work was the investigation and resolution of the decorative finishes. The process began with the localised removal of overpainting from various elements of the room. This revealed a great array of colours and stencil designs, used variously with different periods of decoration. Due to the variety and complexity of this decoration large areas had to be uncovered to establish a correlation between the decoration on one element and the next for a particular scheme. Once this was achieved it was recorded, and samples were taken from all the various areas for microscope analysis. The microscope work was used to confirm the on-site investigation and to match paint colours accurately. The decorative scheme that finally emerged contained seven stencil patterns and eighteen paint colours including colours and stencil designs identified as components of the earliest surviving decorative treatment to the room. In instances where moldings had to be completely reconstructed from photographs, colours and their locations were carefully selected on the basis of use of surviving original colours in the room. In the case of the cornice frieze and the ceiling stencils, the designs of what appeared to be the period was selected. On most surfaces in the room, however, the colours and stencils were accurate reconstructions of those identified in the investigation work.

Historic Environment, 1V, 2 (1985)
Fig. 6 Dining room, after restoration
One anomaly remains. The Webb photograph of c1881 shows the room with a monochromatic colour scheme and fully furnished. A suggested explanation for this is that, as was the practice of the day, 'green' plasterwork was generally left for a considerable period before it was finally decorated, to allow it to dry out. This could be anything from months to years, during which time the plaster was either left unpainted or given a paint coating that could be replaced later. Also, one of the reasons for extending the then Grand Hotel in 1887-88 was to make the most of the crowds flooding to Melbourne for the Centennial Exhibition. If the building process then was similar to today's, it is conceivable that the building work, and the dining room in particular may not have been quite completed in time for this event, so had to be furnished prematurely. Nevertheless the physical investigation of decoration to the room indicates that there is no evidence of a decorative scheme earlier than the now reconstructed scheme. (Fig. 6)

In the present climate of conservation, where the emphasis is on preservation and restoration of original fabric, a reconstruction such as the Windsor dining room is open to question. It is arguable that the layering of the many changes that had occurred in the room should have been left to be interpreted as it existed. A decision was taken against this approach on the basis of the established significance of the room as a grand nineteenth century dining room. Few if any such rooms of this scale survive in Australia, and fewer still have the documentary and physical evidence to enable a reconstruction.

References


2. 'Hotel Windsor Melbourne', The Australian Brewing and Wine Journal, 20 December 1923, p.31.