Heritage Citation

Telephone Exchange

Key details

Also known as	Ballow Street Automatic Exchange
Addresses	At 21 Ballow Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006
Type of place	Telephone exchange
Period	World War II 1939-1945
Style	Art Deco
Lot plan	L20_RP909220
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2011 Date of Citation — December 2008
Construction	Walls: Face brick

Criterion for listing	(B) Rarity

The Valley Automatic Telephone Exchange was built in 1943. It served the increased telephone usage in this part of Brisbane brought about by the area's proximity to the numerous bases established by the US Forces at Fortitude Valley, New Farm, Newstead and Hamilton in the latter half of World War II.

History

Fortitude Valley opened its first post office in 1864. It acquired a telegraph office in 1877. The telephone was invented by American Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. On 28 January 1878, the first successful experiment with the new telephone system was made in Queensland when a successful call was put through from Brisbane to Ipswich. Brisbane's (and Queensland's) first telephone exchange opened at the Brisbane General Post Office (GPO, built 1872) in 1880. In 1886, Fortitude Valley became a recognised postal district with the appointment of its first Post Master, Mr T.J. Cook. The Fortitude Valley Post and Telegraph Office at 740 Ann Street were built in 1887. The first public telephone was opened in the Valley in July 1888. The telephone charge was sixpence for each five minutes of a telephone call.

Plans for an automatic telephone exchange to be built at Fortitude Valley were drafted in April 1941 by the Architect-in-Charge, Drawing Office in Canberra in the ACT. The plans and construction were overseen in Queensland by the Works Director of the Commonwealth Department of the Interior, Mr HW Barker. While World War 2 had been raging for two and a half years, the impact on Brisbane had been minimal. Thus the planning for a new Brisbane automatic telephone exchange was conducted at a leisurely, almost peace-time conditions pace. There was no urgency placed on the construction of the new telephone exchange, for at that time, the centre of Australia's war effort was Sydney/Melbourne/Canberra with Brisbane relegated as a training base with a small garrison of mainly support staff.

The chosen site for the new telephone exchange was in Ballow Street, Fortitude Valley, behind the Fortitude Valley Post Office. During the 1920's, Fortitude Valley's importance had grown as new industries were established in the suburb. These included a new printing works and offices for the Truth and Sportsman newspaper, a bakery complex for Automatic Bakery and a car assembly plant and service garage for General Motors Limited. By the 1930's, Fortitude Valley, with its collection of large department stores, had become Brisbane's second most-important shopping precinct after Queen Street in the City. Subsequently the Fortitude Valley Post Office was one of the busiest post offices in Brisbane, exceeded only by the GPO at 261 Queen Street and, possibly by the South Brisbane Post and Telegraph Office at 472 Stanley Street, South Brisbane. As the City and South Brisbane (built c1926) had existing automatic telephone exchanges then Fortitude Valley was the obvious site for the new exchange.

Responsibility for the building of the new automatic exchange rested with the Commonwealth Government's Post Masters General Department. The building plans were completed on 22 April 1941. The building was designed by Architect in Charge of the Commonwealth Government's Works Director (Queensland). The land that was the proposed site of the new building was in private ownership. James Campbell & Sons Ltd had subdivision 4 of Block 14 of Lot 73 (18.3 perches). Hector Stribling had resubdivision 2 of subdivision 2 of Block 14 of Lot 73 plus

resubdivision 1 of subdivision 7 of Lot 74 (20.88 perches). Hector with Harold Archibald Stribling had subdivions 1 and 3 and resubdivision 1 of subdivision 2 of Block 14 of Lot 73 (1 rood, 5.58 perches). The allotments were appropriated by the Commonwealth Government on 15 July 1940 through its "The Real Property (Commonwealth Titles) Act of 1924". The Commonwealth Government was to finally purchase these allotments in the immediate post-War period. Subdivision 4 of Block 14 of Lot 73 was obtained on 1 August 1946. Subdivision 1 and 3 and resubdivision 1 of subdivision 2 of Block 14 of Lot 73 were obtained on 30 July 1947.Subdivions 1 and 3 and resubdivision 1 of subdivision 2 of Block 14 of Lot 73 plus resubdivision 1 of subdivision 4 of Block 14 of Lot 73 were obtained on 24 September 1951.

Due to wartime shortages in building materials and skilled labour, the commencement of the construction of the Fortitude Valley Telephone Exchange was delayed. On 8 December 1941, Australia entered the Pacific War against Japan. On 22 December 1941, the Pensacola convoy reaches Brisbane delivering the first US service personnel to be based in Brisbane. Major-General Julian F. Barnes became the first commander of the US Forces in Australia (USFIA) with his HQ at Lennon's Hotel, Brisbane. On the 30 March 1942, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff established a new command structure covering Australia. This was the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) command headed by US General Douglas MacArthur. On 20 July 1942, MacArthur transferred his SWPA command HQ from Melbourne to Brisbane. He had preferred Townsville but it lacked the required facilities. During 1942-43, the US forces expanded their operations in Brisbane either through the requestioning of existing properties or through the construction of new facilities.

In Fortitude Valley, the US Army had its 383rd Medical Service detachment, a US Army Air Force air freight receiving depot at 47 Alfred Street, the 5th Air Force service command at 111 Constance Street, an Ordnance and Enlistment Depot on St Pauls Terrace. Nearby at Newstead and New Farm, the US Navy had various training centres, a fleet Post Office and Public Works shop, the Headquarters of the US Brisbane Naval Base, 134th Ships Maintenance Office, the Naval Officers Club in Oxlade Drive, an USN dispensary and shore patrol office, a submarine base at the New Farm wharves and Camp New Farm at New Farm Park, while the US Army had a photographic unit based at Newstead House. Also close to Fortitude Valley was the US Army camp at Victoria Park in Gregory Terrace at Spring Hill.

The US Forces laid their own phone lines to connect their numerous Brisbane facilities and even produced a separate Brisbane telephone directory for their forces. With both the US and Australian forces making extensive use of telephone communication in Brisbane, there was an obvious need to complete the automatic telephone exchange planned for Ballow Street. The first mention, in the Queensland Post Office Directories, of the Fortitude Valley Telephone Exchange, appears in the 1944 edition. As each edition was published the year after a survey was conducted then the Fortitude Valley Telephone Exchange must have been completed in 1943.

Description

This is a two-storey brick building facing Ballow Street. It has an austere face-brick stepped parapet with two downpipes either side of a plastered masonry section in the middle with windows, accentuating the entrance way. It has a hipped roof clad in corrugated metal sheeting and there has been a modern extension to the rear of the building. Along each side there are a series of original steel-framed windows on both storeys.

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:

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage

as a civil governmental facility completed to meet wartime Brisbane's increased need for an expanded telephone service.

References

1. Architect-in-Charge, Works Director (Queensland), *Drawing W8529 – Proposed Automatic Exchange Ballow St. Valley Brisbane Queensland*, (Brisbane: Commonwealth of Australia, 22 April 1941)

2. Australia Post, *Our Colonial Heritage Lives On*, (Brisbane: Australia Post, 1979)

3. Brisbane City Council, 1946, 2001 & 2005 aerial photographs

4. Brisbane City Council, *Properties on the Web*, website

5. Brisbane City Council's Central Library, local history sheets

6. Brisbane City Council Heritage Unit, Fortitude Valley Heritage and Character Study, 1995

7. Commonwealth of Australia's Queensland Works Director, *Drawings of Proposed Automatic Exchange Ballow St. Valley Queensland,* (Brisbane: Commonwealth Government, 1941)

8. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.

9. Mahlstedt & Son, City of Brisbane Detail Fire Survey, Map No. 36, 1951

10. *Queensland Post Office Directories*, 1868-1949

11. Valley Business Council (VBC), *Walk into History – A History of Fortitude Valley*, (Brisbane: VBC, 1981)

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