

Construction of the Manchester Unity Building dubbed the 'Melbourne Miracle'

The Art Deco building in Melbourne's CBD is marking its 90th birthday – but it may never have existed if it wasn't for a revolutionary construction schedule.

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© Kevin McCloud pays tribute to the Manchester Unity Building

It has been nine decades since a Melbourne architect inked the elegant lines and protruding tower of the [Manchester Unity Building](#).

Those were the days when the sky was a foe to be conquered.

The forest of skyscrapers in New York and Chicago ignited the imaginations of draftsmen around the world, who shared in the forward-leaning style of Art Deco.

But the tingling feeling that western civilisation, with the Great War long gone, was rising towards an exciting new future, soon evaporated.



📷 A man stands on the roof of Melbourne's Manchester Unity Building shortly after its construction in 1932. Picture: State Library of Victoria

The depression pulled the rug from under the hopes of construction giants whose fortunes vanished, leading them to the breadline with the men who laid the bricks.

It was in that depth of pessimism that a green sprig shot up, 64 metres above Swanston St.

Despite the grim economic conditions, the Manchester Unity project, a gothic-inspired masterpiece, went ahead.

Using a revolutionary construction schedule that saw one whole floor constructed week, it was truly a Melbourne Miracle.

It has since, rightly, become one of the city's favourite buildings.

All day, all night

Plans for one of Melbourne's most stylish buildings were dreamt up after land on the corner of Collins and Swanston Streets was bought for 215,000 pounds for the mutual company known as the Independent Order of Oddfellows Manchester Unity.

Architect Marcus Barlow designed the building in the style of 'Commercial Gothic', similar to Art Deco, and drew inspiration from the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower.

When the plans were drawn in the late 1920s, times were good. But the crippling economic crisis of the Great Depression threatened to derail the project.



📷 The remarkable building schedule for the Manchester Unity project and, right, a 1932 newspaper article about the speed of construction. Picture: Trove

Defying the bleak outlook, and gambling that the economy would turn around, the Manchester Unity directors pushed ahead with the plan.

The creation of about 750 construction jobs provided a lantern of hope in a city where slums were growing, but the workers had a huge challenge ahead of them.

A new method of construction scheduling was introduced, in which materials, labour and timing were marked down almost to the minute.

As a result the work continued all day and all night.

Demolition of the old building began at midnight on January 1, 1932, as soon as the old lease on the property expired, and work continued around the clock more or less until the new building was completely up.

One newspaper report described the work beginning as bells rang across Melbourne to bring in the new year:

“A minute after the bells had ceased to ring out the old and ring in the new, the iron roof of the building was being removed, and the work of demolition had begun in earnest.”

Work halted only on Sundays, and a roster of three eight-hour shifts per day was developed with special permission from the arbitration authorities.

Workers were given special rates for night-time labour.

As the project rolled on, the results were phenomenal.

By early May, the new structure’s foundations had been laid and it’s basement floors were fully constructed.

Then between May and late July, all of the above-street floors were added.

The extraordinary effort saw one floor added per week on average, as the juggernaut construction schedule ticked over, and 24-hour work continued.



📷 Labourers on the east side of the Manchester Unity Building in 1932. Work continued around the clock. Picture: University of Melbourne Archives



📷 The Manchester Unity Building in 1936, four years after its whirlwind construction.
Picture: State Library of Victoria

Leaping up by six metres per fortnight, the roof was on by July 26 and structure stood 40 metres above the footpath.

That left the building's signature gothic spire, which was completed by the end of November and added another 24 metres.

All-up it took less than 12 months to build one of Melbourne's most iconic and longest-lasting structures.

As the Argus newspaper put it, the building's 12 above-ground floors rose up "to a schedule no less exacting than a railway timetable."

Hardly believing it was possible, workers soon looked down on the intersection of Swanston and Collins Streets from a rooftop that would soon become an up-market restaurant and a symbol of the city's gradual economic revival.



📷 The Manchester Unity project employed 750 construction workers. Picture: University of Melbourne Archives

State of the art

The opening of the building in December 1932 was widely celebrated and included a gala dinner in the building's lower floor, during which the delighted premier Sir Stanley Argyle pushed a button that illuminated the now-famous spire for the first time.

The building remains a lasting example of Art Deco architecture and decoration, including ornately decorated elevator doors and breathtaking ceiling reliefs in the optimistic style of the 1930s.

The Manchester Unity elevators were the fastest in Melbourne at the time of their installation, moving ten feet per second.

The building's escalators were the first in Melbourne.

Housed in the basement was a water treatment unit, an airconditioning system that serviced every floor, and a huge diesel engine to generate electricity in the event of a blackout.

Although used for office and retail space at its opening, the building was used by the army during WWII as a communications hub, and was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth after the war for use by government departments.

Its current tenants include some of Melbourne's top jewellers and a large dental clinic.
