

Heritage Citation



76 Adamson Street, Woollooin

Key details

Addresses	At 76 Adamson Street, Woollooin, Queensland 4030
Type of place	Flat building
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Functionalist
Lot plan	L2_RP54670
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2004 Date of Citation — June 2003
Construction	Roof: Terracotta tile; Walls: Face brick

Built circa 1938/39 for John Duncan Buchanan, this block of flats is an excellent example of the remarkable rise in flat building in inner-Brisbane in the late 1930s, caused by the rapid growth of Brisbane's population and subsequent high demand for accommodation. The building also reflects changing community attitudes towards new forms of housing. Due to its prominent corner siting, the building has strong landmark qualities and makes a fine contribution to the streetscape.

History

In April and May 1859 Robert Lock Thorrold bought portions 194 and 197 – a total of 98½ acres at a cost of £1 an acre. Thorrold would later be appointed Associate to Judge Lutwyche and Supreme Court Librarian. He built his house in the north-eastern part of this holding, near the corner of the present-day Thorrold Street and Kent Road. Thorrold did not subdivide the land himself, instead holding it for over twenty years before selling the lot to George Cowlshaw in October 1881. Cowlshaw was an architect, director of a Stanthorpe tin mining company and gold prospector, amongst his varied business interests. With his brother James, George purchased the Telegraph Newspaper Co., later becoming its Chairman and Managing Director. Brother James also had other newspaper interests, notably as a director of the rival *Brisbane Courier* before the Telegraph purchase.

This large holding in the northern Brisbane suburbs was evidently an investment for Cowlshaw. After resumption of 25 acres by the Commissioner of Railways for the Brisbane-Sandgate railway line, the remaining land was divided into 743 "villa sites". The resulting "Thorrold Town Estate" was marketed by auctioneer John Cameron in July 1882 as having Bay and Island views and no bad drainage or smells. It would be served by its own railway station, and was already cleared of scrub to make for easy gardening. The first sale was finalised in September 1882; however it would take over twenty years for all the lots to be sold.

In 1883 Sandgate man Joseph Lewis Berry bought the land on which these flats stand. After passing through several owners' hands, Eliza Page bought the corner blocks, and built a house here, later known as "Ferrol". In 1894 John Duncan Buchanan began consolidating four lots – he bought the three corner lots facing Adamson Street (then called Main Street) in October 1894 from his father Alexander, and the neighbouring lot along Hamley Street (then called Station Street) in August 1908. John Buchanan lived here in "Ferrol" until the late 1930s. He evidently invested or speculated, as all the land titles show a succession of mortgages securing loans between 1897 and 1922. In April 1938 Buchanan borrowed money from the Brisbane Permanent Building & Banking Company – presumably to finance the building of the flats – and subdivided the holding into a shape to accommodate the new brick flats. All three of these new lots (one on Hamley Street accommodating the tennis court, and one on Adamson Street – both streets newly renamed – as well as the corner lot) were sold in 1939. The flats were bought by Thomas and Mary Dwyer who financed their purchase with a mortgage through the Hibernian Australasian Catholic Benefit Society.

These flats are thought to have been erected in c.1937-8. While a part of the trend to build flats in Brisbane, Buchanan chose a site away from New Farm, which was being transformed by this style of architecture.

Brisbane, in comparison to Sydney where flat buildings were being erected from the early 1900s, was relatively

slow to adopt this new form of domestic dwelling. The practice of converting old houses to flats was well established in Brisbane. By at least the 1910s, Brisbane was following an Australia wide trend of converting larger houses to flats. The incidence of house conversions to flats grew dramatically during the 1920s and 1930s, a period of severe housing shortage in Brisbane. The purpose-designed flat or apartment building emerged as a new form of residential accommodation in Brisbane during the 1920s.

In September 1933, the *Courier Mail* approached a 'prominent Brisbane architect' to comment on the sudden boom in flat construction in Brisbane. A strong trend toward preferences for flat life over suburban housing was identified, the reduction in the size of the average family being considered an important contributing factor. In addition, many working people found that the costs of land, finance, utilities etc were too expensive. They preferred to rent accommodation in the new well-appointed flat and apartment buildings, which in turn created a strong environment for further investment in flat buildings.

The mid 1930s was a time of high population growth and housing shortage in Brisbane. In October 1938, the editor of the *Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland* commented on the "insistent demand for flats ... the people must have homes and these are not being built quickly enough".

The bulk of purpose-designed blocks of flats erected in Brisbane in the interwar period were intended as rental investments, rather than for immediate re-sale, as strata title was not available. Investors favoured centrally located positions, close to workplaces, shopping facilities, entertainment and schools, with easy access to public transport. Corner positions, which permitted plenty of opportunity to ensure flats were well-lit and ventilated, were also favoured.

Buchanan may have been fortunate to obtain finance for the flats, although he may have been considered a good risk, given his business interests as an "oil and colour merchant" in Fortitude Valley. Many property developers found that capital was "practically unprocurable", even though the *Daily Standard* reported in 1936 that there was a keen demand for flats in Brisbane and they provided a good return for the investment. Financiers seemed concerned that the fashion for flats would fade in the future.

With the construction of flats sky-rocketing, the Queensland Institute of Architects called for a review of regulations governing the design, construction and planning of flats to prevent the development of fire hazards and slums in the city. Council ordinances for residential developments required updating in the era of flats.

Houses in Brisbane had to be built on a block of land that was at least 20 perches, but a loop hole in Council ordinances meant that flats could be built on 8 or 9 perches.

There was much debate in Council Chambers and the press about the merits of flats. Some Aldermen argued that since Brisbane had the luxury of space, the ideal of the detached house on a large suburban block should be maintained. Flats were therefore a menace that "deprived children of the fresh air and recreation areas to which they were entitled." *The Daily Standard* reported a city planner as saying that flats were "not conducive to the rearing of families and were a cause of the falling birth rate". According to him there was a danger that some localities, such as parts of Clayfield, might become slum areas.

The Courier Mail speculated that perhaps exorbitant Brisbane City Council rates were restricting working class people from owning a house and garden and preventing Brisbane from becoming the garden capital. Other commentators blamed the rise of flat building on suburban sprawl: obtaining the ideal of the house and garden would force people to move to the outer parts of Brisbane, whereas "the flat dweller can remain near the centre of things, and enjoy all the amenities of civilised life".

Few blocks of flats appear to have been constructed in Brisbane prior to the early to mid-1920s. The construction

of flat buildings in Brisbane peaked in 1936-37, with a decline in 1938-39 partly due to the uncertain investment climate generated by threats of war in Europe, and partly due to the refusal of banking and financial institutions to lend on flat constructions. The bulk of the flats erected in Brisbane in the interwar period were rental investments.

Mostly blocks of flats presented handsome street facades, predominantly in the fashionable Old English, Spanish Mission or Mediterranean architectural styles favoured by architects of much of the more prestigious domestic housing in Brisbane during the interwar period. Flats designed in the modernist, Art Deco and Functionalist schools were much rarer.

These flats are an early example of the limited number of Brisbane buildings in the Functionalist style of architecture. The building was a streamlined departure from the conventional brick boxes of the period. Few residential developments, either detached or attached, survive in Brisbane that display the characteristics of this style, shown in the building's simple massing with a horizontal emphasis, the central stair tower which provides a vertical motif, and corner windows.

Unlike many of Brisbane's interwar flats that have since been converted to strata title, these are retained on a single title.

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 a block of flats built as a part of the flat development boom of the late 1930s.

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 a few Functionalist blocks of flats built in Brisbane before the Second World War.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

for its Functionalist architectural style and prominent corner location.

References

1. *Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland*, March 1936 and editorial October 1938
2. Brisbane City Council Minutes of Proceedings
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4. Brisbane City Council Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board, Detail Plans
5. *Daily Standard*, 4 September 1935 & 2 April 1936
6. *The Courier Mail*, 4 September, 1935
7. *The Sunday Mail*, 19 May, 1991
8. *The Sunday Sun*, 21 April, 1991
9. Department of Natural Resources, Certificates of Title
10. Information from owner Greg Stuart
11. Kerr, J 1988, *Brunswick Street, Bowen Hills and Beyond: the Railways of the Northern suburbs of Brisbane*, Australian Railway Historical Society, Brisbane
12. John Oxley Library photographs & clippings files
13. Lawson, Ronald 1973, *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia
14. Queensland Government, *Queensland Pioneers Index 1829-1889*, (Brisbane: Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2000)
15. *Queensland Post Office Directories*, 1887-1949

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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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