Mitchell House

Melbourne's Mitchell House stands on the north-west corner of Elizabeth and Lonsdale Streets. It shares that intersection with Samuel Jackson's St Francis' Church (1841); Beaver and Purnell's Michael House (1919) and Tomkins and Shaw's Myer House.

As a result of Yuncken Freeman Architects' architectural and historical investigation of this area during 1976, Mitchell House was recommended for addition to the Historic Buildings Register of Victoria. It was considered to have architectural importance, particularly in relation to its near to original condition, and the old lane, which occupied part of the site, had historical associations with the Cobb and Co. stables which had once achieved access from it.

Despite these recommendations, the Historic Buildings Preservation Council, at a public Hearing early this year, refused the registration of both Mitchell House and the lane.

GRAEME BUTLER has prepared a brief description of the building, its place within the context of other like-buildings in Victoria and a summary of the work of its architect, Harry Norris.

First, please consider this contemporary eulogy to the building by its prospective lessors and published prior to its construction. The original document, of which this is a part, is held by Norris and Partners, Architects.

THE BUILDING

The building is constructed entirely of reinforced concrete and steel, and was erected by one of Melbourne's foremost master builders, Hansen & Yuncken.

Each floor has complete natural lighting on three sides, and has a total area of approximately 4,800 sq. ft.

LIGHTING

No city building has such perfect natural lighting. In place of the conventional window apertures in the upper storeys, Mitchell House has transparent glass enclosed in frames of steel, extending along the full length of the building in both Lonsdale and Elizabeth Streets. Further, there are windows overlooking Mitchell Lane.

The interior lighting is therefore perfect throughout the day, there are no dark corners, and there is no necessity for artificial lighting anywhere in the building till after sunset.

HEATING

The whole building from top to bottom is centrally heated on a new and ingenious plan known as hydraulic heating. Each tenant controls his own hydraulic radiator, and thus can adjust the temperature of his part of the premises to suit himself.

VENTILATION

The architects had as their constant aim, a bright healthy well-ventilated building and in this they have more than succeeded.

LIFTS

The most modern, silent, smooth running automatic electric lifts are installed.

Never before have so many natural advantages been grouped in one building in the heart of the City of Melbourne.
Mitchell House

THE HEART OF THE CITY

The following design contrivances represent the ingredients to the streamlined cuboid known as Mitchell House.

Externally, the building is a series of horizontal bands alternating as rendered spandrels and continuous, steel-framed glazing. These horizontal bands terminate on two massive, vertical elements. One of these draws attention to the office entrance in Lonsdale Street and the other provides a vertical punctuation mark to the major Elizabeth Street facade.

The latter is in fact, pure false-work with little relevance to the structure or the internal function. These vertical piers which have been created, are hollow internally and originally housed coat cupboards.

Horizontal and vertical grooves in the cement render are used to accentuate the horizontality and verticality of the respective spandrels and piers whilst the steel glazing sections are aligned to produce the effect of continuous horizontal streamlining on the glass.

The continuity of both spandrels and glazing is achieved by a cantilevered facade to Elizabeth and Lonsdale Streets. No columns interrupt the horizontality. This design feature has always been cited as an important part of the architectural importance of Mitchell House. A further decorative measure is the use of the firm's name in Gill-sans letterface, spelt out in huge letters on the parapets to the central tower and the podium-storey.
Mitchell House was designed as a limit-height building: it could rise to 132 feet above the pavement but no more unless the space created was unoccupied. Leasing brochures were distributed which illustrated these soaring heights, but during construction strange things must have happened and the building stands today at only half its intended altitude.

The leasing brochure informs us of the following facts:
Four extra levels were envisaged.

A further vertical element was to terminate the Elizabeth Street facade to the North, as on Lonsdale Street.

The building was to be built to full height over the two-level section at 281 Elizabeth Street.

The spandrels were flared out to meet a more heavily expressed vertical element to the Elizabeth Street facade.

The Carrara or black glass is shown in the top-lights of the ground level shop windows. This was replaced by obscured (sand blasted clear glass) glass, typically, and by glazed terracotta tiling on the wall-facing at the Lonsdale Street entrance.

The estimated cost of £150,000 was reduced prior, or during construction, to £27,000.

The ultimate derivation of the style, as exhibited in Mitchell House, may be assumed to come from the work of Erich Mendelsohn. His Schocken Department Store, Stuttgart (1928) exemplifies the elements already described in Mitchell House.

At this Stuttgart store, horizontal window and spandrel-bands terminate on a sculpturally designed vertical element. Round profiles are used and the store's name is depicted in giant letters above the cantilever verandah. Simple rectangular window strips are used on the minor facades, such as at Mitchell House (north and west facades.) Sharp arrises were juxtaposed against rounded corners in the same building, as in Mitchell House, and vertical elements were introduced for their terminating effect in the facade composition, rather than for their function.
W.M. Dudok's Town Hall, Hilversum (1927) expresses another aspect of horizontal emphasis in European architecture. As may be seen in Seabrook and Fildes' MacPherson Robertson Girls High School (1934), South Melbourne, Dudok used horizontal rectanguloids of brickwork and strip-windows, which overlapped each other in a more contrived and rectilinear composition than in Mitchell House. Of the two European architects of the era, Mitchell House can be assumed to derive from Mendelsohn and not Dudok.

The development of Mendelsohn's influence in Melbourne (if not Australia) appears to have started with Yule House, 309-11 Little Collins Street, (1932)
Donald Leslie Johnson in his *Australian Architecture 1901-51*, writes the following:

The architects P.A. Oakley and S.T. Parkes completed their Yule House at 309 Collins Street in 1932. Many succeeding buildings in Melbourne imitated the style and its simple formula: bands of glass set in geometric patterns of fixed and opening panes, a terracotta (or stucco) surface and dominant spandrels extending well beyond the surface. Not of the earlier triangular fashion of the 1820s and not of the easy, soft lines of the more typical Depression Modern architecture of the 1930s, it was an esquisse perhaps localized in the Melbourne area. The competition for the Melbourne Herald’s city office received a submission from Stephenson and Meldrum which betrays the difficulty of transition. It was a design containing elements of the geometric modern of the 1920s, the classical, and suggestions of Regency as well as the new trend suggested by Yule House and its kin, The Beehive on Elizabeth Street. Yule House was an asymmetrical composition typical of the early thirties.

Yule House achieves full horizontality without the cantilevered facade of Mitchell House. A narrow frontage meant a single span and no expressed intermediate columns. Yule House also used terracotta facing. This facing was moulded in Melbourne by Wunderlich to the architects’ design. The Beehive Building (1935), Elizabeth Street, used the same horizontal elements as Yule House but with rounded profiles at their termination.
However the major building of this style and of this era was McPherson's Building, Collins Street (1934-5) (*Illustration*). It epitomised Mendelssohn's work albeit still not in a freestanding form. The facade is cantilevered, achieving continuous horizontality, and the Carrara black glass, intended for Mitchell House, was actually used in the McPherson's Building and thus allows the full streamlined effect which was also portrayed in the perspective of the original Mitchell House design. Glazed terracotta faience completes the rounded, gleaming image of the McPherson's Building.

Former McPherson's Building  
646-66 Collins Street, 1934-5.  
Architects: S.P. Calder and Reid and Pearson, in association.  
Contract price: c $4,000.  
Continuous steel windows,  
Carrara spandrels (ground) and terracotta spandrels (typical)  
vertical entrance element.

Some of the buildings which were dependent on the precedent of the Yule House scheme began to dominate the later part of the 1930s. Notable among those buildings was Mitchell House, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, by architect Harry A. Norris and completed in 1937. More obvious was Askew House, Melbourne, by architects Twentyman and Askew, completed in 1938; the Oddfellow Building (now Jensen House), dominating its neighbour Christ Church (sic), was by the architect Marcus R. Barlow in about 1933; and one is tempted to include the stylized 44 Bridge Street building in Sydney by architects Brewer and Manderson, completed in 1938.\(^2\)

Johnson introduces further examples for comparison with Mitchell House: the neighbouring Askew House (1938) and Jensen House (1940) Swanston Street. Unlike Jensen House or Askew House, however, Mitchell House is a free standing building and has been designed as two facades. Built in the same year as Mitchell House, the Royal Melbourne Technical College Buildings (Nos. 5 and 9) (*Illustration*) have achieved all of the design aspects already discussed: a dominantly horizontal, cantilevered facade with glass and glazed brick spandrels, vertical terminating elements emphasising entrance points, rounded corners and a corner site with the design continuing on two facades.
The architect for Mitchell House perhaps deserves more fame than any one of his buildings. Harry Norris commenced practice with Arthur Hedley in 1919. He was joined by his brother, Frank Norris, and about six months later Les Norris joined the firm. A large and atypical early essay was the Northcote R.S.L. Hall (1921) in High Street. It was Beaux-Arts. His next buildings included forays into the Spanish Mission style which he popularised in Melbourne with examples such as Kellow House, St Kilda Road (1932), the Majorca Building (1928-9), 258-60 Flinders Lane, and Coles Store, 299-307 Bourke Street, (1929-30).

His later Coles Store in Bourke Street (1937) illustrated his infatuation with the streamlined style of Mendelsohn and was to become the pattern for all subsequent Coles stores. This prototype has only recently been totally defaced. His other commercial buildings such as Melford Motors (1936-7) Elizabeth Street (Illustration), Foy and Gibson's Store in Bourke Street (1935) (Illustration), and the Capitol Bakery, a renovated cable-tram shed in Chapel Street, South Yarra (c 1937) were all related.
Centre Plaza (Former Foy & Gibson) Cnr Swanston and Bourke Streets, 1935. Architect: Harry Norris. Curved corner, steel framed windows in vertical strips with segment spandrels. (Numerous alterations including two extra storeys, now being constructed).


All of these buildings stood on corner sites; all used the rounded corner and the plentiful glazing of Mitchell House, albeit sometimes in vertical not horizontal strips. All were rendered with decorative grooves. Each of these buildings epitomises the typical approach of Norris in his conception of the outside of the buildings as solid, streamlined masses with simple articulation of window strips (vertical or horizontal) and little expression of the structural grid on the external facade.
Perhaps the first Norris-designed building to use this formula was Burnham Beeches at Sherbrook (1933), built for the Nicholas family. This combined the *jazz-modern* or *Art Deco* geometric decoration with the European streamlined look, although in a domestic application.

Harry Norris frequently journeyed to the United States of America, certainly for family reasons and probably for inspiration. His ardour for the new styles, which he had uncovered there, was irrepressible. He, above all Victorian architects, was a catalyst and energetic entrepreneur of new ways. Perhaps, because of this, he was never lauded by his profession. Thus, it is no wonder that, in his later years, he saw merit in starting a breakaway Victorian Institute of Architects.

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REFERENCES


2. Ibid. (Note: Jensen House was formerly the Manchester Unity Oddfellows Building and 'Christ Church' is currently known as The Church of Christ.)

FURTHER REFERENCES:

*Drawing files and unpublished memoirs of Frank Norris held by Norris and Partners, East Melbourne.*

*Melbourne City Council Building Permit Application Registers and Lodged Drawings.*

*Sands and McDougall Directories.*