

Heritage Citation



John McGrath Motors Pty Ltd (former)

Key details

Addresses	At 324 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006
Type of place	Showroom/s
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Mediterranean
Lot plan	L3_RP69269; L1_RP69269
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000 Date of Citation — September 2010
Construction	Walls: Masonry
People/associations	Lange Leopold Powell (Architect)

This building was erected in 1926 to a design by architect Lange Powell. In March 1926, Brisbane Ford Sales and Service Ltd obtained a lease on the premises for a motor vehicle showroom, reflecting the impact of the motor industry which was beginning to be felt in Brisbane, particularly in the Valley. The site was occupied for this purpose for almost forty years under a series of lessees, but has since had a variety of commercial purposes. Lange Powell was the second president of the Australian Institute of Architects and held various offices with the Queensland Institute of Architects. His most admired designs include St Martin's Hospital (1922) and the Ann Street Masonic Hall (1928).

History

The site which was to host the building was quite large, primarily composed of a two-rood, 29 perch holding owned by James Porter from 1885. Although Porter's block was situated near the Wickham Hotel (1885) [600213], the Booroodabin Divisional Board (1882) and the Valley Swimming Baths, this area of the Valley was only sparsely occupied. Commerce in the Valley centred on Ann Street, particularly around the Brunswick Street intersection and as close to the city as possible before Duncan's Hill blocked the street. Even the economic boom of the 1880s, which vitalised parts of Wickham Street, failed to bring much attention to this area of the Valley. One rood and three perches of Porter's land were resumed for the new Valley railway in 1888. The railway assisted the commercial and industrial development of the Valley in the 1890s and early 1900s, and a few houses and shops were built on Porter's land in this time. However, the land was still too far removed from the centre of the Valley to attract more than a smattering of tenants, with a comparatively high concentration of timber yards, Chinese cabinet makers and Japanese laundry proprietors.

The value of Porter's land began to be realised in the 1910s. Development of the Valley slowly crept outwards, towards the fringes of the suburb. The combination of this slow spread and the newly-discovered industrial advantages of the Valley, led to the establishment of a number of manufacturing and industrial activities along previously under-developed land on Wickham Street, including a bacon curing factory, fuel depots and a brick and pipe company.

Porter died in 1912, before the full potential of the land became apparent, and ownership of the remaining one rood and 25.3 perches was passed to his descendants. It was sold in 1922 to the Enoggera and Virginia Bricks and Pipes Company, which had leased part of the property from 1915. The company continued to operate from the premises, while a variety of builders, plasterers, fuel depot managers and cabinet makers plied their trades on the rest of the site. In 1925 Enoggera and Virginia Bricks and Pipes Company also bought an 18-perch block fronting Constance Street and joining the Wickham Street site at the rear. The Constance Street site had been residential from the 1870s, although after the railway was put through there were only two houses between Alfred and Wickham Streets.

In December 1925, the company had plans for a new brick factory approved. Estimated to cost £6,000, the building was to be constructed by A. Anderson and was designed by Lange L. Powell, a prominent interwar architect. Powell had been partnered with Claude Chambers before the latter returned to Sydney in 1915, and

was a partner in the firms of Powell and Hutton (1922-5) and Atkinson, Powell and Conrad (1927-31). While practising as a solo architect in the 1920s, he was commissioned to construct a number of buildings for motor companies, including the Austral Motors Building (1923-5) [602505] and the expansions for Ward's Motor's in 1928, which gave the company an entire block fronting Wickham Street, between Constance and Bridge Streets. Powell's work also includes Ballow Chambers (1924-6) [600164], St Martins Hospital (1922) [600075] and the Ann Street Masonic Temple (1930) [600074].

The design of the building was influenced by the tenants-to-be. The Brick and Pipes Company had signed a £25 per week lease for the ground floor of the building with Brisbane Ford Sales and Service Limited. This business was founded and managed by M.D. Russell, a former tractor equipment business owner whose innovative advertising displays included lunchtime parades of trucks and cars through the city.

Russell was one of many proprietors entering the motor industry in the 1920s, as the car became an indispensable part of Australian society. From the 1910s it had revolutionised transport, with motorised activities gradually replacing stables and coach and carriage builders. Australians had adopted motor vehicles with enthusiasm, and in 1923-4 had the fifth-highest number of registered motor vehicles in the world, approximately 274,000 vehicles for a population of just over 5,600,000 people. 31,233 of these were registered to Queenslanders, who totalled 755,972 people in 1921, exclusive of full-blooded Aboriginal people.

The impact of the motor industry on Fortitude Valley was significant. Service stations and sales rooms emerged along Wickham Street, where, despite development in the 1910s, land was still available for large new motor factories and the area's proximity to the Valley rail yards enhanced its appeal to industry. Ford was already installed in Wickham Street premises by the early 1920s, with a 1½ acre service station and assembling factory, constructed 1923-4, located at 275 Wickham Street, across the road from the present site. It was the largest in Australia at the time of its construction. Mackay-Ward Motors was also in the area, as well as a number of independent motor car body builders, painters, repairers, engineers and garages. General Motors also had an extensive service station constructed on Wickham Street in 1926.

The new Brisbane Ford Sales and Service building was finished and opened in April 1926. The two-storey building had several features designed specifically for the motor industry, including a ramp to drive cars to the upper floor; three large arched windows on the ground floor for a street view of the two showrooms; a repair shop, with overhead cranes added later; and a car-washing department on the rear of the ground floor, with access via Constance Street. The firm also provided a same-day service for spare car parts, conveying them to customers with a special delivery car.

A month later, the building was officially opened. Over 500 people arrived for the opening celebration on 21 May 1926. By this stage, attendees were told, Ford was a major international company, with a mechanics school in each capital city in Australia, employing about 1,000 people in Australia, the bulk (600 men) in the Geelong assembly plant.

Within a year, the Brick and Pipe Company had moved to new premises. The 'Brisbane Ford Sales and Service Limited' had become known as 'Brisbane Cars and Tractors Limited', and in June 1927 new extensions were opened, more than doubling the amount of floor space. 30,000 square feet of space was now available, adjoining the original building and making 'an imposing structure when viewed from the outside'.¹ The renovations, at £5,500, cost almost as much as the original building.

The building caught on fire twice in 1929, although inquiries into both blazes found no suspicious circumstances. The first fire, in January, was minor (only £275 worth of damage was done to the building), but the September fire, which broke out in the upper floor, was dramatic enough to make newspapers around the country. Repairs

to the building would cost £1,541/14/10, with an additional bill of £3,843 for the cars on site during the fire. The two-storey concrete and brick building was valued at £15,000 and insured for £13,500.

In November 1930 Brisbane Cars and Tractors was replaced with Motors Limited, a subsidiary of General Motors Australia. General Motors undertook further alterations, mostly internal. The new showroom, with 8,424 square feet of space, was reported to be one of the largest in the Commonwealth. The new service and repair departments, on the first floor of the building, boasted 'the most modern and up-to-date machinery' so that the General Motors could offer 'the best service procurable in the quickest possible time and at reasonable cost'.²

The Depression hit the car industry badly, and many of the companies which had leased the Wickham Street property ended in liquidation. In July 1931 General Motors closed down its assembly plant due to lack of custom, and in November, E.G. Eager and Son became the sole distributor for General Motors in Queensland and Northern New South Wales, taking over premises including those at 324 Wickham Street. Eager transferred its entire used car department to Wickham Street, though it soon took advantage of the large display windows to show latest model Chevrolet, Buick and Vauxhall vehicles.

From 1940 the building was rented to McIntosh Motors on a five-year lease. During this time it was used by the US Army Air Corps for offices. At the expiry of the lease, the site was purchased by John McGrath Limited, a large national motor sales company which had set up along Wickham Street during the 1930s. A re-subdivision of the land in 1951 gave McGrath an additional 0.25 perches, giving the company a total holding of just over half an acre on Wickham Street by 1953.

McGrath added a hoist to the building in 1955 and three exits in 1963; new owners Moreton Properties made \$2,300 worth of internal alterations in 1966.

Description

The building is two storeyed, of brick construction, with square headed entrances at each end of the ground floor and intermediate semi-circular arched openings with decorative crests.

The first floor windows are double-hung sashes, square headed and grouped in pairs. A continuous hood is supported off cast brackets below a simple straight parapet.

Minor alterations have occurred to signwriting and the addition of individual awnings to the ground floor arcading.

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 for its association with the early motor retail trade.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places as a good example of a 1920s retail and office building.

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 good example of the commercial work of Lange L. Powell, a prominent Brisbane architect.

References

1. *The Brisbane Courier*, 24 June 1927, p.15
2. *The Brisbane Courier*, 2 December 1930, p.6
3. Brisbane City Council Heritage Unit Citation May 1991
4. Margaret Kerr, "Lange L. Powell, Architect", Bachelor of Architecture Thesis, University of Queensland, 1957, p.67
5. Janet Hogan, 'Powell, Lange Leopold (1886-1938)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, p.268
6. Queensland Land Titles Office Records
7. Queensland Post Office Directories

8. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Year Book Australia, 1923
 9. *The Brisbane Courier*, 1922-7, 1929-32
 10. *The Advertiser (Adelaide)* 1929
 11. *The Canberra Times* 1929
 12. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1929, 1953-4
 13. *The West Australian* 1929
 14. Brisbane City Council Register of New Buildings, 1925-7
 15. Department of Environment and Resource Management, Queensland Heritage Register Entry, Austral Motors Building [602505]
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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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