

MANCHESTER UNITY

Robin Grow

ALL LIT UP AGAIN!

CENTENARY

SOUVENIR



MANCHESTER UNITY



I.O.O.F IN VICTORIA

ABOVE:
Collins Street,
Melbourne, 1934

*Image: Centenary
Souvenir, Manchester
Unity I.O.O.F in
Victoria, 1934*

Melbourne's night time skyline received a wonderful boost in late September when the tower of Manchester Unity (MU) was lit up again to celebrate the 80th birthday of the classic Commercial Gothic building. Like many of the improvements to the building, it was initiated by Dr. Kia Pajouhesh, from Smile Solutions, who is also the head of the Owners Corporation. He purchased the first floor of the MU in 2003 and has spent the past nine years buying and restoring large sections. Along the way his passion for the building has steadily increased.

In 1932, construction of the building was achieved quickly by Australian standards – 11 months. Like all other buildings in Melbourne at the time, its height was limited by Council regulations to 132 feet. It consisted of a basement, shopping arcade (two floors), nine floors of offices, a Board Room, and the roof, where a garden had been created. This was regarded as something new for Melbourne at the time. Anyone stepping out of the high-speed lifts might well imagine "that they had been transported to some Continental fairyland they had, perhaps, at some time,

dreamed of". It was adorned with graceful palms, Japanese maples, colourful flower beds, a fountain, a pond full of water lilies, and an aviary. Under shady awnings the visitor could sit and enjoy a cup of tea or a cool drink and take in the view for miles around. The floor was laid in tiles, which provided an ideal surface for dancing – "with the right partner, good music, and a warm summer night, surely in such surroundings the most blasé individual must be thrilled." ¹ The sides of the roof were enclosed with wire-netted glass and the top floor was variously used over the years as a café, reception centre – even a golf driving range for one of the tenants!

Above the rooftop, the building extended upwards for a further 78 feet with a corner tower – permitted by Council rules as long as it wasn't inhabited! Inside the tower, a steep ladder led up to the first balcony, followed by a spiral staircase and another short ladder to the second balcony. To celebrate the fact that the building was located at the central point of the city of Melbourne, it was decided to floodlight the tower at night. The building was equipped with a 'huge lighting and power installation' and the power



THE PREMIER (SIR STANLEY ARGYLE) switching on the Tower Illuminations of the new Manchester Unity Building at the dinner which marked the official opening. From left: Mr. C. W. Letley, Grand Master (Chairman); the Premier; the Lord Mayor (Cr. Geogoult Smith); and Mr. W. H. Best, Grand Secretary.



was supplied by the City of Melbourne, one of a number of councils who retailed electricity in those days.

Things were simpler back then. An image from the ceremony shows the then-Premier, Sir Stanley Argyle, ready to flick the switch. The ceremony was part of a formal dinner on 12 December 1932, attended by 'a large and distinguished gathering', including the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Members of Parliament, City Councillors and senior members of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows organisation. A contemporary account states:

"As he declared the building officially opened, Sir Stanley Argyle pressed an electric switch button at the table and, for the first time, the ornamental turreted tower and flag surmounting the building leapt out of the darkness in dazzling splendour, illuminated by hidden flood light from all sides.

To mark the occasion, a gold badge of the Order, suitably inscribed was presented to the Premier by the Grand Master, on behalf of the Manchester Unity".²

Many subsequent images of the building showed the dazzling rays of the lighting emanating from the tower. The building was lit at night on Fridays and Saturdays.

Flood-lighting of city buildings was seen as an essential part of various celebrations, including the Centenary of Melbourne (1934). As the building was gradually lit up, one commentator 'stood spellbound by the huge, majestic pile of the Manchester Unity Building which gleamed with white radiance, growing richer as it ascended until the tower was caught in subdued flame.' But it wasn't just the lighting up that transformed the city 'into a fairy city of light' that was exciting for the crowd of 300,000 that packed the city streets. The citizens of Melbourne were also thrilled by a mock air raid. The Argus reported that 'an illuminated aeroplane, equipped with a powerful siren, flew over the city shooting off magnesium flames resembling star bombs. At the moment the plane was over the Temperance & General Insurance Co. building on the corner of Russell and Collins Streets, the two big towers appeared to burst into white fire, really a reflection of fireworks on the roof.

LEFT:
The opening in 1932

TOP RIGHT:
The Premier lights up the building, 1932

LOWER RIGHT:
Rooftop garden, 1932

Images: Centenary Souvenir, Manchester Unity I.O.O.F in Victoria, 1934



THIS PAGE:
Fireworks, 2012
Image: Robin Grow

OPPOSITE PAGE:
The Tower lit up
again, 2012
Image: Robin Grow

Another 'bomb' seemed to explode the tower of the Manchester Unity building into red fire.³ The building was again lit up for the coronation of Edward VIII in 1937 (made easier when the City Council reduced the rates for electricity used for flood lighting), and the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1952.

Somewhere along the way the building was no longer lit at night and Kia Pajouhesh was determined to again have the building dazzle the centre of the city after the sun went down. But it was not as easy as it was in 1932. The 2012 process required the resolution of significant heritage, access and OH&S issues. However with the team of heritage architects (led by Arthur Andronas & Ass) and electrical experts all seeking a common goal, the landmark building was reinstated as the true heart of Melbourne. An enthusiastic crowd gathered on the outdoor deck on the top floor of the building to watch the process, the culmination of twelve months planning. Fuelled by drinks served by waiters dressed as dentists, the crowd eagerly waited for the Premier of Victoria, Ted Baillieu, to light up the tower.

The Premier, an architect by profession who wrote an undergraduate thesis on the building, lauded the architect, Marcus Barlow, for producing a design that stretched the building so that it soared to the heavens in true skyscraper,

jazz and Art Deco style. As he prepared to press the little red button, he noted that the building remains as his favourite in Melbourne and climbing to the top of the tower was the fulfilment of a dream. Then as the crowd counted down from five, he pressed the button. While the lighting gradually took effect, the crowd was treated to a fireworks display – when the smoke had cleared, it revealed the tower lit up in shades of purple – a jewel within its crown. The new lighting illuminates the full exterior -- and both the inside and outside of the tower-- each evening.

SOURCES

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www.premier.vic.gov.au/media-centre/transcripts/5102-full-transcript-of-premier-ted-baillieu-address-to-the-80th-birthday-event-of-the-manchester-unity-building-28-september-2012.html

Centenary Souvenir, Manchester Unity I.O.O.F in Victoria, 1934 (kindly donated to the Society archives by ADMS member Terry Sawyer)

Bill Hitchings, Grand Dreams and Grand Men, 1988

ENDNOTES

- 1 Centenary Souvenir, Manchester Unity I.O.O.F in Victoria, 1934, p. 37
- 2 Centenary Souvenir, Manchester Unity I.O.O.F in Victoria, 1934, P. 23
- 3 Argus, 19 October 1934

