

Heritage Citation



City Electric & Light (CEL) Company junction box

Key details

Addresses	Outside 549 Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000
Type of place	Junction box
Period	Federation 1890-1914
Geolocation	-27.461995 153.031865
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2009 Date of Citation — June 2006
Construction	Structure: Cast iron

This is one of only ten early electrical junction boxes remaining in Brisbane. It is an example of the electrical plant used during the early twentieth century to facilitate the spread of an electricity grid throughout Brisbane. It is a remnant of the important Brisbane electricity supply firm of City Electric and Light (CEL) Company.

History

While scientists had known of the existence of electricity for hundreds of years, American inventor Thomas Edison made the first practical use of electric light in 1878. In Brisbane, the first display of the new electric lighting was conducted in 1882 using eight arc lamps strung along North Quay near the Victoria Bridge. Queensland's Parliament House was illuminated with electricity in 1886. The first public supply of electricity occurred in 1888 when Barton, White & Co installed a generator in Telegraph (later renamed Edison) Lane that was connected to the General Post Office.

The electricity industry, however, was still in its infancy in this period. Nonetheless, the benefits of electricity became increasingly obvious to the colonial government and the public. In 1896, the Queensland government introduced the Electric Light and Power Act to regulate the supply of electricity to Queenslanders. By 1904, the number of electricity suppliers within Brisbane had grown to fourteen, including the City Electric and Light (CEL) Company.

The key figure associated with the formation of CEL, Edward Barton, first became involved in the electricity supply business in 1888 as part of Barton, White & Co. The first major contract for the company was to provide electric lighting to the Old Exhibition Building in Adelaide Street, which had been converted into a skating rink. A subsequent fire destroyed the building and left the company in possession of a heavily mortgaged generator.

The company undertook negotiations with the General Post Office (GPO) and two months later the generator was providing electricity to the GPO building in Queen Street.

The company's financial position declined in the early 1890s, however, due to a combination of factors including over-capitalisation, an economic depression, the 1893 flood and competition from Brisbane's gas suppliers. The company was reorganised in 1896 and renamed the Brisbane Electric Supply Company. The company built its first powerhouse in Ann Street at this time. The company then changed its name to City Electric and Light in 1904. Barton remained the driving force behind the various incarnations of the company in this period.

Initially CEL was only able to supply power to a small section of the Central Business District (CBD). Indeed, it was not until 1908 that the electricity grid had reached Fortitude Valley. Nonetheless, the popularity of electricity continued to increase in this period. CEL established a second powerhouse, located in William Street (near Parliament House), in July 1911. By 1917, the first electric street lighting had been installed in Alice, Mary, Margaret, Charlotte and Albert Streets. In 1925, the newly formed Brisbane City Council established the Electricity Department, which acted as a central authority guiding the provision of electricity throughout the city. By this time, CEL had become the dominant supplier for Brisbane, with the company servicing 12,054 customers in 1925.²

Each of the cast iron junction boxes marked the spread of the electrical network throughout the CBD. Electrical plants were placed along CBD footpaths either above ground (in the junction boxes) or underground via designated manhole covers. The junction boxes were erected at different times as the electricity grid spread throughout the CBD. This explains the variety of styles in the CBD junction boxes; why only some are marked with the CEL logo; and why different foundries such as Balmer & Crowther, Smith & Faulkner and Sargeant Engineering were involved in their production.

CEL continued to prosper as a supplier of electricity to Brisbane. In February 1926, CEL opened another, larger powerhouse at Bulimba. Electricity supply in Queensland was provided by a variety of private companies in this period and a State Electricity Commission (SEC) was established by the state government in 1937 to rationalise and co-ordinate supply. By 1940, the SEC had given CEL and the Brisbane City Council control of the electricity supply for all of Brisbane. In 1953, the Queensland government used its powers to convert the City Electric and Light Company into a public authority and CEL became the Southern Electric Authority of Queensland (SEAQ). The SEAQ in turn became the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) and then, more recently, Energex.

In 2001, nine CBD junction boxes were identified as being of heritage significance by the Institute of Engineers Australia (Queensland Division) in their publication *Engineering Heritage Inner Brisbane – A Walk/Drive Tour*. There is only one other CEL junction box known to be still in existence and this stands near the corner of Annerley Road and Stanley Street, on the footpath outside of the Mater Hospital.

Description

It is a cast-iron, rectangular box with hinged access panel, set upon a concrete base.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history
as it marks the early expansion of the electricity grid throughout the CBD.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage
as one of only ten early electrical junction boxes remaining in Brisbane.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places
as a unique example of an early twentieth century electrical plant.

Technical

CRITERION F

The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period
as a surviving example of Brisbane's early electrical plant.

Historical association

CRITERION H

The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organization of importance in the city's or local area's history

for its association with the major Brisbane electricity company City Electric and Light.

References

1. King, Jan, *Power for the People – Brisbane's Electrical Heritage 1880s-1950s*, Brisbane, Queensland Electricity Museum, 2003, p. 34
 2. Brisbane City Council, 1946 aerial photographs.
 3. Brisbane City Council, Sewerage Map, 1913
 4. *Brisbane Courier*, "Supplement" 23 May 1913
 5. Cole, John R. *Shaping a City: Greater Brisbane 1925-1985*. Brisbane: William Brooks Queensland. 1984
 6. Institute of Engineers Australia (Queensland Division), *Engineering Heritage Inner Brisbane – A Walk/Drive Tour*, Brisbane, Institute of Engineers Australia (Queensland Division), 2001
 7. John Oxley Library, photographic collection.
 8. John Oxley Library, newspaper clippings files
 9. King, Jan, *Power For The People – Brisbane's Electrical Heritage 1880s-1950s*, Brisbane, Queensland Electricity Museum, 2003
 10. Mahlstedt & Son. City of Brisbane Detail Fire Survey. 1951
 11. Taylor, Helen, *Brisbane 100 Stories*, Brisbane, Brisbane City Council, 1997
 12. *The Sunday Mail*, 1978
-

Copyright Brisbane City Council

Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes

available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

Citation prepared by — Brisbane City Council (page revised September 2020)



Dedicated to a better Brisbane