

Brisbane Customs House

427 Queen Street, Brisbane

The 1880s was a period of economic prosperity for Brisbane and, when completed, the new Customs House was amongst the more impressive of grand public and commercial buildings being erected at this time. It is a 2-storey rendered brick building on stone foundations. It is an example of Classical style and incorporates pedimented gables, copper dome and a massive colonnade. Heraldic shields flanked by a kangaroo and an emu and the words "Advance Australia" adorn the pediments. These icons were precursors to the official Queensland Coat of Arms that was not granted by Queen Victoria until 1893.

Navigational hint: on the upstream side of the Story Bridge just before the CityCat arrives at the Riverside ferry terminal, look for the large copper dome of the Brisbane Customs House and a fig tree nestled among the city's high rises.

The Customs House was needed for Brisbane when Moreton Bay was declared a port of entry for commercial shipping and immigration in 1846. The first small wooden customs house was built in 1850, with the site selected for its proximity to commercial activities on the South Brisbane Reach.

However, expansion of the colony and Brisbane's importance as a major shipping centre meant the Port of Brisbane quickly outgrew the early customs house, which was soon unable to cope with the volume and quantity of goods passing through.

The existing Customs House was erected between 1886 and 1889 to a design prepared by Charles McLay, the major designer under George Connolly of the Queensland Colonial Architect's Office.

John Petrie & Son, one of Brisbane's oldest and most respected building contractors tendered a price of £37,342 (equivalent to \$6.5 million today). Difficulties with the supply of some materials, especially stone for the foundations, as well as alterations to the original plans delayed the anticipated completion, and the building was opened on 2 September 1889. Its river-facing court is supported by beautiful Brisbane Tuff stone retaining walls, with wrought iron balustrade and a wide staircase leading down to the waterfront. Much of the stone for construction came from the quarry across the river at Kangaroo Point Cliffs.

With Australia's Federation, the Brisbane Customs House was transferred to the Commonwealth by 1908, and since that time has undergone several refurbishments, including in 1950 when it reopened after a 2-and-a-half-year major renovation. In the mid-1980s, the Australian Customs Department moved out of the building to Australia House. The building remained vacant from 1988 until leased by the University of Queensland and restored as a convention centre and art gallery in the mid-1990s.