



Reader's Digest Building

Address 26-32 Waterloo Street, Surry Hills, 2010

Practice John James

Designed 1963 Completed 1967

History & Description

Surrounded by three streets the Reader's Digest Building extends over four levels & is possibly the first to be designed with a large computer at its centre & with all workspaces arranged in relation to it. The proportions of the building are consistently based on the Fibonacci Series & the Golden Mean, most clearly seen in the external elements and the soaring interior of the entry staircase. The cost of the building was contained with most of the external walls clad in brick with narrow windows to create a thermal mass that required a relatively small air-conditioning plant. The highly acclaimed rooftop garden courtyard, designed by notable landscape architect Bruce Mackenzie, helped maintained an even temperature throughout. The warehouse nature of the client's work was expressed in the large panels of brickwork with narrow windows set between splits in the outer columns. The concept was repeated on the corners that enclose a verterbrates of cast iron by renowned sculpture Doug Annand. Casts had also been prepared for grilles, bollards and railings to act as foils to the white concrete however these were rejected when the client management changed.

James created a building that related to the human scale & to the adjoining terrace house streetscape. He developed organic tree-like forms for the junctions between the columns & the drip moulds under the windows & brickwork. These drips were designed so the rain would create shadows on the outside. The formwork & placement techniques for the Class 1A quality white in-situ concrete, both externally & internally, required considerable craftsmanship & supervision. The internal column set out was innovative in that the placement to one side of the 5.5 metre grid allowed standard partitions to pass them rather than being cut to fit, & therefore was interchangeable.

The building was refurbished in 1995 as an educational establishment & has more recently been refurbished for commercial offices.

Statement of Significance

The idiosyncratic Reader's Digest Building has great importance in the context of post-war commercial architecture because of its accomplished & distinctive aesthetic expression that combined architecture, sculpture & landscaping, & because of its place outside the architectural mainstream of the time. The building demonstrates a high level of integrity within its external fabric & in its major internal spaces. The high level of design & execution is particularly evident in the exceptional quality off-form reinforced concrete finishes. It has added significance because of its association with designer & sculptor Douglas Annand & notable landscape architect Bruce Mackenzie.

Criteria Applicable

N3. Significant heritage value in establishing a high degree of creative achievement



Front elevation (Photo: K Danis 2007)



Detail of paired columns (Photo: K Danis 2006)



Interior in 1967 (Courtesy of John James)