



# University House (Former Nesca House)

Address 300 King Street, Newcastle, NSW, 2300

Practice Emil Sodersten in association with Pitt & Merewether

Designed 1937-38 Completed 1939, 1959 (alt.)

History & Description University House (former Nesca House) is located opposite Civic Park on the corner of King & Auckland Streets & was commissioned by Newcastle Council for the many departments responsible for the electricity supply to the city & neighbouring councils. The brief for the building was to 'be modern, efficient, timesaving & functional', & was to complement the adjacent Town Hall, designed by H. E. White, 1929. As a result the predominantly three storey building was clad in sandstone. The building is an important example of the Inter-War Functionalist style of architecture & marked a new period in the Sodersten's design philosophy, being recognised at the time as one of Australia's notable architects of the Art Deco style having just designed the City Mutual Building, Sydney, 1936. Following an overseas trip in 1935, where he viewed the 'functional modernism' of European architecture in Holland and Sweden, he designed Nesca House incorporating new principles including a reduced palette of ornament & the introduction of extensive areas of glazing. The main facade has a central entrance marked by a 5 storey tower with vertical fins, adjoined each side by 4 storey curved 'pylons' & 3 storey office floors which have contrasting horizontal bands of windows & stone cladding. Though the stone cladding is not a recognised characteristic of the Inter-War Functionalist style of architecture the more modern influences are evident in the simple geometric forms, horizontal glazing & rounded corners with curved glass. The building was constructed with a concrete encased structural steel frame, reinforced concrete floors & beams. Internal elements included an innovative demonstration theatre, showroom, administrative & business offices, & staff accommodation; some of which included purpose designed furnishings & fittings.



University House (former Nesca House) from Civic Park across King Street.  
Source: NSW Heritage Database



Aerial view of Nesca House (left) and Town Hall (right), c1940s  
Source: AIA NSW, Government Printer

The building was enlarged in 1959 with a 3 storey addition at the rear, designed by Sodersten for the recently established Shortland County Council (SCC), which supplied electricity to the Hunter Region. The SCC also added a decorative tower in 1967. In 1969 the theatre & demonstration centre were renovated. In 1970 two floors were added to the 1959 addition & the original council chamber was remodelled for new purposes. In 1979 the curved windows were removed from the front of the building. The building has had various occupants after 1987, until 1995 when it was occupied by the University of Newcastle.

Emil Sodersten is a notable Australian early modernist architect & is recognised by the profession as one of the key practitioners of the Art Deco style in Australia.

(Refer NSW SHR database #5045739: ADB online: AIA NSW Architects: Maitland B, Stafford D, 1997, *Architecture Newcastle*.)

Statement of Significance University House (Former Nesca House) is a significant example of the Inter-War Functionalist style of architecture in Australia & is an important townscape element which forms an integral part of the civic complex of Newcastle. It is the original building that is significant & it demonstrates the transition in style from Art Deco to functionalist modern by the notable architect Emil Sodersten, with its simple geometric forms, roof concealed by parapets, extensive banding including metal framed windows, curved glass & minimalist detailing.

Criteria Applicable **N2.** Significant heritage value in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics  
**N3.** Significant heritage value in establishing a high degree of creative achievement



Stairwell  
Source: AIA NSW