

## Found: Three early C20 designs for RSNSW headquarters

by Davina Jackson

RSNSW archives at the State Library include architectural drawings for three elegant office premises that were designed for the Society between 1911 and 1928. Conceived by several of Sydney's top architects, these were intended to cement the Society as the arbiter of scientific culture in the Antipodes.

The first concept, designed by the distinguished firm of Mansfield and Son in 1911, was for a four-storey plus basement building on Phillip Street (number not known). A watercolour sketch of the façade showed British Arts and Crafts styling, with five bays of red brick walls fenestrated by double banks of white-framed windows. The brickwork was highlighted by horizontal bands of sandstone; creating a red-and-cream striped effect that historians later linked to the First World War with the epithet: 'blood and bandages'.

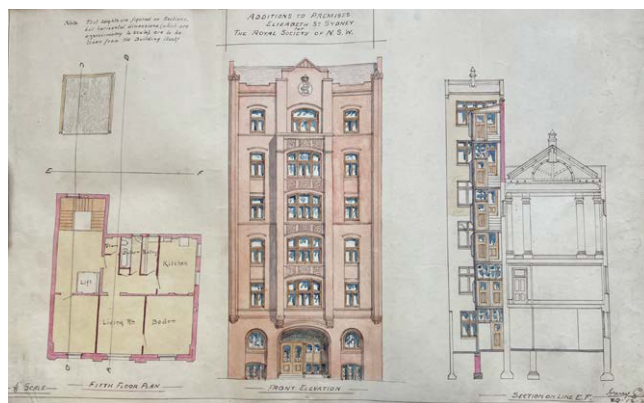


Pencil plans of this Phillip Street building show a large, open basement illuminated by lightwells on three sides; a lecture hall, cloakroom, office and secretary's room on the ground floor; a library, office and lecture hall on the first floor; and warrens of 12 smaller offices on each of the second and third floors. All floors were linked by staircases and a lift (which was a new-fangled import to Australia then).

The façade sketch showed 'The Royal Society of New South Wales' as a prominent sign above a

central entrance with a Baroque (curved) pediment. According to early 20<sup>th</sup> century construction methods for multi-storey office blocks, this edifice would have been assembled with columns and floorplates of iron-reinforced concrete. The façade would have been a curtain wall of brickwork that was attached to the framework but did not carry the roof load.

The second set of drawings, signed in 1920 by prominent architect Harry Chambers Kent, showed alterations and additions to the Society's chambers at 5 (previously numbered 37) Elizabeth Street, which bounded a lane just south of Hunter Street. These plans clarified how to expand the Society's small existing building — two storeys plus a basement — by enlarging the existing floors (eastwards to the foot-path) and adding several new levels above.

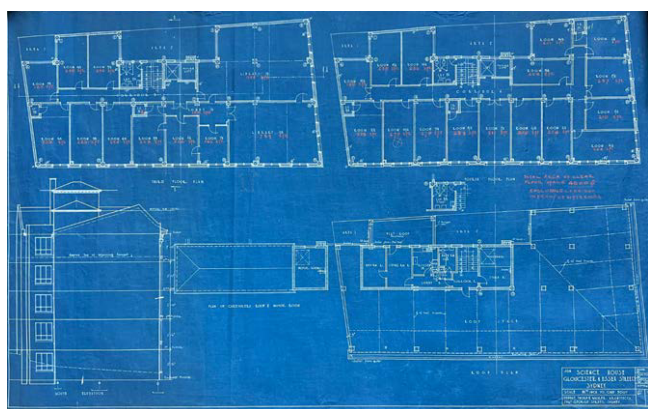


The additions were to include an imposing lecture hall on the top two floors of the original building, a library in the basement and a small caretaker's flat on the roof (facing north between two gables). Offices and committee rooms were shown on the ground and higher floors.

Kent's watercolour sketch for the proposed façade showed conservative styling for its time. Four pilasters, defining three bays plastered in a terracotta tint, created a strongly vertical effect that gestured slightly towards the proportions of American skyscrapers. But the design also included nostalgic English features: a Tudoresque parapet, shallow-arched windows and portal details, and panels of herringbone brickwork above large windows on the four main upper floors. All floors were connected by a 'lift' and a spiral staircase.

Neither of these two architectural concepts were built. Some reasons were clarified in a sheaf of letters typed to the Society from its consulting engineers and lawyers. Dated 1912, these showed that the Society was concerned that its Elizabeth Street building — occupied since 1875 and purchased in 1878 — was too small for its needs and key rooms would lose daylight from a new office building that was being constructed on a neighbouring site. The Society considered selling its Elizabeth Street property and building larger new premises in Phillip Street. After this idea was abandoned (before or during the First World War), the RSNSW commissioned the 1920 plans to expand its existing premises — but that idea was also abandoned.

The third set of drawings includes floor plans for Science House, a five-storey masonry building which occupies a sloping site on the corner of Gloucester and Essex Streets in The Rocks. It was built between 1929 and 1931 on land granted by the State Government to the three owner organisations which had formed a consortium to do so: the Royal Society of NSW; the Institution of Engineers Australia; and the Linnaean Society of NSW. It was officially opened in May 1931 by the Governor of NSW, Sir Philip Game, and immediately occupied by six other scientific and professional organisations, in addition to the owners.



A landmark near today's southern approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge, its architecture is a fine inter-war example of the 'stretched palazzo' style that was inspired by three-storey Early Renaissance townhouses in Florence and updated to lend an aura of stature and stability to multi-storey government and financial buildings.

Science House was designed by Peddle Thorp & Walker, a firm founded in the 1890s by English architect James Peddle. It won a design competition conducted by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1927 and its completed building later won the NSW RAI's Sulman Medal.

PTW's floor diagrams (including some overlaid with electric lighting layouts in red pen) complement a fine exterior perspective illustration that is held in the Society's archive at the University of Sydney.

Like many Australian banks, Science House has two streetfront façades that are divided into three horizontal bands punctured by banks of evenly spaced windows. It has an imposing base of tall arches framed by rusticated sandstone blocks; three middle floors of plain, red brickwork and a top floor of smooth sandstone between projecting eaves and stringcourses.

The floor plans show a high-ceilinged lecture hall on the ground and first floors, a library on the first and second floors, and banks of offices on upper levels, with a one-bedroom caretaker's apartment in the roof zone.

In 1927, the Society sold its Elizabeth Street building to the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society, which occupied the first floor until the RSNSW moved into Science House in 1931. It remained there until 1978, when the government replaced the science groups with its Department of Sport and Recreation.