

Former C M Ross and Co Building (DIC Building)

4-11 The Square, Palmerston North

NZHPT Registration Number: 1256
NZHPT Registration Type: Historic Place – Category II
NZHPT Registration Date: 02/07/82
City/District Council: Palmerston North City Council
District Plan status: Category 1



Brief History

The former C M Ross and Co Building, now the Palmerston North Public Library, stands on the former site of George Snelson's iron store. Snelson and his wife Louisa were among the very first arrivals in the new settlement of Palmerston in December 1870. Snelson was the first storeowner and was also the town's first mayor. Charles M Ross established C M Ross and Co Ltd, in 1882 and the business first had premises on Broadway Avenue before moving to a small store occupying part of the site of the present building the following year. The trading name was initially 'Bon Marché' and later became "Rosco". As the business expanded, Ross purchased additional land fronting the Square adjacent to the first store and after his death in 1927 the firm commissioned architects Arthur Robert Allan and H R Hickson to design a large building to fill the site. This was the first commission received by Napier-born Arthur Allan after shifting his practice from Napier to Palmerston North in the mid-1920s. Allan designed a number of other commercial buildings as well as houses, schools and churches.

The building, which cost £27,700, is a rare example of the Chicagoesque style in Palmerston North. Elements of the façade that reflect the style are the deep cornices, vertical structural members (expressed as pilasters), large window openings with a horizontal emphasis, and Classical details such as festoons and brackets. Its scale and location on the Square make it a landmark building. The department store's tearooms were considered the best and smartest in the city, and many civic banquets were held at the tearooms, including the banquet for Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh during their 1954 New Zealand tour.

In 1959 C M Ross and Co was purchased by Auckland department store Milne and Choice Ltd. The owners then sold the business to D I C, a Wellington department store, a decade later and the building changed hands again in 1989 when Dunedin retail chain Arthur Barnett Ltd purchased the business. The store was closed in August 1991 and purchased by the Palmerston North City Council to house the new City Library. The Borough Council assumed responsibility for library facilities as early as 1879 and since that time the City Library had been located at various sites in the city, from 1929 to 1965 on the corner of The Square and Fitzherbert Avenue and from 1965 on the corner of The Square and Main Street. On May 25 1996 the old Rosco building was reopened as the Palmerston North Public Library

The architect for the new library building was Ian Athfield, a prominent Wellington architect who was noted for his innovative solutions to refurbishment of heritage buildings such as the Wellington City Library and a number of Wellington waterfront buildings. Athfield retained the façade of the Rosco building but demolished much of the interior, exposing materials that were incorporated into the design. The entry was on a main concourse, marked by a controversial giant tapering copper pillar, which linked the Square with the retail and café area in George Street. This helped to recognize the connection between the Library and other heritage buildings in the area. Opposite the Library entrance is a 3 metre high sculpture in patinated bronze 'All Creatures Great', a work of Palmerston North sculptor Paul Dibble. Athfield's design won an Institute of Architects' award. Athfield's practice has won more than 60 national and international awards and in 2004 he was awarded the New Zealand Institute of Architects' Gold Medal acknowledging his influence on New Zealand architecture. This building has heritage significance because of its long association with retailing in the city and because it is an example of a heritage refurbishment by a notable New Zealand architect.

Principal Sources:

Bowman, I. and Kelly, M, *Palmerston North CBD Heritage Inventory*. Palmerston North, Palmerston North City Council, 1993.

Palmerston North Heritage Trails Working Party, *The Square Walk*, 1993.

Ian Matheson City Archives file A175/50, Pt.3.

Palmerston North City Library Photographic Collection Sq 229, 266, 267, 274, 287, 319, 324, 378; Pg107, 26;Bc48, 72, 154, 371, 378, 382, 385, 387; O67-70 – Royal Visit; BC 256, 257, 267, 268, 287, 291, 292, 296; Z5132, 5138, 5149, 5150.