



Coast Lines

A deceptively simple shell conceals a tactile beachside residence



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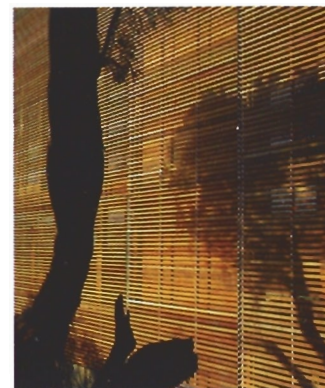
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Then & Now Council House

100 ar revisits a Perth icon, saved by popular demand and the efforts of a significant few.



Cover / Carter-Tucker house, Breamlea, Vic
Architect / Sean Godsell
Photography / Earl Carter



AU

Council House / Perth, Western Australia

Original architects / Jeffrey Howlett and Don Bailey / Howlett and Bailey

Council House revisited then & now

Compiled by Helen Kaiser

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The West Australian and the City of Perth

● In the summer 1997 issue of *ar*, we featured Howlett and Bailey's Council House in Perth. An important part of our post-war architectural heritage, the 1962 Council House demonstrated a prodigious attention to detail, manifest both in the curtain wall façade and in the complete interior designed by the architects. However, the future of the building had been unclear for some time, with the Court Government determined to see the demolition of the building to make way for a 'heritage precinct'.

Reaction against the proposed demolition was strong, with architects, academics, students, the RAIA and community groups opposing the demolition.

A newly elected City Council finally secured the future of Council House after revised cost estimates demonstrated the viability of a refurbishment compared to the costs required to demolish the building and occupy new premises.

The successful fight to preserve the building indicates a new development in the understanding of an Australian urbanism and in the assessment of a building's heritage value. Council House can now continue to tell its story of the West's optimism and prosperity during the years of the nickel boom and Empire Games.

It is perhaps unfortunate however, that in the end, it took a demonstration of 'financial viability' to sway the debate. I would hope that a maturity in our understanding of 'heritage' will one day see the retention of respected works from this era for purely cultural reasons, despite the economic arguments that will surely be waged against them.

Gerard Reinmuth is a Sydney-based architect and partner of Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth *terroir*.





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Bill Warnock
Playwright, critic and CityVision
convenor

When the Premier of Western Australia, Richard Court, did CityVision the courtesy of showing us a preview of his plans for the city: 'Perth, a City for People', we were alarmed that he believed Council House should be demolished. In his view, a modern building did not fit into Perth's historic precinct.

CityVision called a public meeting to test public opinion at which strong support for the retention of Council House was expressed.

This support came from architects and various organisations such as A.I.U.S. (Australian Institute of Urban Studies), engineers, landscape architects, planners, historians and citizens, encouraging us to believe that setting up a defence committee might be justified.

With the participation of these various groups, CityVision formed the 'Save Council House Committee'. Ken Adam, CityVision's chairman took on the role as chair of the committee.

We began raising public concern by lobbying ministers and opposition members, and using the media to gain support. This was sustained for 18 months and involved debates, citizens' demonstrations, public displays and petitions to Parliament. The RAlA played a key role. Committee meetings were held in the Institute's offices. Various architects were also involved.

Geoffrey London, Professor of Architecture at the University of Western Australia, and his staff and students were active contributors to the campaign. The students led a widely publicised demonstration in front of the condemned building. The Commissioners appointed to run the City gave out alarming estimates of the cost of refurbishing the building – in excess of \$42m. (Ken Adam estimated the true cost and came in with a figure of about half that, which proved to be accurate and was instrumental in saving the building.) The Committee was able to demonstrate that rate-payers would save a great deal of money by

refurbishing Council House, rather than paying commercial rates. The delay caused by asbestos removal bought invaluable time for the Save Council House Committee to successfully inform public opinion. The Government's own polling showed that our information campaign had worked, and that the majority of citizens were now against demolishing the building. Fortunately, the Commissioners' term of office ran out before the asbestos could be removed, and the building demolished. The newly elected Council of the City of Perth was then faced with the ultimate decision; whether to stay in rented premises or to refurbish Council House. The Council itself was divided on the matter. They took expert submissions. The Save Council House Committee's argument held and, in a subsequent historic split vote, the Council agreed to refurbish the building and return at last to their historic and independent headquarters.

At the official opening of the refurbished Council House on

December 4, 1999, the Council paid tribute to CityVision's efforts in informing the Council of the various arguments for retaining the building, and in persuading public opinion that the building was an important part of Perth's built heritage.

Geoffrey London
Dean of the School of Architecture
University of Western Australia

From 1963 until December 1993, Council House in Perth accommodated the Perth City Council administrative offices, the Mayoral and reception suites, the Council Chamber, the Council Library, and numerous other Council facilities of a less grand nature. Howlett and Bailey's building was the result of a national architectural competition, which drew 61 submissions. Perth's newest example of civic architecture was acknowledged as a fine, optimistic, and thoroughly modern building, representative of the aspirations of the growing city. Its completion coincided with the time of the Empire Games, when Perth hit



international centre-stage for the first time. Writing in the local journal, *The Architect*, the astute columnist Caliban described Council House as '... very sharp, very sharp indeed. If it had feet it would undoubtedly wear Italian pointeds.' At the time of its completion there was a widespread, almost natural, assumption that the new would triumph over the old, that the modern city would take precedence over the colonial city. Council House as it has stood since 1963 is an incomplete version of a much grander vision of a modern civic centre for the city of Perth. It was conceived with its concert halls, the Public Suite, to the south, accessible from a proposed ceremonial drive and was, in the minds of many, to stand proudly as an ensemble in modern isolation in the Stirling Gardens, which was to be cleared of its colonial remnants. That this never occurred marks, with other factors, a loss of faith in the new. The worm has turned to the extent that, in the early 1990s Council

House was earmarked for demolition by the State Government and its consultants, with the tenacious colonial buildings proposed to remain in a newly refurbished 'Heritage Precinct' as part of Premier Richard Court's vision for Perth. While they did acknowledge that Council House has architectural merit, they argued that it should go because it did not 'fit' within a 'heritage precinct'. This view suggested that the saved past is more worthy than the present and that heritage is something that we salvage rather than create. Is heritage to be dated only prior to some privileged year? Inevitably when such a past is reflected upon it is idealised and is, more often than not, in the words of the British critic, Patrick Wright, '...the historicised image of the establishment'. Fortunately, the future of Council House was secured by the Perth City Council, recognising both the quality and the economic viability of the building and they elected to have the building refurbished for occupation by

themselves and some fortunate others.

Ken Adam

Architect, urban designer & planning consultant

CityVision & Save Council House committee Chairman

I'm sure that Council House would not have been saved if Bill Warnock and I had not firmly decided that it should be! Of course it takes more than the determination of two people, but the story, told elsewhere by Bill, well illustrates Margaret Mead's dictum: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world."

The fate of Council House seemed sealed when, against all professional heritage advice, the City commissioners resolved in June 1994 that the Council "agrees to the demolition of the Council House building". Why 'agrees'? With whom? With the Premier, actually. Council House, icon modernist building, simply didn't fit with his notion of a heritage precinct comprising mainly buildings of the Colonial era. CityVision initiated the campaign to save Council House and the committee advanced six major reasons for keeping the building. Firstly, it is an acclaimed heritage building: on the Register of the National Estate, listed by the National Trust and recommended by the Heritage Council of WA for inclusion on the State Register. Secondly, it is an architectural masterwork: winner of a national competition, an eloquent and rich bearer of the ideas of its time, counted by Jennifer Taylor among the 24 milestone buildings of the post WWII period in Australia. Thirdly, it is unique in its total integrity of design: every element, from structure to furnishings to artworks, was designed as part of a totality,

and most of this remains. Council House adds variety and vitality to the Heritage Precinct. It is a valuable community asset, both financially and socially. And, finally, community opinion, as measured by talkback radio, letters to the newspapers, a newspaper poll, comments recorded at public exhibition and submissions to the government, ran strongly in favour of keeping Council House, especially later in the campaign. This was despite a well-resourced counter-campaign by the commissioners. Against this case there were three main arguments advanced by the demolition brigade. The first, and only credible, argument was that, while acknowledging Council House's intrinsic architectural and heritage merits, it was nevertheless an intrusive element in an essentially unified architectural setting. This 'right building, wrong place' argument is defensible in urban design terms. It has its own irony too: a hallmark of modernist architecture has been supreme indifference to the nuances of context. The second argument was that it would not be feasible to restore the heritage qualities of the building. The third was that the financial cost – \$42m advanced as the estimate – would be unacceptable. In the end, the sheer intrinsic qualities of Council House, both as a building and as an important part of our heritage, held sway over the first argument. The second and third arguments were effectively demolished at a briefing of the newly elected Council in June 1995, when the Campaign Committee, backed by independent consultants, showed that it was feasible to restore the building in accordance with the highest standards and at a cost closer to \$23m than the original estimation.



The financial argument may, in the end, have won the day. Two years later the building had been completely restored and refurbished, at a cost of \$25m.

The formal re-opening of Council House in December 1999 offered a final touch of irony – the Premier and Lord Mayor, officiating, had both been opposed to keeping the building. Such is the politics of the city.

Gary Giles

Senior Interior Designer

Cox Howlett + Bailey Woodland, WA

Some say there are not enough examples of quality interior architecture to experience. Whatever period, historical, contemporary or in-between, we must appreciate and protect quality design.

All too often, 1960s and 70s buildings are out of favour and under threat. Design from 30 to 40 years ago can be considered too recent or simply unfashionable to protect in certain circles.

A passion for architecture is

fundamental to my interest in Council House. It is a rare building in which design has been intensely considered throughout.

In 1993, I carried out a comprehensive 'Needs Analysis' study for the architectural practice Forbes & Fitzhardinge Woodland to assist in the selection of a city building to facilitate the Council's move into temporary accommodation. The purpose for the relocation was to enable the removal of asbestos fire-rating treatment to the building's early 1960s structure.

For obvious health reasons, it had become undesirable to access the false ceiling space for reticulating services cabling. By this time the amount of surface-mounted ducting and conduit for cables had become an impossible filigree spider webbing below ceilings, across floors, and surface-attached to walls.

The building in this sorry state made an easy target for those who did not have a clear understanding of, and passion for, its enduring qualities.

Council relocated out of the building

in January 1994, and didn't return until the refurbishment had been completed in early 1999.

The five, intervening years were a hotbed of intrigue. My involvement included lengthy weekly early morning 'Save Council House' Committee meetings, letters to the press, setting up and manning an exhibition, promotion of a petition, and protest marches along St George's Terrace (Perth's main business boulevard).

There are many reasons for my interest in the building. Mainly this included the concept of the full integration of architecture and interior design. Interior elements were all well considered. From full-height perimeter glass windows with strip lighting across the base, to the special partition and door systems, custom door handles, acoustic timber ceiling panels throughout, and custom-patterned carpet and curtains to the Civic levels. Most of the furniture was custom designed, including chairs, desks and storage.

The material use was often rich and colourful, emblematic of the optimistic nature of the times. Bright orange walls contrasted with deep blue wall vinyl in the cafeteria. Grey or orange double doors to the offices. It is interesting that the paint manufacturers actually called the colours H+B Red and H+B Blue (after Howlett + Bailey architects). Delicious textures along with stylish yet simple detailing made visiting the building a memorable experience.

The refurbishment brought about some major planning changes to update the building to current codes. The front entry no longer floats on a plinth, raised with recesses below the steps. This reinforcement of horizontal lines was a delightful quality. The disabled persons access may have been handled differently to maintain this quality, though most

would not notice the new, slightly ramped forecourt.

The main entry foyer area was initially off centre on plan – to the eastern side of the ground floor. In the 1970s a western foyer area was created, which divided it into two parts with a breezeway between. Admittedly, Perth being regarded in the top three windy cities in the world, this was often more than breezy! As the ground floor had become littered with enclosed rooms, returning it entirely to a public interface area is quite positive. Nevertheless, it is still not as the original configuration, which was much smaller.

Some of the materials saved include, the black glass mosaic ceilings to the ground floor foyer, white marble beam column treatment, mosaic finish to 'T'-shaped sunshade panels, as well as some timber desks, elegant black vinyl and timber lounge chairs, now located in councillors' offices.

Some of the materials lost include silk curtains to windows of the civic floors, designed and printed by artist and interior designer Helen Grey-Smith, numerous furniture items, many of the custom designed desks, credenzas, sideboards and chairs were sold at auction, and timber-panelled acoustic ceilings.

It is heartening to see Council House has been kept, refurbished and is still being used for the civic purpose as its initial brief. The quality of the refurbishment is generally acceptable. Some elements, which a designer may have preferred to keep or reinstate, are often dropped due to the budget constraints of local government. The building today does not have the 'joy' of detail, colour and texture of its hey day. Nevertheless, it still exists, and thereby reminds those of us who knew it well, that it's worth striving in current architecture to attain the design quality of a building such as Council House.