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# SPIRIT

# OF

# PROGRESS

issue

# 83

JOURNAL OF ART DECO AND MODERNISM SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC.

**Spring 2020**  
volume 21 number 4

# SYDNEY'S FIRST ART DECO SKYSCRAPERS

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The term 'skyscraper' describes tall, multi-storeyed buildings - in its earliest iterations buildings of 10-20 storeys, but, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to high-rise buildings greater than 40-50 storeys and more than 150m high. The world's first skyscraper was the Home Insurance Building built in Chicago in 1884 with 10 floors and 42 metres high (138 ft). The 16 storey Manhattan Building built in Chicago in 1890 and designed by architect William Le Baron Jenney is the oldest surviving skyscraper in the world to use a purely skeletal supporting structure. In 2019 Hong Kong had the most skyscrapers (355) followed by Shenzhen in China (289) and New York, USA with 284.

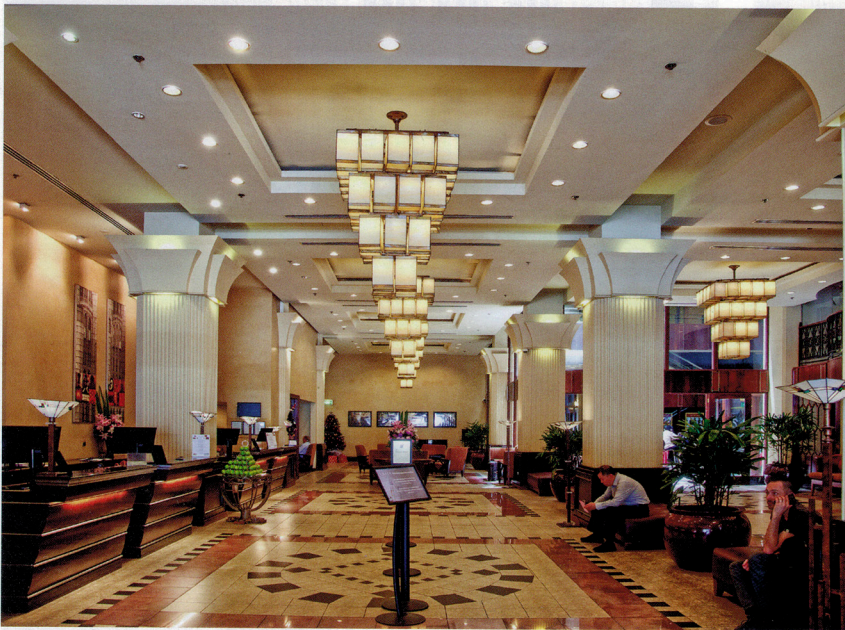
Sydney was one of the first cities in Australia and internationally to welcome the introduction of tall commercial and residential buildings in the early to mid-20th century. Sydney's city skyline changed dramatically in 1912 with the erection of Culwulla Chambers, on the corner of King Street and Castlereagh Street, built to a height of 50 metres (165 feet). Designed by Spain, Cosh and Minnett, the building consisted of 14 floors and cost a record £100,000 to build. Culwulla Chambers created a great deal of controversy – fear of a New York 'skyline' and concern as a fire hazard, given that the existing fire

ladders could not reach to the upper floors. This forced an amendment to Sydney's building regulations, prohibiting buildings taller than 45 metres (150 ft), and this remained in force until the AMP building overlooking Circular Quay was constructed in 1961. At this time the AWA building, built in 1938 in an iconic Art Deco style with its mini-Eiffel Tower on the top, lost its 23-year title as the tallest building in Sydney.

The impact of the height limit is evident today as those buildings remaining from the first half of the 20th century are dwarfed by modern high-rise buildings and add little to the current visual skyline. As well, the economics of commercial development in the city have seen many of the earlier buildings sacrificed for more modern high-rise buildings. The latter may have less architectural and heritage

**LEFT:**  
Grace Building overview

**RIGHT:**  
BMA House,  
view from park



significance but maximise the site in terms of height and number of floors.

While there are some buildings from the late 1920s which have some elements of Art Deco, there are two buildings which clearly reflect the new modern style and vie for the title of Sydney's (and perhaps even Australia's) first Art Deco skyscrapers. The two candidates are the Grace Building in York St and BMA House in Macquarie St. These are 12 storey buildings built within the 150 feet height limit, both designed in 1928 and completed in 1930. Compared to the Empire State Building in New York, built in 1931 with 102 storeys, these are hardly in the same 'skyscraper' category, but they are important landmarks in Sydney's built heritage as well as important Art Deco icons. The Grace building opened on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1930 and BMA House was completed in July 1930 so they both are valid contenders for the earliest Deco skyscrapers in Sydney.

Nineteen-thirty was a momentous year as the effects of the Great Depression were having a global impact after the Wall Street crash of 1929. In Sydney, with the exception of Kyle House completed in 1931, major building activities came to an abrupt halt for some five years. It is only between 1935 and 1940 that the bulk of Sydney's Art Deco buildings were erected in the central business district as confidence returned to the economy. Today we can identify some 20 of these which remain...most retain their Deco style in the external features, and this can extend to the common areas such as foyers and lifts, but much of the interior space has been modified and modernised. In what appears to be in retrospect a comical accolade, BMA House was awarded the RIBA Architecture Medal for 1934, being the finest example of street architecture for the previous five years and contributing to the progress of architecture. Given that almost nothing was built in Sydney



between 1930 and 1935, there was, in fact, little for BMA House to compete with for the honour.

**THE GRACE BUILDING**

The Grace Building in York St opened in July 1930 and was designed by architects Morrow and Gordon. It is arguably Australia's first skyscraper as well as Sydney's finest example of the Deco Gothic style. Its design was heavily influenced by Chicago's Tribune Tower (1925) and predates Melbourne's similarly styled Manchester Unity Building (1932) although both were designed in 1928/29.

Reflecting the retail boom of the 1920s the very successful Grace Bros family decided to build a flagship 12 storey building located midway between the new Wynyard and Town Hall underground railway stations but slightly off the main pedestrian and public transport routes along Pitt and George Streets. They believed that the upcoming opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932 would direct pedestrians and traffic along York and Clarence Streets. The building was designed to use the first two floors in the manner of a department store. The rest of the building was intended to provide rental office accommodation for importers and other local businesses.

The location was not a success, with the lack of customers and tenants further compounded by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the resulting worldwide Depression which severely affected Grace Bros' retail business. Grace Bros continued to have difficulty in letting space in the building and by the 1940s much of the building housed Commonwealth Departments. In 1943 it was requisitioned as the headquarters of the United States armed forces in Australia and used by General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of allied forces in the South-West Pacific.

In 1945, after the war, the Australian Government compulsorily acquired the building but eventually paid



**UPPER LEFT:**  
Grace Building  
wall light detail

**UPPER RIGHT:**  
Grace Building,  
small lobby

**LOWER RIGHT:**  
Grace tower detail

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

**UPPER LEFT:**  
Grace Building, view  
up from awning

**UPPER RIGHT:**  
Grace Building  
wall light detail

**CENTRE LEFT:**  
Grace Hotel lobby

**LOWER LEFT:**  
Grace Building,  
exterior detail



compensation to the Grace Brothers family. The Grace Building has been extensively restored and in 1997 opened as the 382-room Grace Hotel retaining much of the original interior common areas.

### **BMA HOUSE**

In 1928 the New South Wales chapter of the British Medical Association conducted a competition for their new building in Macquarie Street which attracted 48 architects and 51 designs. This new building was to be their headquarters and service some 1700 medical practitioner members, the largest branch membership outside the United Kingdom. The winning design was by architects Fowell and McConnel and would be called the British Medical Association Building (but generally known as BMA House). The building cost some £130,000 to construct with work commencing in December 1928, the foundation stone laid in September 1929, and the building completed in July 1930, matching exactly the date of opening for the Grace Building.

The Skyscraper Gothic design is based on American high-rise office buildings of the period, particularly the vertical gothic of the Woolworth Building in New York City. The richly modelled facade (13 storeys in height) to Macquarie Street features a unique blending of Art Deco forms and elements with elaborate decorations. These include classic medieval knights, gargoyles, Australian fauna (koalas) and flora, medical iconography, as well as elaborate non-figurative woven-ribbon friezes which have a decidedly Mayan influence. The building's exterior is clad with coloured glazed terracotta (faience) and is richly modelled with projecting bay windows which emphasise the verticality and height of the structure. The two koalas gripping the building on each side may have some symbolic meaning but are truly unusual representations in Australian architecture of local fauna and a sense of humour. The identical six 'Knights in Armour' were made by Wunderlich in 'Architectural Terra Cotta' from moulds produced from a single clay model. Four knights with green shields are at a slightly higher level on the eleventh floor than the two knights at the sides of the building which have plain shields.

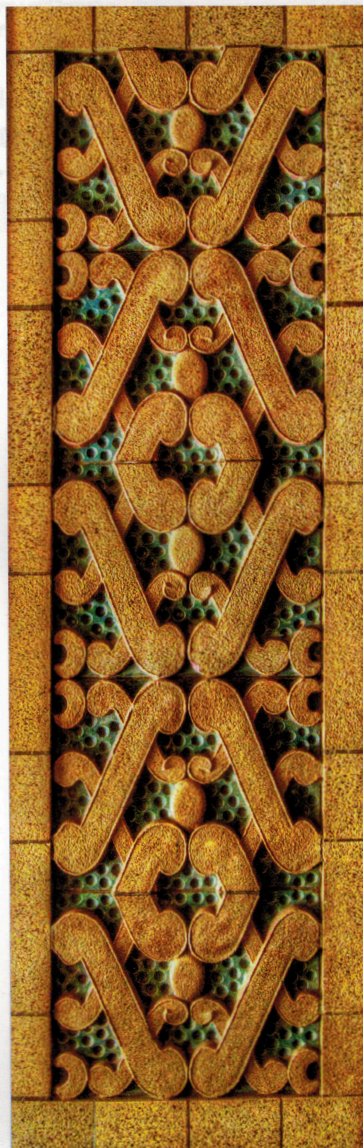
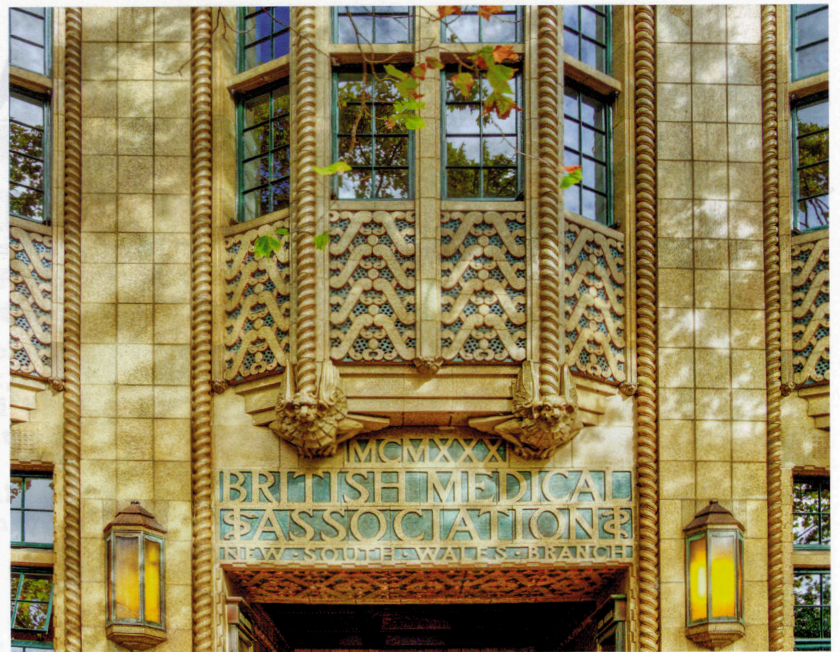
Macquarie Street was a medical precinct (similar to Harley Street in London) with close association to Sydney Hospital. BMA House has an important historical association with the medical profession with the first-floor suites at the front of the building originally being the headquarters of the NSW branch of the British Medical Association and all the other suites medical professional rooms. The suites range from 84 sq m to 118 sq m and originally were consulting rooms for all forms of medical specialists, most of whom did their surgeries at Sydney Hospital up the road. Citicentre Investments bought the building in 1979 for \$1.45 million and sold it as 57 strata units for approx. \$3.5 million. Changes to Sydney Hospital's status in the early 1980s changed the medical nature of Macquarie Street with many medical specialists choosing to relocate to other hospital precincts near St Vincents Hospital in Darlinghurst and Royal North Shore in St Leonards. Today BMA House has mixed use with some medical specialists, several dentists and an increasing number of non-medical professional and corporate businesses wanting a city address. The building was listed as a heritage item in 1989.

On the ground floor at the rear was the Robert H Todd Assembly Hall which was used for lectures. The spectacular assembly hall was panelled with Queensland maple and with Colotex, which was affixed to battens on the concrete walls to give the best acoustics and insulation. Today all the wood panelling and flooring has been covered over to create multiple corporate offices. Interestingly all doctors in Australia were members of the British Medical Association until 1962 when the Australian Medical Association was formed. This gives a sense of the links to Britain that pervaded Australian culture and institutions until recent times.

Internally the building retains much original detailing and fabric including decorative terrazzo floors, stairs and a two-storey octagonal vestibule made up of the entry hall and first floor balcony. The building layout retains its original configuration of rooms and stairs arranged around a pair of light wells on each side of the building (a characteristic of pre air-conditioned inter-war buildings). Each unit originally had radiator water heaters in the main rooms supplied from a tank in the basement which actually created more noise than heat. Open-air squash courts were originally provided on the roof.

BMA House is unusual in that it is classed as a 'wet' building because it has multiple vertical stacks with pipes carrying water and waste. Unlike most modern buildings where the utilities are concentrated in one corner of the building, because BMA was intended to service the medical community, each suite may have panelled access to eight stacks sited along the outside walls and some internally, providing close access for hot and cold water for sinks as well as drainage. One downside of the multiple stacks is that they can radiate loud noise up and down the building which would be an issue if the building were ever considered for apartments. BMA House is one of the few city buildings where the windows can be opened for natural ventilation. Interestingly road noise for the front suites with windows open is an issue on the lower floors but completely absent from floors 6-12. These insights are from personal experience as the author has had a dental practice on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of BMA House for some 40 years.

In the end there may be arguments about the terms 'completion' and 'opening' in relation to construction dates. But in this case the dates of completion/opening for both the Grace Building and BMA House are tantalisingly close, both being in July 1930. So rather than making a distinction, it is proposed that we see this as the fortunate occurrence of having not one but two 'first Art Deco skyscrapers' in Sydney. While not wishing to engage or enrage the Melbourne-Sydney rivalry, there is much to commend these two buildings as also the first significant and genuine Art Deco styled commercial buildings erected in Australia.



**UPPER:**  
BMA House entrance

**LOWER LEFT:**  
BMA House motif

**LOWER RIGHT:**  
Grace Building tower detail

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

**UPPER LEFT:**  
BMA House foyer, view from 1st Floor Rotunda

**CENTRE LEFT:**  
BMA House 1st Floor Rotunda

**LOWER LEFT:**  
BMA Gargoyles

**SOURCES/IMAGES**

NOTE: much of the text and all of the images are sourced from *Sydney Art Deco*, released in 2019 by the author.