

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

ITEM DETAILS			
Name of Item	273 Crown Street, Surry Hills		
Former name	Ruby Reds		
Item type	Built		
Address	Number 273	Street Crown Street	Suburb Surry Hills
Property description	Lot A		DP 436515
Use	Current Vacant		Former Residential, commercial, social club
Statement of significance	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street is significant as the location of Ruby Reds, Sydney's first recreational venue dedicated to the lesbian community. This building has been, in various iterations, associated with Sydney's lesbian and gay communities since the second half of the 1970s almost up to the present time. The place has associations with prominent entrepreneur Dawn O'Donnell, who gave much support to Sydney's lesbian and gay communities and was responsible for opening several recreational venues to serve these communities, including Ruby Reds.</p> <p>Documentary evidence suggests that 273 Crown Street would have significance to members of Sydney's lesbian community who frequented the place while it was an exclusive lesbian venue. It may also have significance to members of the LGBTIQ+ community who frequented the premises in its subsequent iterations.</p> <p>Alterations carried out in the 1920s to 273-275 Crown Street are associated with architect Percy Gordon, who was a sole practitioner when it was designed and then a director of the prominent commercial architectural practice of Morrow, De Putron & Gordon and Morrow & Gordon, which were responsible for the design of high quality buildings during the interwar period. It was not one of Gordon's major commissions. The façade of 273-275 Crown Street is a modest example of the Inter War Free Classical style, which was popular during the 1920s.</p>		
Level of significance	State: No	Local: Yes	
Heritage listings			
DESCRIPTION			
Designer	Percy James Gordon (1923 alterations) L J Kennedy & Associates (1974-75 alterations and additions to 273 Crown Street)		
Builder			
Construction years	Circa 1869: Semi-detached residences 1923: Crown Street façade and shop alterations 1974-75: extensive alterations and additions to 273 Crown Street		

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

<p>Physical Description</p>	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street is the northern component of a pair of two storey nineteenth century buildings overlaid by 1920s facades demonstrating characteristics of the Inter War Free Classical style, which enjoyed great popularity during the 1920s. Characteristics of the style include symmetry, broad stylistic effects rather than intricate detail and simplification of classical idioms, in this case the detailing of the parapet. First floor walls are lined with cement render. Overall the building has a characteristic nineteenth century terrace form. Its roof is covered by corrugated steel. There are dormers on the eastern side of the roof over 273 and 275 Crown Street. A stone party wall capped by a chimney at the ridge separates the two buildings. The shopfront of 273 Crown Street has retained its 1920s form, with a recessed porch on the northern side of the building but otherwise has been modified. The shopfront of 275 Crown Street has retained much of its 1920s form and fabric, including leadlight glazing and the glazed door to the shop. Shopfronts are sheltered by a suspended awning, although original soffits have been replaced.</p> <p>The rear (western) side of the building, built during the 1970s, is three storeys high. External construction consists of textured brickwork, the edges of concrete floor slabs being exposed. The lowest level has a tall full width opening and contains a loading dock on the southern side of the building. A roller shutter has been installed in the loading dock opening. A door to the north is accessed by a flight of concrete stairs with a simple tubular metal pipe handrail on one side. Fenestration in the two levels above consists of a pair of windows on the northern side of the elevation and two single windows on the southern side. Windows consist of double hung aluminium framed sashes.</p> <p>The interior of the building was not inspected. However, documentary evidence indicates there has been a relatively high level of internal modification to 273 Crown Street, suggesting there is little remaining early fabric.</p>
<p>Physical condition</p>	<p>The building appears to be in fair to good condition.</p>
<p>Modification and Dates</p>	<p>The following list of works for physical modifications to the building is based on Council's building application records summarised in street cards for 273 Crown Street:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1922-23: conversion to retailing on ground floor and residential use on first floor (273-275 Crown Street). • 1925: unspecified alterations. • 195: demolition of outhouse and new lean-to structure. • 1956: alterations. • 1960: new stairs. • 1961: restaurant extensions. • 1963: balcony enclosure. • 1974: major alterations and additions; awning modifications • 1987: flagpole above awning. • 1989: upgrade for Liquor Administration Board.
<p>Archaeological potential</p>	<p>Not ascertained</p>

HISTORY

The coastal regions of Sydney between Port Jackson and Botany Bay are the ancestral territories of the Eora people. The traditional owners of the land now within the Woollahra Council area were the Cadigal (Gadigal) people. In common with other tribes living by Sydney Harbour, the Cadigal lived in harmony with the natural resources within their country, fishing from canoes or hunting the animals that lived in surroundings. The tribe appears to have moved within their territory in response to the seasons and family connections. Shell middens and

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

other archaeological remains in the area provide material evidence of many centuries of sustained connection to the land that also sustained them. The arrival of white settlers caused the wholesale disruption of traditional life and the cultural practices of the Eora people generally. Despite enormous challenges, today many Indigenous people identify as Eora and maintain cultural practices and a connection to Country.

The site of 273 Crown Street is part of 25 acres (10.12 hectares) granted to Alexander Donaldson in August 1795 and shortly after acquired by Commissary John Palmer, who acquired a substantial land holding in the area. His Surry Hills Estate was sold in 1814 to clear his debts. The land then became part of merchant and pastoralist Edward Riley's estate that extended from Woolloomooloo Bay to Surry Hills. The site is on part of Block B4 of the Riley Estate, bounded by Riley, Crown, Campbell and Goulburn Streets.

What was to become the site of 273-275 Crown Street was acquired by builder Joseph Watson and his wife Hannah in September 1868. A pair of two storey houses, one with a shop, was built shortly after. What was then identified as 271 Crown Street (later 273 Crown Street) was occupied by Joseph Watson and his family. On 7 January 1878 the Watsons conveyed the property title to piano tuner August Gehde, who became one of the directors of W H Paling & Co, a major retailer of musical instruments. He and his family initially occupied one of the houses and eventually both of them. Gehde sold the two buildings to chemist and president of the Pharmaceutical Society of New South Wales, Andrew Wadsworth, in January 1913. Wadsworth then brought the property under Torrens Title.

On 27 October 1922 architect Percy James Gordon lodged a drawing proposing alterations to 273-275 Crown Street with the City Council. The drawing described the conversion of the ground floor of the buildings from residential to shop use and the construction of a new Crown Street façade. Percy Gordon (1892-1976) was articled to the office of architects Morrow & De Putron in 1909. He received formal education at Sydney Technical College and after completing his articles in 1914 studied architecture in London and Pennsylvania University in the USA, with some work experience in Chicago. Gordon enlisted in the AIF in 1917 and served in France. At the conclusion of World War I he remained in London and studied at the London Architectural Association. Gordon returned to Sydney during 1919 and after eighteen months in private practice, rejoined Morrow & De Putron and became a partner in 1922. De Putron resigned from practice in 1925 and Morrow resigned in 1932. Gordon was President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects NSW Chapter between 1944 and 1946.

Some four days after Gordon lodged the drawings, Wadsworth transferred the property title to freeholder Raymond Gales and warehouseman James Adamson. Just over a week later they conveyed it to shopkeeper William Browning.

In March 1923 Browning sold 273-275 Crown Street to Mrs Louise Cherry, who subsequently sold it to John Deehan of Garland (near Cowra) in November 1923. During the 1920s and the following decades the two buildings were occupied by a succession of small retailing businesses and their owners.

After Deehan's death in 1928 the property passed to Ambrose Marks, a market gardener residing at Dalby Falls, and John Deehan Gruber, a Parkes grazier, during 1929. Both are understood to be members of Deehan's family. Marks and Gruber retained possession of 273-275 Crown Street for several years before transferring the title to storekeeper Placido Guisepppe Volani and wine and spirit merchant Aldo Testoni in April 1948. In February 1952 Volani and Testoni split the property title into two parts. Volani retained 275 Crown Street while Testoni retained 273 Crown Street. 273 Crown Street was leased to a succession of wine and spirit merchants before Testoni transferred the property title to Martha Rhodes Pty Limited at the end of August 1973. During this period the first floor balcony was enclosed.

Martha Rhodes Pty Limited commissioned LJ Kennedy & Associates to document extensive alterations and additions to the building, extending it across the entire site to Lower Campbell Street. Plans were lodged with the City of Sydney in March 1974. The basement level was to be used as storage, the ground floor as a liquor shop and the first floor as a bar and restaurant served by lavatories on the floor below.

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

At the end of 1975 the first floor and part of the ground floor were leased to a company called Satay Hut Pty Limited. The lease expired in July 1978. The previous month a development application was lodged by Australian Tavernas to maintain the existing restaurant and allow recorded music and dancing. This was approved in September 1978 and is understood to be associated with Ruby Reds.

A few dates have been given for the opening of Ruby Reds at 273 Crown Street. According to the Pride History Group,

Ruby Reds was the first lesbian only bar in Sydney and when it opened in 1976 every kind of lesbian started to go there. There were students, bar dykes, feminists and discreet professional women, all mixed up together.

Ruby Reds had been a steakhouse on Crown Street, above Crown Liquor, when Dawn O'Donnell and Roger-Claude Tesseydre took it over. They took out the tables and chairs and turned the kitchen into a bar, but left the leather banquettes for people to sit on. It was a long, narrow building with a dance floor in the middle and seating around the edge.

According to Frances Rand, co-founder and publisher of *Lesbians on the Loose*, Ruby Reds opened around 1975, while historians Clive Faro and Garry Wotherspoon date it to 1979. The Australian Tavernas development application suggests this is the most likely date. Ruby Reds was a bar and dance venue devoted to Sydney's lesbian community. The business was owned by Dawn O'Donnell. The steakhouse that occupied the premises, evidently called Ruby Red's Steakhouse, was offered by its managers to O'Donnell and Tesseydre.

Available oral history evidence suggests that lesbians only appeared on Sydney's camp social scene (as the early lesbian and gay bar culture was known) in significant numbers in the early 1960s, when they began frequenting bars and cabaret clubs alongside camp men. Prior to this, evidence suggests the lesbian social scene in Sydney centred on private networks meeting at house parties and later in social groups. Chez Ivy's at Bondi Junction (1962-1967, since demolished) was a pioneering lesbian and gay establishment. Ivy's Birdcage at 191-195 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, opened in 1967 and was well patronised by lesbians and gay men. The Sussex Hotel at 68 Liverpool Street, Sydney (1922, demolished) was a lesbian venue in the 1960s. Other venues prior to Ruby Reds included the Trolley Car in Chippendale (1960s) and the Park Inn (now Centennial Hotel) at Woollahra, which opened as a camp venue in 1970. The Royal George Hotel on the north-western corner of King and Sussex Streets, Sydney, opened as a "new gay spot" in the first quarter of 1977 and attracted a part-time lesbian clientele into the early 1990s. The Belmore Park Hotel at 47 Reservoir Street, Surry Hills, opened as a short-lived lesbian venue in August 1983, closing in 1985.

As with its opening, the date of Ruby Red's closure is not clear. It is said to have closed in 1982 although another source maintains it closed in 1986. The building then housed a succession of bars and clubs catering to the lesbian and gay community. These included:

- the mixed venue Querelle, which opened on 23 May 1986.
- the Boogie Room, opened by building owner Roger Carroll in November 1988.
- 'B's opened in early 1990, and then Pastels a few months afterwards.
- Ruby Red's reopened in the venue in 1991 as "Rubies." It apparently closed in the last quarter of 1992 or early 1993.
- in 1995 the building became Headquarters, a gay male bath house and bar. Headquarters proved to be relatively enduring.
- around December 2016 Trade cruise club opened, closing in 2023.

A restaurant called Destiny's on Crown Cabaret Restaurant occupied part of the building from 2007 to circa 2015. 273 Oxford Street, which is presently unoccupied, is owned by Stasia Pty Limited.

HISTORICAL THEMES

Australian Theme	State theme	Local theme
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Commerce	Retailing - shops

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

4 Building settlements, towns and cities	Towns suburbs and villages	Historic development in Surry Hills during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Leisure	Nightclub, recreational venue.
9 Marking the phases of life.	Persons	Significant people associated with the site: Dawn O'Donnell; Percy Gordon.

HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT	
<p>Historic significance SHR criteria (a)</p>	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street is significant as the location of Sydney's first recreational venue dedicated to the lesbian community. It has also been suggested that it was the first such venue in Australia, although this needs to be substantiated. The site has been, in various iterations, associated with Sydney's lesbian and gay communities since the second half of the 1970s almost up to the present time.</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street meets the threshold for listing at a Local level.</p>
<p>Historical association SHR criteria (b)</p>	<p>The pair of buildings at 273-275 Crown Street have associations with the work of architect Percy Gordon, who was a sole practitioner at the time it was designed. He became a director of the prominent commercial architectural practice of Morrow, De Putron & Gordon and then Morrow & Gordon. These two firms were responsible for the design of a relatively large number of high-quality buildings, several of which have been listed as heritage items in Sydney LEP 2012. However, 273-275 Crown Street is not one of Percy Gordon's major projects.</p> <p>The place has associations with prominent entrepreneur Dawn O'Donnell, who gave much support to Sydney's lesbian and gay communities and was responsible for opening several recreational venues to serve these communities.</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street meets the threshold for listing at a Local level.</p>
<p>Aesthetic significance SHR criteria (c)</p>	<p>The façade of 273 Crown Street (along with that of 275 Crown Street), is typical of small suburban commercial buildings constructed in Sydney during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many, like 273 Crown Street, were constructed as alterations and additions to earlier buildings. The façade is a modest example of the Inter War Free Classical style, which was popular during the 1920s. The façade of 273 Crown Street has been obscured by later modifications while the façade of 275 Crown Street has a higher level of integrity. However, it does not demonstrate a high degree of technical achievement, nor is it of outstanding aesthetic quality. Alterations and additions undertaken during the 1970s are understood to have removed a substantial amount of original internal fabric, as is evident from building application drawings.</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street does not fulfil this criterion.</p>

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

<p>Social significance SHR criteria (d)</p>	<p>Documentary evidence suggests that 273 Crown Street would have significance to members of Sydney's lesbian community, who would have frequented the place while it was serving as an exclusive lesbian venue. It may also have significance to members of the LGBTIQ+ community who frequented it in its subsequent iterations. However, further research is required to confirm this.</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street is considered likely to fulfil this criterion at a Local level.</p>
<p>Technical/Research significance SHR criteria (e)</p>	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street is unlikely to fulfil this criterion. The information that it can yield can also be obtained from other sites in the local government area. Modifications undertaken to the building's interior have compromised its integrity.</p>
<p>Rarity SHR criteria (f)</p>	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street, as an example of an Inter War Free Classical shop and residential building, is not rare. It should be noted that the Free Classical façade has been imposed over a Victorian terrace house, evidence of which is still clearly visible. The history of the building, where the original structure has been adapted to a variety of uses over time, <i>is not rare</i>.</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street does not fulfil this criterion at a Local or State level.</p>
<p>Representativeness SHR criteria (g)</p>	<p>The building at 273 Crown Street is representative of Victorian dwellings that were adapted to retailing during the 1920s. Its façade is representative of the Inter War Free Classical style</p> <p>The building at 273 Crown Street fulfils this criterion at a Local level.</p>
<p>Integrity</p>	<p>The exterior of 273 Crown Street has moderate integrity. The building at 275 Crown Street has a higher level of integrity externally.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage 273 Crown Street in accordance with Sydney LEP 2012 and Sydney DPC 2012. • The existing building may be demolished and replaced provided the new building interprets the LGBTIQ+ historic and social significance on site.
-------------------------------	--

INFORMATION SOURCES

Type	Author/Client	Title	Year	Repository
Written	TKD Architects	273-275 Crown Street, Surry Hills Heritage Assessment	2025	City of Sydney

AUTHOR OF THIS REPORT

TKD Architects	<p style="text-align: center;">Name</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Date</p> <p style="text-align: right;">September 2025</p>
----------------	---

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption

Portion of an aerial photograph of Surry Hills that includes 273-275 Crown Street (highlighted).

**Image Year**

Circa 1932

Image author and Copyright Holder

Milton Kent; State Library of NSW

DRAFT

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption Behind the bar at Ruby Reds, 198



Image Year

1984

Image author and Copyright Holder

Cayte Latta photograph, Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Papers of Cayte Latta.

DRAFT

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption

Façade of 273-275 Crown Street. 273 Crown Street is highlighted.



Image Year

2025

Image author and Copyright Holder

TKD Architects

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption Shopfronts at 275 Crown Street (left) and 273 Crown Street (right).



Image Year

2025

Image author and Copyright Holder

TKD Architects

DRAFT

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption

Lower Campbell Street elevation of the 1970s addition to 273 Crown Street.



Image Year

2025

Image author and Copyright Holder

TKD Architects

Heritage inventory sheet

Based on the NSW Heritage Office State Heritage Inventory sheet

IMAGES

Image Caption

Looking to the rear of 275 Crown Street from Lower Campbell Street.



Image Year

2025

Image author and Copyright Holder

TKD Architects

DRAFT