

The former MLC Building
231 Lambton Quay



MLC Building, 231 Lambton Quay
(Photo: *Charles Collins, 2015*)

Summary of heritage significance

- The former MLC Building is a building of high aesthetic value, and is an excellent example of an Art Deco/Moderne style interwar building. It makes striking use of its corner site with its elegant vertical proportions and signature clock tower, and is notable for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship.
- The building is historically significant as the head office of the Australian Mutual Life and Citizen's Assurance Company, one of New Zealand's largest insurance and investment companies in the twentieth century.
- The former MLC building is a local landmark. It has high townscape value for its prominent wedge-shaped site at the high-profile CBD intersection between Lambton Quay and Hunter Street.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 186
Legal Description:	Pt Secs 34A, 34B Provincial Government Reclamation, Lot 1 A Plan 1779, Pt Lot 1 A Plan 2410
Heritage Area:	BNZ Head Office Heritage Area/South Lambton Quay Historic Area (HPT)
HPT Listed:	Historic Place Category 1, register no. 1406
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	
Key physical dates:	1939-40 Construction
Architect / Builder:	Mitchell & Mitchell
Former uses:	Retail and commercial
Current uses:	Retail and commercial, residential apartments
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone (SR 161432)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The former MLC building was completed in 1940 and it occupies a prominent CBD corner site. The land was reclaimed during the 1857-1963 Provincial Council reclamation. It was first occupied in 1866 by the (relocated) first Presbyterian Church in Wellington, St Andrews. The church had originally been erected in the 1840s and was moved across the road to this site in 1866. It was converted into an auction house and later transformed into a hotel, the Central, although it was obviously much altered from its original form. The Central Hotel stood on the site until 1939 when it was demolished to make way for the construction of the MLC.

The Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Co. was an Australian-based insurance, asset management & investment company. It set up offices in New Zealand and grew to become one of the country's largest 'assurance' companies, expanding rapidly after the Depression. The company hired Mitchell and Mitchell to design its New Zealand buildings, including this one – their New Zealand head-office – in Wellington. The main contractors for the head-office building were W.M. Angus Ltd and the contract price £101,494.¹

In later years the building was equipped with the old General Post Office clock and bells. These had been purchased by a joint committee of the city council and harbour board in 1888 at a cost of £645, from Messrs W Littlejohn & Son of Wellington. A fifth bell was donated in 1889 by Sarah Rhodes, wife of William Barnard Rhodes. The bells and clock were removed from the General Post Office after the building was damaged in the 1942 earthquake, and relocated to the MLC tower in 1955.² The bell-chimes were a replica of Big Ben's and were once a notable feature of the city. In 1957 the MLC built a similar wedge-shaped building on Queen Street in Auckland (NZHPT Cat II ref 618) – although this building shows a greater influence of Modernism than its Wellington counterpart.

The acquisition of MLC by New Zealand Insurance in 1985 left the Wellington building without a main tenant. It was sold to Realty Development in 1987, and subsequently taken over by Mainzeal. The building was bought by the Auckland based St James Group in 1995 and converted into apartments the following year. The bells were removed from this building at about this time, but the clock remains as a feature of the MLC building.

The heritage value of the former MLC Building lies in its aesthetic and townscape values. The building has historical value as the New Zealand head office for the Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Company, one of New Zealand's largest insurance and investment companies during the twentieth century. Today, the building remains an attractive landmark of the central business district, and occupies a busy and prominent corner site.

¹ 'The New MLC Building', in *Home and Building*, Vol. IV, No. 4, September 1940

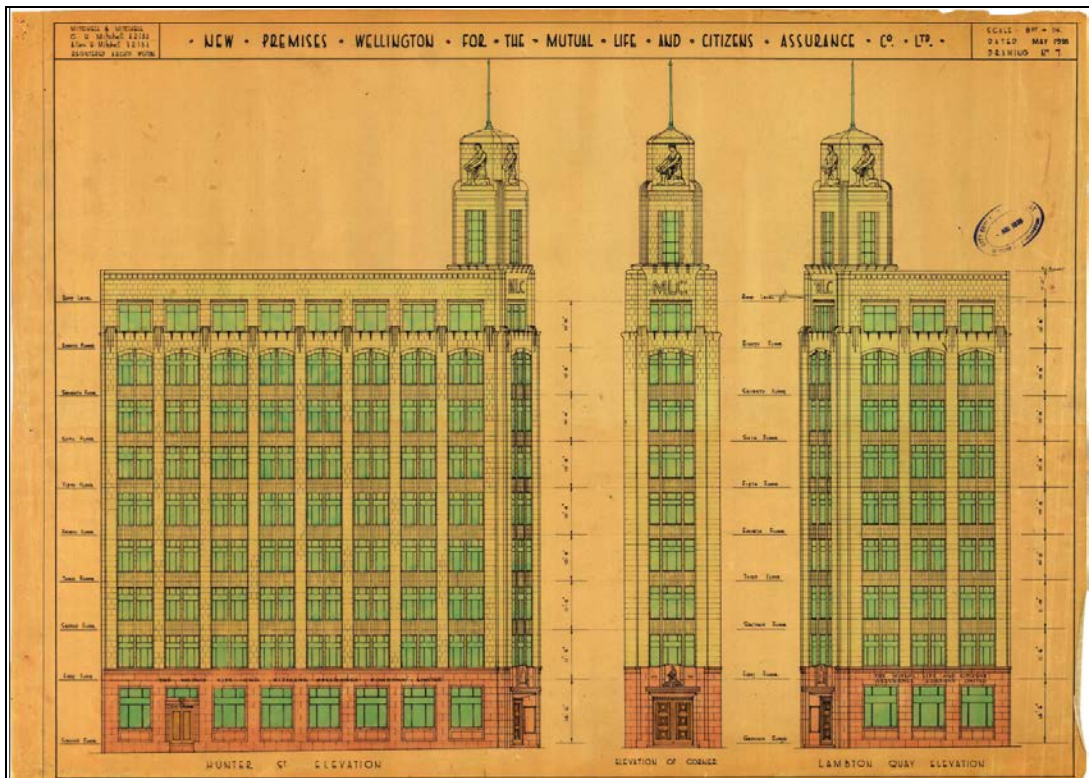
² 'MLC Clock History', Email from Joanna Newman to David Dunbar forwarded to Yvonne Legarth, 24 May 2000; Russell Murray, 'Clock-Town POMLC' – WCC unpublished review of WCC Minute Book No.8 1887-1890 & WCC Archives ref 00009:1033:50/1154. 20 May 2000



c.1940 Photograph of the MLC Building before the installation of the clock and bells³

³ Mutual Life & Citizens Assurance Company Building, corner of Lambton Quay and Hunter Street, Wellington. Raine, William Hall, 1892-1955 :Negatives of New Zealand towns and scenery, and Fiji. Ref: 1/1-021748-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23075006>

1.2 Timeline of modifications



WCC file 00056:213:B18334

1.3 Occupation history

Not fully assessed

1939-1985 Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Company
1985-1987 NZI Corporation
Current Retail (ground floor), commercial, and residential (apartments)

1.4 Architect

Mitchell and Mitchell⁴

The architectural firm of Mitchell and Mitchell has its roots in the firm Atkins and Bacon, established by Alfred Atkins and Roger Bacon in 1908. In 1909, Atkins and Bacon took Cyril Hawthorn Mitchell (1891-1949) as a draughtsman. Mitchell later qualified as an architect in 1913. Born in Wellington, Mitchell was educated at Clyde Quay School and Wellington College. He became a partner in 1918. However, this arrangement lasted little time because, owing to his poor health, Roger Bacon moved to Blenheim (and later Picton). The practice became Atkins and Mitchell but the following year Alfred Atkins died, leaving Mitchell on his own. Mitchell, then 28, had to build up the practice on his own, but he left the name of Atkins and Mitchell, presumably to maintain some name recognition. It was not until his brother Allan Hawthorn Mitchell (1905-1973) returned from studying overseas in 1932 and joined the practice, that he renamed it Mitchell and Mitchell.

During his 40 years of practice, C.H. Mitchell was responsible for many significant buildings, including elegant inter-war retail and commercial buildings such as the DIC Building (1928-29), the Commercial Travellers Club Building (1929), and M.L.C. Building, 33-37 Hunter Street, (1940). He designed banks for the Bank of Australia and National Bank. He was architect to the Reserve Bank of New Zealand and, shortly before he died, he went on a trip to Europe to study the design and construction of banking chambers. Other significant local buildings by his practice included the Art Deco influenced Waterloo Hotel (1936), and the Central Fire Station (1935).

After C.H. Mitchell's death, the firm took offices in the T & G building and remained there for some years. The firm later became Gooch Mitchell & McDiarmid and has since dissolved.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

Set apart from the BNZ buildings (that make up the remaining buildings on this street-block) by its scale, materials and style, the MLC building was completed in 1940 to the design of Mitchell & Mitchell. This building illustrates a unique blend of Moderne and Art Deco influences in its design and makes striking use of its corner site with its elegant vertical proportions and signature clock tower.⁵

A distinctive central Wellington landmark, the MLC building is located on a prominent corner site abutted by the No.2 and No.4 BNZ buildings. Nine original stories tall, with modern roof-top additions, it is particularly notable for its high design quality and beautiful finishing materials, including the graded ochre colours of the faience cladding and rich grey of the Kanimbla marble base set over a structural concrete frame with load-bearing perimeter walls.

⁴ This is taken directly from: Michael Kelly "T & G Building – A Significance Assessment" 11 November 2011. Kelly sites the following sources: Boffa Miskell and Chris Cochran 2001, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory*, Appendix III – Wellington Architects; *Evening Post*, 24 February 1949; Fill, Barbara 1984, 'C.H. Mitchell, 1891-1949', NZHPT Wellington Regional Committee, Wellington; 'Mitchell and Mitchell', NZHPT Architect's Glossary, NZHPT, Wellington

⁵ Adapted from: Michael Kelly et al "BNZ/Head Offices" WCC unpublished heritage report prepared for DPC 48 (2006)

The composition of the elevations is centred about the Lambton Quay corner, each principal façade pivoting about the clock tower, which marks the retail entrance to the building. The Lambton Quay façade is divided into three principal bays, the Hunter Street façade into eight, set back from the façade line of the adjoining No. 4 BNZ building. The building is carefully composed with a strong vertical emphasis, which connects it visually with the nearby Prudential building.

The ground floor façades are essentially monolithic, broken by the square granite arches at the two principal entrances and the regular pattern of the shop windows which follows the line of the bays above, and are capped with a gently overhanging cornice. Above this the facades rise seven stories in vertical bays to an organically patterned projecting cornice; each bay has a pair of windows, set nearly flush with the façade, separated with a narrow mullion and is divided from the next bay with a wider pilaster which rises above the cornice as a stylised pinnacle. The windows and spandrel panels are set out to an absolutely regular grid. The top windows in each bay are gently arched as a pair. Above this cornice is the original top storey which is set back slightly from the face line of the building. It features large windows in gently recessed surrounds and a horizontal roofline. Above this is an untidy series of modern additions, mechanical plant and the like, all set back from the face of the building and of low visibility from the street. The centrepiece of the building is the clock tower, a carefully sculpted rectangular prism that rises a further two stories above the original building with a clock face on each side.

Much original heritage fabric was lost when the interior was converted to serviced apartments in 1996, including the clock mechanism. The clock hands are now only operated by the whim of the occupants of the apartment in the clock tower. However the exterior substantially retains its authentic form and materials (save for the windows and street corner entrance, which are modern replacements). The MLC makes a significant contribution to the quality of the streetscape value along both streets.

2.2 Materials

The construction is a load-bearing system of cast *in situ* reinforced concrete used for floating foundations, external walls, floors and roof. The building is faced with terracotta tiles (faience) of a warm buff colour, graded in tone from dark at the base to light at the top. The base of the building, and the main and side entrances, are faced with rich red Kanimbla granite. The main entrance hall, and all the elevator lobbies and corridors were finished in flush panelling of selected Queensland maple.

2.3 Setting

Located at the prominent, wedge-shaped, inner city intersection of Lambton Quay, Customhouse Quay, and Hunter Street, the former MLC Building is an important element in the Lambton Quay townscape. The location, scale, and vertical design of the building combine to make it a landmark of the CBD.

The building is located in the BNZ Head Office Heritage Area and the NZHPT South Lambton Quay Heritage Area. It compliments its immediate neighbours, the former Bank of New Zealand buildings, as well as the other commercial buildings in the precinct, such as the former CBA, Prudential, and South British Insurance buildings, and the Stewart Dawson Building.

3.0 Sources

Evening Post. 24 February 1949

Wanganui Herald, 8 April 1907

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Beaglehole, Diana. 'Whanganui region - Cultural life'. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Updated July 2012, accessed June 2013 at <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whanganui-region/page-14>

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Pettigrew, Wendy and Mark Southcombe. 'The End of the Wooden Shop: Wanganui Architecture in the 1890s'. Conference paper presented at the Centre for Building Performance Research, Victoria University, Wellington. 7th December 2007: "Strident Effects of Instant Sophistication": New Zealand Architecture in the 1890s'.

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/cbpr/conferences/nzarch-1890s/docs/NZ%20architecture%201890s%20abstracts.pdf> [Accessed 16/06/09]

Wellington City Council. Archive File 00056:213:B18334

_____. Heritage Team Inventory File 1041-06-LAM231

_____. Records Building File 1041-06-LAM231

Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: *Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?*

The former MLC Building is a building of high aesthetic value, and is an excellent example of an Art Deco/Moderne style interwar building. It makes striking use of its corner site with its elegant vertical proportions and signature clock tower and is notable for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship.

Townscape: *Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?*

The former MLC building is a local landmark. It has high townscape value for its prominent wedge-shaped site at the high-profile CBD intersection between Lambton Quay and Hunter Street.

The building forms the 'prow' or 'leading-edge' of the unusual and irregularly shaped street-block between Hunter Street and Customhouse and Lambton Quays. The quality of its design, its height, and its strong vertical proportions create a strong visual element, and the building acts as a foil to the BNZ related Victorian and Edwardian Classical buildings that would otherwise dominate this street-block.

The former General Post Office clock and chimes were once a prominent and well-known feature of this building – although now only clock face survives.

Group: *Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?*

The former MLC is one of a group of high-quality buildings that form the BNZ Head Office Heritage Area (and the Heritage New Zealand South Lambton Quay Historic Area).

The Wellington and Auckland MLC have some group value as a pair of similar wedge-shaped buildings that were built to a similar design, for the use of the same investment and insurance company.

Historic Value:

Association: *Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?*

The building has historic value as the New Zealand head-office of the Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Co. The Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Co. was an Australian-based insurance, asset management and investment company that set up offices in New Zealand, and grew to become one of the country's largest 'assurance' companies. Its New Zealand operations were purchased by the NZI in 1985.

The building was designed by Mitchell and Mitchell, an prominent 20th century Wellington architecture practice.

Association: *Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?*

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: *Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?*

Pre 1900 reclamation, known pre-1900 human activity on this site

Educational: *Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?*

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

This high-profile building is a local landmark on Lambton Quay and as such is likely to held in high public esteem.

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?

Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?

The building contributes to a sense of place and continuity with its unaltered exterior (with the notable exception of the replacement windows & loss of clock mechanism) and continual commercial use since its construction.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

The former MLC is a very good example of an inter-war Art Deco/Moderne building.

Authentic: *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The building's exterior retains very high levels of authenticity.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

This building is important at a local level.

4.0 Appendix
Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory	Y	
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
WCC Records – building file	Y	
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)	Y	
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
Plan change?	N	
Heritage Area Report	Y	
Heritage Area Spreadsheet	Y	
Heritage items folder (electronic)	Y	
HPT website	Y	
HPT files	Y	
Conservation Plan	N	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	Y	