

Heritage Citation



King George Chambers

Key details

Addresses	At 154 Roma Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000
Type of place	Office building, Shop/s
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Free Classical
Lot plan	L3_RP84756; L2_RP84756; L1_RP84756
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2009 Date of Citation — June 2006
Construction	Walls: Face brick

People/associations H. Cheatham (Builder);
Hennessy, Hennessy, Keesing and Co. and J.P. Donoghue (Architect)

Criterion for listing (A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (E) Aesthetic

King George Chambers was constructed in 1927 for the Murphy family, who were involved with property development at this end of George Street from the 1880s. It was one of a number of projects proposed during the 1920s as part of the George Street retail precinct's modernisation program. This two-storey shop and office building has been tenanted by a number of various retail and commercial enterprises since its construction including fruiterers, grocerers, a chemist, commercial agents, accountants, a dentist, and even a cake expert. Many buildings with similar, curved facades have since been demolished thus making King George Chambers a rare and endangered example of a building type that once dotted the Central Business District (CBD).

History

This building was erected in 1927 for the Murphy family. Its construction reflects the modernisation of buildings in the George Street retail precinct and a major road improvement project instigated by the Brisbane City Council.

The opening of Brisbane's first railway station in Roma Street in 1873 was the catalyst for George Street's development into an important shopping precinct. The building of Brisbane's Supreme Court in 1879 effectively cut George Street into two components. Subsequent government building programs turned the eastern end of George Street into a government precinct. Pedestrian and road traffic to and from Roma Street Station and its goods yard attracted businesses to the other section of George Street so that "George Street west of Ann Street became a legitimate shopping strip in its own right".¹

The economic boom of the 1880s spurred projects such as the erection of the Grosvenor Hotel in 1881-82 at the Ann Street corner and the Transcontinental Hotel in 1883-84 near the intersection of George and Roma Streets. Between these two hotels, a number of modest two-storey commercial buildings were erected for various retail businesses. The relocation of the Brisbane Municipal Markets from Market Street to Roma Street in 1884 and the opening, in 1888, of a branch of the Royal Bank of Queensland branch at the Herschel (then spelt Herschell) Street corner brought further trade to the George Street precinct. A horse drawn tram service to ferry passengers from Roma Street Station to the Queen Street retail precinct was introduced in 1885 and was replaced in 1897 by an electric tram service. From 1901, retailers McDonnell & East, which operated from a succession of George Street buildings, began to be a major presence in this retail precinct.

Peter Murphy was a major influence in the development of the George Street shopping precinct. Murphy, an Irish Catholic migrant, arrived in Brisbane in 1871. By 1879 he had become the licensee of the Burgundy Hotel in Roma Street. Murphy acquired land near the corner of George and Roma Streets where he erected the Transcontinental Hotel in 1884. He financed the creation of the McDonnell & East store in George Street in 1901 and was one of that company's founding managing directors. In 1906, he relinquished management of the Transcontinental Hotel but retained ownership of that property. From 1904-22, he was a Member of the Legislative Council. Murphy remained a shrewd businessman and while he and his family had many investments both in Townsville and across Brisbane, their business interests were centred on the George Street retail

precinct. Peter Murphy purchased the 458-460 Roma Street site in July 1907. At that time, it was part of a larger property that contained a two-storey nineteenth century building that extended from the Transcontinental Hotel to the Mackerston Street corner. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, Murphy leased the old building to a variety of small businesses. During this period, the George Street retail precinct experienced a slow but steady redevelopment. In 1909, a new drama theatre, the Lyceum Hall (now the Dendy Cinema) opened near the Grosvenor Hotel. McDonnell & East built a new warehouse/store at the Tank Street corner during 1911-13. In 1914, the Martin Building with its new shops and offices was constructed at the corner of Mackerston and Roma Streets, next to the 458-460 Roma Street site. Brisbane's second BAFS dispensary was erected on the northeast corner of George and Turbot Street in 1916. The same year, surgical instrument makers Jenyns Patent Corsets erected their offices next door at 327 George Street.

After the First World War, Murphy again looked at modernising his remaining property holdings in the George Street precinct. By the 1920s, Murphy was planning to remodel the Transcontinental Hotel and erect new shops on the surrounding block which, by that decade, was viewed as having "some of the oldest buildings in the city".² This was a period of economic prosperity that encouraged a building boom within the CBD. As a result, a number of projects were proposed for the modernisation of the George Street shopping precinct. Murphy was unable to complete his part in these projects as he died on 24 February 1925.

Nonetheless, the rejuvenation of the George Street shopping precinct continued. A new three-storey department store was constructed for McDonnell & East during 1925-28 and this building dominated the precinct for the next 70 years. Plans for the precinct's further amelioration were reported in Brisbane's media on 27 April 1926. The Daily Mail announced that "extensive improvements are contemplated to several of the properties which form the bend from Roma street into George street" with "a proposal to rebuild practically the whole of the block".³ One of the proposed rebuilding programs was the erection of modern shops (King George Chambers) next to the Transcontinental Hotel. During 1926, the Duncalfe & Co Building at 338 George Street was given a new façade. In May 1926, it was reported that the George Street precinct modernisation program might include the erection of a new Roma Street Station within a decade. It was also noted that the new King George Chambers was to be erected in a block "regarded as one of the most flourishing business sections of the area just outside the city proper or the Valley".⁴

King George Chambers was erected, at the cost of ?10,400, for the trustees of Peter Murphy's estate, his two sons Kevin and Peter Murphy and son-in-law Austin Lennon. Plans for this and the other new buildings planned for this section of George Street were delayed due to the legal requirements of honouring the leases held on the existing older buildings in the block. This delay enabled alterations to be made to the design plans for King George Chambers. In April 1926 it was proposed as a three-storey building containing six shops, with foundations strong enough to allow further storeys to be added later. By the time that tenders had closed on 9 October 1926, the building was reduced to five shops or offices and, when completed in 1927, it was just two-storeys with a basement. The building was named after King George V, who reigned from 1910 to 1936.

The architectural firm of Hennessey, Hennessey, Keesing & Co designed King George Chambers to a brief that required a building "of the very latest design".⁵ H. Cheatham was the builder. Hennessey, Hennessey, Keesing & Co was a Sydney firm of architects that had an office in Brisbane run by architect John Patrick Donoghue. Donoghue would thus have overseen the King George Chambers project during 1926-27. Hennessey & Hennessey had been operating in Brisbane since 1916 and it maintained a Brisbane office until 1967 when Martin Conrad took over its operations in the city.

The design of King George Chambers was influenced by the alignment of the intersection of George and Roma Streets. The nineteenth century building that had previously occupied the 154-158 Roma Street site had a

façade that mirrored the alignment where George and Roma Streets met. In June 1926, however, the recently formed Brisbane City Council proposed to take advantage of the planned erection of King George Chambers to effect a new alignment on the bend at the George and Roma Street junction. The Council was “of the opinion that the time is now opportune to effect a very necessary improvement at this point by the setting back of the buildings on a new alignment”.⁶ The realignment of the intersection was the start of a major Council project involving the reconstruction of George and Roma Streets as far as Countess Street.

The Council resumed 6.3 perches from the frontage of the 154-158 Roma Street site on 17 July 1926. This caused Hennessey, Hennessey, Keesing & Co to further amend their design of King George Chambers so that the new building was set back further onto the block. In 1927, the Trustees for Peter Murphy’s estate were offered £750 by the Council “as compensation for land taken, and for alterations to building plan”.⁷ As a result of the land resumptions, King George Chambers was given a recessed, curved façade that provided it with a powerful streetscape presence. The number of Brisbane buildings with curved facades have decreased over the years due to the demolition of buildings such as Atcherley House and the Centenary Building (both at Petrie Bight). In 1994, heritage architect Michael Kennedy, in writing about King George Chambers’ curved façade, noted that “it is rare, and its currency has been increased” due to the loss of other, similar buildings.⁸

The first tenants to occupy the ground floor shops and second floor offices of King George Chambers were: grocers Queensland Cash & Carry, dentist G. Somerville, commercial agent Bert Grant, commercial agents Sinclair & Coy, fruiterers Maromattes Brothers, cake expert G. E. Adams and chemist Wilkinson (Northern) Ltd. These small businesses were typical of the commercial operations that were spread throughout the George Street shopping precinct. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, tenancies declined dramatically so that, by 1932, only Queensland Cash & Carry and Maromattes Brothers remained at King George Chambers. By 1938, conditions had improved so that the building had six tenants: a grocer, a fruiterer, a pastrycook, an accountant, a commercial agent and artist Percy Hatton. Located directly across from Roma Street Railway Station, the shops and offices in King George Chambers were likely to be the first or last retail stop for many intrastate rail passengers. These last-stop shops included the Economic Watchmakers, the Spotted Dog Tea Rooms, the Felix Casket Agency, Henderson’s Dance Academy John Black Hairdressers and Dragona’s newsagents.

Brisbane City Council approved alterations to the building in 1957, 1958, 1961 and 1963. As with most commercial premises within the Central Business District (CBD), King George Chambers has undergone many internal changes over the years to accommodate the requirements of different tenants. This is particularly the case with the ground floors of CBD buildings but King George Chambers retains some original ground floor features. These include the decorative geometric-patterned pavement of the entrance hallway, doors leading to the toilets and the storage room under the stairs, stairwell and railings and decorated upper section of one shop window. It also retains its stairs leading to the upper floor offices. Most of these offices appear to be intact.

In 1982, King George Chambers was identified as a building of heritage significance in the first-ever heritage survey of the CBD. In 1984, it was included in a Roma Street heritage precinct comprising the Transcontinental Hotel, King George Chambers and Martin Chambers (since demolished) that was proposed by the National Trust of Queensland. A high rise development was proposed for the site in the early 1990s, but did not proceed.

Description

The ground floor of this two-storey with basement polychrome brick building comprises five shops while the first floor accommodates offices.

The building, with its vestigial pediment, use of polychrome bricks and simplified architectural components, as well as curved building's facade (mirroring its alignment with the George and Roma Street intersection), presents a unique local design with an eclectic stylistic approach incorporating some elements of the Inter-War Free Classical style.

The facade features imbedded piers with a decorative diamond-shaped lighter brick pattern, vertical sash windows with brickwork decoration above each bay of windows on the upper storey. A parapet with pediment and nameplate tops the facade. A suspended awning shelters the footpath.

King George Chambers appears in fairly original condition externally. Although it has undergone some internal changes over the years to accommodate the requirements of different tenants, it retains a number of original features including the decorative geometric-patterned floor of the entrance hallway, the doors leading to the toilets and the storage room under the stairs, the stairwell and railings as well as the upper section of one shop window. It also retains its stairs leading to the upper floor offices; which also appear to be mostly intact.

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 part of a project designed in the 1920s to modernise upper George Street in order to enhance its position as one of Brisbane's major shopping precincts.

Rarity

CRITERION B

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

as a rare surviving example in Brisbane of a commercial building with a curved façade.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

for its curved façade featuring polychrome brickwork in a geometric pattern.

References

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5. *The Daily Mail*, 27 April 1926, n. p.
6. Brisbane City Council, Works Committee Minutes of Meeting, 15 June 1926
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 23. *Queensland Post Office Directories*, 1868-1949
 24. Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Queensland), *Buildings of Queensland*, Brisbane, Jacaranda Press, 1959
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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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