



Heritage Citation



O.K. Building (former)

Key details

Also known as

Roubin's Building

Addresses	At 117 Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000; At 196 Albert Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000
Type of place	Shop/s, Factory
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Stripped Classical
Lot plan	L1_SP140690
Geolocation	-27.469983 153.025104
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2009 Date of Citation — June 2006
Construction	Walls: Face brick
People/associations	Hall and Prentice (Architect); M. A. Dwyer (Builder)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (F) Technical; (H) Historical association

The OK building, constructed in 1926, was an integral part of the redevelopment of Queen Street that occurred during the 1920s building boom. It was designed by prominent architectural firm Hall & Prentice in the Interwar Stripped Classical architectural style and occupies a prominent position in the CBD in Queen Street Mall. The building was originally built for tailoring company OK Foxwell Ltd but has since been occupied by a number of various businesses including florists, dressmakers, real estate agents, solicitors and hairdressers.

History

The former OK Building was constructed in 1926 for OK Foxwell Ltd, which was a tailoring company. The company was formed following a merger between two tailoring firms, O'Keefe Brothers and Foxwell Brothers, in 1924. Tailoring was a well-represented profession in Brisbane in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the 1860s the Queensland Post Office Directory (POD) lists a wide array of tailoring firms, including large retailers such as Foy & Gibson, Alan & Stark, Finney, Isles & Co and Pike Brothers. The location of the former OK Building in the most prestigious section of the Queen Street retailing precinct indicates that OK Foxwell was on a par with some of the better-known tailoring businesses that operated in Brisbane at this time.

V. W. Foxwell is recorded in 1890 as the manager for the Queensland Woollen Co. Ltd, a position he appears to have occupied until 1894. Foxwell first began trading in Brisbane as a tailor in 1895 from Kent's Buildings in Albert Street. In 1904, he moved to premises in Albert Street and by 1910 he had taken on a brother as business partner, as the business was then known as Foxwell Brothers. The business was moved to Adelaide Street in

the early 1910s where it remained until 1924 when Foxwell and O'Keefe Brothers merged.

O'Keefe Brothers first began trading in Brisbane as tailors in 1915 from a premises located on Stanley Street, Woolloongabba. It has only been possible to determine the name of one of the brothers: Frederick O'Keefe. By 1918, the business had moved to Duncan Street, Fortitude Valley. In the early 1920s, the business expanded with a new premise opened in the CBD at 117 Queen Street, the future site of the former OK Building. The business was located in a shop that, according to the Brisbane Courier, was a "well-known Brisbane landmark".¹ The Fortitude Valley premises were moved to Brunswick Street at this time and remained there until 1923, when it appears all business activities of the firm were then conducted from 117 Queen Street.

Foxwell Brothers merged with O'Keefe Brothers in 1924 to form OK Foxwell Ltd. The merger freed up some of O'Keefe's capital, as 117 Queen Street was purchased in 1924 in the name of Lillian Mary Margaret O'Keefe, the wife of Frederick O'Keefe. That the O'Keefes supplied the capital for this purchase and subsequent construction of the building is suggested by the fact that the building was named 'OK Building', despite the new company name of 'OK Foxwell'. Demolition of the old 'landmark' buildings present on the site was undertaken in July 1925 and construction of the new premises begun in the same month. The design of the building allowed for ten storeys. Six were initially planned for, but another two storeys were added during construction, bringing the total height to eight storeys. The building was completed in 1926. Other features included a roof garden and an electric box sign, with the title 'OK Building', located on the parapet.

The commercial outlook of Brisbane at the beginning of the 1920s was characterised by a general sense of optimism about the future. Following the depression of the 1890s and a severe drought in 1902, economic conditions in Queensland steadily improved and by 1908 economic growth was "striking".² The Queensland economy contracted during World War One and only slowly recovered in the immediate postwar years. By 1920, however, economic conditions had once more improved, though they did not reach the same level of growth experienced prior to World War One. Nonetheless, business confidence in the period from 1920-26 was high. This optimism encouraged one of Brisbane's most significant building booms in the CBD.

According to the editor of The Architecture & Building Journal of Queensland, 1923 was the year that "The Building Boom" was manifestly apparent:

We may justly look upon 1923 as 'The Great 1923'. Brisbane, though a smaller city than Sydney or Melbourne, may at least claim itself an equal in beauty and progressiveness. Our city has had her troubles, but on the eve of 1923 a break has come in the dark cloud, and, may it be so termed, a better land is in view.³

The 'boom' occurred primarily between 1923-28. The peak year of the boom was 1926, with over £3 million spent on new buildings – the year the former OK Building was constructed.⁴ Much of this building activity was concentrated in the CBD. The pace of development, particularly in the CBD, was only matched by Brisbane's building boom of the 1880s.

The boom occurred during a period of technological and architectural innovation. During the 1920s, Brisbane emerged as a modern city with numerous tall buildings. Such buildings were made possible through the development of reinforced concrete, elevators and steel framing. Though this technology had been in existence for some time, it was not consistently applied in Brisbane until the 1920s. This technology was primarily developed in America and the spread of these ideas throughout much of the world was an integral aspect of America's emerging cultural pre-eminence. As such, these buildings were considered important markers of modernity, along with cars, the wireless and motion pictures. Consequently, the height of a building increasingly

came to be seen as indicative of a city's social and economic progress.

The 1920s was therefore a significant period in the history of Brisbane's CBD. Other events further reinforce the importance of this decade. The growth of the city prompted the formation of Greater Brisbane in 1925.

Construction of City Hall was begun in the same year and its design reflected ideas of progress and civic pride. Throughout the decade, the City Council widened and concreted the streets of the CBD. This latter development, prompted by the increase in private car ownership, along with appearance of tall buildings, transformed the CBD landscape. These developments, taken with the architectural and technological innovations mentioned above, are indicative of the social, commercial and municipal significance of the 1920s to Brisbane's CBD.

The building boom was closely followed by Brisbane's newspapers, which regularly reported property sales and construction in the CBD. The former OK Building was considered an integral part of the boom. According to the Brisbane Courier in 1925, the former OK Building was "one of the latest additions to the city's tall buildings".⁵

Other modern conveniences included in the building's design, such as fireproof stairs, a "fast elevator" and hot air vacuums, were noted in the article, which is accompanied by a photo of the building in the course of erection.⁶

The building's location on Queen Street also drew attention. As the city of Brisbane grew during the second half of the nineteenth century, so too did the importance of Queen Street. By the 1880s, it was firmly established as the pre-eminent street of the city, especially as it contained the majority of prominent retail premises. Indeed, from this period onward the section of Queen Street between George and Edward Streets was considered the "best area".⁷ According to The Architecture & Building Journal of Queensland in 1925, "Queen Street a decade hence, will be something perhaps of unparalleled grandeur in building orders".⁸ The OK Building is specifically mentioned in this context:

Messrs. Pike Bros. will spend about £15,000 in alterations to their premises and work on Foxwell's Ltd [sic] is well under way. The completion of additions to the Hotel Carlton and the Deposit Bank was effected recently, so altogether Queen Street in time will be a thoroughfare of great and impressive building proportions.⁹

In the same journal the former OK Building is also described as a "skyscraper".¹⁰

The architectural firm of Hall and Prentice designed the building. The partnership between these two architects began in 1913. Hall and Prentice quickly became one of Brisbane's major architectural firms and the two architects were, collectively and individually, responsible for a wide range of prominent buildings in this period, such as Ascot Chambers (1925), Tattersall's Club (1925) and, most notably, City Hall (1930). The firm also designed alterations to the neighbouring Federal Deposit Bank building at the same time as construction of the former OK Building. Builder M. A. Dwyer constructed the former OK Building.

In 1929, at the outset of the Great Depression, the O'Keefes encountered some financial difficulty, as a warrant of execution from the Land Tax Commissioner was served on the property. The business must have suffered, as OK Foxwell ceased to be listed in subsequent PODs and in 1932 the Certificate of Title to the building and land passed to the Brisbane Permanent Building & Banking Co. Despite the apparent collapse of OK Foxwell in the early 1930s, the building continued to be known as 'OK Building' in the POD until 1949. The name was then changed to 'Roubin's Building', after 'Roubin's Superior Suits'. The suit business operated from the building from the late 1940s. By 1951 another floor had been added to building, though the fabric and style does not match the original design. Ownership of the building continued to change hands on numerous occasions in the following decades.

The former OK Building has accommodated a diverse range of businesses over time. Examples include florists, solicitors, dressmakers, cafes, a hairdresser and real estate agents. Interestingly, a number of businesses included 'OK' in their title, such as 'OK Hairdressing Service' and 'OK Lounge', though there is no reason to believe that they were owned by O'Keefe. Such usage suggests the name of the building was well known and therefore business owners found such association useful. In more recent times tenants have included a tattooist and chiropractor.

As with most retail premises within the CBD, the former OK Building has undergone a number of internal changes over the years to accommodate the requirements of its different commercial tenants. Alterations were carried out on Roubin's Superior Suits warehouse facilities in the building in 1948. The ground floor also underwent alterations in 1949 and 1958. The internal stairwell was altered in 1966.

The Brisbane History Group identified the former OK Building as a part of Brisbane's commercial heritage in 2002, when they included it in their publication *Walking Tours – Brisbane's Commercial Heritage 1900-1940* (2002).

Description

This building, in the Inter-War Stripped Classical style, is constructed of brown face bricks with plain metal-framed windows. The facade is symmetrical with a smooth surface and Spartan appearance. Spandrels between storeys are subdued to emphasise verticality. A balcony spans the width of the facade at the eight and second floors and a smaller waving balcony is centred at the sixth floor. A suspended awning hangs from the building over the footpath.

The original building design allowed for ten storeys but eight storeys only were initially built. The OK Building contained modern features such as a fast elevator, hot air vacuums, a rooftop garden and natural lighting for all its offices. When erected it featured an electric box sign located on the parapet with the name, 'OK Building'. This parapet with signage was demolished when another floor was added, sometime before 1951, the fabric and style of which does not match the original design.

Over time the building accommodated a diverse range of businesses and a number of internal changes to accommodate the requirements of these different commercial tenants were made.

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 an example of the multiple-storied (skyscraper) buildings constructed in the CBD during the 1920s building boom.

Technical

CRITERION F

The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period

as one of the earliest surviving steel-framed buildings in Brisbane's CBD.

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

as a building designed by one of Brisbane's most prominent architectural firms, Hall and Prentice.

References

1. *The Brisbane Courier*, July 11, 1925, n.p.
2. Glen Lewis, *A History of the Ports of Queensland: A Study in Economic Nationalism*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1973, p. 134
3. "Editorial", *The Architecture & Building Journal of Queensland*, January 8, 1923, p. 7
4. Brisbane History Group, *Walking Tours – Brisbane's Commercial Heritage 1900-1940*, Brisbane, Brisbane History Group, 2002, p. 54
5. *The Brisbane Courier*, July 6, 1926, p. 15
6. *Ibid*
7. R. Lawson, *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*, Brisbane, University of

Queensland Press, 1973, p. 47

8. *The Architecture & Building Journal of Queensland*, December 10, 1925, p. 21-2
 9. *Ibid*, p. 22
 10. *The Architecture & Building Journal of Queensland*, February 10, 1926, p. 15
 11. Brisbane City Council, *Properties on the Web*, post-1946 building approval cards
 12. Brisbane City Council, 1946 aerial photographs.
 13. Brisbane City Council, Sewerage Map, 1913
 14. Brisbane City Council, *Third Volume of the Brisbane Statistics*, Brisbane, A. H. Tucker, Government Printer, 1942, p. 54
 15. Coutts, J.V.D. (ed.), *The Architectural & Building Journal of Queensland*, 1925-6
 16. De Gruchy, Graham. *Architecture in Brisbane*. Brisbane: Boolarong, 1988
 17. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
 18. Fitzgerald, Ross, *A History of Queensland from 1915 to the Early 1980s*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1982
 19. Job, William, *The Building of Brisbane 1828-1940*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 2002
 20. John Oxley Library, photographic collection.
 21. John Oxley Library, newspaper clippings files
 22. Lawson, Ronald *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*. St Lucia U of Q Press, 1973
 23. Glen Lewis, *A History of the Ports of Queensland: A Study in Economic Nationalism*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1973
 24. Mahlstedt & Son, City of Brisbane Detail Fire Survey, Map No. 11,1951
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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.

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