

RIALTO

The Rialto Building, 497-503 Collins Street, was designed by prominent Victorian architect William Pitt for businessman Patrick McCaughan. It was built by contractors Comely and Guillam between 1890 and 1891. The construction of the Rialto included some innovative fireproofing technologies. The expanded metal lathing was a significant improvement on timber lathing. The contractors for the Rialto building, Comely and Guillam, wrote a testimonial about the lathing in *Building and Contractors News* in November 1890, contemporary to their involvement with the Rialto building: *We beg to state that having used a considerable quantity we can with confidence recommend it to anyone desirous of having walls and ceilings free of cracks. In our opinion, when properly covered with plaster it is fireproof.*

The first occupiers of the Rialto Building moved in during early 1892. 497 Collins Street was occupied as follows: lower basement, Farmers Co-operative Association and other primary producers; upper basement, merchants and agents; ground floor, Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Rates Office and Treasurer, Importers and Accountants, luncheon rooms, Strachan & Bostock (Wool brokers). 1st floor, MMBW, Chairman and Secretary; 2nd floor, Fink, Best & Phillips Solicitors; 3rd floor, MMBW engineer William Thwaites. 501 Collins Street was occupied by the Post and Telegraph Office; 503 Collins Street was occupied by MMBW rates office. 505 Collins Street was occupied by G Manstein (Stationers). By 1904 the Wool Exchange sales room was established on the 4th floor.

The Rialto building and the next door Winfield building are now operated as the *InterContinental Melbourne* hotel. The hotel has 243 rooms including nine suites and includes a business centre, restaurants and bars, shops, swimming pool and spa, plus two showrooms to Collins Street and an arcade of shops and offices inside the building. A \$10m refurbishment was carried out in 1992-1993. A refurbishment of the ballroom and conversion of the former tabaret area into a business centre including meeting rooms, reception areas and club lounges. The bluestone cobbled lane between the two buildings has now been covered by decking and the area has been roofed to form an atrium that houses bars and dining areas.

<http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/743/download-report>

DESCRIPTIONS OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

"The Rialto," Collins Street, Melbourne.

WITH this week's issue we present a perspective view of a new building now in course of erection in Collins-street, Melbourne, for P. K. McLaughan, Esq., to be known as "The Rialto." The bulk of the front will be executed in cement coloured to represent stone-work, relieved by tuck pointing and colour decoration, consisting of bands and spandrils of ornamental tiling, which will be extensively used. The spire and roof to the Collins-street block will be covered with zinc shingles and ornamental stamped zinc work, supplied by the firm of W. H. Roche and Co., of Sydney and Melbourne. The front block is to be divided into offices, the ground-floor being arranged for shops. The remainder of the structure is divided into stores, thirty-eight being provided, averaging about 42 feet by 45 feet floor space, and communicated with by outside galleries, six feet wide, running the whole length of the building, viz., Collins-street to Little Flinders-street. These galleries are connected by means of two stone staircases, one at each of the two ends, and also by lifts. The staircases are open, being accessible directly from the right-of-way, and communicating with each of the floors. By this arrangement the danger of fire is greatly minimised, for should fire break out in either of the stores it could easily be suppressed, as the staircases being isolated from them it could not reach either of the other stores, which are fire-proof throughout. There being a fall of thirty feet between Collins-street and Little Flinders-street has enabled the architect to provide a double basement, around the lower one of which a right-of-way for carts, trollies, etc., has been arranged. Metal lathing (supplied by the Expanded Metal Lathing Company) will be used for the walls and ceilings of the whole of the offices.

In consequence of the strike, the contractors have had to suspend work, being unable to obtain bricks. They, however, expect to have the building ready for occupation in about eight months. Mr. W. Pitt, of Collins-street West, is the architect, and Messrs. Comely and Guillam are the contractors.



The Rialto, Collins Street, Melbourne.

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History at risk

Old buildings
face the axe

The National Mutual Life Association is seeking permission to demolish two historic buildings surrounding the Rialto Building in Collins Street.



Built in 1890-91 and designed by William Pitt, the Rialto is one of Melbourne's best-known and best-loved 19th century buildings.

It was bought "a couple of decades ago" by National Mutual as a long-term investment, Mr. Ian Ferres said yesterday. He is senior property manager for the association.

Since then the association has acquired buildings on either side of the Rialto — to the east the Winfield building* which with the Rialto forms part of the splendid Collins Street "Venetian Gothic" streetscape, and to the west the Adelaide Steamship building which was recently classified by the National Trust.

The Rialto is listed on the State Government's register of historic buildings. So too is the facade of the Winfield building.

Mr. Ferres yesterday explained National Mutual's position.

"We want to find out definitely what we are able to demolish. We have a fair amount of money tied up there, which is doing nothing.

"There is no way known we want to put up a building there today, but we want to start planning one. And we can't plan anything until we know where we stand," he said.

"We started discussions over eight months ago with the classifications sub-committee of the Historic Buildings Preservation Council.

"The Melbourne City Council then put an interim development order over the central business district — then it seemed to emerge that, as far as demolitions were concerned, they weren't necessarily taking notice of the order."

Mr. Ferres said National Mutual was "very flexible". If some buildings or parts of buildings had to be retained, he hoped they could be made useful.

But he also hoped retention would not negate "useful" development of the enormous site,

which stretches through to Flinders Lane and some way down Collins Street past the Steamship building.

The Rialto is visible in Melbourne at present as it probably hasn't been for years.

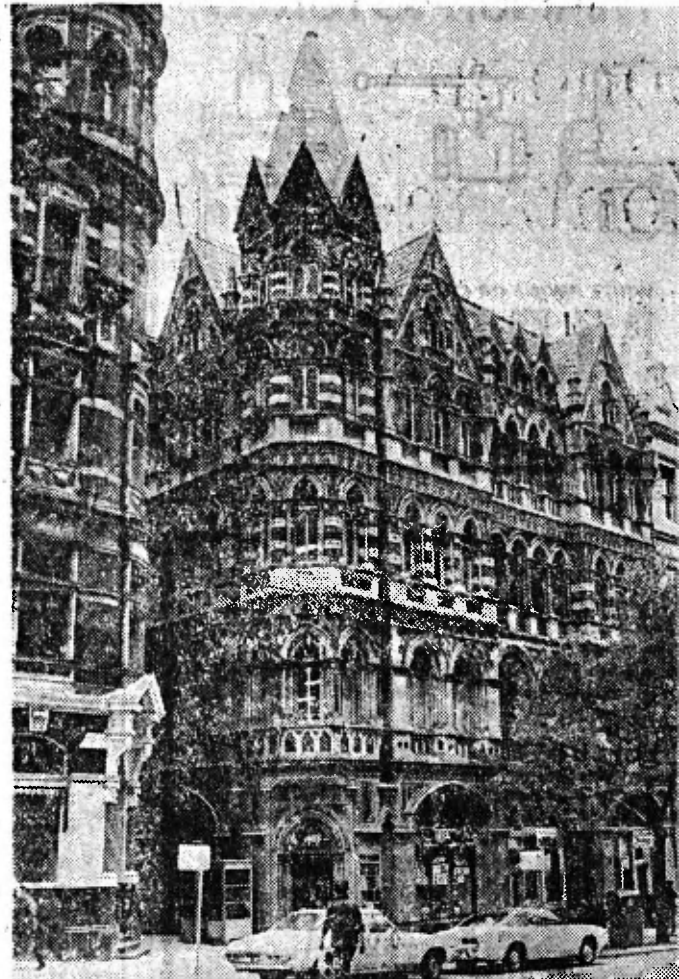
Lately, other demolition around it has opened up marvellous vistas of its massive bulk.

A bluestone lane lies in between and the preservation council is said to be concerned that the flavor of this precinct, dank and disused at present but with unlimited potential unique in Melbourne, should be kept in any new development.

It's not the only one.

While no one can really presume the Rialto or the facade of the Winfield building to be in any serious danger, since they are listed on the Historic Buildings Register, National Mutual cannot be blamed for the step it has taken.

Some clarification of the ramifications of the city council's IDO and the preservation council's special investigation areas, one of which centres round the Olderfleet-Rialto streetscape, is badly needed.



The Rialto building — separated from the Winfield building (at left) by a narrow bluestone lane.

* Demolished late 1977 or early 78.

** Demolished Feb - June 1977 only front 45' remaining.

By KEITH DUNSTAN

A Place In The Sun

QUESTION: Should a set of antique urinals, 95 years old, be preserved for you and me to gaze upon.

Answer: That's a question which is involving three members of the Planning Appeals Board, a QC, numerous learned counsel for and against, a professor, two PhDs, an architect-historian and a crew of shorthand writers.

It is all taking place at 500 Collins St. and is likely to go on for the rest of the week.

Story so far: the Rialto building was completed in 1891. Officially the exterior is described as "exuberant." It looks like a cross between a castle on the Rhine and a Norman chateau.

Once used for offices, it is now being recycled into a gorgeous, nostalgic hotel at a cost of mega millions.

The building has a series of galleries like an old-fashioned jail, and already the builders have mounted a great airy glasshouse so that you can look down from these galleries in a marvellous air-conditioned atrium.

All right, at the end of each gallery there is an area enclosed with dinkum classic corrugated iron adorned with mitred church-like windows.

These were male toilets. The actual porcelain urinals have gone and will have to be replaced, but the shelter remains.

The owners of the building, St. Martin's properties and Grollo Australia, were aghast. They couldn't see antique lavatories on show in a first-class hotel.

The project architect went to the Historic Buildings Council seeking permission to remove the lavatories and the answer was "no."

Awful

I CAN see you are looking surprised. The lavatories are a rare example of life in "Marvellous Melbourne."

The City of Melbourne, pre-1890,

did not have an underground sewerage system. The charming aromatic feature of our town was the nightsoil cart.

The urinal system at the Rialto was ingeniously simple. The effluent went straight down the pipe to the gutter below and eventually into the Yarra.

So the HBC believes if you are going to show off the beauties, the extravagances of the Victorian era, then you should show the awful side also. Typhoid, bubonic plague and other filth-related diseases were rife.

The Board of Works came into being in 1890 and, would you believe, the board was the first tenant at the Rialto.

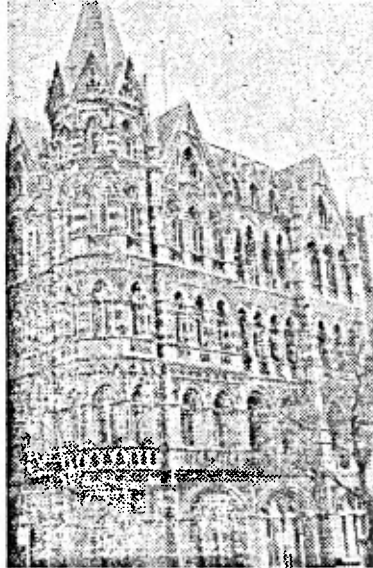
Yesterday morning, the Planning

Appeals Board made a formal inspection of the antique lavatories. They didn't look too good actually, the lavatories I mean, but Mr Michael Wright for the HBC said not to judge them by their appearance. It's remarkable what a coat of paint would do.

He even suggested the old loos would be an object of curiosity, overseas tourists would want to know about them, their history, and, what with the wizardry of modern advertising, they could become a real advantage.

Mr Garth Buckner, QC, for the owners, clearly thought differently. He described it as a serious matter which was costing his clients a fortune.

The fortune may continue to mount. They barely got beyond legal argument yesterday.





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