



Heritage Citation



McGeehin & Co Building (former)

Key details

Addresses

At 198 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006

Type of place	Shop/s
Period	Federation 1890-1914
Style	Free Style
Lot plan	L3_RP9541; L2_RP9541; L1_RP9541
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000 Date of Citation — September 2010
Construction	Walls: Masonry - Render
People/associations	John Watson (Occupant)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (E) Aesthetic; (H) Historical association

The McGeehin & Co building was constructed in approximately 1902 for John Watson, a former M.L.A. who represented the Valley Ward. Construction of the building reflected the growing importance of the Valley as a commercial hub, and the increasing trend of ornate retail buildings in the Valley, built for investors and leased to small businesses. Similarly decorative buildings were soon constructed on both sides of the building. The building was erected on the original site of the first Roman Catholic Church and School in the Valley, demonstrating the importance of the site from the early settlement of the Valley.

History

The McGeehin & Co building is located on the original site of the Fortitude Valley Roman Catholic Church and School, built in the late 1850s. The Valley had been settled by European immigrants in the late 1840s and the street, named Wickham after magistrate and surveyor Captain Wickham, was in existence as early as 1855, although it was only a dirt track which meandered through a series of private properties and terminated in a swamp. Churches and hotels appeared early in the development of the Valley, and along with small dwellings, the first buildings on Wickham Street included the Catholic Church and the adjacent Prince Consort Hotel, established around 1862. The church, a small wooden building with an attached schoolhouse, was the second Catholic Church and one of only fourteen churches in the Moreton Bay settlement by 1859. The population of Fortitude Valley increased over the ensuing two decades and although it was merely a small town in comparison with the central business district, the Catholic congregation outgrew the Wickham Street building. A new Cathedral designed by diocesan architect Andrea Stombuco was constructed in Morgan Street, near Ann Street. The new building was consecrated in December 1882 and the congregation removed there, while the school was continued by the Sisters of Mercy until 1887, when it moved from the 'dilapidated buildings' on busy Wickham Street to a new school house in Ivory Street. The new building, St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, is listed on the Queensland Heritage Register [600210]. The old church remained hidden but intact on the Wickham Street site until 1911, when work undertaken for the construction of new premises revealed the old wooden chapel.

With a large new church nearly ready for its parishioners, the Wickham Street land was offered for sale in September 1881. It passed through the hands of the church's clergy before the property of one rood and 21 perches was sold to contract builder and politician John Watson in 1889.

Scottish-born Watson was a well-known figure in nineteenth and early twentieth century Brisbane. He had arrived in Queensland with his wife Eliza in 1864 and settled near the river on what is now Oxford St in Bulimba. By 1866 he had acquired a license for the Bulimba Ferry Hotel (later the Bulimba Hotel) and was the lessee of the Bulimba ferry. He was a man of many trades, having worked in the shipping and building industries, constructed the Victoria Bridge (1888-9) and several wharves and jetties around Brisbane, provided postal services for Breakfast Creek and Bulimba and served in various political functions, including chairman of the Balmoral and Bulimba Boards and a Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Valley Ward. Watson was politically conservative and a protectionist, claiming at a political meeting that he always bought from the Valley. On the other hand, he was not one to shy away from controversy and publicity: he was the head of the Anti-Chinese League, had been chairman of the Balmoral Board when it was involved in financial scandals, drove the Bulimba steam punt into the oncoming ship Wyandra, and was duped out of £100 on a trip to London in 1909. He also felt strongly that the Brisbane River should be kept clean, protesting the dumping of sewage into the river. Watson was married three times and died in 1912 at his Bulimba residence.

Watson's connections with the Valley were significant. As its representative from 1888-1896, he was credited with having been instrumental in bringing the railway to the Valley. Watson had been vocal about the location of tramlines in the Valley and was among the deputation of ratepayers who approached the Mayor in 1903 about the possibility of commencing markets in the Valley. As a contractor he had constructed the belfry for the new Valley Catholic Church in 1886. He purchased multiple properties along Wickham Street from 1882 and in 1886 commissioned Andrea Stombuco to design two two-storey brick shops on the premises, now the heritage listed as Muller Brothers' Buildings. Watson's second wife Elizabeth Gillies was the daughter of a Brunswick Street draper and his father-in-law, John, managed the lease of the Wickham Street properties throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

The exact date of the construction of this building is unknown, although it was almost certainly between 1898, when the property was classified as vacant land, and 1905, when the Brisbane Courier provided a history of the old Wickham Street church and added that:

*[t]he land in question is no longer devoted to religious purposes, for the hand of commerce had been laid upon it, and it is now occupied by business premises owned by Mr John Watson.*¹

The buildings were probably constructed around 1902, coinciding with a flux of development on Wickham Street. Transportation to the Valley had swept away the isolation of the township, and the Valley had emerged as a prime shopping and industrial destination. Investors began to take advantage of the circumstances, with those lucky enough to own land in the street constructing newer, larger buildings on their sites to attract tenants and customers. In addition, many of the timber buildings that had survived the development boom of the 1880s were demolished in the 1900s and replaced by more substantial masonry buildings, as required for a First Class building area.

From 1902, the building was occupied by grocers McGeehin & Co and an oyster saloon. McGeehin was later joined by Tolman, who lived in the residential portion upstairs. The buildings, described after a fire in 1910 (which damaged only goods within the shop), were three two-storey shops with residential quarters upstairs, similar to the Muller Brothers building. It remained a grocery store and oyster bar well into the 1920s. A photograph of this building taken in 1913 from the McWhirters building, looking down Wickham Street, shows the

distinctive facades of Watson's buildings.

Following the death of John Watson in 1912, the property and the Muller building next door were placed in trust. The remarriage of Watson's wife Christina prevented her from inheriting, so the five remaining beneficiaries intended to divide the properties so that each owned one of the shops on Wickham Street. The Council was reluctant to subdivide properties which were so small (each had a frontage to Wickham Street of less than twenty feet), but Watson's beneficiaries successfully appealed the Council's decision and the properties were subdivided in 1924. Joseph Gillies Watson inherited shop 202, Isabella Margaret Dobson (nee Watson) shop 200 and William Francis Watson inherited shop 198, each parcel comprising around 8 perches of land. The properties also carried charges in favour of Mary Murray (another of Watson's children, who had not inherited a property) and Christina Scott, Watson's widow.

Each new owner continued to lease the properties, particularly as cafes, restaurants and wine saloons, which became popular in the Valley in the 1930s and 1940s. The shop in the centre (200) was run as a wine saloon for close to forty years (c.1915–c.1954). Alterations to the shops fronts and awnings were undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as interior changes such as a toilet block added in 1955. The properties continue to be owned separately and are used for commercial and entertainment purposes.

Description

The building is two storeyed, of rendered masonry construction, and subdivided by pilasters into three adjacent tenancies. Above awning level, the central bay contains a large semi circular arched window subdivided into three pairs of double hang sashes, while the outer bays each contain three vertical openings separated by piers. Piers and pilasters have moulded capitals.

Directly above the top of the arch, a wide panel is contained within two sets of string courses, and is divided into six sections by the primary pilasters and secondary flat pilasters. Each section contains a moulded horizontal rectangular panel. A square recessed panel is contained between the top string course and a plain corbelled cornice. The pediment is divided into three sections by piers above the main pilasters, with the outer panels infilled with screen masonry with rectangular voids. The central panel is solid, surmounted by a solid triangular pediment. The central piers have ball cappings, while the pediment is topped by a fleur-de-lis ornament.

Alterations have occurred to the ground floor shopfronts, and the replacement of the original post supported awning with a suspended awning.

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 it reflects the growing importance of Fortitude Valley as a commercial centre in the early years of the twentieth century.

Rarity

CRITERION B

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

as an externally intact example of an early twentieth century Neo-Classical style commercial building.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

for its contribution to the streetscape as part of an extensive group of similarly scaled buildings of flamboyant design.

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

for its association with owner John Watson, a significant figure in nineteenth century Brisbane, for whom the building was constructed.

References

1. *The Brisbane Courier*, 29 April 1905 p12
2. Post Office Directories.
3. Titles Office Records
4. John Oxley Library Photograph Collection, Brisbane – Suburbs: Fortitude Valley
5. *The Brisbane Courier*

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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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