COMMERCE

Commercial & Retail Sydney

Cover Photo: Gary Deirmendjian collection, City of Sydney Archives
From imposing banks to opulent shops and old warehouses, much of Sydney’s commercial history can be seen in its buildings.

Sydney’s shops demonstrate the evolution of shopping from elaborate Victorian shopping arcades to multistorey department stores. This walk will take you through the heart of the City’s financial and retail district – Martin Place, George Street and Pitt Street – pointing out landmarks, their architectural features and the history behind them.
The streets of York, Clarence and Kent between Erskine and Druitt Streets are peppered with late 19th and early 20th century warehouses. These buildings serviced the busy wharves of Darling Harbour and the expanding retail businesses along George and Pitt Streets. Today many of them have been converted into offices and residential units. If you have time, you might like to wander around the block bounded by King, Clarence, Market and Kent streets. Keep your eyes open for the arches of old carriageways which led to courtyards behind the warehouses. Highlights include the "twin warehouses" at 197-199 Clarence and 340 Kent Streets and at 201-207 Clarence and 346-348 Kent Streets – both groups of warehouses back onto shared central courtyards. Also of interest is Broughton House an imposing former warehouse of the ironmonger John Keep and Sons dating from 1900.

**Detour – Stockpiling in the city**

The city council designed and planned this long thoroughfare as “the financial and insurance centre” of Sydney. The widening and extension through to Macquarie Street commenced in 1923 but was not completed until 1935, after an expensive legal battle with landowners seeking compensation. The area was closed to cars in the 1960s and 1970s. Martin Place is lined with imposing banks and insurance buildings that aim to impress. The grand designs and lavish materials convey prestige and wealth, strength and security.

**Martin Place**

Pitt Street Mall, created in 1988, contains many layers of Sydney’s commercial and retail history. There is the old Liverpool Arms Hotel; the former Australian Mutual Fire Insurance Society Building; the Strand Arcade; Skygarden which incorporates the facades of the City Bank Hotel (1903) and an old Bank of New South Wales; and the landmark Centrepoint tower which opened in 1982. Have a look up at the parapet on the Soul Pattinson Chemist building. Can you see the phoenix rising from the ashes? W.H. Pattinson rebuilt his pharmacy in 1886 after a fire and named the new building “Resurgam”. 

**Detour – Pitt Street Mall**
Please allow approximately 1-2 hours to do the tour.

1 **St James Station**
In the 1920s, the railway was extended from Central Station into the city, shifting the retail focus from Haymarket back towards the City centre. St James Station brought shoppers to the edge of Sydney’s retail district, and from there they wandered off to Gowings, Farmer’s (now Myer), and David Jones.

Start at St James Station (1926), Elizabeth Street, opposite Market Street.

Opposite the station are the **David Jones Department Stores** on Elizabeth Street and Market Street.

2 **David Jones Department Stores**
From its humble beginnings in 1838, David Jones Limited became Sydney’s most elegant department store. The store on the corner of Elizabeth, Market and Castlereagh Streets was opened in 1927. The glamorous ground floor interior is ablaze with mirrors, marble and lights. Located diagonally opposite, the second David Jones building was completed in May 1938 to mark David Jones’ trading centenary.

Walk down Elizabeth Street until you reach Martin Place. On the way you will see the **Old Supreme Court**, 102 Elizabeth Street corner King Street and the former Sun Building.

3 **The former Sun Building**
The Sun newspaper was an afternoon daily, which ran from 1910 until the 1980s. This building was the last of the great newspaper buildings to be built in the city, and the spectacular Skyscraper Gothic style confidently portrayed the commercial power of the media. Built in 1929, the Sun Building is one of only three in the city to be designed in this architectural style. (The other two are The Grace Hotel and the State Theatre which you will also see on this tour.)

4 **Commonwealth Savings Bank**
This imposing building was built as the headquarters for the Government Savings Bank of NSW and opened in 1928. Go inside and have a look at the banking chamber – originally one of the largest in the world – which incorporates both Australian and imported marbles and a plaster and pressed metal ceiling.

Martin Place is a large pedestrian plaza stretching from Macquarie Street to George Street. On the northern side of Martin Place, between Elizabeth and Castlereagh Streets, is the Commonwealth Savings Bank.

5 **Martin Place**

Walk down Martin Place you will see the Mutual Life & Citizens’ Assurance building corner Castlereagh Street, with its logo on the tower, and the Commonwealth Trading Bank and Headquarters corner Pitt Street. Cross Pitt Street and continue down to George Street. Running the block between Pitt and George Streets on your left is the GPO No.1 Martin Place.
The General Post Office was constructed in stages from 1866-91. It is the most notable work in the city by colonial architect James Barnet. The realistic carvings facing Pitt Street and Martin Place, carved by sculptor Thomas Sani, caused a public scandal. They were viciously attacked by the press and Parliament as being “hideous in form and expression” and attempts were made to force Barnet to remove them.

In 1997-99, the site was redeveloped and major conservation works undertaken. Down in the basement, parts of Sydney’s first water supply, the Tank Stream, were uncovered and some historical interpretation of this watercourse has been provided.

On George Street directly opposite Martin Place are two more bank buildings: Westpac Bank 13 and the (former) National Australia Bank 14 in 343 George Street.

Cross over George Street and wander up the pedestrian section of Barrack Street to York Street and turn right. Lift your eyes and look for the miniature Eiffel Tower on the AWA building 15 at 45-47 York Street.

Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd (AWA) was a household name from the 1930s to the 1950s as both a broadcaster and a manufacturer of radios, record players and other electrical equipment. Wireless House, its headquarters on York Street, became a Sydney landmark when it was built in 1939, the steel tower being the highest structure in the city until the 1960s.

Wander south along York Street until you reach The Grace Hotel. Along the way you will see a remarkably intact streetscape (the so-called York Street Wall) which retains many fine 19th and early 20th century buildings. Look out for the former warehouse of the furniture emporium Beard Watson & Co. 16 on the left at 22-26 York Street. The original sandstone facade has florid detailing including fluted pilasters with ornate capitals, vermiculated courses, swag mouldings, dentils, parapet and broken pediments topped by urns.
The Grace Building was built in 1930 for Grace Bros as a department store and offices. The Gothic skyscraper design and in particular the spectacular corner tower was modelled on the Chicago Tribune Building (1922). The Grace Building was requisitioned by the Australian Government during the Second World War and used by the US Army Services of Supply and the Royal Navy as a service base for Pacific operations. The building was extensively refurbished in 1995 and opened as The Grace Hotel in 1997.

At this point you may wish to take a detour (see Stockpiling in the City). Otherwise head down King Street towards George Street, passing by the Forbes Hotel 30 York Street corner King Street.

Before crossing George Street, look across at the Darrell Lea shop corner King Street opposite you and also to the right down George Street to the Strand Arcade 412-414 George Street, The Block, Dymocks 428 George Street and Myer corner Market Street. Cross and walk down George to Market Street.

This exuberant building was constructed in 1863-64 for Ashdown & Co, wholesale and furnishing ironmongers. It later became the Royal Exchange Hotel in the 1930s and most recently the chocolate shop.

Named after The Strand in London, a smart and fashionable shopping street, Sydney’s Strand Arcade opened in April 1892. Today it still retains the small elite boutiques that defined the Sydney shopping experience of the 1890s.

The State Theatre opened on 7th June 1929 in a blaze of colour and light. It is the third building on our tour designed in the Gothic skyscraper style. Above the theatre is an 11 storey office tower. The interiors of the State Theatre are lavish and it is worthwhile going on a guided tour.

The former retail emporium of Farmer and Company (est. 1840) was built between 1928 and 1957. The store included an art gallery, roof garden and restaurant. In 1960 Farmer and Co. was taken over by the Melbourne retail giant Myer. The store traded as Grace Bros. from 1983-2004.

Before crossing Market Street, pause and look up at Gowings and the State Theatre next to it. Then cross over to take a closer look at each of these buildings.

The Grace Hotel

Darrell Lea shop

Strand Arcade

Dymocks Building (The Block)

Myer

Gowings

State Theatre

Photo: City of Sydney Archives

Photo: Lisa Murray/City of Sydney

Photo: John Thiele, courtesy The State Theatre.
Walk down Market Street until you get to Pitt Street. At this point you may wish to take a detour (see Pitt Street Mall). Otherwise, turn right into Pitt Street. As you walk look out for the City Tattersall’s Club 202-204 Pitt Street, with its prancing horse on the parapet, and The Arthouse Hotel (former School of Arts) 275 Pitt Street.

You will shortly arrive at Park Street. Diagonally opposite on the corner of Park and Pitt Streets is the Criterion Hotel.

Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts were central civic buildings in many nineteenth-century towns. Founded for the educational improvement of skilled working class men, they quickly became popular with clerks, schoolteachers and professional men. The former School of Arts in Pitt Street was refurbished as a hotel in 2002 and the restored interior decoration is impressive.

This hotel replaced in the Criterion Theatre in 1936 when it was demolished for the widening of Park Street. Inside, the hotel retains many original furnishings, including painted poster advertising, tiled walls and leadlight windows. This was a typical pub interior of the 1920s and 30s.

There have been markets on this site since 1810. The Queen Victoria Markets replaced the old George Street markets in 1898. They were designed for the Council by the City Architect, George McRae, and aspired to be the grand shopping arcade of Sydney rather than produce markets. The imposing Romanesque building was never successful as markets. The QVB was refurbished in 1986.

Turn right and walk down Park Street to the Sydney Town Hall corner George and Druitt Streets, and the Queen Victoria Building (QVB). George Street between Market and Druitt Streets.

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