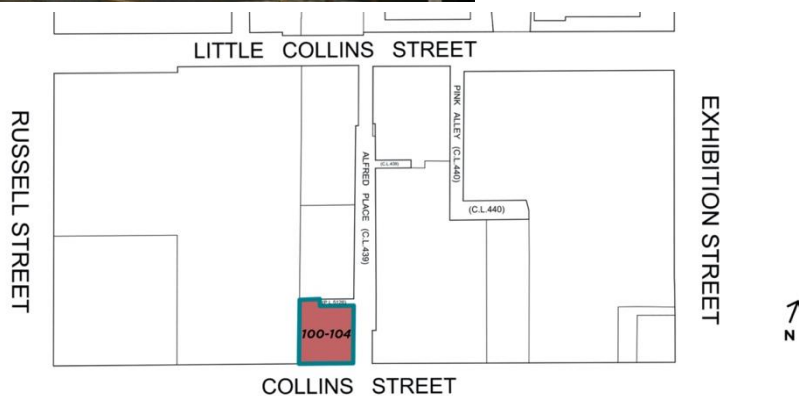


SITE NAME	Former Gilbert Court
STREET ADDRESS	100-104 Collins Street, Melbourne
PROPERTY ID	102156



SURVEY DATE: October 2019		SURVEY BY: GJM Heritage	
HERITAGE INVENTORY	No	EXISTING HERITAGE OVERLAY	HO504
PLACE TYPE	Individual Heritage Place	PROPOSED CATEGORY	Significant
		FORMER CATEGORY	Significant
DESIGNER / ARCHITECT / ARTIST:	John A La Gerche	BUILDER:	E A Watts Pty Ltd
DEVELOPMENT PERIOD:	Postwar Period (1945-1975)	DATE OF CREATION / MAJOR CONSTRUCTION:	1954-1955

THEMES

ABORIGINAL THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Research undertaken in preparing this citation focused on the postwar history of the site and did not address 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
POSTWAR THEMES	DOMINANT SUB-THEMES
1 Shaping the urban landscape	1.8 Expressing an architectural style
3 Building a commercial city	3.2 Business and finance

LAND USE

THEMATIC MAPPING AND LAND USE	
1890s	Medical
1920s	Merchant, Medical, Retail, Studio
1960s	Medical, Café/Restaurant, Retail, Hairdresser, Workshop, Office, Studio, Club

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme as an individual heritage place.

Extent of overlay: To extent of property boundary

SUMMARY

Gilbert Court is a curtain wall structure designed by architect John A La Gerche and built in 1954-55 by builders E A Watts Pty Ltd. It was developed by Gilbert Court Pty Ltd and owned on a co-operative share basis by tenants. It was noted as Melbourne's first office building to earn the popular title as 'Glass House'.

CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

The period from 1945 to 1975 was one of radical transformation for Melbourne; from the low-rise city that still reflected its colonial origins to a bustling international centre of commerce and culture. The surviving buildings from this period are evidence of the evolving economic and social conditions in Melbourne at the time and demonstrate the city's transition from its nineteenth century manufacturing origins to its current banking, office and service industry focus. These buildings reflect the increasing commercial and cultural role of Melbourne in the international context of globalisation and postwar optimism as well as a radically altered economic environment which saw an influx of foreign capital and ideas. Collectively, these buildings represent a transformative period in the life of the city; a period that is categorised by significant change, growth and evolution across all aspects of life – social, political, economic and cultural.

Expressing an architectural style in the postwar period

Multi-storey commercial buildings made a significant contribution to postwar Melbourne, particularly from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. With the resumption of building construction in the 1950s after the hiatus of World War II, the advent of curtain wall construction – enabling the application of a non-load bearing skin to the face of a building – radically altered the appearance of the modern city commercial building.

Constructed predominantly for the financial and business sectors, there was an eagerness amongst clients to establish a dominant city presence and to project a modern, progressive and prestigious approach to commercial building design. The resulting Post-War Modernist style of multi-storey buildings, influenced particularly by steel and glass office tower design in the United States, were in stark contrast to the pre-war city buildings in central Melbourne and presented architects of the day with a completely new design challenge.

Thirty major city buildings were completed in Melbourne in four years alone from 1955 to 1958 and 22 were office buildings within, or on the fringes of, the CBD (Saunders 1959:91). Largely influenced by the American skyscraper, the earliest office buildings of the 1950s utilised innovative curtain walling, formed from continuous metal-framing filled principally with glass. The curtain wall is described by Miles Lewis as 'essentially a continuous, non-bearing skin on the face of a building' and is one of the 'leitmotifs of modernism, both in Australia and overseas' (Lewis 2012:185). The curtain walled 'glass box' aesthetic was embraced by the local architects, and many buildings followed to the extent that high-rise office buildings with curtain walling became a defining characteristic of the new buildings in the latter half of the 1950s (NTAV 2014:5-6).

Amongst the first curtain walled buildings to be constructed in Melbourne was the 13-storey glass-fronted Gilbert Court at 100 Collins Street (J A La Gerche 1954-56), which was built to the height limit of 132 feet (40m), and – perhaps the most influential – the free-standing ICI House, 1 Nicholson Street (Bates Smart & McCutcheon 1955-58). Located on the outskirts of the Hoddle Grid, ICI House was clad on all four facades with glass curtain walling and exceeded the well-established maximum building height within the Hoddle Grid. Large numbers of similarly designed city commercial buildings followed, often displaying bold horizontal contrast between alternating rows of glazing and coloured spandrels.

Business and finance in the postwar period

The postwar period was one of fluctuating fortunes in the business and finance sectors. In the main however, economic confidence and financial deregulation came together to create a period of growth that would radically change the appearance of central Melbourne.

Speculative investment in Melbourne increased after the Commonwealth government lifted restrictions on share dealings in 1947, which resulted in a dramatic increase in new company registrations (Marsden 2000:44-45). Subsequently, during the 1950s, a number of national and international companies sought to assert a physical presence in the country, constructing corporate buildings in the city centre. In Melbourne, up to the mid-1960s, investment was predominantly driven by British and American companies, government bodies, large Australian corporations such as AMP and BHP, and property developers, including Lend Lease (formerly Civil and Civic) and L J Hooker Ltd. Later in the 1960s, it was also driven by private developers such as Grollo and Lustig & Moar (Marsden 2000:46-47).

The construction of large bank buildings was also prolific during the postwar period with the passing of the Banking Act 1947, which led to an increase in the number of bank branches established in Victoria. One of the most significant changes in banking in Australia at this time was the creation of the new Reserve Bank of Australia in 1959, which replaced the central bank known as the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (Heritage Alliance 2008:17). Bank buildings constructed in the central city during this period included the State Savings Bank of Victoria at 233-243 Queen Street (1967-68), the Bank of Adelaide Building at 265-269 Collins Street (1959-60) and the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney Building at 251-257 Collins Street (1971-73).

The period between 1961 and 1963 was one of business recession, while the years between 1967 and 1969 was a time of growth due to two mineral booms. From 1967 to 1971 the construction of new office space in the city centre more than doubled that of the previous five years (City of Melbourne Strategy Plan 1974 in Clinch 2012:66-67). The property boom ended during the economic crash of the early 1970s and the 1974 oil crisis when many British institutions that had founded the commercial property industry left Australia. Government bodies and banks subsequently took over much of the building construction in the city centre (Marsden 2000:48).

SITE HISTORY

Gilbert Court is a curtain wall structure designed by architect John A La Gerche, and built in 1954-55 by builders E A Watts Pty Ltd. It was developed by Gilbert Court Pty Ltd and owned on a co-operative share basis by tenants (Logan 2012:393; *Argus*, 11 Mar 1954:1; *Age*, 27 May 1955:19).

Gilbert Court was one of the first speculative office buildings constructed in the post-World War II period. Rather than wait for commissions, La Gerche assessed the increasing demand for office space in Melbourne's central business district and took on the role of developer for Gilbert Court (Logan 2012:393; *Cross-Section*, Oct 1959:2). In 1953, *The Herald* stated that the development was 'the first co-operative office enterprise launched in Melbourne,' and that this method of financing new office buildings was popular in the United States (*Herald*, 18 Sep 1953:10). La Gerche later used this finance method on his development of the Coates Building at 18-22 Collins Street (1958-59). The company, Gilbert Court Pty Ltd, was registered in October 1953, before purchasing 100 Collins Street (*Age*, 17 Oct 1953:6).

The building was named in honour of Gilbert Walsh, who had purchased the property in 1950 with the intention of building a 12-storey building. However, Walsh died in December 1951 and his wife subsequently sold the land with the condition that the building would be named after her husband. Mrs Peggy Walsh was appointed chairman of the directors for Gilbert Court Pty Ltd and owned the ground floor shops, one of which she occupied for her millinery business (*Argus*, 21 Jul 1955:11).

The City of Melbourne received a building permit application for the new building in March 1954 (estimated total cost of £212,400) (BAI) and work commenced on the project the same month (*Argus*, 11 Mar 1954:1). The development attracted much attention and was reported on widely in contemporary newspapers and architectural journals. Gilbert Court was to be 'Melbourne's most ultra and up-to-date building' (*Age*, 27 Oct 1953:11) and 'the first in Australia to have a full glass construction on both frontages' (*Age*, 20 Feb 1954:3). In September 1953, *The Herald* (18 Sep 1953:10) reported that the 'limit-height blue glass and aluminium building', also described as a 'glass block,' was to occupy 'one of the most commanding and exclusive sites in any Australian capital.' The University of Melbourne's publication *Cross-Section* noted in April 1954 that Gilbert Court 'indicates heavily the New York influence: a box of glass here doing its best to ignore the regulation set-backs which once were affected as a "sky-scraper" silhouette'. Newspapers suggested that the design of the 'Glass House' was influenced by the United Nations Headquarters in New York (*Argus*, 11 Mar 1954:1; 21 Jul 1955:11). A few years after completion in May 1958, *Cross-Section* reported that Gilbert Court had 'firmly attached to its reputation the title "Melb's first glass box"' (*Cross-Section*, May 1958:2).

Gilbert Court was designed with thirteen floors, a reinforced concrete frame, full transparent curtain walls to the streets and sheer walls on the other elevations, with the service core backing on one of these (Taylor & Stewart 2001:31). Taylor & Stewart state that, like the Coates Building, Gilbert Court was 'distinguished by the absence of the traditional upstanding fire-retarding spandrels between floors' that were no longer required under the fire codes due to advances in alternative systems (Taylor & Stewart 2001:31, 36).

The site lent itself to the design, receiving natural light on three sides, with no light courts needed. A 1953 article reported that the building was to be constructed of reinforced concrete and faced with pale blue wired glass from pavement to roof on both the Collins Street and Alfred Place facades. There was to be a vitreous-enamel-covered pier on the corner and a blank wall on the west side. The glass walls were to comprise more than 1,000 windows set in anodised aluminium frames without any visible columns or masonry, giving the effect of an enormous glass screen. The concrete floor slabs were to be cantilevered three feet beyond the structural frame (*Herald*, 18 Sep 1953:10). Partial air-conditioning was installed, but hopper windows were also used to ensure adequate ventilation (Taylor & Stewart 2001:31).

The Equitable Probate and General Life Insurance Co. occupied the building in 1957, erecting a large sign on the rooftop (Figures 5 and 6).

Four years after completion of Gilbert Court, *Cross-Section* (Oct 1959:2) stated that Gilbert Court was 'Melbourne's first office building to earn the popular title as Glass House', and that the second was La Gerche's Coates Building built in 1958-59:

Both earned the title in a technical sense as well as a popular one, by being remarkable for the absence of the traditionally expected upstanding fire-retarding spandrel between floors. In addition, both were promoted rather than

commissioned, both are the only intrusions of this sort of architecture, this end of Collins Street (Cross-Section, Oct 1959:2).

Architectural historian Miles Lewis states that Gilbert Court was the first generally recognised postwar example of a city curtain wall (as it was finished before the Alliance Assurance Co building at 408-410 Collins Street, which was completed in 1957). Lewis notes that Gilbert Court's curtain wall 'is a facade wall, but it covers the entire facade rather than being framed or limited in the manner of Leonard House [44-6 Elizabeth Street; 1923-24] and the Barnett Building [164 Bourke Street; 1937-8]. It is clad in aluminium with heat-resisting glass, which in technical terms was not especially novel even for Victoria, but it suggests the aesthetic of the United Nations Building' (Lewis 2015:8.10.11).

Taylor (2001:31) claims that Gilbert Court was the first multi-storeyed building to embody the principles of Modernism. Both buildings were the only architecture of this type at the east end of Collins Street until 1960 (Goad et al. 1993).

Recent commentary on Gilbert Court states:

The building predated Bates Smart & McCutcheon's ICI House, and like ICI House, it eschewed traditional architectural language, employing the glass curtain wall that had become synonymous with the corporate skyscraper in the United States in the post-war decades. La Gerche's Collins Street buildings [Gilbert Court and Coates Building] suggested a striking new direction for architectural expression in the central city and demonstrated characteristic cultural affinities with the United States in the same period (Logan 2012:393).

La Gerche's Coates Building and Gilbert Court

... epitomised the sought-after total transparency and minimalism of the period where the cladding almost disappeared exposing the unadorned structural frame and the building occupants to honest scrutiny. No other multi-storey offices achieved this in the brief period before air-conditioning forced a modest spandrel to hide the false ceiling and facades began a practical path to less transparency, particularly to the sun's heat (Goad et al. 1993, cites the National Trust).

Alterations and renovations to Gilbert Court in the 1980s included the removal of air conditioning units to the windows within the curtain walls on the south and east elevations, and replacement with glazing (BAP).

John Alfred La Gerche (1907-c1972), architect

John Alfred La Gerche is best known for designing two of the earliest 'glass box' buildings in Australia – Gilbert Court (1954-55) and the Coates Building (1958-59), both located on Collins Street in Melbourne's city centre.

La Gerche undertook architectural training at the Melbourne Technical College, followed by the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier. He subsequently took up a position as draftsman with architects, Walter and Richard Butler, followed by five years as Chief Draftsman in the office of Frederick Morsby.

After serving in the Royal Australian Air Force and then the Royal Australian Navy during WWII, La Gerche took up the position of Chief Architect for Ansett Transport Industries. He designed several

hotels in this role, including at Hayman Island, Queensland, which was heralded as Australia's first luxury international tourist resort.

In 1951, La Gerche established his own practice, where he focused on hotel remodelling as well as other commercial and industrial work. It was during this time that he designed Gilbert Court and the Coates Building, some of the first 'true curtain-walled office buildings in the city' (Reeves, Dictionary of Unsung Architects).

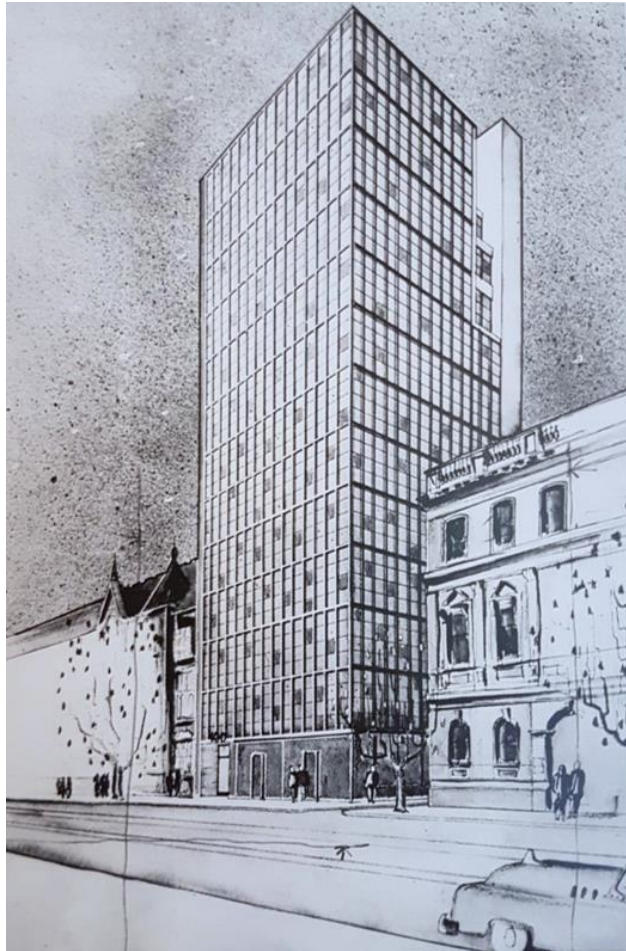


Figure 1. Drawing of the Gilbert Court project by J A La Gerche. No date (Logan 2012:394). Part of this drawing was published in *Cross-Section* in April 1954.



Figure 2. Construction of Gilbert Court, photo dated 28 February 1955 (SLV, Lyle Fowler, photographer, Image H92.20/5270).



Figure 3. Photo of the building nearing completion, published in *Cross-Section* in July 1955.



Figure 4. Gilbert Court in 1955 (SLV, Wolfgang Sievers, photographer, Image H88.40/950).



Figure 5. Gilbert Court, the premises of The Equitable Probate and General Life Insurance Co., in April 1957 (SLV, Lyle Fowler, photographer, Image H92.20/6016).



Figure 6. Gilbert Court, the premises of The Equitable Probate and General Life Insurance Co., in April 1957 (SLV, Lyle Fowler, photographer, Image H92.20/6017).



Figure 7. Entrance to Gilbert Court c1985 (Butler via Flickr).



Figure 8. The building in 1984 (City of Melbourne Libraries online Heritage Collection, Reference no. Butler13462).

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Former Gilbert Court at 100-104 Collins Street is a 12-storey commercial building located on the north-west corner of Collins Street and Alfred Place. Constructed in 1954-55 to a design by John A La Gerche, the multi-storey building is an example of the Post-War Modernist style.

Built to the then prevailing height limit of 40m (132 feet), Gilbert Court is square in plan with main frontages to Collins Street and Alfred Place. The building has a small footprint, occupying approximately one quarter of the block between Collins and Little Collins Streets. The building appears as a large transparent box with the two visible street facades presenting as entire walls of light aluminium frame and glass which wrap around the south-east corner. The service core occupies the west side of the building and presents to the exterior as a sheer wall.

The building is of reinforced concrete column and slab construction with the two adjacent curtain walls formed from aluminium framed windows and spandrels of blue obscure, but not opaque, glass. These curtain walls run continuously from the front corner of the west façade, around to a sheer wall at the rear of the east façade, which encompasses a secondary stair block. At this junction, the east facade steps back over the top floors, to accentuate the glass prism appearance of the building when viewed from Collins Street. The use of an entirely glazed façade was highly innovative at the time of

construction when the typical curtain wall incorporated opaque spandrels that obscured the view of the building's interior and provided a horizontal accent to the façade.

A slim projecting element delineates the upper façade from the street level shopfronts. The simplicity and transparency of the façade is continued at street level, with aluminium framed butt-jointed shopfronts and fully glazed doors and the absence of a verandah awning.

INTEGRITY

Gilbert Court, including the original form and the detailing of the exterior of the building, remains highly intact to its original construction in 1954-55.

Overall, the building retains a very high degree of architectural integrity to the Post-War Modernist style in fabric, form and detail. While the building has undergone minor alterations, particularly at street level, these do not diminish the ability to understand and appreciate the place as a fine example of a Post-War Modernist multi-storey commercial building.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Gilbert Court at 100-104 Collins Street is a fine and representative example of the Post-War Modernist style and clearly demonstrates the typical characteristics of the emerging multi-storey commercial building design of the mid-1950s. The building's two grid-like curtain wall façades, with rows of aluminium-framed glazing and blue obscure glass spandrels and vertical mullions, can be clearly observed from Collins Street and Alfred Place. The use of two adjacent and entirely glazed transparent façades on a corner site was highly innovative at the time of construction. Despite the redesign of the façade at street level, the upper facades of Gilbert Court remain highly intact to their original design.

There are a number of buildings in the Hoddle Grid within the City of Melbourne which were constructed in the same period and display similar characteristics to Gilbert Court. These are detailed below.

State-significant places

A comparative example in the City of Melbourne which is located immediately adjacent to the Hoddle Grid is ICI House, 1-4 Nicholson Street (Bates Smart & McCutcheon 1958). This place is included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR H0786).

Locally-significant places

Precinct Heritage Overlay

As only a piece-meal evaluation of postwar buildings within the Hoddle Grid in the City of Melbourne has previously occurred, few buildings from the early postwar period are currently included in the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme. Those from the 1950s that are included in the Heritage Overlay are currently included as part of Heritage Precincts, but are recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay as Individual Heritage Places. These places are:



Former Bank of Adelaide Building, 265-269 Collins Street (Godfrey & Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb, 1959-60) included in HO502 The Block Precinct as a Contributory place.



Former Hosie's Hotel, 1-5 Elizabeth Street & 288-290 Flinders Street (Mussen McKay & Potter, 1954-55), included in HO505 Flinders Gate Precinct as a Significant place.



Coates Building, 18-22 Collins Street (John A La Gerche, 1958-59) included in HO504 Collins East Precinct as a Significant place.



Former Allans Building, 276-278 Collins Street (Godfrey & Spowers, Hughes, Mewton & Lobb, 1956-57) included in HO502 The Block Precinct as a Significant place.

Other Examples

Despite the demolition of many 1950s multi-storey commercial buildings in the City of Melbourne, a number of fine and highly representative examples of this building type that are not currently included in the Heritage Overlay on a permanent basis have been retained with sufficient integrity to demonstrate this class of place. These buildings clearly illustrate the initial period of curtain wall construction in Melbourne and demonstrate similar characteristics to the subject building. The following examples are recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay as Individual Heritage Places as part of the Hoddle Grid Heritage Review:



Lauren's House, 414-416 Lonsdale Street (Harold Bloom, 1956) (Interim HO1254).



Former Atlas Assurance Building, 404-406 Collins Street (H Garnet Alsop & Partners, 1958-61) (Interim HO1008).



Former London Assurance House, 468-470 Bourke Street (B Evans & Partners, 1960) (Interim HO1006).



Former Batman Automatic Telephone Exchange, 376 Flinders Lane (Commonwealth Department of Works, 1957).



Former Ajax House, 103-105 Queen Street (HD Berry, 1956).



HC Sleigh Building, 166-172 Queen Street (Bates Smart & McCutcheon, 1953-55).



Coles & Garrard Building, 376-378 Bourke Street (Meldrum & Noad, 1957).



Canton Insurance Building, 43-51 Queen Street (Bates Smart & McCutcheon, 1957).



Former AMP Building, 402-408 Lonsdale Street (Bates Smart & McCutcheon, 1956-58).

Analysis

As a fine and highly intact representative example of its type, Gilbert Court at 101-104 Collins Street clearly demonstrates an important phase in the architectural development of multi-storey commercial buildings in the City of Melbourne. Similar to the small number of 1950s buildings presently included in the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme – and a small number of other examples identified throughout the Hoddle Grid and listed above – Gilbert Court clearly demonstrates this class of place.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

✓	CRITERION A Importance to the course or pattern of our cultural or natural history (historical significance).
	CRITERION B Possession of uncommon rare or endangered aspects of our cultural or natural history (rarity).
	CRITERION C Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history (research potential).
✓	CRITERION D Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments (representativeness).
	CRITERION E Importance of exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics (aesthetic significance).
	CRITERION F Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period (technical significance)
	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).
	CRITERION H Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history (associative significance).

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 43.01-4)	No
INCLUDED ON THE VICTORIAN HERITAGE REGISTER	No
PROHIBITED USES MAY BE PERMITTED	No
ABORIGINAL HERITAGE PLACE	No

OTHER

N/A

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The Age.

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PREVIOUS STUDIES

**Central Activities District
Conservation Study 1985**

A

**Central City Heritage
Study 1993**

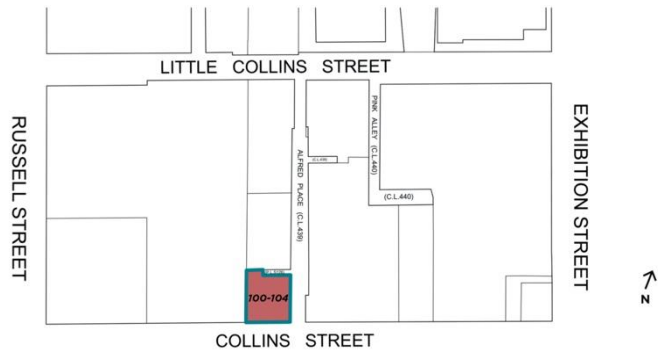
A

**Review of Heritage
overlay listings in the
CBD 2002**

Ungraded

**Central City Heritage
Review 2011**Ungraded

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Heritage Place: Former Gilbert Court**PS ref no:** HOXXXX**What is significant?**

Former Gilbert Court at 100-104 Collins Street, a multi-storey office building constructed in 1954-55.

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 very high level of integrity to its original design.

Later alterations made to the street level facade are not significant.

How it is significant?

Former Gilbert Court at 100-104 Collins Street is of historical and representative significance to the City of Melbourne.

Why it is significant?

Constructed in 1954-55, to a design by John A La Gerche, Former Gilbert Court has a clear association with the postwar building boom which transformed central Melbourne into a modern high-rise city. The design of these commercial buildings from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s – many of which were architect designed – was driven by the commercial demands and the prestige afforded by a dominant city presence (Criterion A).

Former Gilbert Court is a fine and highly intact representative example of a Post-War Modernist commercial building. The building strongly reflects the style which was emerging in the mid-1950s and was popular in the late 1950s, particularly in central Melbourne. Constructed to the prevailing 40m (132 foot) height limit of the time, Former Gilbert Court clearly demonstrates typical characteristics of a 1950s structure with two adjacent, fully glazed curtain wall façades. The transparent façades of alternating

rows of glazing and obscure glass spandrels, and vertical mullions which divide the facade into a grid-like pattern, and the use of materials such as blue obscure glass and aluminium window frames, demonstrate important aspects of the Modernist style. On completion it earned the title of Melbourne's first 'Glass Box' (Criterion D).

Primary source

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

