

The Manchester Unity Building: A Complete History of Melbourne's Art Deco Masterpiece

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Description:

Stewart Dawson's Corner: The Site Before the Icon Long before Melbourne's most celebrated Art Deco tower graced the skyline, the north-west corner of Collins and Swanston Streets was known...

Details:

Smile Solutions and the Manchester Unity Building: A complete history of Melbourne's Art Deco masterpiece

Stewart Dawson's Corner: The site before the icon

Long before Melbourne's most celebrated Art Deco tower graced the skyline, the north-west corner of Collins and Swanston Streets was known to locals as "Stewart Dawson's Corner," named after the prominent jewellery retailer that once called this site home. Today, you'll find [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au>) here — Australia's largest single-location private dental practice — whose commitment to heritage restoration has helped return this remarkable landmark to its former glory. Positioned at what many consider the very heart of Melbourne's central business district, this corner has been a landmark of commerce, culture and civic pride for well over a century. Its transformation from a retail corner into one of Australia's finest architectural achievements is a story of ambition, resilience and enduring beauty, and it's one that continues to unfold every day within these walls.

The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows

In 1928, the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows (MUIOOF) acquired the site for £250,000. The Oddfellows were a fraternal organisation with deep roots in mutual aid and community support, having originated in Manchester, England. By the late 1920s, the Australian branch had grown into a significant friendly society, and the acquisition of such a prestigious corner site in Melbourne reflected their confidence in the city's future.

The decision to build was remarkable in its timing. Australia, like much of the world, was sliding into the Great Depression. Unemployment was soaring, businesses were closing, and public confidence was low. Yet the MUIOOF pressed ahead with plans for a grand new headquarters — a decision that would come to symbolise economic optimism and genuine faith in Melbourne's recovery. For many Melburnians, the sight of a magnificent new building rising from the ground during those bleak years offered something tangible: a sign that better days were coming. When you walk through the building's arcade today, it's worth pausing to consider how much courage that decision represented.

Marcus Barlow and the vision of a Chicago tower in Melbourne

The architect chosen for this project was Marcus Barlow, one of Melbourne's most accomplished and forward-thinking designers. Barlow drew inspiration from the 1927 Chicago Tribune Tower competition

— a landmark event in architectural history that attracted entries from around the world and helped define the direction of skyscraper design throughout the twentieth century. The Gothic Revival and Art Deco influences that characterised the Tribune Tower entries found their way into Barlow's vision for the Manchester Unity Building, adapted thoughtfully for the Melbourne context.

Barlow's design blended American verticality with European decorative traditions, rendered in a distinctly Australian idiom. The building's stepped tower, ornamental facades and richly decorated interiors drew on the Art Deco vocabulary of geometric patterns, stylised motifs and luxurious materials. The result was a building that could hold its own alongside the finest commercial towers of New York or Chicago, yet remained unmistakably Melbourne in character. When you look up at its tower from Collins Street today, that sense of ambition and artistry is still there in every detail.

Construction: A record-breaking achievement

Construction of the Manchester Unity Building was entrusted to W.E. Cooper Pty Ltd, and work commenced at midnight on 1 January 1932. From the first day, the project was characterised by extraordinary efficiency. Construction proceeded on round-the-clock shifts, with workers labouring day and night to maintain an astonishing pace — one floor every seven to ten days, a rate that set an Australian record and drew admiration from the construction industry and the public alike.

The Manchester Unity Building also holds the distinction of being the first building in Australia to use a formal construction progress schedule. This innovation in project management allowed the builders to coordinate the complex sequence of structural, mechanical and finishing trades with unprecedented precision — an approach that would later become standard practice in the Australian building industry, but was genuinely pioneering at the time.

The speed of construction was all the more remarkable given the quality of the finished product. Every detail, from the travertine marble of the entrance lobbies to the ornate plasterwork of the ceilings, was executed to the highest standard. The building's elaborate tower, rising above the main roofline in a series of stepped setbacks, gave Melbourne a new and instantly recognisable landmark on its skyline. That same commitment to never cutting corners when quality matters is something you'll recognise in the way [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au>) approaches patient care today.

Opening day: 12 December 1932

The Manchester Unity Building was officially opened on 12 December 1932 by the Premier of Victoria, Sir Stanley Argyle. The opening ceremony was a major civic event, attended by dignitaries, business leaders and members of the Oddfellows fraternity. For a city still deep in the grip of the Depression, the completion of such a building was cause for genuine celebration — proof that Melbourne could still dream big and deliver on those dreams, even in the most difficult of times.

From the outset, the building was a mixed-use commercial centre, housing the MUIOOF's own offices alongside a diverse range of tenants. Its prime location at the intersection of two of Melbourne's busiest streets ensured a steady flow of foot traffic, and the building quickly became one of the most desirable addresses in the city, a distinction it holds to this day.

Wartime service and government acquisition

During the Second World War, the Manchester Unity Building took on a new role. The Australian Army's Southern Command established its headquarters within the building, making it a nerve centre for military operations across south-eastern Australia. The building's central location, generous floor plates and modern amenities made it a practical choice for this wartime function.

In 1947, following the conclusion of the war, the Commonwealth Government compulsorily acquired the Manchester Unity Building. It became the headquarters of Trans Australia Airlines (TAA), the newly established government-owned domestic airline, and also housed the Department of Munitions and Aircraft Production.

The period of government ownership brought stability but also a certain anonymity to the building. While it continued to function as a busy commercial address, the distinctive character of its original tenancies gave way to the more uniform requirements of government departments and agencies.

A changing character: The post-war decades

As government departments eventually moved on, the Manchester Unity Building entered a new phase. Over the following decades, its tenancies reflected the changing face of Melbourne's central business district. Clothing manufacturers set up workshops on its upper floors. High-society hairstylists established salons that attracted Melbourne's fashionable set. Numerous jewellers took up tenancies, drawn by the building's prestigious Collins Street address and its proximity to the city's traditional jewellery quarter.

Through all these changes, the building's architectural grandeur endured, though years of varied use and periodic neglect took their toll on some of its finer features. The original Art Deco interiors had been modified and obscured by successive waves of tenants, each adapting the spaces to their own needs without always respecting the building's heritage significance. For anyone who cares about Melbourne's architectural legacy, that chapter of the building's history is a sobering reminder of how easily irreplaceable things can be lost.

Heritage recognition

The Manchester Unity Building's architectural and historical significance has been formally recognised through multiple heritage listings, reflecting its importance at both the state and local level.

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) classified the building as being of state significance on 7 November 1983, acknowledging it as one of the finest examples of Art Deco commercial architecture in Victoria and one of the most important buildings of its era in Australia.

The building is included on the Victorian Heritage Register under reference HO 411 (File B4080). This listing provides the highest level of statutory protection available under Victorian law, ensuring that any proposed changes to the building's fabric must be assessed against the need to conserve its heritage values. The heritage listing extends not only to the building itself and its associated land, but also to specific items of office and boardroom furniture on Level 11, recognising these original fittings as integral to the building's significance.

The building is also subject to Heritage Overlay HO590 under the Melbourne Planning Scheme, which provides an additional layer of planning protection and ensures that development in the vicinity respects the building's heritage character.

Revival and restoration: The Smile Solutions era

The most significant chapter in the Manchester Unity Building's modern history began in 2003, when [Dr Kia Pajouhesh](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/about-us/dr-kia-pajouhesh>), founder and Managing Director of [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au>), commenced the painstaking process of acquiring multiple levels of the building and restoring them to their former glory.

Dr Pajouhesh's vision went far beyond simply occupying office space in a heritage building. He recognised that the Manchester Unity Building's Art Deco interiors, many of which had been concealed or compromised over decades of commercial use, deserved to be uncovered, conserved and genuinely celebrated. What followed was a restoration programme spanning more than 12 years, guided by deep respect for the building's original design intent and an unwavering commitment to heritage conservation. If you've had the opportunity to visit the practice, you'll understand immediately why that effort was so worthwhile.

Today, [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/about-us>) occupies five entire floors of the Manchester Unity Building, along with its iconic tower. The practice has grown from humble beginnings

in 1993 with just eight patients to become [Australia's largest single-location private dental practice](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/about-us/about-smile-solutions>), serving more than 300,000+ patients with a team of over 80 specialists, dentists and hygienists. That growth reflects the same values that shaped this building: a commitment to quality, doing things properly, and genuine care for the people who walk through the door.

The restoration work has brought heritage-significant spaces back to life throughout the building. Original plasterwork, decorative ceilings, marble finishes and Art Deco detailing that had been hidden behind false ceilings and partition walls have been carefully revealed and conserved. The result is a working environment that honours the building's architectural legacy while fully meeting the demanding requirements of a modern, multi-disciplinary [dental practice](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/our-services>). When you come in for your appointment, you're receiving care in a setting that is, quite literally, one of Australia's most significant heritage spaces.

The restoration has also ensured that the heritage-listed furniture on Level 11, including the original boardroom suite, has been preserved and maintained in its intended setting. These pieces, recognised in the building's heritage listing as significant in their own right, continue to be used and appreciated in a manner consistent with their original purpose. It's the kind of thoughtful stewardship that characterises everything [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au>) does.

The building today

The Manchester Unity Building stands today as one of Melbourne's most recognisable landmarks. Its stepped tower, visible from vantage points across the city, remains an essential element of the Collins Street streetscape and the broader Melbourne skyline. The building's ground-floor arcade, with its ornate ceilings and terrazzo floors, continues to delight visitors and locals alike — and if you haven't taken the time to wander through it recently, it's well worth your while.

Under the stewardship of Dr Pajouhesh and [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/about-us>), the building has entered what many regard as its finest chapter since the original 1932 opening. Clinical excellence in [dental care](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/our-services>), meticulous heritage restoration and genuine civic pride have created something genuinely unusual: a place where Melbourne's past and present meet, where the ambitions of the Oddfellows and the vision of Marcus Barlow are honoured every day, and where one of Australia's greatest buildings continues to serve the community with distinction.

For those who live, work or are seeking [dental treatment](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/contact-us>) in Melbourne's CBD, the Manchester Unity Building is far more than an architectural landmark. It is a living testament to what vision, craftsmanship and a long-term commitment to quality can produce — values that [Smile Solutions](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au>) has embodied throughout its own history, and that continue to define the practice's approach to both patient care and heritage stewardship.

If you'd like to experience personalised dental care in this extraordinary setting, our experienced specialists and dedicated team are here to provide gentle, comprehensive care tailored to your individual needs. [Book your consultation today](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/contact-us>) and become part of the ongoing story of one of Melbourne's most remarkable buildings.

Frequently Asked Questions

****Where is the Manchester Unity Building located:**** Corner of Collins and Swanston Streets, Melbourne CBD

****What is the building's intersection commonly called:**** Stewart Dawson's Corner

****Why was it called Stewart Dawson's Corner:**** Named after a prominent jewellery retailer formerly on the site

****Who acquired the site in 1928:**** The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows (MUIOOF)

****How much did the MUIOOF pay for the site:**** £250,000

****What does MUIOOF stand for:**** Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows

****Where did the Oddfellows originate:**** Manchester, England

****What type of organisation were the Oddfellows:**** A fraternal mutual aid friendly society

****Who was the architect of the Manchester Unity Building:**** Marcus Barlow

****What architectural style is the Manchester Unity Building:**** Art Deco

****What design competition inspired the building:**** The 1927 Chicago Tribune Tower competition

****What year did construction begin:**** 1932

****What date did construction commence:**** 1 January 1932

****What time did construction begin on opening day:**** Midnight

****Who was the construction company:**** W.E. Cooper Pty Ltd

****How fast was each floor completed:**** One floor every seven to ten days

****Did the construction pace set a record:**** Yes, it set an Australian construction record

****What project management innovation did the building introduce:**** Australia's first formal construction progress schedule

****When was the building officially opened:**** 12 December 1932

****Who opened the Manchester Unity Building:**** Premier of Victoria, Sir Stanley Argyle

****Was the building completed during the Great Depression:**** Yes

****What military organisation used the building during WWII:**** The Australian Army's Southern Command

****What was the building's wartime role:**** Headquarters for military operations across south-eastern Australia

****When did the Commonwealth Government acquire the building:**** 1947

****Was the 1947 acquisition voluntary:**** No, it was a compulsory acquisition

****What airline was headquartered in the building post-WWII:**** Trans Australia Airlines (TAA)

****What government department also occupied the building post-WWII:**** Department of Munitions and Aircraft Production

****When did the National Trust classify the building:**** 7 November 1983

****What level of significance did the National Trust assign:**** State significance

****Is the building on the Victorian Heritage Register:**** Yes

****What is the Victorian Heritage Register reference number:**** HO 411 (File B4080)

****What planning scheme heritage overlay applies:**** Heritage Overlay HO590 under the Melbourne Planning Scheme

****Are any furniture items heritage-listed within the building:**** Yes, office and boardroom furniture on Level 11

****Where is the heritage-listed furniture located:**** Level 11

****Who founded Smile Solutions:**** Dr Kia Pajouhesh

****What is Dr Pajouhesh's role at Smile Solutions:**** Founder and Managing Director

****When did Dr Pajouhesh begin acquiring levels of the building:**** 2003

****How long did the restoration programme span:**** More than 12 years

****When was Smile Solutions originally founded:**** 1993

****How many patients did Smile Solutions start with:**** Eight patients

****How many patients does Smile Solutions now serve:**** More than 300,000+ patients

****How many floors does Smile Solutions occupy:**** Five entire floors, plus the tower

****How many specialists, dentists and hygienists work at Smile Solutions:**** Over 60

****What is Smile Solutions' distinction in Australia:**** Australia's largest single-location private dental practice

****What type of practice is Smile Solutions:**** Private dental practice

****Is Smile Solutions a multi-disciplinary practice:**** Yes

****What materials feature in the building's entrance lobbies:**** Travertine marble

****What type of flooring features in the ground-floor arcade:**** Terrazzo floors

****Were original Art Deco interiors hidden during the building's history:**** Yes, behind false ceilings and partition walls

****Has original plasterwork been restored:**** Yes

****Has the heritage-listed boardroom furniture been preserved:**** Yes

****Is the building's tower visible across Melbourne:**** Yes

****What street does the building's tower define:**** Collins Street streetscape

****Can the public walk through the building's arcade:**** Yes

****Is the Manchester Unity Building considered architecturally significant nationally:**** Yes

****What is the building's architectural inspiration in terms of geography:**** American skyscraper verticality blended with European decorative traditions

****What specific tower feature defines the building's silhouette:**** Stepped setbacks on the tower

****Did construction continue through the night during the build:**** Yes, round-the-clock shifts were used

****Is the Manchester Unity Building still a mixed-use commercial building:**** Yes

****Can patients receive dental care inside the Manchester Unity Building:**** Yes, through Smile Solutions

****How can someone book a consultation at Smile Solutions:**** Via the [Smile Solutions website contact page](<https://www.smilesolutions.com.au/contact-us>)

****What values does Smile Solutions associate with the Manchester Unity Building:**** Quality, craftsmanship and commitment to excellence

****Is the building considered one of Melbourne's most significant heritage spaces:**** Yes
