Newcastle Art Gallery

Newcastle Art Gallery was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on Friday 11 March 1977. It was the culmination of decades of work to realise the belief that Newcastle, a city known for industry, could also be famous for having the best art gallery in the country.

Newcastle Art Gallery is a pioneer. It was the first purpose built regional art gallery in Australia. With its sharp geometric shapes and exposed concrete walls the gallery reflects the Brutalist aesthetic that flourished in the decades after the Second World War. The Gallery has collected over 6000 works since its inception, and is considered one of the most significant public collections in the country.

Today the gallery hosts a variety of exhibitions drawn both from its own collection and from other institutions via travelling exhibitions.
Music, Literature and Art

Paul Beadle’s relief sculptures adorn the entrance to the Newcastle War Memorial Cultural Centre. His heavily stylised work is designed to fit into tight spaces. The two relief shows music, literature and art. Beadle included a unique self-portrait carving a male bust in the top of the right entry. The works reflect the community’s desire to be a place of creativity and learning.

English born Beadle was the head of the Art School at Newcastle Technical College from 1951 until 1957. He taught and exhibited widely in Australia before migrating to New Zealand in 1961.

The Baptist Tabernacle

The Baptist Tabernacle was designed by one of Newcastle’s most prominent and popular architects of the late 19th and early 20th century, Frederick Menkens. Constructed from 1889 to 1890, the buildings elaborate painted plaster and neo-classical Corinthian facade was inspired by the Spaegue Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. It was threatened with compulsory demolition during the planning of the neighbouring Newcastle War Memorial Cultural Centre in the 1940s but both legal arrangements and the Tabernacle’s trustees prevented the building’s destruction.

Frederick B. Menkens

Frederick B. Menkens was born in Germany in 1855. Few could claim to have had as diverse and striking an impact on the look and character of Newcastle’s architectural environment as Menkens.

His first trade was bricklaying but he went on to study Architecture at the Royal Polytechnicum at Hanover. He migrated to Australia in 1876. In 1881 he set up an architectural practice in Maitland for a year before moving to Newcastle. Here his practice flourished, and Menkens would go on to design over 100 buildings in the city and throughout the Hunter.

Menkens developed a reputation amongst local builders as uncompromising and demanding. Having learnt bricklaying as a trade, it is said he would remove his hat and coat, snatch the trowel from a bricklayer and proceed to demonstrate the proper technique for laying bricks. If what was being produced did not meet his standards, Menkens even spent time in court with the builder, and if necessary, with one builder, sued in the Supreme Court over a dispute with the contractor regarding the quality of their product.

Menkens died aged 55 from cirrhosis on 10 March 1910. His legacy can be seen across Newcastle in the buildings he designed.

His skills as an architect and his ability to adapt his style to meet the needs of his clients are well demonstrated here on Laman Street. Menkens, not only designed the Baptist Tabernacle, but in the very same year designed the very different Gothic influenced St Andrews Presbyterian Church on the corner of Laman and Auckland Street.

The Earthquake

The Earthquake struck Newcastle at 10.27am on Thursday, 28 December, 1899. It was one of the most serious natural disasters in Australia’s history.

Registering 5.5 on the Richter scale, the earthquake claimed 9 lives in total. In addition to the nine people killed at the Newcastle Worker’s Club three people were killed in Beamoun Street, Hamilton and one person died of shock. A further 160 people were hospitalised. The death toll could have been far worse.

At this time Newcastle’s CBD was a dominant commercial and retail hub. Thousands of people would normally flock to the CBD to take advantage of post-Christmas sales, but a public transport strike meant that fewer people were in town than usual.

50,000 buildings were damaged and approximately 40,000 of these were homes. 300 buildings had to be demolished. 1,000 people lost their homes and the damage bill was estimated to be about four billion Australian dollars.

Newcastle Civic

Newcastle Civic is a combination of the 1896 Art School building, the 1895 Trades Hall building and a 1997 extension that joins the two architectural highlights into one.

8 The Workers Club

The Workers Club forms the legacy of one of the most prominent cultural, political and social hubs in Newcastle, as well as being the site of one of the city’s greatest tragedies.

The Newcastle Trades Hall Workers Club otherwise known as the ‘Red Inn’ and ‘The Newcastle Workers Club’ opened on this site on the 8th of October 1848, to prepare and teach skills for workers in preparation for the revolution.

During the 1950s and 60s the club played an important role in the local Labour movement, and acted as a platform for organising and staging community events.

By the 1980s it was a popular live music venue. On December 28th, 1989, the Workers Club was due to host a performance by popular band Crowed House, with thousands expected to attend. Hours before, however, at 10.27 am, the city was devastated by an earthquake. Parts of the Workers Club collapsed resulting in nine deaths.

The new Workers Club building was officially opened in 1992 by Prime Minister Paul Keating.

10 Bank Corner

The acutely angled intersection of Hunter and Hannell Streets was occupied by a bank for over 100 years. The previous building stood for 50 years before being replaced by the one before you in 1940.

Described in the press at the time of its opening as a simple modernised version of the Classical Traditional, the building also has Art Deco influences in the detail and decorative elements.

The building was a branch of the Bank of New South Wales.

13 Civic Theatre

Dominating Newcastle’s Civic Precinct is the Civic Theatre, built in 1929. The theatre was designed by Henry Eli White, the same architect responsible for the City Hall. White was one of the most successful theatre architects in the country with Sydney’s Capitol and State Theatres also to his name.

Originally designed internally in a dramatic Spanish Baroque style for both cinema and live theatre, the building went through many modifications and operators. By the 1980s the Civic was in decline, due to competition from television, and its patronage fell by 63%.

It closed in 1973 and Newcastle Council made the decision to transform the Civic into a dedicated live theatre venue. This decision saved one of the last great remaining examples of picture palace architecture in the state.

Today the theatre is Newcastle’s premier performance venue, hosting a diverse program of shows including dance, drama, comedy, cabaret, film and children’s shows.