

Flagstaff House, Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty. Ltd. offices
407-415 King Street, WEST MELBOURNE



Grading: A
Streetscape: 2
Place type: offices
Date(s): 1968
View of place: 2015

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

Titled the Flagstaff House project, a permit for this steel-clad, basement and two-level, office building was sought in July 1968 by owners, occupiers and designers, Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty. Ltd.. The proposed building was to replace four Victorian-era row houses, then used as the firm's offices, at an estimated cost of \$310,000.

As Yuncken Freeman Brothers Griffiths and Simpson Architects, the firm had previously occupied the terrace houses at 411-415 King Street as 'Flagstaff House'. The new building, also Flagstaff House, marked a change in the firm's oeuvre if not the name. Balcombe Griffiths and Roy Simpson were from the five original partners, with descendant John Yuncken, but the new Mesian theme (after Mies van der Rohe of Chicago), that this building expresses so well, came with Barry Patten who joined the firm in c1953. Patten led a team for the prize winning Sidney Myer Music Bowl in 1957, marking a new structure-based design theme. The once large office of Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty. Ltd. no longer exists.

The new Flagstaff House is inspired by van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951), among others. As a 'skin and bones' (van der Rohe) architectural concept, the design can be seen as a horizontal parallel to the commercial towers of BHP house (1967-1972) and the aluminium clad Eagle House (1971-2).

Meticulously planned on an imperial module of 4'10", escape stairs, toilets and plant were in a service strip located along the south side of an open plan office, forming a square of three 27' structural bays per side. The main open stair was centred on the plan within a generous light well, the steel bar balustrades were minimal and the stair flights appeared to float within the space. Suspended ceilings followed the module with recessed low-brightness fluorescent fittings doubling as air distribution within each module; less was more. Upper floors were suspended reinforced concrete.

The south side service strip provided the concrete and masonry buttress for a steel and glass box attached on the north, with a cantilevering upper level, allowing column free façades on two sides. A steel universal-section marked the planning model planted on all glazed facades as structural mullions: exposed columns were also

universal-sections painted matte black as was the facade. A shallow gabled steel deck clad roof set behind a minimal fascia gave the illusion of a flat roof. Double aluminium-framed entry doors were symmetrically arranged on the King Street elevation, accessed by minimalist stair flights that abutted a rendered podium that catered for the sloping site.

When furnished the interior was among the most elegant Modernist office spaces the City had seen, with flush black modular panelling housing adjustable drafting desks, exposed black steel structural frame, grey tufted carpet, white plaster and block walls and suspended ceilings.

Contributory elements include:

- basement and two upper levels of offices in a rectanguloid form;
- no expressed roof;
- the counter play of simple geometric rectanguloid forms, as horizontal elements set again a masonry vertical element, with an offset to allow expression of each;
- glass and steel modular façade with full-height tinted glazing (floor to ceiling);
- imposed 'structure' as steel universal-section mullions on steel plate fascias;
- originally an open office plan with modular partitioning (modified);
- natural grey podium base;
- original black external colour scheme;
- floating external open-riser stairs with simple steel bar balustrading as handrails and newels only;
- flush plaster soffits with recessed downlights; and
- minimal landscaping, paved setting.

Sign panels have been added. External doors and furniture changed. Interior layout and furnishing changed (inspection from street only). Glass bricks added facing the rear car park.

How is it significant?

Flagstaff House, Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty. Ltd. offices is significant historically and aesthetically to West Melbourne, the City of Melbourne and Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Flagstaff House, Yuncken Freeman Architects Pty. Ltd. offices is significant.

- Historically, for the close link with the important architectural firm of Yuncken Freeman Architects designed as their own offices, the firm being nationally prominent at that time; and
- Aesthetically, the most accomplished, early small-scale International Modern office designs in Victoria, serving as a prototype for the design and development of BHP house as well as an advertisement for the firm's design direction; perhaps one of the most faithful of the Mies van der Rohe inspired designs in Victoria, following an internationally applauded design theme.