



Heritage Citation



Overell Building (former)

Key details

Addresses At 250 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006

Type of place Shop/s

Period	Federation 1890-1914
Style	Warehouse
Lot plan	L2_M333125; L5_RP9618; L6_RP9618; L1_RP9623; L1_RP42342
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000 Date of Citation — October 2011
Construction	Walls: Face brick
People/associations	W.J. Overell and Sons (Association)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (D) Representative; (E) Aesthetic; (H) Historical association

This substantial brick building was constructed in 1907 for well-established drapery firm, W.J. Overell and Sons. William Overell first established his business in 1883 on the corner of Ann and Warner Streets before relocating to Brunswick Street in 1900. When this store opened in 1907, it only sold men's clothing, while the Brunswick Street store sold women's clothing and accessories. The building was originally constructed with only three storeys, with the upper three floors added in 1927. W.J. Overell and Sons operated a very successful family business in Brisbane from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and also established branches in other parts of Queensland. In 1956, the company and the building was purchased by large retailer Waltons.

History

The famous Overell department store was established in Brisbane in 1883 as a small drapery store in Fortitude Valley. Moving to Brisbane from Tasmania, William James Overell had opened the store with Thomas White in premises on the corner of Ann and Warner Streets which had been run as a drapery store since the mid-1860s. The partners bought a 15 perch (379.4m²) block of land fronting Brunswick Street in 1886, but did not occupy the site initially, instead leasing it to tenants. White left the business in 1889, transferring his share of the Brunswick Street site to Overell. Overell renamed the business 'Overell' and expanded to additional premises in Queen Street and other stores around southern Queensland. He adopted the motto 'While we live we grow' for the store, a statement that proved true over the following decades.

As Overell was branching out, other retailers were looking into the Valley for premises. Thomas Beirne and James McWhirter both started their drapery businesses in the centre of the Valley in the 1890s, with Foy and Gibson following, and the long-established drapers Stewart and Hemmant had a clothing factory constructed on McLachlan Street. The drapers' stores and their competitive prices played a large role in making the Valley a vital commercial and industrial centre. By the turn of the twentieth century, helped by improvements to public transport and roads, the Valley had become a favourite shopping destination for Brisbane residents.

With the growing commercial importance of the Valley, Overell bought 28.83 perches of land (729.2m²) near the corner of Brunswick and Wickham Streets from the Bank of New South Wales in 1899. The site had a connection with the Brunswick Street property that Overell already owned, though they did not share a street front, giving the block an odd shape. An 'exceedingly handsome building' was designed by Addison and Corrie for the site and the firm relocated there in July 1900. The new premises caught fire and burned to the ground in February 1904,

causing the death of one man, knocking out power to the trams and destroying the Bank of New South Wales premises next door.

After a dispute with Addison and Corrie, Overell engaged architects Eaton and Bates to design a replacement building. At that time the architectural firm was new to Brisbane, having shifted their Rockhampton practice to Brisbane in 1902, but had promptly designed impressive buildings, including St Bridgid's Convent (1903) [QHR 601078], Bunburra, Clayfield (1902) and Cremorne, Hamilton (1905) [QHR 600218]. Eaton and Bates also designed Swift's Building, almost diagonally opposite Overell's on the Valley corner, as well as the rebuilt Bank of New South Wales building on the corner (no longer extant).

The new three-storey brick building was featured in Brisbane's newspapers on its opening on 1 December 1904. 'It is a different building which has arisen from the ashes,' wrote the Telegraph, 'not perhaps in contour, but there is more light and ventilation, larger departments, finer windows, and generally more convenience from a public point of view.'¹ The fire was credited with the development of the company's trademark, the Phoenix, with the company's new building almost literally rising from the ashes. The building had three entrances, with shopping on the ground level, furniture and delivery departments in the basement, and a workshop on the upper floor, where Overell's 'Phoenix' shirts were made. Eight large display windows provided views of Overell's wares, and a phoenix was displayed on one of three coloured glass windows at the back of the building. Pressed metal ceilings, wide staircases, suites and lunchrooms for the workers and electric lighting were all installed.

Further growth followed the opening of the new building. WJ Overell and Sons was registered as a limited liability company in August 1905, with £30,000 in capital. Factories were established in Spring Hill and South Brisbane. In May 1906 architect Claude Chambers called for tenders for additions and alterations to Overell's Brunswick Street property. In July, William Overell purchased a further 11.53 perches of land (291.63m²) from the Bank of New South Wales, fronting Wickham Street and with a lane (now called Overells Lane) at the side. Overell's extension plans were detailed in the Brisbane Courier in August, which noted that the new premises would be fitted with pneumatic cash carrying tubes and fire sprinklers. Plans were approved for brick and iron additions to the Overell premises, this time on Wickham Street, in September, and construction was underway by October. With the Bank of New South Wales still occupying the Wickham and Brunswick Street corner, Overell was unable to dominate the Valley Corner, but the back of the Wickham Street building was connected to the Brunswick Street shops, creating an uninterrupted shopping arcade for customers.

No architect was listed in the register of new buildings in September 1906, though Claude Chambers' advertisements for tenders suggest that he was engaged to design the building. Chambers' solo practice was one of the largest in Brisbane, resulting in commercial designs including Finney and Isles' 'Big Block' Building [QHR 600142] (1908-10) and Perry House on the corner of Elizabeth and Albert Streets [QHR 600103] (1910-13). He also appears to have known William Overell personally, as both were active members of the Booroodabin Bowling Club in the early 1900s.

In March 1907 Overell held a sale to celebrate the opening of the new Wickham Street building. A kiosk provided free tea and biscuits to shoppers. The expansion enabled Overell to divide the store into departments, with the Wickham Street side devoted to male clothing while the Brunswick Street building sold women's apparel and accessories. By 1910, Overell's comprised twenty departments in the Valley store, and the company had branches in Charleville, Laidley and Pittsworth.

Further renovations were undertaken on Overell's buildings in 1911. An extra storey was added to the Wickham Street frontage, bringing it to the height of the Brunswick Street shops, while the Brunswick Street store was extended at the back. Galleries were constructed inside the building, to be used as offices and for toy displays. The designer of these additions was Walter Carey Voller, a Sydney-born architect who had trained with F.D.G. Stanley and practised in Brisbane since 1891. Voller was a fellow in the Queensland Institute of Architects and had served as its president and vice-president by the time he was commissioned for Overell's building. Voller's

design was approved in late November, although the extensions were partially completed and opened in December 1911, just in time for Christmas.

William Overell died in 1917 and his properties were transferred to the company, Overells Limited. William Overell, the first of the famous Valley drapers-turned-department store owners, had played a significant role in the development of the Valley as a commercial hub. Along with Beirne and McWhirter, the appeal of Overells' impressive store drew customers to the Valley, providing a market for smaller businesses and entertainment venues that sprang up in the Valley in the first half of the twentieth century. Overell's contribution to the business development of Brisbane was acknowledged with the observation that his death caused 'a blank in Brisbane business circles'.²

Management of the company passed to Overell's eldest sons, Arthur and William, who continued the firm along the same expansionary lines. By 1923, Overells' was a forty-year old business and had 'the honour of being the oldest established firm in Fortitude Valley'.³ The company marked the occasion with the purchase of another block of land on Brunswick Street, a 15.1 perch (381.92m²) allotment adjoining the Overell store. The company extended their building along Brunswick Street and updated windows for the Wickham Street frontage, in accordance with designs by architectural firm Atkinson and Conrad.

Three storeys were added to the Wickham Street building in 1926-7. The company obtained a mortgage from the National Mutual Association in February 1926 and plans were approved in June. The Council also granted permission for the architects to add a chiming clock on the front of the Wickham Street premises, though if installed, is no longer extant. Atkinson and Conrad were again engaged to design the new storeys, which were built by Blair Cunningham. The additions cost £30,000 and were finished and opened in September 1927. The building featured rest-rooms for staff and customers and sick-rooms, and the additional storeys made it one of the tallest buildings in the Valley.

The success of Overell's continued well into the 1930s and 1940s. From the original drapery goods, the company branched into selling wireless radios, furniture, household goods, footwear, fancy goods including jewellery, toys, confectionary and self-service groceries. There was also a mail-order service, a radio club, an employee benefit society, a war bonds group, fashion parades, child care centre for shoppers, employee sports clubs, charity balls, a social theatre and tea rooms. Entries in Overell's dressmaking competition were displayed in the Wickham Street island window. The company even applied to run a movie theatre in the basement but permission to do so was refused.

Several alterations were undertaken on the Brunswick Street building front in the 1950s, converting it to a masonry facade. In 1953 Overell's was replaced by Sydney department store Walton-Sears, one of four branches opened in November 1953 as the company expanded into Queensland. Title passed to Waltons in 1956, and the company made significant internal alterations in 1960, 1962, 1967, 1973 and 1975. The Valley's popularity as a shopping destination declined from the 1960s onwards, and the department store closed in the 1980s.

Description

The building is six storey brick construction with prominent cornices at the third floor level and to the parapet. The corner has a small truncation and an awning is suspended to the Wickham Street elevation. Windows to the first and second floors have segmented arch heads and are grouped horizontally into pairs between brick pilasters.

The third floor windows are flat headed and are grouped with the fourth floor windows into vertical semi circular headed recesses with rendered keystones. The fifth floor windows are semi circular headed with rendered springing points, grouped as two or three openings into recessed rectangular panels.

External changes have occurred to the awning and shopfronts, and intrusion of an unsympathetic vertical sign.

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 an example of the importance of the growth and expansion of Fortitude Valley as a retail business centre in the 1910s and 1920s.

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 an early twentieth century department store.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

as an imposing building with effective use of arched fenestration and cornice detailing.

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 store built for, and owned by W.J. Overell and Sons, who operated one of the earliest, largest and most successful family-owned retail businesses in Brisbane.

Supporting images



Fire damaged Overell's Department Store in Fortitude Valley, 1904 (JOL, SLQ, image number 9614)



WJ Overell & Sons Ltd, Brunswick Street (EJT Barton (ed), Jubilee history of Queensland: a record of political, industrial and social development from the landing of the first explorers to the close of 1909, Brisbane: Diddams, 1910). The appearance of a bend in the building is likely a photographic illusion, as the building was not on a corner site.

References

1. *Telegraph*, 2 December 1904 p9
2. *The Brisbane Courier*, 17 March 1917, page 9
3. *The Brisbane Courier*, 24 September 1923, page 16
4. Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland, 1927
5. Brisbane City Council archives, Brisbane images and building registers
6. Brisbane City Council, Properties on the Web, Building Cards
7. Brisbane City Council aerial photographs, 1946, 2012
8. Brisbane City Council Heritage Unit Citation May 1991
9. EJT Barton (ed), *Jubilee History of Queensland*, Brisbane, H.J. Diddams & Co, 1910
10. Fortitude Valley Centenary Committee, *Fortitude Valley Centenary 1948-1949*,
11. Mahlstedt's City of Brisbane Detail Fire Survey (Map No 33), 1951
12. National Library of Australia, Trove newspapers, *Brisbane Courier*, *Courier Mail*, *Truth*, *Telegraph*, *The Week*
13. Queensland Post Office Directories
14. Queensland Certificates of Title and other records
15. Queensland State Archives, Companies Index 1863-1959
16. State Library of Queensland, John Oxley Photo Collection 1913, 1921
17. Donald Watson and Judith McKay, *Queensland Architects of the Nineteenth Century*, South Brisbane: Queensland Museum, 1994

Copyright Brisbane City Council

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 2025)



Dedicated to a better Brisbane