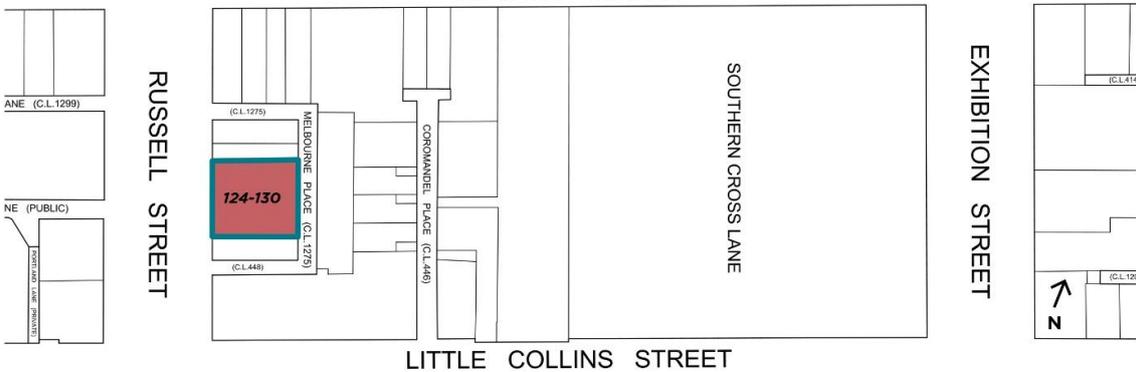


SITE NAME	Melbourne Theosophical Society (former Russell House)
STREET ADDRESS	124-130 Russell Street Melbourne
PROPERTY ID	101126



BOURKE STREET



SURVEY DATE: February 2018		SURVEY BY: Context	
HERITAGE INVENTORY	H7822-1662	EXISTING HERITAGE OVERLAY	No
PLACE TYPE	Individual Heritage Place	PROPOSED CATEGORY	Significant
		FORMER GRADE	Ungraded
DESIGNER / ARCHITECT / ARTIST:	Meldrum Burrows & Partners (1972-75)	BUILDER:	Swanson Bros (1972-75)
DEVELOPMENT PERIOD:	Interwar Period (c1919-c1940)	DATE OF CREATION / MAJOR CONSTRUCTION:	1923, 1972-75 (refurbished)

THEMES

ABORIGINAL THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Research undertaken in preparing this citation did not indicate any associations with Aboriginal people or organisations.	Aboriginal Themes (Hoddle Grid Heritage Review, Stage 2 Volume 3 Aboriginal Heritage, March 2019) have therefore not been identified here
HISTORIC THEMES	DOMINANT SUB-THEMES
5 Building a Commercial City	5.5 Building a manufacturing capacity
	OTHER SUB-THEMES
6 Creating a Functioning City	6.7 Transport
10 Shaping Cultural Life	10.3 Belonging to an Ethnic or Cultural Group

LAND USE

HISTORIC LAND USE	
Archaeological block no: 39	Inventory no: 662
Character of Occupation: Commercial, Residential, Religions	
Fourth land sale 1839, Block 10 Allotment 19 & part of Allotment 18, both purchased by A Hordern	
1839 Williamson	
1840 Hoddle	
1850 Proeschel	Building shown
1855 Kearney	
1866 Cox	Building shown
1880 Panorama	
1888, 1905/6 Mahlstedt	Four two-storey buildings; Registry office, Venetian blinds, pharmacy

THEMATIC MAPPING AND LAND USE

1890s	Not able to be determined
1920s	Not able to be determined
1960s	Not able to be determined

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme as an Individual Heritage Place.

Extent of overlay: Refer to map

SUMMARY

This five-storey commercial building was built in 1923, as a car showroom at ground level and with manufacturing/retail spaces on the four upper floors. The building retains its interwar upper façade.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Building a commercial city

Building a manufacturing industry

As Melbourne developed through the nineteenth century, so did its manufacturing industry. Flinders Lane became an important area for clothing manufacturers, while Chinese cabinet makers were concentrated at the east end of town. Food-processing plants were established in North and West Melbourne. Factories tended to be small and specialised. Large factories, built in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century tended to be built outside the City of Melbourne, where land was more easily obtainable (Context 2012:44).

The growth of manufacturing was accompanied by the construction of offices to house administration staff and warehouses to store goods.

After being the centre of manufacturing in Australia in the 1920s, Melbourne's importance in this regard began to decline. In the postwar period many city factories and warehouses were left empty or converted for other uses (Context 2012:35).

Creating a functioning city

Transport

The first Motor Regulation Act came into force in 1910, and by June 1911 there were 2722 motor cars and 2122 motorcycles registered in Victoria, mostly concentrated in Melbourne. With increasing car ownership, the first motor garages selling petrol and repairing vehicles were established throughout the city (Churchward 2008).

Through the early twentieth century motor cars and buses and electric trams slowly replaced horse-drawn vehicles. As Melbourne's population grew, there was greater competition for parking spaces. The first multi-storey car park was built in Russell Street in 1938 (Context 2012:44).

During the 1930s depression the rate of motor car ownership slowed from that of the late 1920s. During World War Two when petrol was rationed and new vehicles were unprocurable, ownership further stagnated (emelbourne.net.au).

Shaping Cultural Life

Belonging to an ethnic or cultural group

From the beginning of settlement, colonial society in Melbourne comprised many diverse cultural groups. One of these societies was the Theosophical Society, formed in New York in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky to advance the study of theosophy. Later the society was incorporated in India with its headquarters at Adyar, Madras. The Australian Theosophical Society was officially chartered on 1 January 1895. Prior to that, the Melbourne section of the Society, or Lodge, was unofficially formed in 1890.

SITE HISTORY

The site was part of the original Allotment 18, Block 10, purchased by Anthony Hordern Senior at the fourth Crown Land Sale in 1839. A Hordern purchased two allotments (18 and 19) in Block 10, which is bounded by Bourke, Russell and Little Collins Streets and the west boundary of the Allotment 17.

The first documented occupation of the land was in 1850, and until the early 1870s, the east side of Russell Street between Little Collins and Bourke streets was more residential than commercial (Age 16 September 1872:4). By 1888 there were four two-storey brick buildings housing the following businesses: a registry office, signwriter, venetian blinds, and the Botanic and Electric Pharmacy (Mahlstedt 1888). The shops were originally numbered nos. 82-88 Russell Street, and became nos. 124-130 Russell Street by the early 1890s (S&Mc 1888-1894).

The four brick shops formerly at 124-130 Russell Street were replaced with an interwar office building, Russell House, in 1923.

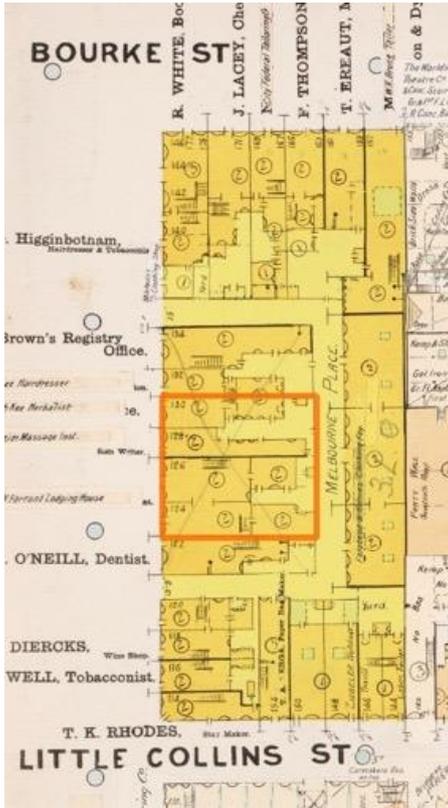


Figure 1. Coloured in yellow is the extent of the allotments 18 & 19, Block 10, and the orange outline shows the extent of the land at current 124-130 Russell Street. The U-shaped Melbourne Place was established to serve all commercial buildings in the area. (Source: SLV)

Russell House

The current five-storey concrete office building at 124-130 Russell Street (often referred to just as no. 126) was constructed in 1923, for Russell Investments Pty Ltd, a company founded in 1920 (Age 3 March 1920; CoMMaps). Named 'Russell House', the ground floor originally housed a motorcar showroom and was leased to Olympia Motors Pty Ltd who specialised in Durant, Wolseley and Rugby-branded cars (CoMMaps). The upper stories were occupied by: Brooklands (motor) Accessories Pty Ltd on the first floor; Lewisco (military and handkerchiefs) Manufacturing Co Pty Ltd and Horsely & Co Pty Ltd (mantles and costumes) on the second floor; the Ruskin Press (printers) and Nu Mode Manufacturing Co (mantles) on the third floor; and Waratah Manufacturing Co (mantles) on the fourth floor (S&Mc 1924-5).

The ground floor had an open plan supported by a dividing wall and concrete columns and girders. Three openings were provided on the Russell Street elevation for entering the ground floor

showroom, and one for accessing the upper floor premises. There were four rear doors facing Melbourne Place. The building was fitted with two lifts and two staircases (Mahlstedt 1925; Figure 2).

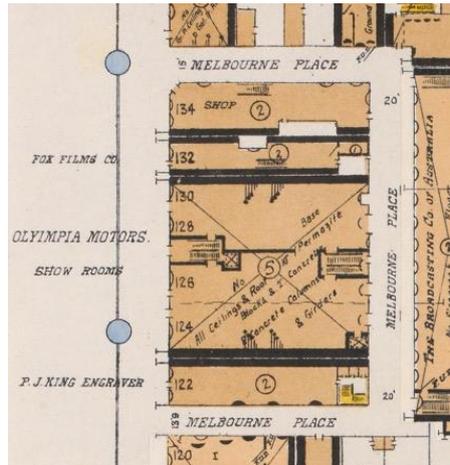


Figure 2. A fire survey plan surveyed in 1924 showing the internal plan of the building at 124-130 Russell Street. (Source: SLV)



Figure 3 1950s, showing the verandah in its current condition and the original windows to the upper levels. (Source: CD Pratt, SLV)

In 1930, the ground showroom was occupied by Knight Motors Pty Ltd, motorcar sellers, and the first floor by A F Greferson Motors Pty Ltd, motor shop. The upper stories were still utilised by various clothing manufacturers (S&Mc 1930). In c1930-31, the ground floor was divided into two separate retail spaces, respectively numbered 124-126 and 128-130 Russell Street. Around that time, nos.124-126 were occupied by Victorian Taxi Bus Services, and 128-130 by a furniture warehouse run by M L Copolov. Apart from this short period, both shops were continually associated with a number of motorcar sellers until the late 1940s, including Carsall's Class Cars Pty Ltd, Clemenger Motors Pty Ltd and Condon Philpott Motors Pty Ltd, used motorcar sellers (S&Mc 1933-1942).

Between 1947 and 1968, the National Cash Register, automated teller machine sellers, occupied 124-130 Russell Street (*Age* 14 November 1947:4; 24 April 1968:43).

In 1972, the Melbourne Theosophical Society purchased the building.

In 1916, the Melbourne Theosophical Society, then known as the Melbourne Lodge, purchased premises in Collins Street from the Continental Tyre Co Ltd. The Melbourne Lodge expanded and attracted many new members between 1920 and 1935, and the headquarters at 181-187 Collins Street was built in 1936 for £16,000.

In December 1971, the Melbourne Theosophical Society agreed to sell its headquarters in Collins Street to the Melbourne City Council, at a cost of \$1.9 million, to make way for the City Square project. (*Age* 22 December 1971:2).

After signing of the contract, the Collins Street building was required to be vacated by 31 December 1971. The Society temporarily leased the Athenaeum Hall (188 Collins Street) across the road from 1 January 1972. Later in the year, Russell House at 124-130 Russell Street was purchased by the Melbourne Theosophical Society for \$810,000. It was completely refurbished for the Society by Swanson Bros to a design by Meldrum Burrows & Partners (CoMMaps).

According to the alteration plans prepared in 1972, the original façade was not heavily changed except for the ground floor highlight window, which was bricked and rendered over (Figure 4). More changes were made to the rear of the building, where the ground floor entrances and original loading gates on each floor were bricked and new gates and windows introduced (Figure 5).



Figure 4. West (Russell Street) elevation drawn by Meldrum Burrows & Partners in 1972. Coloured in orange shows openings to be bricked. (PROV Public Building Plan VPRS8044/P/3)



Figure 5. East (Melbourne Place) elevation drawn by Meldrum Burrows & Partners in 1972. Coloured in orange are original openings to be bricked and coloured in yellow are new openings introduced to the rear elevation. (PROV Public Building Plan VPRS8044/P/3)

While the second to fifth floors remained as rented office spaces, the most significant changes were made to the ground and first floors (Figure 6). Most of the ground floor space was reserved for an auditorium, fundamental to the Theosophical Society's day-to-day activities including public lectures and general assembly. The floor level was slightly lowered for the new auditorium, utilising the limited floor height. On the first floor the meditation room, kitchen, dining space, committee room and library were constructed for the members of the society (PROV Public Building Plan VPRS8044/P/3).

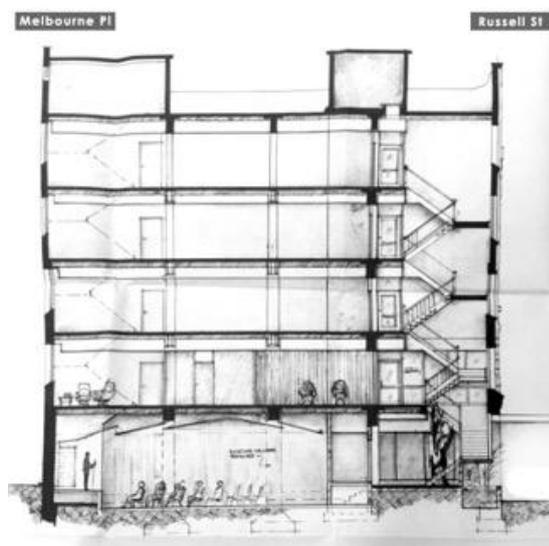


Figure 6. Section drawn by Meldrum Burrows & Partners in 1972. The floor level in the ground floor auditorium was to be lowered and sloped. (PROV Public Building Plan VPRS8044/P/3)

Following the completion, its first meeting and first public lecture 'the Keystone of the Arch' was held at the new premises on 23 March 1975, led by the President Mr Hal Steele (Age 22 March 1975:18). The Theosophical Society Building has since provided space for various activities and classes for its members.

The Theosophical Society Bookshop (or TS Bookshop) was established on the second floor in 1975 and continues to trade today (TS Bookshop n.d.). Mick Lewis's Music Store on the ground floor has been in existence since 1963. Other lessees since 1975 include the Electric Development Association of Victoria (Age 12 November 1976:22); the Vegan Society of Victoria (age 24 February 1978:44); and a medical clinic run by Dr W C Chen (Age 22 July 1978:20).

Currently, the Melbourne Theosophical Society building at 124-130 Russell Street is tenanted by 10 businesses including the Melbourne Theosophical Society, four shops and one food and drink outlet (CoMMaps).

Meldrum Burrows & Partners, architects

The architectural practice Meldrum & Partners was formed in 1959 by Percy Hayman Meldrum (1887-1968), and it became Meldrum Burrows when Sydney-based Bill Burrows joined the firm. Meldrum was joined in practice by his son, Richard John Meldrum (1928-2004). Meldrum Snr retired from practice in 1965. Meldrum Burrows gained particular prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and were involved in advising on and strategic planning for large projects (Willis 2012).

Percy Hayman Meldrum had been articled to A A Fritsch from 1907 to 1913. Moving to London in 1914, Meldrum practiced as an aircraft designer at the War Office. At the end of World War One Meldrum joined the staff of the Architectural Association later returning to Australia to join A G Stephenson as Stephenson & Meldrum. His work during this time include Newspaper House, Collins Street (1932) and Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historic Museum (1930). Meldrum went on to practice as Meldrum & Noad between 1937 and the 1950s, during which time he won the 1942 RVIA Street Architecture Medal for the National Bank of Australasia building in Collins Street (1938) (Willis 2012).

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

124-130 Russell Street, fully between 1972 and 1975 for the Theosophical Society, has been closely associated with the Society for over 40 years.

Formed in 1875 in New York, with international headquarters at Adyar, South India, the Theosophical Society has branches in around seventy countries. The Australian Section dates back to 1895 (TSAML n.d.). Promoting ancient philosophies and their metaphysical thoughts, the Society's three declared objects were:

- To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
- To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science.
- To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.

Since the opening of the Melbourne Lodge in 1916, a range of activities was developed for the Theosophical Society. A regular Sunday night public lecture had been provided throughout the year, continuing for over 75 years. Regular member nights provided space for liberal and critical discussions on a wide range of Theosophical and kindred topics.

Today, classes and group activities held at the premises include mental healing groups, yoga, meditation, astrology, discussion groups and metaphysical workshops and studies (TSAML n.d.).

It is anticipated that the Theosophical Society Building at 124-130 Russell Street, Melbourne is of social significance for its association with the Society. The relevant significance indicators include:

- The community or cultural group has a deep sense of ownership/stewardship and/or connectedness to the place or object
- The place is important to this community's sense identity
- Important as a place of community service (including health, education, worship, pastoral care, communications, emergency services, museums, etc.)

It may also be important to this community as an 'Important as a place of collective socialisation'.

SITE DESCRIPTION

124-130 Russell Street is located on the eastern side of Russell Street, between Bourke Street and Little Collins Street. The building is constructed of a concrete structural frame with brick walls. The front façade is rendered, and the side elevations are of face brick (now painted).

The symmetrical front façade is divided into three vertical bays with the entry located in the narrow central bay. Rendered spandrels run horizontally across the building, marking the location of each floor level, and contrasting with the strong vertical lines of the columns. Each column is decorated with a rusticated base and a squared rendered motif at the top. The existing windows are not original (updated prior to the 1970s renovations but after the 1950s (Figure 3)).

A parapet runs across the top of the building, and is shaped to correspond to the vertical bays, rising to a pedimented arrangement over each of the side bays. Decoration of the façade consists of simple rendered geometric patterns and shapes, currently painted in a contrasting colour. Three large round motifs run down the central bay, corresponding with the middle floor levels. The upper and lower motifs are identical – an open circular rendered arrangement. The central motif is a round solid metal feature inscribed with a star motif – the emblem of the Theosophical Society.

At the ground floor level, a cantilevered verandah steps up to the main entrance from the shopfronts and contains the lettering of the Melbourne Theosophical Society. It appears to be either original or early. The street entrance is clad with marble tiles and bronze shopfront window frames. A wide entrance with steps leads to the entry foyer.

INTEGRITY

The upper façade is relatively intact, although windows are non-original. At the street level, the building has been altered, with shop fronts replacing the original showroom openings. Some alteration to window openings at the rear was carried out in the early 1970s along with changes to the ground and first floor interiors. Examination of a large number of places for the Hoddle Grid Review has shown that building alterations to windows are very common. This building is considered to be at benchmark for integrity when compared with a large sample across the Hoddle Grid.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The building can be compared to other commercial buildings of a similar scale and form from the interwar period; car showrooms, and / or buildings associated with a particular social/cultural/spiritual group. The following buildings are of a similar scale and form to 124-130 Russell St. The buildings are five or six storeys with rendered facades. The upper façade is treated as one element and is clearly distinguished from the ground level in terms of both use and appearance. Primary aesthetic interest is derived from an interplay of strong vertical elements and regular horizontal banding.

131 King Street, 1926 (HO1048)

The former Salvation Army's People Palace is a seven-storey rendered reinforced concrete building. Designed in the Greek Revival style by Adjutant Percival Dale of the Salvation Army and built in 1926, it was refurbished and converted to a hotel and restaurant in 1979.



Figure 7. 131-137 King Street, Melbourne constructed 1926. (Source: iheritage)

Benjamin House, 358-360 Little Collins Street, 1929 (HO1210)

358-260 Little Collins Street is a five-storey interwar commercial building with restrained render detail to the spandrels and vertical columns expressed on the façade.



Figure 8. 358-360 Little Collins Street constructed 1929. (Source: iheritage)

The following buildings are comparable to 124-130 Russell Street, as examples of a new building type – the car showroom, that evolved in the 1920s and 30s in response to a rapid growth in personal car ownership.

Melbourne City Toyota, 615-645 Elizabeth Street, 1937 & 1955 (VHR H2306; Significant in HO294 HO1124 Elizabeth Street North (Boulevard) Precinct)

Three interlinked brick three-storey buildings with an open-air car yard used as showrooms and offices for motorcar retailing. The southern property bounded by Elizabeth, Queensberry and O'Connell Streets was designed by Harry Norris in a moderne style in 1937. The northern section of the building was completed in 1955 in a complementary style.



Figure 9. 615-645 Elizabeth St constructed 1937 and extended in 1955. (Source: HERMES)

Former Kellow Falkiner showrooms, 375-385 St Kilda Road, 1926-29 (VHR H668; HO490)

These interwar buildings were built as car showrooms. They demonstrate a high level of architectural detail and integrity, particularly the ground floor car display area, which is still legible.



Figure 10. 375-385 St Kilda Road constructed 1926-29. (Source: HERMES)

The following buildings are comparable to 124-130 Russell Street, as buildings associated with a particular social/cultural/spiritual group.

YWCA building, 489 Elizabeth Street, 1939 (non contributory to HO1125 Elizabeth Street Precinct)

The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), an organisation with a mission to nurture the physical and spiritual well being of young women outside of the mainstream established religious institutions. A building was constructed in 1939 but was rebuilt in 1975.



Figure 11. 489 Elizabeth Street constructed 1939 and 1975. (Source: CoMMaps)

124-130 Russell Street remains legible in scale, form and detail as an interwar commercial building. Other interwar buildings including 131-137 King Street and 104-106 Elizabeth Street have more complex ornamentation and retain their original windows, leading to a higher degree of integrity than 124-130 Russell Street. 158-160 Little Collins Street is most architecturally comparable to 124-130 Russell Street however the former Theosophical Society building unusually retains an early cantilevered verandah. Historically it is of interest for its use as a car showroom, a building typology that emerged in the 1920s and 30s, although that aspect of its use is not now as apparent as in the other examples provided. Its association with a group with a social/spiritual mission from 1972 falls into the contemporary period of use, and may have meaning for the Society’s current members.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

- | | |
|---|--|
| ✓ | <p>CRITERION A
Importance to the course or pattern of our cultural or natural history (historical significance).</p> |
| | <p>CRITERION B
Possession of uncommon rare or endangered aspects of our cultural or natural history (rarity).</p> |
| | <p>CRITERION C
Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history (research potential).</p> |
| ✓ | <p>CRITERION D
Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments (representativeness).</p> |
| ✓ | <p>CRITERION E
Importance of exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics (aesthetic significance).</p> |
| | <p>CRITERION F
Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period (technical significance)</p> |
| ✓ | <p>CRITERION G
Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions (social significance).</p> |
| | <p>CRITERION H
Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history (associative significance).</p> |
-

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme as an Individual Heritage Place.

Recommendations for the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Clause 43.01) in the Melbourne Planning Scheme:

MELBOURNE PLANNING SCHEME

EXTERNAL PAINT CONTROLS	No
INTERNAL ALTERATION CONTROLS	No
TREE CONTROLS	No
OUTBUILDINGS OR FENCES (Which are not exempt under Clause 43.01-3)	No
TO BE INCLUDED ON THE VICTORIAN HERITAGE REGISTER	No
PROHIBITED USES MAY BE PERMITTED	No
ABORIGINAL HERITAGE PLACE	No

OTHER

N/A

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PREVIOUS STUDIES

Central Activities District Conservation Study 1985	Ungraded
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Central City Heritage Study 1993	Ungraded
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Review of Heritage overlay listings in the CBD 2002	Ungraded
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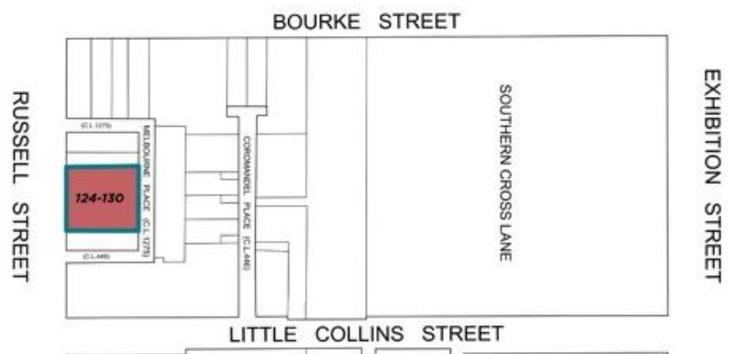
Central City Heritage Review 2011	Ungraded
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Heritage Place: Melbourne Theosophical Society (former Russell House)



PS ref no: N/A



What is significant?

Russell House at 124-130 Russell Street, Melbourne, built in 1923 as a car showroom and offices and used from 1972 as the office of the Melbourne Theosophical Society.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include (but are not limited to):

- The building's original external form, materials and detailing;
- The building's relatively high level of integrity to its original design;
- The original size and pattern of fenestration;
- The pedimented parapet, spandrels, columns and rendered geometric shapes;
- The round solid metal feature with star motif; and early signage; and
- The marble tiles and bronze shopfront window frames at street level.

Later alterations made at ground level are not significant.

How it is significant?

124-130 Russell Street, Melbourne is of local historic, representative, aesthetic and social significance to the City of Melbourne.

Why it is significant?

Russell House at 124-130 Russell Street is historically significant for its demonstration of car sales in the early years of motoring in Victoria. With car ownership concentrated in Melbourne in the 1920s, motor garages represent an important use for a small number of buildings in the central city.

124-130 Russell Street is historically significant for its association with the Melbourne Theosophical Society, which was formed to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science. The Society was formed unofficially in Australia in 1890 following its New York formation in 1875, and became a chartered organisation in 1895. Since 1936 the Melbourne Theosophical Society was located at 181-187 Collins Street, then subsequently leased the Athenaeum Hall (188 Collins Street), and in 1972 purchased Russell House, converting several floors to suit its purposes in 1972. (Criterion A)

As a commercial building designed in the interwar classical style, 124-130 Russell Street is significant for its form, scale and façade detail of the period, and its level of integrity. (Criterion D)

124-130 Russell Street is aesthetically significant for its relatively intact façade. This is evident in the simple rendered geometric patterns to the rendered surfaces including the parapet with circular motifs and a round solid metal feature inscribed with a star motif - the emblem of the Theosophical Society. Aesthetic significance is attributed to the original cantilevered verandah and the wide entry with steps leading from street level and clad with marble tiles and bronze shopfront window frames. (Criterion E)

124-130 Russell Street is of social significance for its long-standing associations with the Melbourne Theosophical Society as its headquarters and the location of its library, bookshop and meeting spaces. 124-130 Russell Street is of social significance as a long-standing meeting place where those interested in theosophy meet, learn and exchange ideas. (Criterion G)

Primary source

Hoddle Grid Heritage Review (Context & GJM Heritage, 2020)