'All at BSM are delighted'

ROBERT A. BRUCE

PROJECT St. Hilda's, 1 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne

CLIENT Bates Smart & McCutcheon

ARCHITECT Bates Smart & McCutcheon Pty. Ltd.
Robert A. Bruce (partner-in charge)
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Bates Smart & McCutcheon bought St. Hilda's at auction in November 1981, after the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works had decided to abandon the concept of a ring road along Clarendon Street, East Melbourne. This was one of the links in the vast freeway network originally proposed in the early 1960s. Over the years the MMBW had acquired properties along the route of the Clarendon Street link, including several at the Albert Street/Clarendon Street/Victoria Parade junction. Its 1964 acquisition of St. Hilda's terminated the building's use as a training college for the Missionary Society and marked the start of its use as a boarding house.

Following the abandonment of the ring road concept the MMBW rezoned all the reservations to Residential 'A' and made arrangements to sell off the acquired properties. In the process it sought Neil Clerehan's advice on their historic significance. Following Clerehan's report a study was commissioned by the Historic Buildings Council from Winston Burchett and Graeme Butler, which recommended that St. Hilda's should be added to the Historic Buildings Register as at that time the register included no buildings representing the Queen Anne/Federation style of architecture.

With St. Hilda's passing from government authority to private hands the property was put on the register, as historic building no. 481. Our aim in buying it was to create an efficient office and new home for BSM in a building combining historic elements and sympathetically designed new ones. Each had to play a functional role as parts of a new whole. We wanted a project capable of future subdivision and adaptation to other uses; we aimed to treat it as a commercial investment and we saw it as a vehicle for demonstrating the skills of the office.

The HBC commissioned study had not identified the building's architect. Our research, aided by Miles Lewis and his architect's card system at the La Trobe Library, found it had been designed in 1906 by architects Ward and Carleton, as a Brick Residence, Clarendon and Albert Streets, East Melbourne, for Jas. Griffiths Esq. As luck would have it, the drawing and letter files of Ward and Carleton had passed on to architect Alex Henderson, and by way of him to the La Trobe Library's Henderson collection.
The drawing files contained a full set of seven ink and water colour working drawings and details for St. Hilda's, including site plan, plans, elevations, sections, all at one eighth inch to the foot, and various walls, fireplace, verandah, fence and screen details at one quarter inch and one half inch to the foot. (Figs 1,2) The La Trobe Library did not allow the drawings to be borrowed and lacked the equipment to copy drawings true to scale, so a photographer was commissioned to record them. By this process negatives were produced at desired scales for use in the recording and design process. The Henderson collection of letter files had not been catalogued by the La Trobe Library and we were told it was not possible to have the files checked, nor to check them ourselves to see if any written documentation relevant to St. Hilda's was included. This was most disappointing.

It was wonderful, however, that the original Ward and Carleton drawings (witnessed by Harry Norris) were in existence. In best fashion there were penned notes of omissions and changes, all of which helped us understand the state of the building today. - for example: 'verandahs omitted', 'building shortened by two feet', 'building lowered by one foot', 'folding doors omitted', etc. The drawings revealed a sensible building, clearly planned, romantically conceived, innovative in some ways but technically unadvanced in its use of solid brick non-cavity wall construction, and of gas lighting when electricity had been around for decades.

The next phase of our study was the building itself. Working in the gloom of a still-occupied rooming house, we took colour slides and prints of each space and major element, and checked out dimensions. It was difficult to understand spaces divided by partitions, and to get a feel for detail in rooms cloistered by old blinds and drapes and cluttered with old furniture.

The Christian Missionary Society seemed a likely source of information. Their records were unclear, however, on the origins of the building even though its gift to them by the Griffiths family was widely acknowledged. Their photographic records were mainly of the 1940s and 1950s, but there was one beautiful view of the building as new, complete with original fence and horse and sulky. (Fig.3) This photograph indicated a sense of crispness no longer evident in the facades and was a useful boost to our morale. It was also an excellent guide for paint scrapes, which were carried out by Peter Lovell. Externally, scrapes were taken on the present metal tower roof and gutters, being the only original roof plumbing; the pebble dash wall surface, crisp in the photograph, now a murky grey; and all window and door joinery. Internally, scrapes were taken of all surfaces in the main ground floor rooms and hallways, in representative back of house areas, two bedrooms upstairs and the intact bathrooms.

Lovell's report revealed that much of the interior woodwork had been stained prior to all its all-white paint out, and that the colour scheme throughout was un-Victorian and plain, but logically co-ordinated, with the accent colour in fireplace tiles relating to the base colour in linoleum flooring, and to wall and joinery colours. Creams and pale tones predominated throughout, and there was little evidence of richly coloured mouldings, wall papers or dados, except in the dining room with an art nouveau pressed metal wainscot, the study with a diagonally boarded timber wainscot, and the strap plaster mouldings to the ceilings in these rooms. In fact, the relatively simple, spartan interior aptly suited the building's function as a missionary training college.
Fig. 1  Elevation copied from the drawing and letter files of the architects Ward and Carleton
Figs. 2 Plans copied from the drawing and letter files of architects Ward and Carleton
This then was our historic material - the registered building itself, an early photograph, the architects' drawings, and a record of its original finishes and colours.

Broadly, a conservation policy was defined. Its aims included restoration of the exterior of St. Hilda's, restoration and use of the main interiors, design of a modern building for use as a studio, in sympathy with the existing building, and carrying out of works in the spirit of the ICOMOS Burra Charter.

Prior to acquiring St. Hilda's we had prepared a user brief with all the space requirements normal to an architectural and planning office. The next task was to see how the brief fitted into the existing building fabric, but first there were statutory and physical restrictions to be overcome.

Under the Metropolitan Planning Scheme, Clause 9, Amendment 88, introduced in 1982, provision existed to apply to use a registered building for uses other than those allowed by its present zoning. To our knowledge this was an untested piece of legislation, but it was vital to BSM's acquisition of the site.

The Melbourne City Council was the responsible authority to which planning application was to be made. It advised prior discussion with the East Melbourne Group and also with owners of adjoining properties, which included a block of 1930s flats and a Victorian mansion used as offices in order to gain support (or minimise objection) to the use of St. Hilda's as an office.

The council advised that any new building should be designed to complement the character of the historic precinct and that it should comply with residential planning codes on setbacks from boundaries, height of building, and overlooking and privacy provisions for residential neighbours any works on the building and any new works also needed approval from the Historic Buildings Council. Amendment 88 required the MCC as responsible authority to seek the opinion of the HBC on the change of use issue. Finally, the building works had to comply with all other normal planning and building constraints.

We had quickly decided that a glass box was not the correct approach to take, and felt happy with a brick building with pitched tile roofs echoing the romantic forms of the house. An initial proposal, larger than our original brief was modelled and then submitted to the MCC to get the ball rolling and test the water with the neighbours, the East Melbourne Group and the authorities.

A second proposal grew out of the first. It is the building we now occupy. (Fig. 4) It was a simplified diagram with car parking along the side of the house opening off Albert Street and a two storey studio building along the rear of the site, with a link to the old building made onto the rear verandah as an extension of the main internal corridor. This proposal provided adequate space and a good layout for the operation of the office. It was on budget, it provided a good balance between the old and the new, and also it let us keep a large oak tree and an exuberant palm tree between the buildings. (Figs 5, 6)
Fig. 4 St. Hilda's as it now stands in the East Melbourne streetscape.
Fig. 5  St. Hilda's with new studio, 1983 - ground plan
Fig. 6 St. Hilda's with new studio, 1983 - first floor plan
Fig. 7 The restored entrance hall
A further round of discussions followed with the neighbours, the East Melbourne Group, the HBC and the MCC and subsequently this replacement proposal was submitted to the MCC. The East Melbourne Group had some difficulty in coming to grips with the distinction between an application to use a building for a use other than that permitted under the zoning and an application to re-zone the area, and was therefore inclined to object. However once the distinction had been made clear, it also supported the application.

While all these broader issues were being resolved, detail design and documentation were proceeding on the assumption that a permit would ensue. The initial planning application was made in February 1982, three months after buying St. Hilda's, revised submission took place in April 1982, and a planning and HBC permit was issued in July 1982. The following week work began on site. Six months later the new building was completed and works in the old building were advanced enough to allow occupation over Christmas 1982. Completion of the interior (Fig.7) and exterior restoration of St. Hilda's took another three months, so that everything was completed and ready for the opening party in April 1983.

The construction of the new wing was relatively straightforward, but the restoration of St. Hilda's itself was the usual unknown quantity, even though as much as possible had been documented. A construction manager was appointed to control the process and manage the various contracts. This procedure worked admirably, even though it required continuous architectural attention to resolve the countless issues which arise in restoration projects. Every issue required research into what was original, what was the correct solution, always keeping in mind that the end use was not a museum but an efficient functioning office.

In summary, several questions arise. Does St. Hilda's provide a good home for BSM? The answer is yes. Everyone enjoys the location, the atmosphere and the building. Staff find the generally domestic scale comfortable and pleasant to work in. Visitors and clients alike are enthusiastic. Heritage Week open days have drawn large crowds of visitors, and for many it provides a trip back into their past to visit a 1907 building which feels just like the house they grew up in.

Is an Edwardian building like a Victorian building? The answer is no. Obvious similarities aside, there are great differences between the two periods and styles. In Melbourne, Edwardian and Federation buildings have only recently become noteworthy. St. Hilda's was the first Federation house put on the Historic Buildings Register. It was classified by the National Trust after the restoration was completed.

In October 1983 the RAIA Victorian Chapter gave an Award of Merit to St. Hilda's for restoration and adaptation in the spirit of the ICOMOS Burra Charter guidelines. All at BSM were delighted.