



# Rough Red

A brazen monolith rises from a Victorian vineyard



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Cover / Shadowlax Winery, Werribee, VIC  
Architects / Wood Marsh  
Photography / Tim Griffith

# Sydney's GPO then & now

GPO / 1 Martin Place, Sydney

Collated by Gerard Reilmuth

New photography by Tim Griffith

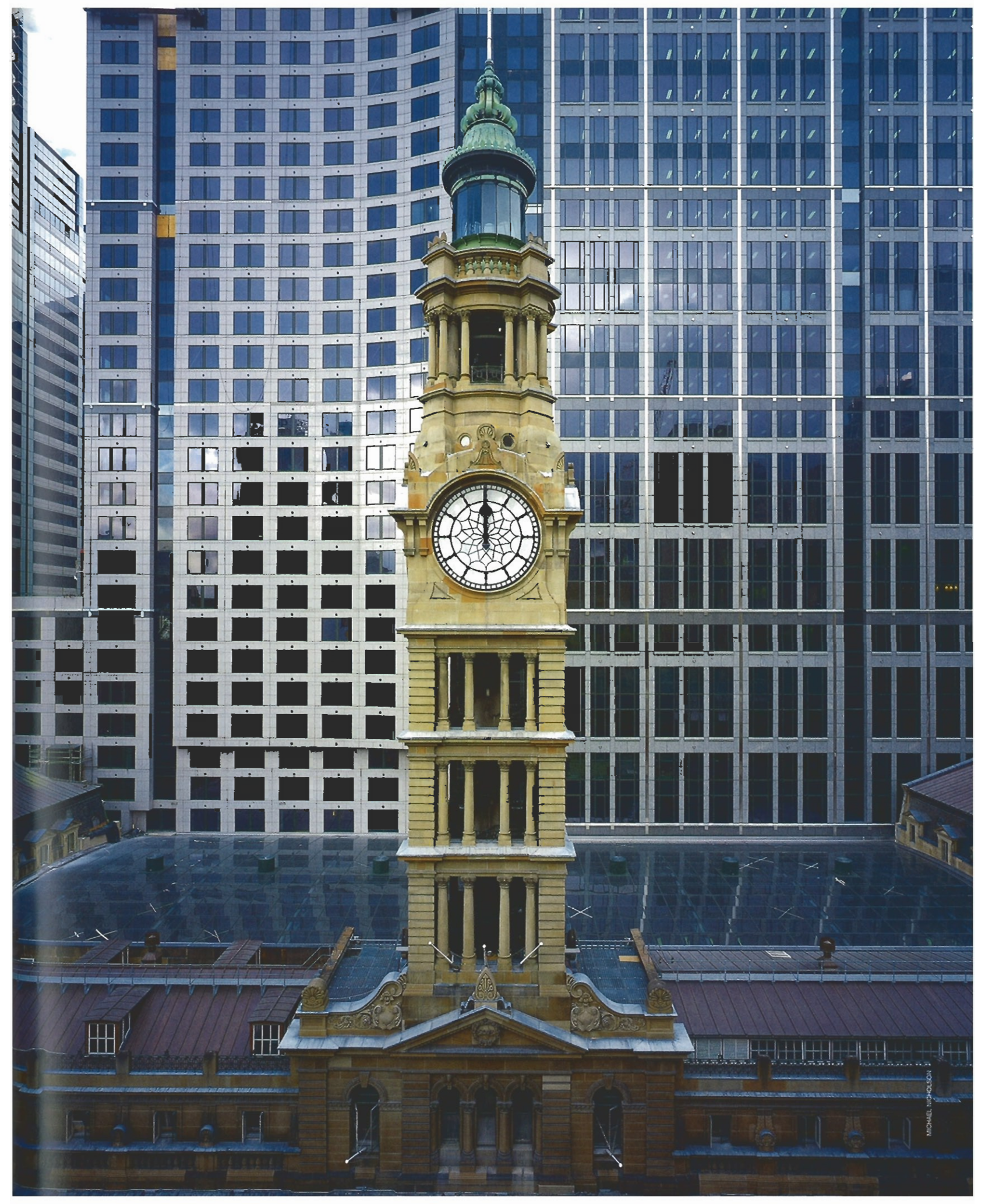
B & W Images courtesy of the NSW Government Architect's office



● **Sydney is a city without a major public square** – save for LePlasterier's notion of 'harbour as plaza' – and to which a sense of civic responsibility and a social contract has always occupied a very second place to commerce, speculation and self-interest. In this context, the General Post Office, situated adjacent to the Cenotaph in Martin Place, carries perhaps too great an expectation from those who wish for a more poetic, and symbolic, structure to the city.

The redevelopment of what is a 'sacred site' for some was always going to be contentious for reasons far beyond issues of architectural strategy and language that might normally dominate a critique of the work. Here, the debate centres on the nature of our changing society, the privatisation of public assets, and the changing role of the great public spaces of our past. Certainly the new development is extremely 'successful', with throngs of suit-clad urban warriors with a suitably important disposition, mobile phones at the ready for any movement on the market, finding their way through the atrium from one salary review to another. However, the extremely corporatised nature of this once public space – I always expect to be ejected once security are tipped off that a member of the arts community has slipped through – does raise serious questions as to the character of these pseudo-public arenas funded by big business.

Chris Johnson and Peter Myers both suggest, from very different perspectives, that only the passage of time will tell. In the meantime, the situation may be best surmised by Peter Droege, for whom architecture never lies. Or, as I would put it, society gets the architecture it deserves.



**David Cole**

**Design Architect, The Buchan Group**

The design of No. 1 Martin Place is essentially an integration of the old Sydney GPO building with a new mixed-use development, constructed on the property (previously occupied by various Australia Post buildings of the 1920s through to the 1950s) located to the south of the GPO. The design responds directly to its civic context; at the same time, it has reinvigorated and, in part, redefined that context. It recognises from the outset the altered social dimension to contemporary Australia Post business. The key to the design has been the diverse mix of contemporary urban uses provided – hotel, offices, retail,

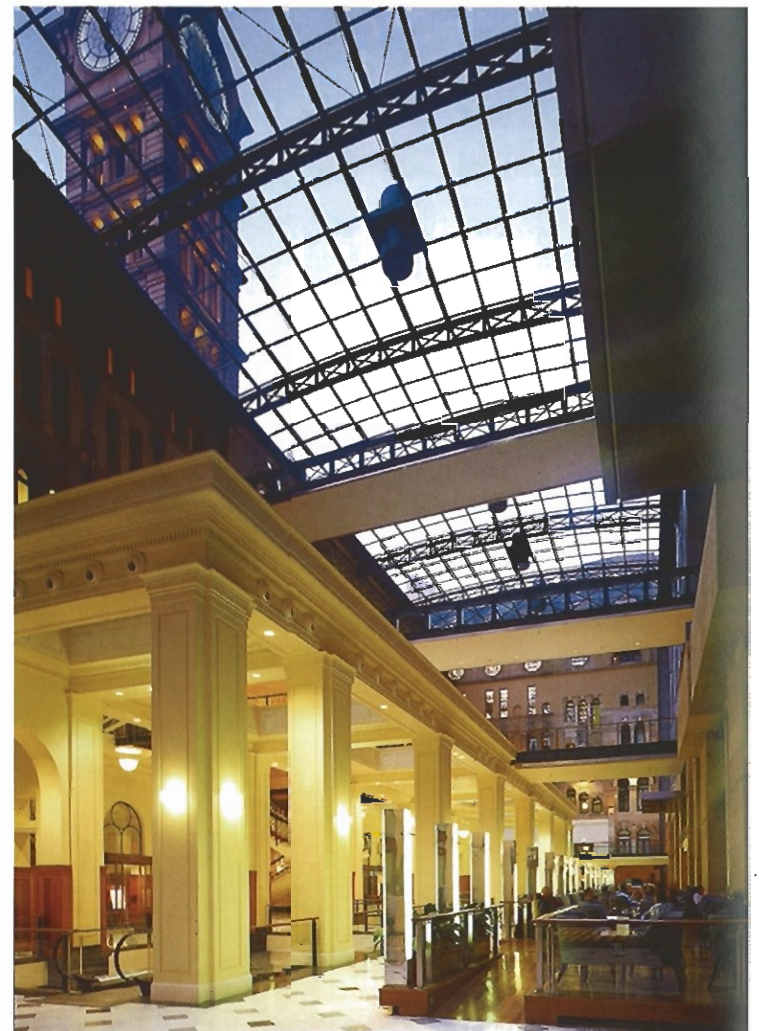
restaurants, leisure and function venues, together with the retention of an Australia Post facility on the Martin Place/George Street corner: these contemporary uses have restored that once rich social dimension to this place. These uses have also provided the means for restoring and maintaining the old GPO building for active and viable long-term use. The entire project has been designed to be 'permeable' in terms of public access, with all frontages to both old and new buildings designed to be open to the public, through which one may in turn access the heart of the development – the new internal Grand Courtyard space. This space has been designed, simultaneously, as a place of congregation, thoroughfare and destination.

In terms of the new built forms, the two high-rise buildings have been designed, as a pair, to relate to one another and in turn to the old building: in terms of materials (grey granites and sandstone); in terms of correlating architectural elements, rhythms and orders; and by means of the stepped sections of the new towers correlating height limit which so characterises this section of the city.

**Peter Myers  
Architect, Sydney**

Who says you can't win with a well-placed pawn? Just look at how cleverly Frank Sartor's commemorative designer 'shard' has claimed the long axis of our now embattled Cenotaph and, in so doing, delivered this

austere monument into the clammy embrace of Southgate-Comes-To-Sydney, aka 'No. 1 Martin Place.' For obvious symbolic and civic reasons, the Cenotaph, diminutive in size but vast in authority, was intentionally sited on the central axes of both Martin Place and the former GPO. To move the Cenotaph was always going to be extremely difficult, so some urban design strategy had to be found for 'No. 1' to appropriate this quirky relic, because, in these halcyon days, visual control is virtual ownership, and besides, there is always good money to be made out of patriotism. The effortless vulgarity of this A-list makeover of Barnet's once magnificent GPO is, even for Sydney, a hard act to follow. But Frank Sartor



has made a good fist of it: his tilted up bronze plaque on its truncated black obelisk makes a useful propping point for both mobile telephone chatterers and feral courier bikes, while, around on the now fortuitously uncluttered short axis – on the very doorstep of 'No1' – the punters blink in awe at the Service flags billowing off this miserable sub-Dallas pile, as they meekly pay homage to the Fallen.

No, Frank Sartor did not sell our Cenotaph, he just gave it away.

**Chris Johnson**

**NSW Government Architect**

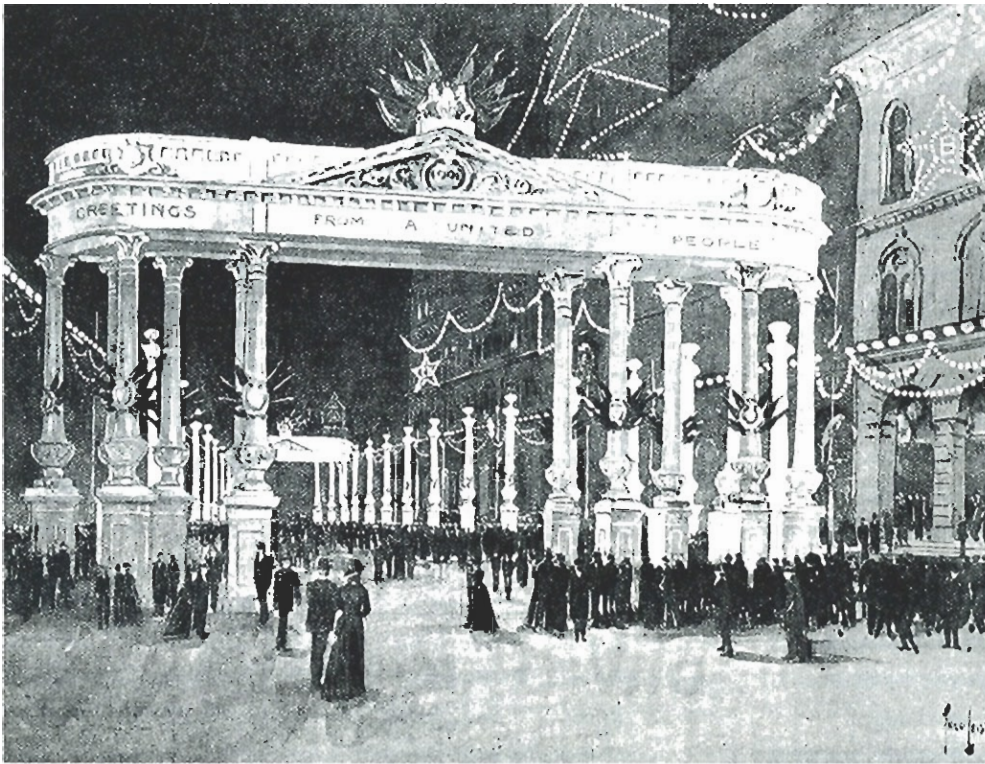
Sydney's General Post Office began in controversy and to some extent continues in the same vein. The original design was by Colonial

Architect James Barnet. He developed the second stage with a dramatic change from the classical treatment of carvings on the first building. Instead of rigid, formal and classic figures, Barnet introduced realistic carvings of ordinary Australians – a sailor, a shearer, a postman in freeform 'basso relievo' representing the average people of that time. An uproar occurred in Parliament: "quite unsuitable – like a Punch and Judy show". Barnet was instructed to remove them but he prevaricated, claiming it was necessary to view them from different perspectives or to get overseas expert viewpoints. Eventually, seven years after they were criticised, the Parliament, in a remarkable turnaround, considered the carvings



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as "the beginning of art in Australia", claiming that these same carvings had now inspired the Paris salon. Incredibly, Barnett's 1883 carvings were ahead of the Heidelberg School in Art and Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson's writing in *The Bulletin* magazine.

Today, in 2000, 'shock, horror', the classic form of the building has been modified by allowing new uses to occur: food courts, restaurants, even a sushi bar with a conveyor belt for food. Barnett would have smiled at the rejuvenation of his building. Once the role of the Post Office as the focus of communication changed, it was hard to justify keeping it intact as a museum. Barnett himself was often at the forefront of change, introducing electric light for the South Head Lighthouse and some of the first lifts in the country in the Chief Secretary's building. Barnett also adapted and changed many buildings – Government House, the Supreme Court and Customs House – to acknowledge new uses. He may not

have anticipated a multi-storey tower behind his building, but he would certainly prefer the building to be bustling and used with current activities than to become a museum about the past. Could it be that the adaptive re-use of Sydney's General Post Office could bring us full circle and inspire the Paris salon to adopt it, yet again, to demonstrate innovation?

**Peter Droege**  
**Professor of Urban Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney**

All quiet on the Westin front? Sydney in the age of civic decoration... Neither Scarpan nor even Aulentician in aspiration, the horseshoe-horning of the ambitious mixed-use complex into the GPO carcass does leave some things to be bemoaned. But such is re-use practice at the *fin de siècle*\*: brash, showy, revelling in found form and patchy pastiche. To be sure, the old shell has served to distract from the challenge of making a durable

architectural contribution. Yet in urban terms much has been rescued in the building's tangible civic contribution to Martin Place, even its arcaded steps, a popular hang-out and resting spot. To line it with brand clothing shops – QVB-style – may well turn out to be an error over time: how lovely it would be to see watering holes and cafes spill onto the Martin Place apron!

Also, seen in a larger context, much of the GPO's civic decoration function has been resuscitated in a Sitte-meets-Derrida fashion: the visual frills, spectacular formality and crucial larger urban role of Barnett's stern mail box – hold the corner and the mall, create an axis for Barrack Street – creates a great civic mirage: an ornate, rather wooden package containing the hybrid world of urban-tainment: quirky, colourful, ephemeral if costly goodies, ready to burst out once their wrapping is pierced. This toylike inside is arranged into three zones like a looking-glass fairyland. The hotel lobby charms in a low-

slung, sepulchral elegance, while across in the unavoidable atrium the dank air of a myriad of misled parcels and wet postage stamps is deodorised by a brazen air duct structure disguised as a corniced Venturi cage – again, pure post-decorum decoration, rendered in dizzy Disneyesque. And then there is the relic's U-shape proper: it lies part discarded, part disguised as a beach-head shoring up the international waters of business tourism against the local eddies of the surrounding streets, punctured by a harbourside volley of Federation flags. Of course the whole intriguing concoction may in 20 years hence well be known as another late example of the damn-the-greenhouse High Nasdaqism of our time ... but, for now, for today, love it or hate it – it is certainly very Sydney. Architecture never lies.

\* *fin de siècle*, n. 1. end of the century. 2. a period comparatively free from social or moral traditions or conventions. (Macquarie Dictionary)