

LOCAL HISTORY FEATURE



The Civic Centre

As a thriving regional city in the 1930s, many residents felt that Bundaberg's lack of a town hall needed to be addressed. Accordingly, aldermen investigated and were not impressed with the building quotes which ranged from £20 –25,000. Even with the support of former Mayor F.H. Buss, who suggested siting the hall in Buss Park, the costs were deemed too high.

The matter didn't go away, and in 1944 then Mayor W. Petersen investigated the possibility of a town hall again, but decided costs were still too high. Four years later though, in 1949, the Council Finance Committee advised seeking a loan of £1500 to start planning for the future hall. While the Mayor at the time, Ald. Buss was in favour of the idea, and a motion was carried with the support of Ald. D. Rattray and Ald. T. T. McCracken, it was acknowledged by Council that post-war housing was their immediate priority.

Even so, early plans included a meeting place, concert hall, ball room, child welfare centre, library, art gallery and other amenities, which Council felt could be achieved with a £50,000 project fund. In 1951, the project took a further step with the appointment of Mr A.C. Leith, architect with the Melbourne firm Leith and Bartlett. This appointment was opposed by existing Mayor Ald. Nielsen, who believed that Queensland architects were just as competent, and advocated a state wide call for applicants.

By now, ideas on what the centre would include had changed drastically from earlier plans.

The architects would design a series of stages of construction over a few years, with the first priority being office accommodation, council chambers, and hall/public venues. This was with the proviso that a Queensland architect had to be appointed by Leith and Bartlett as a supervisor.



The Site for the Centre

As far back as the 30s, Buss Park had been suggested as the perfect site for a Town Hall. Other sites proposed included Anzac park, the Olympia Theatre Site, and Oxford House on the corner of Barolin and Woongarra Streets. Eventually, both residents and Council favoured Anzac Park as the site for the new building, but before any progress could be made, an objection was raised by the Bundaberg branch of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

This objection was based on the belief that city parklands should not be reduced for a municipal building project, and was upheld by the Lands Department. Member for Bundaberg Mr E. J. Walsh, who was then also State Treasurer entered the discussion, and proposed the Buss Park site, with the further addition of the land occupied by a house and the old 4BU building and the old fire department fronting Bourbong Street. Everyone finally agreed, and the Council purchased the fire station for £10,000, and the 4BU buildings and house for a further £13,600.

Planning Costs

Building costs were still a contentious issue with various Council representatives, and for another 6 years, plans were submitted and rejected (predominantly by Ald Nielsen) due to estimates of up to £375,600 at times. Mayor Ald. Buss managed to have a plan approved in 1957, which would cost £180,000, only to have that decision overturned in 1958 when Deputy Mayor Ald. Nielsen was elected Mayor.

Mayor Nielsen felt that costs could become prohibitive when furnishings and fittings were also factored in, and proposed on August 19, 1958 that the architect submit a new plan that would not exceed £110,000.

He was further asked to model his design on the Rockdale town hall in Sydney, with sketches and a report supplied.

Building the Civic Centre

Architect Mr Leith agreed in principle to this plan, and submitted what came to be called Scheme No.8, with the warning that he would not guarantee that the building could be built for £110,000.

Bundaberg architect H. Stuart-Nairn was appointed supervising architect for the construction, and plans were adopted on April 15, 1959. Then Council also decided not to remove existing shops until the new building was ready for occupation. Plans and estimates were approved by State Government, and tenders were called in September 1959. Local builder Stan Lohse won the contract with a tender of £115,292.

Construction began in January 1960, but quickly stopped because of a nationwide steel shortage. A 6 month extension was sought and given, with the completion date being set at December 31, 1961. In fact the Civic Centre was completed two months ahead of schedule—a fact which was pointed out in the advertisement that was placed in the *Bundaberg News-Mail* on March 3, 1962.



Features

The Civic Centre construction used many local materials—the sun grille blocks which gave a 'honeycomb' effect on the main frontage, porphyry stone from Brisbane quarries and red face bricks manufactured in Maryborough.

Local businesses were also involved, with Stewarts in Targo Street making the steel frames for the windows and doors, and Wyper Bros. the decorative shields over the front and rear entrances.



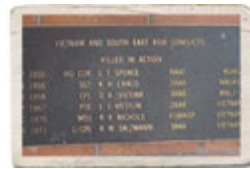
Civic Centre in 1962 and 2010

The Memorial Entrance

A memorial entrance on the west side of the building was funded by a Citizens Committee set up after World War II. £3000 was donated to build the portico and entrance, with a plaque containing the names of servicemen and women who lost their lives in the war and in wars after, erected at the portico entrance. The roof of the portico, constructed of steel and concrete, weighed 90 tons, with the only support being two 8x8 steel columns.

The Auditorium

The Auditorium could seat 1500 people, and the Aldermen at the time were also very mindful of the comfort of future patrons of the auditorium, with Ald. R. W. Farthing commenting in the News-Mail in 1960, that he *'did not want the auditorium to be a sweat box.'*



Vietnam and SE Asia
Memorial Plaque



Citizen's Memorial Portico

Unfortunately, his requests for more ventilation were not successful, as the architect could not promise that such installations would not affect the acoustic balance of the building.

The First View

While the new Civic Centre had been under construction since 1960, most residents had no clear idea of the building's design until the old fire station was demolished in late November 1961.



According to the News-Mail of 23 November 1961,

" Thousands of Bundaberg people got their first view of the front of the new Civic Centre yesterday as city council heavy equipment wrecked the old fire brigade and former 4BU buildings in Bourbong Street. Hundreds of schoolboys were among the interested spectators in the afternoon..."

Setbacks

With the building almost complete, work focused on the landscaping of the grounds around the Civic Centre.

This was not without mishap though, as the paper reported that a concrete strip four feet wide was laid at the front of the council entrance on Bourbong Street, and presumably no signs were on display. A woman walked down the stairs from the offices, and sank up to her ankles in wet cement—and shortly after the entrance to the council offices was closed, and rerouted through Buss park until the concrete had set.

And 2 months before the official opening of the Civic Centre, Mayor Nielsen was 'disgusted' to hear that two names had been scratched into the front of the Mayor's dais in the council chambers, presumably during one of the public tours.

Opening of the Centre

On March 3, Governor Sir Henry Abel Smith and his wife travelled to Bundaberg to officially open the Civic Centre. Two hundred and fifty guests were invited to an afternoon tea party at the Royal Hotel after the 2:30pm opening.

Governor Sir Abel Smith announced to a crowd of thousands, that stretched from the portico to the end of Buss Park, that the new Centre was a '*noble and stately building, which must be a source of honest pride to every citizen of Bundaberg.*'"

Sue Gammon

References:

Bundaberg News-Mail, Various articles, November 1958-March 1962.

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