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AN AUSTRALIAN WOOL STORE— A WORLD TRAGEDY

The Dennys Lascelles Austin & Co. wool store, before it was demolished in 1990. Courtesy the Richard Aitken Collection.



In May, 1990, the Dennys Lascelles Austin & Co. wool store was razed after an unprecedented series of events in the Australian conservation movement: the overturning of government controls intended to protect such structures from political and commercial intervention.

The Dennys Lascelles building was one of an ensemble of wool stores and built as long as 140 years ago within the waterfront precinct of the port of Geelong, the second largest city in Victoria, Australia. Geelong's early prosperity, from the mid-1800s and through successive boom and bust periods, stemmed from its role in selling western Victoria's wheat and wool to domestic and distant markets.

In 1909, Sydney engineer Edward Giles Stone was commissioned to design a store for Dennys Lascelles. Built between 1910-12, it was significant because it included the world's largest uninterrupted space covered by a reinforced concrete roof. The show floor, with its south-facing saw-tooth roofing, was of aesthetic interest for its wonderfully even light, ideal for displaying and selling wool. It had a clear roof span of 166 feet and "remain[ed] one of only two structures in Australia which [could] be identified unequivocally as having been reinforced accord-

ing to the system of the Frenchman Armand [-Gabriel] Considère."¹

The Considère system was distinguished by its use of "hooped" reinforcement, which was spirally wound around the outside of the bars of all compression members. Stone designed six 166-foot roof girders, which were paired to form three "bridges," derived from Considère's Plougastel Bridge in Brittany (1903-4) and his test bridge at Ivry (1903). These bridges supported the concrete saw-tooth roof.

In 1980 the building was classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and listed on the Register of the National Estate in the same year. In 1984 it was included on the Victorian Historic Buildings Register. The first two organizations merely acknowledge significance but give no protection, while the third can issue permits for alterations. When it was demolished in 1990, an application for nomination to the World Heritage List also was being made.

The Dennys Lascelles building had support for its preservation from an enviable gathering of professionals from public and private bodies within Australia and abroad: the Victorian Historic Buildings Council, the Australian Council of National Trusts, the International Council on

Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Secretariat in Paris, Australia ICOMOS, the Australian Heritage Commission, the World Heritage Working Group and the Science Museum in London. Regrettably, this was to no avail.

The local community's distaste for the appearance of the building, a private consultant's report (commissioned by Liffay Pty. Ltd., the consortium of private developers who owned the site) that concluded that the building was so unsafe that it had to be razed and a reactionary press stirred local pressure for demolition. The community was uninterested in the potential world significance of the building. Local government, it seems, could only perceive a safety hazard and potential litigation.

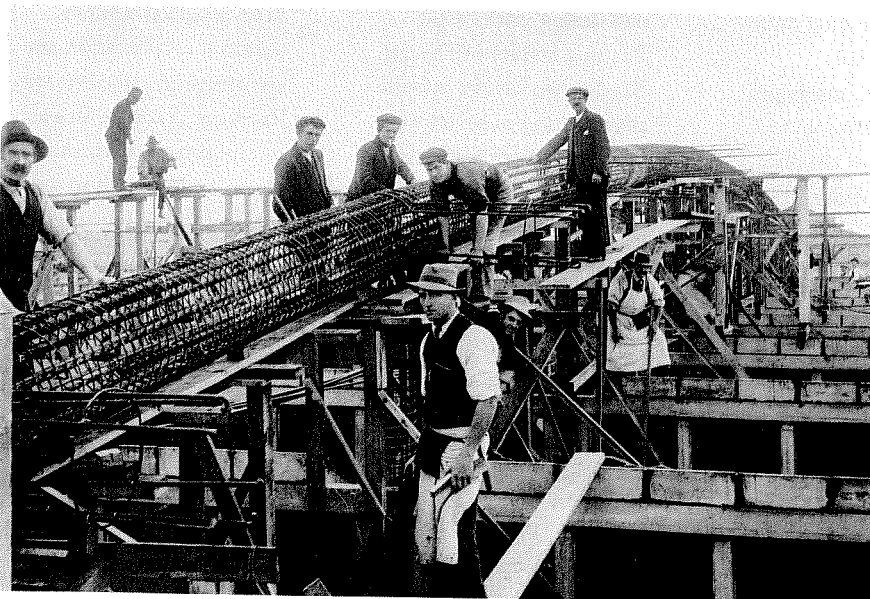
Subsequent engineering reports highlighted flaws in the original report and proposed a viable rehabilitation to incorporate the building, possibly, as part of the adjacent National Wool Museum. This resulted in a dispute between the government departments responsible for heritage and for public

safety, an unfavorable situation for an insecure government. The expedient solution, determined by the Premier and his Cabinet, was demolition. And so, to the approval of the Geelong City Council, the Geelong Regional Commission, the local *Geelong Advertiser* newspaper and the developers, the Victoria state government intervened to override the legitimate state heritage body. The site is still empty and unused.

Australia has nine World Heritage natural landscapes, some including petroglyphs. But the only Australian building considered for listing on the World Heritage Register — one of the only twentieth-century commercial buildings ever proposed — has now been irretrievably lost.

— *Robert G. Colosimo*

**Workers forming roof girders.
Circa 1911, this was the world's
largest uninterrupted concrete
roofed space.
Courtesy the Richard Aitken
Collection.**



Note

1. Miles Lewis, "E. G. Stone's Wool Store," *Heritage Australia* (North Sydney: Concrete Institute of Australia, 1988), 17-22.