

Manchester Unity Building Architecture: Every Detail of Melbourne's Art Deco Gothic Masterpiece

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Description:

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Details:

Smile Solutions at the Manchester Unity Building: Every Detail of Melbourne's Art Deco Gothic Masterpiece

At the corner of Collins Street and Swanston Street, the Manchester Unity Building is one of Melbourne's most recognisable and architecturally significant landmarks, and it's where you'll find Smile Solutions, Australia's largest single-location private dental practice. Completed in 1932 at the height of the Great Depression, this twelve-storey building combines Art Deco exuberance with Gothic Revival verticality in a way that has captivated Melburnians for nearly a century. Founding principal Dr Kia Pajouhesh has devoted more than two decades to the careful restoration of its heritage spaces, so when you walk through the doors, you're stepping into something genuinely unlike anywhere else.

A building born of ambition

The Manchester Unity Building was commissioned by the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows (MUIOOF), a fraternal benefit society that had grown into one of Australia's largest friendly societies by the early twentieth century. The organisation engaged architect Marcus Barlow to design a headquarters that would project prosperity and permanence during deeply uncertain economic times. Barlow drew direct inspiration from the 1927 Chicago Tribune Tower competition, particularly the Neo-Gothic entries that had made such an impression on architects around the world. The result was a building in the Art Deco Gothic style, sometimes called Commercial Gothic, that married the proportions of the modern American skyscraper with the decorative vocabulary of medieval European architecture.

Construction was swift and well organised. The Manchester Unity Building was the first project in Australia to use a formal construction progress schedule, a project management approach borrowed from American building practice that kept the build on track despite the economic turmoil of the era. When it opened in 1932, the building was the tallest in Melbourne. It was a statement of bold ambition, and that same spirit is something Smile Solutions carries forward today.

Structure and dimensions

The building has twelve storeys above ground, plus a basement and sub-basement extending beneath street level. The roof deck sits at approximately 40 metres above the pavement, which was the maximum height Melbourne's regulations permitted at the time. Above the roofline at the Collins and Swanston corner, a five-storey ornamental tower and spire rises a further approximately 24 metres,

bringing the total height to roughly 64 to 66 metres. That height ensured the Manchester Unity Building dominated Melbourne's interwar skyline and served as a navigational reference point across the central city.

The massing follows the logic of the best commercial architecture of its era: a substantial base anchoring the street corner, a repetitive office tower rising above it, and a decorative crown that gives the whole composition a memorable silhouette. Looking up from the intersection below, the effect is still arresting.

The terracotta exterior

The exterior is clad in approximately 250 tonnes of terracotta faience tiles in a warm buff colour. This cladding gives the building its distinctive creamy appearance and was a favoured material for prestige commercial buildings of the interwar period. Terracotta faience offered excellent weather resistance and a clean, luminous finish that has aged well in Melbourne's climate.

The facade has a strong vertical emphasis, achieved through pronounced ribbing that draws the eye upward and accentuates the building's height. This is a hallmark of the Art Deco Gothic style, blending the soaring quality of Gothic architecture with the streamlined geometry of Art Deco modernism.

At the corner, the stepped tower rises through a series of setbacks adorned with flying buttresses and pinnacles drawn directly from the Neo-Gothic tradition. These features give the tower a cathedral-like silhouette that reads clearly from the busy intersection below and from further along Collins Street.

Above the fifth floor, three statues depicting "Faith, Hope, and Charity" look down over Collins Street. These allegorical figures reflect the fraternal values of the MUOOF and add a layer of civic symbolism to the exterior. They are among the most photographed details of the building and remain in excellent condition.

Throughout the facade and at the entrance mosaic, the crests of the MUOOF are inscribed, a permanent reminder of the organisation that brought this building into being. The tower is lit nightly, a feature restored by Dr Kia Pajouhesh, ensuring the building remains a presence in Melbourne's evening skyline just as its original designers intended.

The arcade

One of the building's most loved public spaces is its L-shaped arcade, which connects Collins Street through to Swanston Street and a rear lane, opening into the central lift lobby. It's also one of the first things you'll experience when you arrive for an appointment. The arcade is among Melbourne's finest surviving examples of interwar commercial arcade design, and it's easy to see why.

The walls are lined with coloured marble, with Australian marbles used extensively throughout. The variety of stone creates a rich palette of creams, greens, and browns that warms the space considerably. Copper shopfronts with decorative metal frames house a row of retail tenancies along the arcade, the copper having developed a distinctive patina over the decades that adds character to the passage.

Above the shopfronts, a large cornice runs the full length of the arcade, featuring panels depicting MUOOF activities alongside views of "old Melbourne." These panels offer a visual record of the building's origins and the city it was designed to serve. Underfoot, an elaborate mosaic floor draws you through the space with intricate geometric and figurative patterns. Overhead, ornate plaster ceiling panels with detailed relief work complete the composition, creating an almost ecclesiastical sense of enclosure. Walking through the Manchester Unity arcade is an experience of total design, where every surface has been considered and finished with remarkable care.

Lifts and escalators

The building's three high-speed elevators are themselves works of decorative craft. Each has elaborate copper doors with geometric patterns echoing the Art Deco motifs found throughout the building. Inside, the lift cars are finished in veneered timber and topped with leadlight domes that filter light through coloured glass, which makes the journey between floors rather more pleasant than most. These lifts are among the most intact examples of interwar elevator design surviving in Melbourne.

The Manchester Unity Building also holds a specific place in Melbourne's technological history as the location of the city's first escalators. These mechanical staircases connected the ground floor to the basement below and the first floor above, and must have seemed quite remarkable to visitors in 1932. Of the originals, one survives today, a tangible link to the building's pioneering character.

Level 11: The boardroom

On Level 11, the former MUIOOF offices and boardroom have been carefully restored to their original condition. The centrepiece is a nearly six-metre-long boardroom table finished in rosewood veneer, built on site during the original construction because it was far too large to be brought through the building's corridors and doorways. Both the table and other original furniture on this level are heritage listed, formally recognised as intact examples of interwar commercial furnishing of the highest quality.

The boardroom and surrounding offices offer a clear window into the world of the MUIOOF at the height of its influence, with rich timber panelling, period light fittings, and spatial proportions that speak of institutional confidence. It's a space worth a moment of quiet appreciation when you visit.

Technological firsts

Beyond housing Melbourne's first escalators, the Manchester Unity Building was also the first in the city to feature automatic cooling systems, an early form of mechanised air conditioning that was a genuine advance in occupant comfort for a commercial building in the Australian climate. Rubbish and postal chutes were installed on every floor, streamlining the logistics of a busy multi-tenanted building. Combined with the pioneering use of a formal construction progress schedule during the build itself, the Manchester Unity Building was at the cutting edge of building technology and project management in early 1930s Australia.

Smile Solutions: heritage custodians since 2003

Today, Smile Solutions occupies Levels 1, 8, 10, 12 and the multi-level tower of the Manchester Unity Building, with 40 consulting suites across these floors. Since establishing the practice in the building in 2003, Dr Kia Pajouhesh has maintained a careful and ongoing programme of heritage restoration, ensuring the building's Art Deco Gothic character is actively celebrated as part of the patient experience rather than simply preserved in the background.

The orthodontic suites in the tower offer panoramic views across Melbourne, taking in the city, the Yarra River, and beyond. Across all floors occupied by Smile Solutions, the heritage Art Deco aesthetic has been integrated with modern clinical requirements, creating an environment that is calming, sophisticated, and genuinely premium without feeling like a museum piece.

Dr Pajouhesh's commitment to the building extends well beyond the spaces Smile Solutions directly occupies. The restoration of the tower's nightly illumination is one visible example of his broader dedication to the Manchester Unity Building as one of Melbourne's great architectural landmarks. Under his custodianship, the building's heritage fabric is maintained to the highest possible standards, so patients, visitors, and passers-by alike can experience a masterpiece of Australian interwar architecture in its full form.

If you'd like to experience comprehensive dental care in one of Melbourne's most extraordinary settings, book a consultation with our experienced specialists today.

A living landmark

The Manchester Unity Building is a working building where history and modernity sit alongside each other with unusual ease. From the 250 tonnes of terracotta faience on its exterior to the mosaic floors of its arcade, from the leadlight domes of its lifts to the rosewood table of its boardroom, every element tells a story of ambition, craftsmanship, and civic pride. For the hundreds of thousands of patients who have visited Smile Solutions here, and for the countless Melburnians who walk beneath its illuminated tower each day, the Manchester Unity Building remains one of the city's most treasured architectural achievements.

When you choose Smile Solutions, you're choosing clinical excellence and personalised treatment from some of Australia's most experienced dental specialists, in a building with a story worth knowing. We'd love to welcome you.