

Attachment C

**Former Ruby Reds - 273 Crown Street,
Surry Hills – Heritage Assessment**



273 – 275 Crown Street, Surry Hills

Heritage assessment



Prepared for the City of Sydney

September 2025

TKD Architects acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands in which we practise, and we pay our respects to Elders and express our gratitude for sharing of knowledge and culture.

We recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded and acknowledge the continuing unbroken connection to the land, water, and sky.

Cover

273-275 Oxford Street. TKD photograph 2023.

Authorship

This report was written by Senior Heritage Specialist Dr Roy Lumby and reviewed by Principal George Phillips of TKD Architects.

Image credits

All images are by TKD Architects except where noted.

Acknowledgements

City of Sydney Archives.
Erin Cashman, Manager OCEO

Tanner Kibble Denton Architects Pty Ltd | ABN 77 001 209 392

Gadigal Country Level 1, 19 Foster Street, Surry Hills NSW 2000

www.tkda.com.au | +6192814399 | contact@tkda.com.au

NSW Nominated Architects

Robert Denton Registration No. 5782 | Alex Kibble Registration No. 6015

TKD Architects Project No. 220110

Document issue

Issue	Date	Purpose	Written	Reviewed
P1	4 June 2025	Draft issue	RL	GP
P2	28 August 2025	Final draft issue	RL	GP
P3	1 September 2025	Revised final draft issue	RL	GP
P4	5 September 2025	Revised final draft issue	RL	

Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Historical background of the site	3
3	Physical evidence	9
4	Comparative analysis	12
5	Assessment of heritage significance	17
6	Conclusions	19

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of report

This report has been prepared on behalf of the City of Sydney to assess the heritage significance of the former Ruby Reds at 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills. The property was identified as a potential heritage item in the Oxford Street LGBTIQA+ Heritage Study (TKD Architects, 2024). It is one of a pair of buildings comprising 273-275 Crown Street.

The assessment of heritage significance has been undertaken using the guidelines and criteria contained in *Assessing heritage significance – Guidelines for assessing places and objects against the Heritage Council of NSW criteria* (Environment and Heritage Group, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023).

1.2 Site description

273 Crown Street is one of a pair of two storey residential buildings that were constructed circa 1869 and modified in the first half of the 1920s to provide retailing and residential accommodation. The building is located on the western side of Crown Street between Goulburn and Campbell Streets. It is bounded to the west by Lower Campbell Street. The site is identified as Lot A Deposited Plan 436515.



1 Location Plan.
Source: SIX Maps with TKD Overlay.

2 Historical background of the site

2.1 Site history

The site of 273 Crown Street is part of 25 acres (10.12 hectares) granted to Alexander Donaldson in August 1795 and shortly after acquired by Commissary John Palmer, who acquired a substantial land holding in the area. His Surry Hills Estate was sold in 1814 to clear his debts. The land then became part of merchant and pastoralist Edward Riley's estate that extended from Woolloomooloo Bay to Surry Hills. The site is on part of Block B4 of the Riley Estate, bounded by Riley, Crown, Campbell and Goulburn Streets.

What was to become the site of 273-275 Crown Street was acquired by builder Joseph Watson and his wife Hannah in September 1868.¹ A pair of two storey houses, one with a shop, was built shortly after. What was then identified as 271 Crown Street (later 273 Crown Street) was occupied by Joseph Watson and his family.² On 7 January 1878 the Watsons conveyed the property title to piano tuner August Gehde, who became one of the directors of W H Paling & Co, a major retailer of musical instruments. He and his family initially occupied one of the houses and eventually both of them. Gehde sold the two buildings to chemist and president of the Pharmaceutical Society of New South Wales, Andrew Wadsworth, in January 1913.³ Wadsworth then brought the property under Torrens Title.⁴

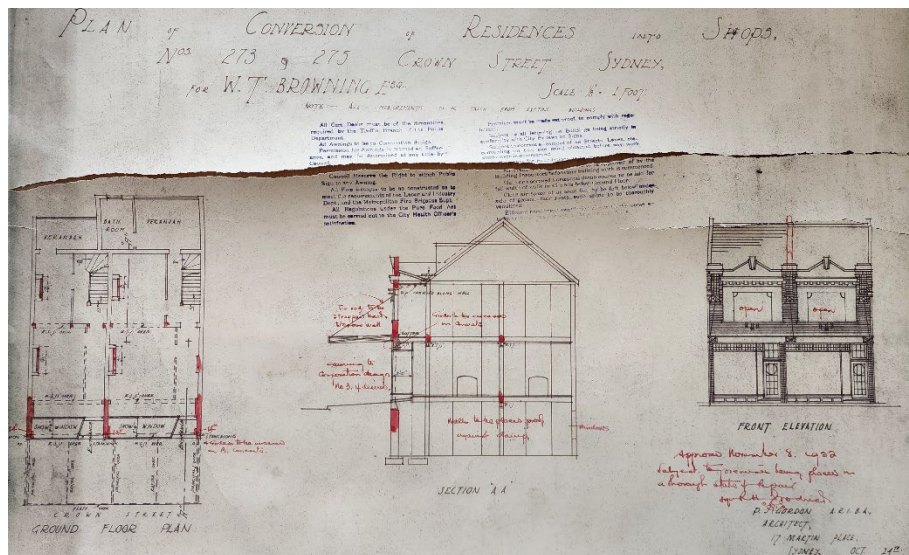
On 27 October 1922 architect Percy James Gordon (refer to Section 4) lodged a drawing describing alteration to 273-275 Crown Street with the City Council. The drawing described the conversion of the ground floor of the buildings from residential to shop use and the construction of a new Crown Street façade.⁵ Some four days after Gordon lodged the drawings, Wadsworth transferred the property title to freeholder Raymond Gales and warehouseman James Adamson. Just over a week later they conveyed it to shopkeeper William Browning.

In March 1923 Browning sold 273-275 Crown Street to Mrs Louise Cherry, who subsequently sold it to John Deehan of Garland (near Cowra) in November 1923. During the 1920s and in the following decades the two buildings were occupied by a succession of small retailing businesses and their owners.⁶



2 Portion of an 1880s survey showing the footprint of development at 273-275 Crown Street, including two storey brick dwellings with single storey rear sections and a timber structure at the rear. Source: City of Sydney Archives - Rygate and West Sheet 19, 1888.

1 HLRV NSW Old Systems Title Book 110 No. 939.
2 *Sands Sydney and suburban directory*, 1870 edition.
3 HLRV NSW Old Systems Title Book 986 Number 43.
4 HLRV NSW Primary Application 18500.
5 City of Sydney Archives Building Application 796/22.
6 HLRV NSW Certificate of Title Volume 2411 Folio 43.



- 4 Drawing describing alterations and additions to 273-275 Crown Street documented by Percy James Gordon, 1922.
- Source: City of Sydney Archives Building Application 796/22.



- 3 Portion of a circa 1932 aerial photograph of Surry Hills showing 273-275 Crown Street. The original form of the buildings is clearly apparent.
- Source: State Library of NSW Milton Kent photograph.

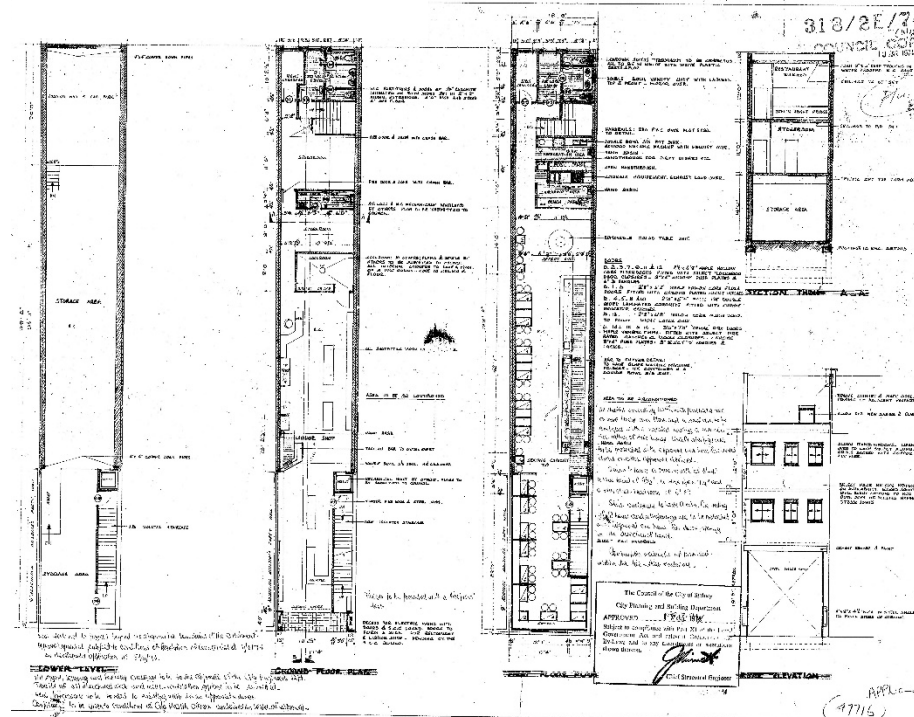
After Deehan's death in 1928 the property passed to Ambrose Marks, a market gardener residing at Dalby Falls, and John Deehan Gruber, a Parkes grazier, during 1929. Both are understood to be members of Deehan's family. Marks and Gruber retained possession of 273-275 Crown Street for several years before transferring the title to storekeeper Placido Guiseppe Volani and wine and spirit merchant Aldo Testoni in April 1948.⁷ In February 1952 Volani and Testoni split the property title into two parts. Volani retained 275 Crown Street while Testoni retained 273 Crown Street.⁸ 273 Crown Street was leased to a succession of wine and spirit merchants before Testoni transferred the property title to Martha Rhodes Pty Limited at the end of August 1973.⁹ During this period the first floor balcony was enclosed.

Martha Rhodes Pty Limited commissioned LJ Kennedy & Associates to document extensive alterations and additions to the building, extending it across the entire site to Lower Campbell Street. Plans were lodged with the City of Sydney in March 1974. The basement level was to be used as storage, the ground floor as a liquor shop and the first floor as a bar and restaurant served by lavatories on the floor below.¹⁰

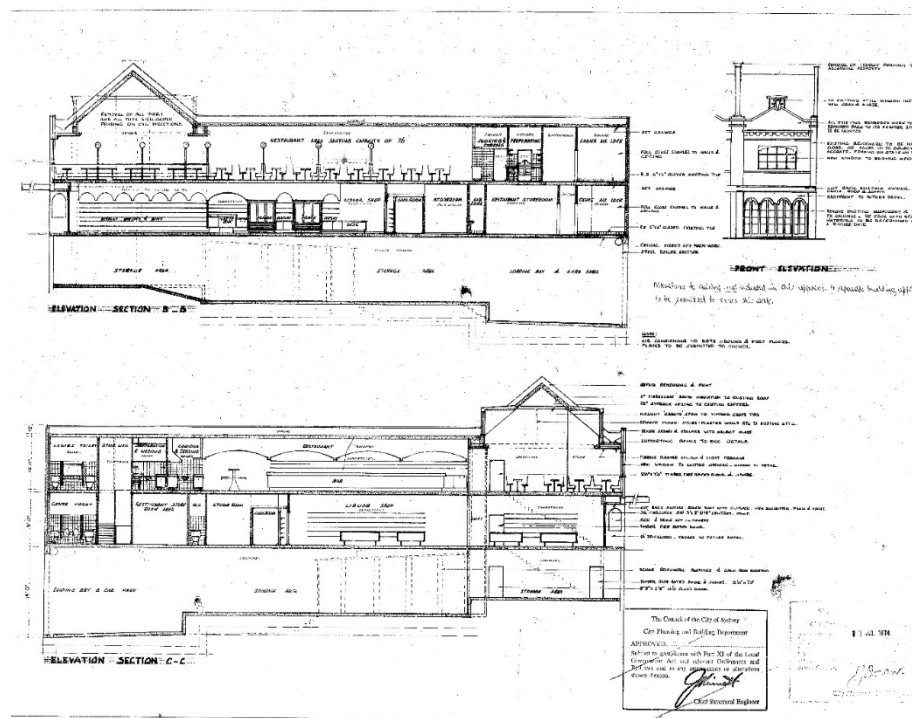


- 5 Portion of an aerial photograph taken in 1949 showing development on the site of 273-275 Crown Street.
- Source: City of Sydney Archives – Aerial Photographic Survey, 1949, Image 34.

7 HLRV NSW Certificate of Title Volume 2411 Folio 43.
 8 HLRV NSW Certificate of Title Volume 5857 Folio 211.
 9 HLRV NSW Certificate of Title Volume 6527 Folio 170.
 10 City of Sydney Archives Building Application 318/74.



6 Architectural drawing describing alterations and additions to 273 Crown Street, 1974.
Source: City of Sydney Archives, Building Application 318/74.



7 Architectural drawing describing alterations and additions to 273 Crown Street, 1974.
Source: City of Sydney Archives, Building Application 318/74.

At the end of 1975 the first floor and part of the ground floor were leased to a company called Satay Hut Pty Limited. The lease expired in July 1978.¹¹ The previous month a development application was lodged by Australian Tavernas (refer to Section 2.2) to maintain the existing restaurant and allow recorded music and dancing. This was approved in September 1978 and is understood to be associated with Ruby Reds.

11 HLRV NSW Certificate of Title Volume 6527 Folio 170.

A few dates have been given for the opening of Ruby Reds at 273 Crown Street. According to the Pride History Group,

Ruby Reds was the first lesbian only bar in Sydney and when it opened in 1976 every kind of lesbian started to go there. There were students, bar dykes, feminists and discreet professional women, all mixed up together.

Ruby Reds had been a steakhouse on Crown Street, above Crown Liquor, when Dawn O'Donnell and Roger-Claude Tesseydre took it over. They took out the tables and chairs and turned the kitchen into a bar, but left the leather banquettes for people to sit on. It was a long, narrow building with a dance floor in the middle and seating around the edge.¹²

According to Clive Faro and Garry Wotherspoon, Ruby Reds opened in 1979¹³ while Frances Rand, co-founder and publisher of *Lesbians on the Loose*, dates it to around 1975.¹⁴ The Australian Tavernas development application suggests this is the most likely date. Ruby Reds was a bar and dance venue devoted to Sydney's lesbian community. The business was owned by Dawn O'Donnell. The steakhouse that occupied the premises, evidently called Ruby Red's Steakhouse, was offered by its managers to O'Donnell and Tesseydre.

2.2 Dawn O'Donnell

Dawn O'Donnell (1928-2007) was a prominent businesswoman in the gay and lesbian community. She was born in Paddington. During the 1940s she gained a reputation as a popular and skilled ice skater, taking part in shows staged at Sydney's Glacarium at Railway Square and the Ice Skating Palais at the Sydney Showgrounds. She became the Australian ladies' ice speed skating champion in 1948 and in 1951 travelled to London to take part in a pantomime staged on ice.¹⁵ She returned to Sydney during 1953. During this period she taught speed-skating at the Glacarium and, after it closed, at the Prince Alfred Park rink. Her skating career ended after a training accident.

After the accident Dawn O'Donnell married butcher Des Irwin. The marriage was short-lived. However, she managed a butcher's shop at Double Bay and then a parking lot in Ultimo. In 1962 she and a small group of gay men and lesbians including her partner at the time, Julia Farmer, formed the inclusive social group known as the Chameleons, a successful club that lasted into the early 1990s. In 1966 the Chameleons became Sydney's first legal homosexual organisation.¹⁶

One of O'Donnell's earliest (if not the earliest) ventures into gay venues was Karen's Castle, which opened in 1965 in a converted shop in Cleveland Street, Redfern. Drag shows were staged there on weekends but it was sold in 1967. In the interim she and Julia Farmer opened the



8 Dawn O'Donnell, 1993.
Source: National Library of Australia,
<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-142843715/view>, Greg Barrett photograph.

12 Rebecca Jennings and Sandra Mackay, *Out and About: Sydney's Lesbian Social Scene 1960s-1980s* (Pride History Group Sydney, 2009), p.28.

13 Clive Faro and Garry Wotherspoon, *Street Seen: A history of Oxford Street* (Melbourne University Press, 2000), p.252.

14 Frances Rand, "Dawn O'Donnell: 'Hard but fair' ", *Lesbians on the Loose*, January 1992, p.14.

15 "Australians on the Ice", *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1951, p.18.

16 <https://glebesociety.org.au/street/49-glebe-point-rd-story/>

Trolley Car, which attracted a mixed gay and lesbian crowd, around 1966. It was located on the first floor of a terrace house on City Road.¹⁷

A succession of venues initiated by O'Donnell for lesbians and for gay men followed. These included a gay male bathhouse at Bondi Junction known as the Viking Sauna (opened in 1968) and Capriccio's at 163-169 Oxford Street, opened in association with Marjorie Hathaway and celebrated for its sophisticated drag shows (opened in 1969). Others included the cabaret venue and supper club Jools at 121-129 Crown Street, East Sydney, taken over by Dawn O'Donnell and Roger-Claude Tesseydre in 1973, Patchs at 33 Oxford Street (opened in 1976 and later taken over by O'Donnell),¹⁸ Flo's Palace at 97 Oxford Street (1979) and the Exchange Hotel at 34 Oxford Street (circa 1982). Several of these venues were associated with a company by the name of Australian Tavernas. Thus, Jools was Tavernas No 1 and Ruby Reds was Tavernas No. 2. Other businesses were under other company names. Patchs and Rubies were under the control of O'Donnell's business partner Abe Saffron.¹⁹

According to the State Heritage Register listing for the Imperial Hotel at Erskineville, which she acquired in 1983 along with the Newtown Hotel at Newtown,

O'Donnell's business partnerships with Abe Saffron and supposed involvement in paying for police protection and other activities in a time when homosexuality was still considered a crime in NSW surrounded her in controversy and rumour. She was well known for providing bail money for those arrested under the laws but was famously never arrested or charged with anything herself despite her public operations of the clubs and bars. During her life she actively encouraged stories of her connections and influence which were explored in a documentary of her life, *Croc-A-Dyke Dundee: The Legend of Dawn O'Donnell* (2014) made after she died in 2007. Through her many businesses on Oxford Street and in the surrounding neighbourhood she was credited with transforming Oxford Street into a famous LGBTQIA+ precinct.²⁰

However, Dawn O'Donnell was also noted for her generosity and philanthropy, supporting lesbian, gay and mainstream charities.²¹

2.3 Subsequent site history

As with its opening, the date of Ruby Red's closure is not clear. It is said to have closed in 1982 although another source maintains it closed in 1986.²² The building then housed a succession of bars and clubs catering to the lesbian and gay community. These included:



9 The bar at Ruby Reds, 12 April 1984
Source: Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, photograph by Cayte Latta, Papers of Cayte Latta.

¹⁷ Jennings and Mackay, p.8.

¹⁸ Although Patchs opened in 1976, its first operator was Rod Stringer, who also published the national gay monthly tabloid magazine *Campaign*. Dawn didn't take it over until later.

¹⁹ Pride History Group, "Pride History Group Oral History Interview with Sharyn Lee Interviewer: John Witte" at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b4d8eda620b85efd8bc7a05/t/6785a86ec3e00c55b948d5b5/1736812654807/log_lee_sharyn.pdf, accessed 8 May 2025.

²⁰ State Heritage Register inventory for the Imperial Hotel, 35 -37 Erskineville Road, Erskineville at <https://www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5068106> accessed 8 May 2025.

²¹ Ian Johnson, Out Now, "Parent of Gay Sydney History Dies" at <http://www.gaymarketnews.com/2007/06/part-of-gay-sydney-history-dies.html>, accessed 8 May 2025.

²² [file:///C:/Users/rlumby/Downloads/FINAL%20Parade%20History%20Walk%20Accessible%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/rlumby/Downloads/FINAL%20Parade%20History%20Walk%20Accessible%20(2).pdf), accessed 24 April 2025.

- the mixed venue Querelle, which opened on 23 May 1986.²³
- the Boogie Room, opened by building owner Roger Carroll in November 1988.²⁴
- 'B's opened in early 1990, and then Pastels a few months afterwards.
- Ruby Red's reopened in the venue in 1991 as "Rubies." It apparently closed in the last quarter of 1992 or early 1993.
- in 1995 the building became Headquarters, a gay male bath house and bar. Headquarters proved to be relatively enduring.
- around December 2016 Trade cruise club opened, closing in 2023.

A restaurant called Destiny's on Crown Cabaret Restaurant occupied part of the building from 2007 to circa 2015. 273 Oxford Street, which is presently unoccupied, is owned by Stasia Pty Limited.

23

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b4d8eda620b85efd8bc7a05/t/5e104a8f749ef14481b2e293/1578125989596/Decades+of+Pride+-+1988.pdf>

24

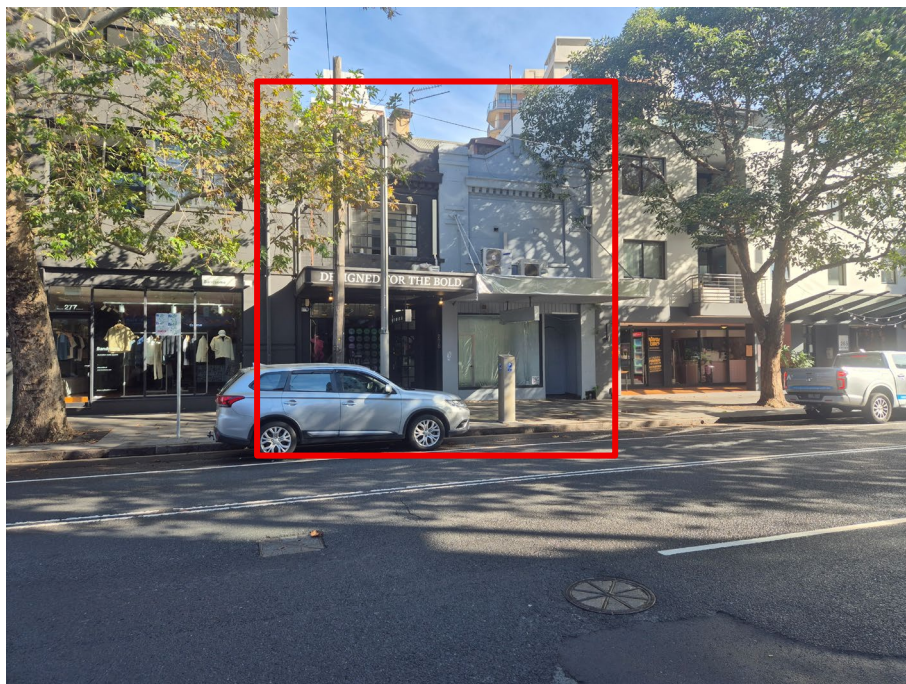
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b4d8eda620b85efd8bc7a05/t/5e104a8f749ef14481b2e293/1578125989596/Decades+of+Pride+-+1988.pdf>

3 Physical evidence

273 Crown Street is the northern component of a pair of two storey nineteenth century buildings with 1920s facades demonstrating characteristics of the Inter War Free Classical style, which enjoyed great popularity during the 1920s. Characteristics include symmetry, broad stylistic effects rather than intricate detail and simplification of classical idioms, in this case the detailing of the parapet. First floor walls are lined with cement render. Overall the building has a characteristic nineteenth terrace form. Its roof is covered by corrugated steel. There are dormers on the eastern side of the roof over 273 and 275 Crown Street. A stone party wall capped by a chimney at the ridge separates the two buildings. The shopfront of 273 Crown Street has retained its 1920s form, with a recessed porch on the northern side of the building but otherwise has been modified. The shopfront of 275 Crown Street has retained much of its 1920s form and fabric, including leadlight glazing and the glazed door to the shop. Shopfronts are sheltered by a suspended awning although original soffits have been replaced.

The rear (western) side of the building, built during the 1970s, is three storeys high. External construction consists of textured brickwork. The edges of concrete floor slabs are exposed. The lowest level has a tall full width opening and contains a loading dock on the southern side of the building. A roller shutter has been installed in the loading dock opening. A door to the north is accessed by a flight of concrete stairs with a simple tubular metal pipe handrail on one side. Fenestration in the two levels above consists of a pair of windows on the northern side of the elevation and two single windows on the southern side. Windows consist of double hung aluminium framed sashes.

The interior of the building was not inspected. However, documentary evidence indicates there has been a relatively high level of internal modification, suggesting there is little remaining early fabric.



10 273-275 Crown Street in their immediate context. The stone chimney between the two buildings can be seen.



11 Crown Street façade of 273-275 Crown Street. 273 Crown Street is highlighted.



12 Looking west along Taggart Lane towards 273-275 Crown Street (highlighted). The original roof and party wall between the pair of buildings are visible.



- 13 Shopfronts of 275 Crown Street (left) and 273 Crown Street (right). The shopfront at 275 Crown Street has a higher level of integrity, but that at 273 Crown Street has retained its 1920s form.



- 14 Looking east (left) and north (right) along Lower Campbell Street towards the rear of 273 Crown Street.



- 15 Left: rear elevation of 273 Crown Street. Right: looking to the rear of 275 Crown Street. Part of the original roof of 273 Crown Street is also visible.

4 Comparative analysis

4.1 Percy James Gordon

Percy James Gordon (1892-1976) was articled to the office of architects Morrow & De Putron in 1909. David Thomas Morrow was Gordon's uncle. He received formal education at Sydney Technical College and after completing his articles in 1914 studied architecture in London and at Pennsylvania University in the USA, with some work experience in Chicago.

In 1915 he returned to work with Morrow & De Putron before enlisting in the AIF in 1917 and served in France. At the conclusion of World War I he remained in London and studied at the London Architectural Association. Gordon returned to Sydney during 1919 and after eighteen months in private practice, rejoined Morrow & De Putron and became a partner in 1922. De Putron resigned from the practice in 1925 and it became known as Morrow & Gordon. Morrow resigned in 1932. Gordon was President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects NSW Chapter between 1944 and 1946. The practice was carried on and continued after Gordon died, closing in 1992.

Percy Gordon worked as a sole practitioner for only a brief period and records of buildings designed by him in this period are scarce. However, several buildings designed by Morrow, De Putron & Gordon and Morrow & Gordon that are listed as heritage items by the City of Sydney include:

- Vanderbilt Flats, 13 Springfield Avenue, Potts Point (1925).
- Alexandria Town Hall (1928).
- Grace Bros Repository, Mallett Street, Camperdown (1928).
- Former Grace Building (now Grace Hotel, 77-79 King Street, Sydney (1930).
- AWA Building, York Street, Sydney (1939; in association with Roberston & Marks).
- Alterations to the CB Hotel in Pitt Street, Sydney (1940).

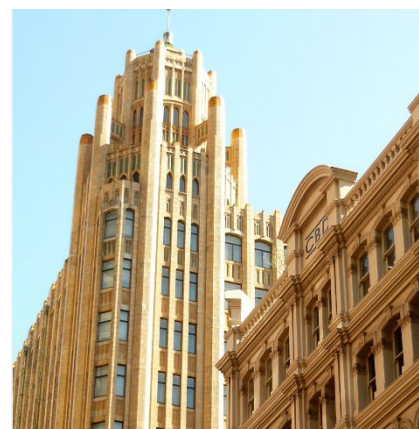
Further afield, other heritage listed buildings by the firms include Greenway Apartments, Broughton Street, Kirribilli (1948) and Burwood Masonic Temple (1925).

4.2 Architecture

The architectural form of 273-275 Crown Street reflects a relatively common interwar practice, whereby Victorian era residential buildings were "modernised" by alterations that included conversion to retailing use accompanied by the application of an up-to-date façade over the front of the structure, frequently masking the original roof form behind it. If the building was set back from the street this meant the loss of its front yard. Examples that occurred in other local government areas include the shops that were constructed in front of the historically significant Colonial era house known as Juniper Hall in Paddington during 1921. The building was converted to flats at the same time. A similar process took place in Rose Bay during 1937, where the construction of shops in front of the Federation era house at 730-738 New South Head Road was also accompanied by the conversion of the house to flats.



16 Percy James Gordon.
Source: *Decoration and Glass*, April 1936



17 The Grace Building (now Grace Hotel).
Source: City of Sydney Archives Unique ID A-00062397, Mark Goddard photograph.



- 18 Left: Free Classical style shops in front of Juniper Hall on Oxford Street, Paddington. The shops have since been removed.
 Right: Inter War Functionalist Style shops in front of the Edwardian era house at 730-738 New South Head Road, Rose Bay.
 Sources: Woollahra Library Accession Number pf004462; City of Sydney Archives Unique ID A-01170166.

The facades added to 273-275 Oxford Street were designed in the Inter War Free Classical style, as outlined in Section 3 above. The style was widely used by architects during the 1920s, applied to building types as diverse as town halls, hotels, cinemas, masonic lodges, office buildings, department stores and hospitals. Traditional classical elements were often simplified or interpreted imaginatively, while broad effects were preferred to intricacies of detail.²⁵ The following images demonstrate the characteristics of the style.



- 19 Retailer Edward Arnold undertook development on its site at the intersection of Oxford and Crown Streets in 1923, designed by architects H A Wilshire & Day. Free Classical detailing includes the pilasters on the first and second floors dividing elevations into bays and the cornice above the second floor windows. Source: State Library of NSW Home and Away 35001, Hall & Co photograph.

²⁵ Richard Apperly, Robert Irving and Peter Reynolds, *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: styles and terms from 1788 to the present* (Angus & Robertson, 1989, pp.158-161.



- 21 Albion House at 10-16 Flinders Street is understood to have been constructed in 1926. The modulation of the simple façade is similar to Edward Arnold's buildings – piers regulating it into bays and a prominent cornice below the parapet. The quoins in the piers at either side of the façade is a characteristic Free Classical detail.
Source: City of Sydney Archives Unique ID A-00074618, Mark Stevens photographer.



- 20 The Court House Hotel at the intersection of Oxford and Bourke Streets was designed by architects Prevost Synnot & Ruwald and built around 1930. Classical detailing has been spread imaginatively across the facades. The exterior of the hotel contrasts with the Free Classical design of the neighbouring Victorian era building at 185 Oxford Street to the right.
Source: Australian National University Noel Butlin Archive at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/203536842?keyword=Court%20House%20Hotel%20%20Oxford%20Street>

4.3 Bars and venues frequented by Sydney's lesbian community

For a large part of the twentieth century stigma against homosexuality and pressures to conform forced many people to be discrete in their behaviour and gather in private or otherwise frequent a small number of hotels where their presence would not be conspicuous.

According to Rebecca Jennings, formerly Honorary Fellow in the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University and Professor of Modern Gender History University College London:

Available oral history evidence suggests that lesbians only appeared on Sydney's camp social scene – as the early lesbian and gay bar culture was known – in significant numbers in the early 1960s, when they began frequenting bars and cabaret clubs alongside camp men. Prior to this, much of the evidence points to a unique lesbian scene in Sydney, centred on private networks meeting at house parties and later in social groups. The predominance of private rather than public patterns of socialising in the immediate postwar decades had a lasting impact on the development of lesbian social practices and subcultural identities...²⁶

26 Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: a Sydney lesbian history* (Monash University Publishing, 2015, p.51. Social groups included the Chameleons (founded in 1962), Boomerangs, Kuringals the Polynesian Social Club (also known as Polly's, founded 1967) and the lesbian-only Clover (founded in 1972). Refer to Jennings and Mackay, pp.15-24.

Chez Ivy's, understood to have been at 101-105 Oxford Street Bondi Junction (since demolished) was a pioneering lesbian and gay establishment. Ivy Richter (1927-2013) was a pioneering venue owner who turned a wine bar that she ran in Bondi Junction into Chez Ivy's in 1962, assisted by her husband and gay friends. Here camp men and women were served drinks by drag queens in bunny girl outfits and were entertained with live music. She sold Chez Ivy's in 1967 and opened Ivy's Birdcage at 191-195 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst.²⁷ The Birdcage, originally extending over two levels, staged drag shows on the top level. Both Chez Ivy's and Ivy's Birdcage were well patronised by lesbians and gay men:

... lesbians were ... beginning to join a much longer-standing gay male bar culture in significant numbers, reflecting a broader social acceptance of women and public drinking in the wake of reforms to the licensing laws in the late 1950s. Male narrators recall seeing lesbian on the commercial scene for the first time in the early 1960s, and lesbian narrators began to discuss their participation in the bar scene from the 1960s onwards. Lesbians socialised alongside homosexual men and drag queens in venues such as Chez Ivy wine bar in Bondi Junction and the Purple Onion coffee shop on Anzac Parade...²⁸

The Sussex Hotel at 68 Liverpool Street, Sydney (1922, demolished in the late 1980s) was a lesbian venue in the 1960s. At the Sussex women were confined to one bar. After the Trolley Car opened women would move on to it from the Sussex after drinking there ceased at 10.00 pm. Although not exclusively lesbian, upstairs at the Trolley Car enjoyed a large female patronage. This was the first time there was intermingling. Another venue that was popular with lesbians in the 1960s and early 1970s was the Park Inn (now Centennial Hotel) at 88-90 Oxford Street, Woollahra, which opened as a camp venue in 1970.

The circa 1903 Royal George Hotel on the north-western corner of King and Sussex Streets, Sydney, opened as a "new gay spot" in the first quarter of 1977.²⁹ For some years a favourite pub of the Sydney Push, it attracted a part-time lesbian clientele into the early 1990s. In August 1990 "Georgies" nightclub opened in the lower section of the hotel, operating from 10.00 pm every Saturday – "it's a sophisticated club with dance floor, lounge rooms, and an open air area, perfect as the nights warm."³⁰

Other hotels utilised by heterosexual or gay male patrons would also have women's nights. For instance, in 1978 the Back Bar of the Oriental Hotel, at the intersection of Crown and Campbell Streets, Surry Hills, was advertised as a women's only venue from Thursday to Saturday between the hours of 7 and 10 pm.³¹ Further afield, the Honest Irishman Hotel at 138 Parramatta Road, Camperdown, which began trading as a predominantly gay male venue in December 1981, included for a time a women's bar known as "Vicki's Venue".

However, venues targeting lesbian trade didn't always succeed. The 1907 Belmore Park Hotel at 47 Reservoir Street, Surry Hills, opened as a short-lived lesbian venue in August 1983. According to the *Oxford Weekender News* it was the first full-time pub in Sydney for women. Halfway between two major women's venues, it was a pub that women would patronise before moving on to other places. It is understood to have closed for business in 1985. Other lesbian venues

27 Development application DA 263/1/68 for the use of 193-195 Oxford Street for a licensed restaurant and nightclub was lodged on 20 November 1968.

28 Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: a Sydney lesbian history* (Monash University Publishing, 2015), p.58

29 "New Gay Spots", *Campaign*, March 1977, p.27.

30 "New Bars Open", *Lesbians on the Loose*, September 1990, p.1.

31 Advertisement, *Campaign*, April 1978, p.20.



22 191-195 Oxford Street, the site of Ivy's Birdcage, photographed in 1959.
Source: City of Sydney Archives Unique ID A-00058116, Len Stone collection.



23 The Sussex Hotel.
Source: Australian National University Noel Butlin Archive.



24 The Royal George Hotel, photographed during the 1980s when it was a favoured lesbian venue.
Source: City of Sydney Archives UID A-00028379



25 The Belmore Park Hotel in Surry Hills as it appeared in 1921.
Source: City of Sydney Archives Unique ID A-00037057.

that opened during the 1980s included The Playground at 504 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, which opened at the end of January 1983 and CJ's restaurant and disco at the intersection of Cleveland and Elizabeth Streets, which opened in January 1988.

In September 1990, the magazine *Lesbians on the Loose* reported on the opening of three new lesbian bars in Sydney – Girl Bar, XL's, and Georgie's – but only open one night a week. These venues, along with existing ones, brought the total number of lesbian nightspots in Sydney to seven. Other lesbian and women-only spaces included a Feminist Bookshop in Lilyfield, a "Dyke Talent Nite cum cabaret", and "Girls own Space".

In 2024 it was reported that Sydney currently had only one nightspot for lesbian and queer women: "Birdcage", at the top level of Newtown's Bank Hotel, which operated every Wednesday.³²

4.4 Conclusions

Architecturally 273 (and 275) Crown Street are typical of conversions undertaken to Victorian era houses during the 1920s. The façade is typical of many suburban shops from the 1920s and is not exceptional.

Clearly the opening of Ruby Reds was a milestone in the history of Lesbian venues. Although it is not clear how long it functioned as an exclusively lesbian venue, evidence suggests that it maintained its popularity longer than contemporary venues frequented by lesbians. As well, the building has apparently been continuously used as a LGBTIQ+ venue for the second half of the 1970s to 2013, which places it amongst the most enduring of buildings associated with LGBTIQ+ gathering and recreation.

32 Emma Peters, "'Missing: the Search for Sydney's Missing Lesbian Nightlife'", Gamamari, 1 August 2024 at <https://gamamari.com/missing-the-search-for-sydneys-lesbian-nightlife/> accessed 7 August 2025

5 Assessment of heritage significance

The building at 273 Crown Street, Surry Hills, is assessed below in accordance with the guidelines contained in *Assessing heritage significance: Guidelines for assessing places and objects against the Heritage Council of NSW criteria* (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023).

Historical significance

Criterion A An item is important in the course, or pattern, of NSW's cultural or natural history (or the cultural or natural history of the local area).

273 Crown Street is significant as the location of Sydney's first recreational venue dedicated to the lesbian community. It has also been suggested that it was the first such venue in Australia,³³ although this needs to be substantiated. 273 Crown Street has been, in various iterations, associated with Sydney's lesbian and gay communities since the second half of the 1970s almost up to the present time.

273 Crown Street meets the threshold for listing at a Local level.

Historical associations

Criterion B An item has strong or special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance to NSW's cultural or natural history (or the cultural or natural history of the local area).

273-275 Crown Street has associations with the work of architect Percy Gordon, who was a sole practitioner at the time it was designed. He became a director of the prominent commercial architectural practice of Morrow, De Putron & Gordon and then Morrow & Gordon. These two firms were responsible for the design of a relatively large number of high quality buildings, several of which have been listed as heritage items in Sydney LEP 2012. However, 273-275 Crown Street is not one of Percy Gordon's major projects.

273 Crown Street has associations with prominent entrepreneur Dawn O'Donnell, who gave much support to Sydney's lesbian and gay communities and was responsible for opening several recreational venues to serve these communities.

273 Crown Street meets the threshold for listing at a Local level.

Aesthetic significance

Criterion C An item is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics and/or a high degree of creative or technical achievement in NSW (or the local area).

The façade of 273 Crown Street (along with that of 275 Crown Street), is typical of small suburban commercial buildings constructed in Sydney during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many, like 273 Crown Street, were constructed as alterations and additions to earlier buildings. The façade is a modest example of the Inter War Free Classical style, which was popular during the

³³ <https://www.sushi-rider.com/friends-of-dorothy/first-lesbian-bar-clubs-worldwide.html>, accessed 9 April 2024.

1920s. The façade of 273 Crown Street has been obscured by later modifications while the façade of 275 Crown Street has a higher level of integrity. However, it does not demonstrate a high degree of technical achievement, nor is it of outstanding aesthetic quality.

Alterations and additions undertaken during the 1970s are understood to have removed a substantial amount of original internal fabric, as is evident from building application drawings.

273 Crown Street does not fulfil this criterion.

Social significance

Criterion D An item has strong or special associations with a particular community or cultural group in NSW (or the local area) for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

Documentary evidence suggests that 273 Crown Street would have significance to members of Sydney's lesbian community, who would have frequented the place while it was serving as an exclusive lesbian venue. It may also have significance to members of the LGBTIQ+ community who frequented it in its subsequent iterations. However, further research is required to confirm this.

273 Crown Street is considered likely to fulfil this criterion at a Local level.

Research potential

Criterion E An item has potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of NSW's cultural or natural history (or the cultural or natural history of the local area).

273 Crown Street is unlikely to fulfil this criterion. The information that it can yield can also be obtained from other sites in the local government area. Modifications undertaken to the building's interior have compromised its integrity.

Rarity

Criterion F An item possesses uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of NSW's cultural or natural history (or the cultural or natural history of the local area).

273 Crown Street, as an example of an Inter War Free Classical shop and residential building, is not rare. It should be noted that the Free Classical façade has been imposed over a Victorian terrace house, evidence of which is still clearly visible. The history of the building, where the original structure has been adapted to a variety of uses over time, is not rare.

273 Crown Street does not fulfil this criterion at a Local or State level.

Representativeness

Criterion G An item is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of NSW's (or local area's) cultural or natural places, or cultural or natural environment.

273 Crown Street is representative of Victorian dwellings that were adapted to retailing during the 1920s. Its façade is representative of the Inter War Free Classical style.

273 Crown Street fulfils this criterion at a Local level.

6 Conclusions

273 Crown Street fulfils the NSW Heritage Council's criteria for historical, historical association, and social significance at a local level. It therefore warrants consideration for listing as a heritage item in Schedule 5 of Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012.

Consider listing the pair of buildings at 273-275 Crown Street. Although 273 Crown Street has been a significant component of Sydney's LGBTIQ+ community since the late 1970s, the buildings share a common history between 1869 and 1952 and the 1920s alterations were designed by architect Percy Gordon as a pair.