

Heritage Citation



Customs House Precinct

Key details

Addresses	At 427 Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000; At 427 Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000; At 493E Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000
Type of place	Retaining wall, Administrative offices / building, Tree/s, Urban precinct
Period	Victorian 1860-1890

Lot plan

L19_RP207927; L650_SP104142; L1_BUP105471; L2_BUP105471;
L3_BUP105471; L4_BUP105471; L5_BUP105471; L6_BUP105471;
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L191_BUP105471; L192_BUP105471; L193_BUP105471

Geolocation

-27.465186 153.031396

Key dates

Local Heritage Place Since — 12 March 2004
Date of Citation — November 2003

People/associations

Colonial Architect's Office (George Connolly and Charles McLay) (Architect)

Criterion for listing

(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (E) Aesthetic

The Customs House Precinct is important in demonstrating the evolution of the maritime history of Petrie Bight, particularly its riverfront commerce and industry. This stretch of the River was once Brisbane's maritime entry point and consisted of large expanses of low wharfs, sheds and warehouses. The precinct is comprised of Customs House, built in 1889, a stone retaining wall, built in 1881, a mature fig tree, the Colonial Building, built in 1988, and a public park with views to the Brisbane River and Story Bridge. These elements both individually and collectively contribute to the cityscape, and are located in one of the few places in Brisbane where the River and the city streets are in close proximity.

History (previous revision)

The area around the Customs House, at the northern end of Queen Street was set aside for wharves immediately following Brisbane's establishment as a free settlement in the early 1840s. A Customs House was built on the current site around 1850 and was extended in 1872. By the early 1880s trade through the port had increased substantially, the facilities were less than adequate and plans were prepared for a new Customs House on the site.

Queen Street was widened around Petrie Bight in 1875, and a Brisbane Tuff retaining wall 45 metres long and 5 to 9 metres high was constructed to support Queen Street over the steeply sloping to riverbank. This wall was completed in 1881 and strengthened with buttresses in 1887.

Several designs for the new Customs House were prepared before approval in 1886. The final design is attributed to Charles McLay of the Colonial Architect's office. The building was constructed by John Petrie and Sons at a cost of almost \$40,000, and completed in 1889.

In 1924 Brisbane City Council constructed an office building adjoining the Customs House, known as the Maritime Building. It was three storeys from the riverside, but lower from Queen Street. In the mid to late twentieth century, port facilities gradually moved further downstream to Newstead/Teneriffe, then Hamilton, and ultimately Fisherman's Island at the mouth of the river. The Customs House was adapted for new uses as the area fell out of favour for maritime business.

Major internal alterations were made to the building 1947-50, when almost every interior wall was replaced, and the timber floors were replaced with concrete. Internal spaces were replanned and the original stairs were removed. Further modifications were made over subsequent decades until 1988 when the building was vacated. The Commonwealth Government investigated new uses for the building, but were delayed pending the introduction of adequate heritage legislation at State level to ensure its conservation. Expressions of Interest in 1991 resulted in the University of Queensland restoring and adapting the building for a variety of uses between 1993 and 1994. This work was carried out between 1993 and 1994. The University purchased the Customs House from the Commonwealth in 2002.

By the 1980s the wharves along Petrie Bight had been abandoned and either demolished or used for car parking. Part of the area between the river and the Petrie Bight retaining wall was developed as a park, and the National Trust of Queensland and the Australian Heritage Commission listed the view to the Story Bridge through the area to encourage any development to be in sympathy with the historic importance of the area.

In 1987 the Queensland Government passed control of the area north of the Customs House, including the wharves and Maritime Building, to a private development company. A development known as Admiralty Wharf was proposed, and negotiations with the Australian Heritage Commission and Brisbane City Council were held over several years with the intent to limit the scale of development near the Customs House. A number of tall buildings were proposed at the northern end of the site, and the existing park in front of the retaining wall was to be retained as an open space above underground car parking. At the southern end of the site a building was proposed to replace the Maritime Building, despite Council's preference for extension of the park up to the Customs House.

Negotiations revolved around the footprint, height and finishes of the new building, to try to retain the setting of the Customs House as closely as possible to that provided by the Maritime Building. In particular, the height was not to exceed the parapet height of the Customs House. Through a process of development approval, building approval and reference to the Building Referee, the new building, initially known as the Prudential Building, and later the Colonial Building, was constructed with a maximum height considerably above the Customs House parapet level. The final height of the new building was equal to the level of the drum supporting the copper sheathed dome.

The northern section of the site was developed during the 1990s as a series of four residential towers of up to 40 storeys, and a commercial building of just over 20 storeys was constructed on the adjoining site to the south of the Customs House at 175 Eagle Street. These tall buildings now flank the Precinct, which consists of the Customs House, its mature fig tree, the four/five storey Colonial Building, the stone retaining wall, the public open space and the views to the river and Story Bridge.

An application to convert the Colonial Building from office to residential use, and construct four additional floors, was lodged in 2002 and refused by Council as the height from Queen Street would be effectively doubled, and was considered to impact on the setting of the Customs House which had been the subject of extensive negotiations 15 years earlier. This decision was appealed to the Planning and Environment Court and defended by Council, but the appeal was allowed. At the time of writing this citation (November 2003) the additional floors had not been constructed.

Description (previous revision)

The site consists of all of the land between the Queen Street kerb to that part of the River Boardwalk contained in the property description. The site contains of the Brisbane Customs House, river wall, steps and mature fig tree (individually entered in the Queensland and City Plan Heritage Registers), the Petrie Bight retaining wall (also individually entered), the site of the Colonial Building and the public open space up to the security fence of Admiralty Towers II.

Customs House is located by the Town Reach of the river at the end of Queen Street. It was purpose-designed as a Customs House in the Classical Revival style. The design also shows some adaptation for climate with its use of colonnades, balconies and projecting pilasters. The building is two storeys high above a basement and has a large dome at one end. The majority of the structure is rendered brick on a stone foundation with Murphy's Creek stone used for columns and pilasters, the balusters to the colonnade, the parapet and side entrances. The main roof is corrugated iron while the dome is sheathed in copper. The verandahs have railings of English ironwork.

Because of the location of the dome and the inclusion of a curved end bay, the facades of the building facing Queen Street and the river are asymmetrical. These have two projecting portions separated by a colonnade of

giant order Corinthian columns and surmounted by triangular pediments containing a crest similar to that later adopted as the Australian coat of arms. Italianate balustrading above a projecting cornice with dentil blocks extends around the perimeter of the roof with regularly spaced ball-shaped finials above. Fluted giant order pilasters with Corinthian capitals sit below each pediment, while the curved end section has semi-circular engaged piers. The dome is supported on small pilasters to either side of alternating square and circular recesses with decorative festoons above. Copper ribs in line with the pilasters continue up the dome to a lantern light. The exposed basement facing the river elevation has arched openings in a rusticated base.

Inside the building the most imposing space is that of the Long Room beneath the dome. Fluted Corinthian pilasters of painted plaster are below the coffered ceiling of the dome that has a central glazed section. In the basement some of the original walls with arched openings remain. The windows in the building seem to be the original double-hung sashes. Many changes in the internal layout have occurred, incorporating new finishes to walls and ceilings.

The asymmetrical positioning of the dome and the effect of that in the view of the building as the observer moves towards and past it extends the visual envelope that is the 'setting' of the Customs House.

The sandstone retaining wall, incorporating stairs and privies at the river's edge, the surrounding railing and fig tree all form part of the building's setting.

The Colonial Building is a commercial building of four floors to Queen Street and five to the river frontage and stands on a site extending from Queen Street to the river. It has a flat roof and large areas of dark glazing set in a framework faced with brown polished granite.

The open space at the north of the site consists of a public park above an underground car park, with series of terraces leading from Queen Street to the River Boardwalk. It also features trees in containers and items of public art. The area provides views of the retaining wall, the River and Story Bridge.

The Precinct, which forms a setting for the Customs House, is a prominent landmark visible from various areas of the city.

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 remaining low-scale precinct that was once the focal point of the Port of Brisbane and which demonstrates the principal uses of the site over time for customs collection, wharfage, municipal engineering works, commercial activities and recreation.

Rarity

CRITERION B

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

as one of the few places and settings in the city where important views of the Brisbane River and the Story Bridge can be obtained from a major street.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

as a low-scale precinct containing one of Brisbane's best Victorian Classical buildings, prominent mature fig tree, imposing stone retaining wall, public open space and views of the Brisbane River and Story Bridge and allowing prolonged views of the Customs House building as the observer moves towards it.

References

1. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
 2. *Queensland Post Office Directories*, 1868-1949
 3. Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle, Brisbane Customs House Conservation Study 1987
 4. Australian Construction Services, Brisbane Customs House Conservation Plan, 1993
 5. Robert Riddel Architect, Draft Statement of Evidence, Urban Properties Pty Ltd v Brisbane City Council 2003
 6. Letter from Australian Heritage Commission 9 June 1987
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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.

Citation prepared by — Brisbane City Council (page revised February 2024)



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