

16. Browns Mart



Browns Mart is a unique building that dates to the 1880s and is highly regarded as a landmark in the city. Built of porcellanite stone, it has a corrugated iron roof and is considered to have architectural, historic and social significance.

Architect John George Knight designed new premises for Vabien Louis Solomon & Co in 1885 and it became known as Solomon's Emporium, the finest stone store in Palmerston (Darwin's then name).

From 1887-1910, the building was known as the Mining Exchange where the Port Darwin Mercantile Agency, run by John Alexander Voules Brown and Herbert Henry Adcock, operated as importers, customs and shipping agents. Its use as a shipping agency and auction house continued until it was leased by the Bank of New South Wales in 1937 while the Bank's own building was constructed.

The building suffered substantial damage in the cyclone of 1897. During WWII, it was converted to a torpedo workshop. After the war it was used by the Navy until about 1952. It then housed the police force, the Crown Law Office and the Motor Vehicle Registry.

Browns Mart became a community theatre in 1971. It was damaged during Cyclone Tracy in 1974, repaired and resumed its use as a valued community theatre.

History

The following is extracted from a *Conservation and Management Plan* (2009) by David Bridgman for the Heritage Branch:

The town of Darwin dates from 1869 when George Woodroffe Goyder, the Surveyor General of South Australia, surveyed a small township on a peninsula overlooking Port Darwin. Originally called Palmerston after the British Prime Minister, it was later renamed Darwin after the Port. The completion of the overland telegraph line from Port Augusta to Darwin in 1872 linked the cable from England with the southern towns. While it was hoped the telegraph would encourage the settlement of the interior of Australia it brought few settlers to the north. However, the discovery of gold by a work party drilling holes for the telegraph line near Pine Creek started a small gold rush.¹

The first dwellings in Darwin were similar to those erected by Europeans in settlements elsewhere in Australia consisting of tents and then simple prefabricated timber, or steel and iron, cottages more suited to temperate climates. Their role was primarily to provide shelter and protection from the environment. Uncomfortable conditions soon led to modifications with verandahs added to many of the cottages to provide shade for the buildings and a cooler outdoor space. Drawing on British experiences in other tropical colonies the verandah became the defining characteristic of a building in the tropics until the 1930s and progressively became the principle living area. As Darwin prospered, new dwellings were constructed with whatever materials were available. Rough shelters were made of split timber slabs, logs, palm trunks and sheets of bark while roofs were often covered in bark or shingles and Chinese cottages were often thatched with grass. By the end of the 1880s corrugated iron began to replace local materials for wall and roof linings.²

While simple cottages met accommodation needs, more substantial government buildings were often constructed of local stone providing an illusion of permanence in the small settlement. The climatic characteristics of the region were largely overlooked in the design of many of these buildings in favour of building traditions drawn from colonial models in South Australia and Victoria. Many of these early stone buildings remain in Darwin and their design has been attributed to the architect John George Knight (c.1824–1892). Browns Mart dates from this period in Darwin's history and had the distinction at the time of being one of the few privately owned stone commercial buildings in a town where corrugated iron was the more popular building material.

The Building of Browns Mart

Browns Mart was built by Vaiben Louis Solomon (1853-1908) in 1885 and was originally known as 'Solomon's Mart'. V.L. Solomon came to the Territory from Adelaide in 1873 in search of gold. He managed a store for his uncle, M.J. Solomon in Palmerston (later Darwin) and was in partnership with H.W.H. Stevens. He formed V.L. Solomon and Co in 1877 and acted as an 'auctioneer, shipping, mining, estate and general commission agent.'³ Solomon

¹ Bridgman, D., *Acclimatisation [architecture at the top end of Australia]*, Canberra: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003

² Lewis, M., 'Making Do' in Troy, P., (ed) *A History of European Housing in Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.42.

³ Rich, J., *Browns Mart, Darwin: A history*, Darwin: Browns Mart Trustees, 1988, p4.

was to spend 17 years in the Territory and during this time held a wide range of official positions including 'Councilor and Chairman of Palmerston District Council, editor and proprietor of the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, Netherlands Vice Consul, agent for Netherlands India Steam Navigation Co. Ltd., agent for Lloyds of London, architect, builder and contractor.'⁴ V.L. Solomon was also actively involved at a state and Commonwealth level.

...[He was] one of the first two members elected to represent the Northern Territory in the South Australian Parliament...he was South Australian Premier and Treasurer [for 1 week]...was a member of the national convention which framed the Commonwealth Constitution in 1897 and 1898 and was a member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives from 1901 to 1903...He worked hard for a better deal for the Northern Territory...⁵

Solomon leased the land upon which Browns Mart was built in June 1883 but it wasn't until 1885 that he started to build the store on the site using Chinese labour and taking advantage of the local stone known as porcellanite⁶, a soft claystone and a popular material for Government building within Darwin. Browns Mart is, however, unusual in being one of the few private buildings of that era to be constructed of local stone, the other being the Sue Wah Chin Building in Cavenagh Street. The *Northern Territory Times* reported on the construction of the building in early January 1885:

We understand that Messrs V.L. Solomon and Co have arranged to build a large stone warehouse on the allotment adjoining Mr Bull's store in Smith Street, immediately opposite the Town Hall. It is to be hoped that this example will be followed by others and permanent stone buildings soon replace most of the somewhat frail structures of wood and iron which have hitherto satisfied [sic] the ambitions of our local builders.⁷

The following month the *Northern Territory Times* reported that:

The foundations of V.L. Solomon and Co.'s new stone store in Smith Street are down and the contractor intends pushing forward the work with the utmost dispatch. The building will, when completed, be an ornament to the street, and we hope soon to be able to chronicle the erection of more of the same substantial character. The dimensions will be 80 x 38 feet, with 17 feet [high] walls. New office premises for this journal are nearly complete at the rear of the stone store, the entrance to which will be by a fourteen feet right-of-way between the new building and Mr J.T. Bull's store.⁸

The design of Browns Mart has been attributed to the Architect John George Knight (1826-1892), although Jenny Rich notes that '...V.L. Solomon may also have been involved and suggests that Solomon was the architect for several other Palmerston Buildings.'⁹ John George Knight (c.1824–1892) arrived in the Territory in 1873 as Government Secretary. Originally from England, he established himself in Melbourne as an architect and engineer before moving to Darwin where he designed a number of buildings including the Police Station and Courthouse, the Town Hall and Government House.¹⁰ Knight recognised the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. Rich notes that porcellanite stone was 'unusual' at the time as most buildings were constructed of timber and iron. While this is true, and the N.T. Times makes reference to this in their article on the building, several substantial stone buildings had been constructed in Darwin by the mid-1880's including the Darwin Town Hall (1883) just opposite Browns Mart and now in ruins; Government House (1871); the former Police Station and Courthouse (1884); and several other Government buildings in the City that have since been demolished.

⁷ *Northern Territory Times*, 17 January 1885, quoted in Rich, op.cit., p.4.

⁸ *Northern Territory Times*, 21 February 1885, quoted in Rich, op.cit., p.4.

⁹ Rich, op.cit., p.4.

¹⁰ Bridgman, D., op.cit.

climatic difference between the Territory and Victoria and suggested that 'here I find it necessary to ignore much of my acquired knowledge and to make a fresh and especial study of my immediate surroundings.'¹¹ Holding the view that the 'free movement of air' was the primary consideration for comfort, Knight modified many of the prefabricated cottages sent from Adelaide 'by the addition of louvreboards and by generally increasing ventilation.'¹² In 1883 he designed his own house overlooking Darwin harbour. It was an eccentric Venetian-gothic cottage known locally as 'Knight's folly' and described as 'a cool bungalow-like place of wood and iron and inter-laced bamboo strips.'¹³

While the design of Browns Mart has been attributed to J.G. Knight the *Northern Territory Times* reported in June of 1885 that:

...the front doors and windows of Solomon's new store were sketched by Mr Knight, Architect, to harmonise with the Town Hall opposite.¹⁴

It seems unusual for the *Northern Territory Times* to have reported that J.G. Knight designed the Smith Street façade, rather than report that J.G. Knight had designed the building and it is possible to interpret this comment as Jenny Rich suggests, meaning that J.G. Knight designed only the Smith Street façade of Browns Mart. Nevertheless, it is also a simple comparison between the two buildings highlighting the importance of Browns Mart in the context of the Town Hall, a very important Darwin building at the time. While it would have been unusual for J.G. Knight, as a Government employee, to design a private building in Palmerston, it is, nevertheless, quite feasible for him to have done so.

While Jenny Rich was to conclude that '...whether Knight designed the whole building, or just the Smith Street frontage remains uncertain'¹⁵ and W.V. Mason recognized that '...the stone work on the side walls does not show the same careful selection as the official buildings...'¹⁶ in the absence of evidence to the contrary it is reasonable to attribute the design of the building to J.G. Knight in association with V.L. Solomon, the building owner.

¹¹ Knight, J.G., quoted in Allom, R., Two Centuries of the North Australian House in P. Freeman & J.Vulker (eds), *The Australian Dwelling*. ACT: RAIA Education Division, 1991, p.51.

¹² Ibid, p. 56.

¹³ Sowden, W.J., quoted in Carment, D., Wilson, H. & James, B., *Territorian: The Life and Work of John George Knight*. Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1993, p.42.

¹⁴ *Northern Territory Times*, 27 June 1885.

¹⁵ Rich, op.cit., p.5

¹⁶ Mason, 1968, quoted in Rich, op.cit., p.5.

The building's many uses throughout history

Solomon's Mart

Browns Mart opened for business in 27 June 1885 with the *Northern Territory Times* reporting that:

Messrs V.L. Solomon and Co. have just completed the largest and finest stone store yet raised in Palmerston. The building, which is situated in Smith Street nearly opposite to the Town Hall, has a frontage of 38 feet by a depth of 85 feet...with two rooms at the back 17 x 15 feet separated by a 6 foot passage, the front portion of the building having also two offices 15 x 14. The walls are 17 feet high and the hipped roof has a rise of 13 feet, making a total height from floor to ridge of 30 feet. Ample provision has been made for light and ventilation by 13 large windows, the front ones being of heavy plate glass.

The masonry of the front is random course ashlar, the joints being tuck pointed. The side walls are blind jointed and pointed in 12 inch courses, which gives the appearance of ashlar work. The architrave dressings around all the doors and windows (sketched by Mr. Knight, Architect) are in the Renaissance style and are designed to harmonize with the Town Hall without copying its details. The floors throughout are laid in one inch Portland cement and great care has been taken in laying them to prevent cracking. The whole building presents a substantial appearance and is unquestionably the finest warehouse yet erected in the Territory.¹⁷

The reference to 'Mr. Knight' having sketched the details around the windows suggests that his role as Architect may well have been limited to the Smith Street facade. Of interest also is the description of the flooring which suggests a paving of some kind, not timber as is currently installed in the building. Solomon's Mart, or Solomon's Emporium as it has sometimes been called, was a warehouse that Solomon suggested could hold '...500 tons of merchandise at reasonable rates, with no charge for storage on goods consigned or sent in for sale and only a small nominal charge for insurance.' In July of 1885, Solomon advertised his business as:

...importers and shipping agents, agents for Lloyds of London, land and estate agents, stock and station agents, custom house agents. Colonial and foreign consignments received for sale on commission. Free of storage charges.¹⁸

Solomon's Mart was a venue for regular auctions, often held on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, where a wide variety of goods would be placed for sale including: '...buggies, building materials, buildings, carts, clothing, drapery...farming implements, furniture, groceries, horses...land, mines, wines and spirits...'¹⁹ It was also a popular venue in the town for public and private meetings.

Solomon's Mart was one of several stores in Palmerston and competition within the small market must have been fierce. The other stores included: '...Adcock Brothers; P.R. Allen & Co; Baines and Hughes; J.T. Bull (closing in October 1885); Frederick Griffiths and Jolly & Luxton...'²⁰ The number of stores in what was a relatively small town may have contributed to the decision by Solomon to move from the large Solomon's Mart, possibly to a more modest establishment although Jenny Rich notes that Solomon became increasingly involved in mining and other activities on the District Council during his time in Darwin suggesting that he progressively withdrew from his business activities.

¹⁷ *Northern Territory Times*, 27 June 1885, cited in Rich, op.cit., p.5. Rich notes that Browns Mart was 80 feet deep rather than 85 feet as reported in the *N.T. Times* (on site measurement reveals that it is 79' 8").

¹⁸ *Northern Territory Times*, 4 July 1885, cited in Rich, op.cit., p.5.

¹⁹ Rich, op.cit., pp.5-6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 7.

The Mercantile Mart

In September 1887 V.V. Brown, H.H. Adcock and J.A.V. Brown arranged to take over Solomon's Mart with V.L. Solomon holding his last auction in the building on the 8 October, a 'clearing out sale...prior to his removal to new premises.'²¹ Brown, Adcock & Brown had considerable experience in commercial enterprises in Darwin. H.H. Adcock came from Victoria in the 1870s initially working with V.L. Solomon, he began his own business, H.H. Adcock & Co, at nearby Southport, and went into business with his older brother William trading as Adcock Brothers. V.V. Brown came to the Territory in 1876 to manage the business of M.J. Solomon, taking over from V.L. Solomon when he opened the Mart. In 1879 V.V. Brown established his own business and in 1880 became a junior partner in Adcock Brothers. J.A.V. Brown came to the Territory from South Australia for a short time in 1873 to work in the goldfields and returned in 1882 to help his brother Victor erect Fannie Bay Gaol. In 1885 he established a branch of Adcock Brothers in Derby. In 1910 J.A.V. Brown was '...one of two Members elected to represent the Northern Territory in the South Australian Parliament following in the path of V.L. Solomon before him.'²²

Victor Voules Brown (1841-1910) and Herbert Henry Adcock (1858-1908) left the firm of Adcock Brothers and, together with Victor's brother, John Alexander Voules Brown (1852-1945), took over Solomon's Store and established a new partnership trading as Port Darwin Mercantile and Agency Co. The business was much the same as V.L. Solomon's and they advertised as '...importers, custom house, shipping and general commission agents.' They also provided offices for the Eastern and Australian Steam Ship Company, North Australian Lloyds and the Northern Territory Mining Exchange. From this time, notes Jenny Rich, the building was known as The Mercantile Mart, the Mercantile Auction Mart or the Mining Exchange.

As with Solomon beforehand, Adcock and the Brown brothers held regular auctions at the Mart with the building appearing to have been a centre for trade at the time. Jenny Rich notes that '...H.H. Adcock was the underwriter for Lloyds...V.V. Brown was the agent for Eastern and Australian...the company held a share in the Port Darwin Navigation Company...the Mining exchange sold shares in mines, displayed mining samples and was the venue for a number of mining meetings...Shipping and mining notices were posted outside the building...men were occasionally interviewed and hired for work in the country.'²³ In January 1888 the store was made a bonded warehouse by H.M. Customs.

The Mercantile Mart was in competition with several other businesses in Palmerston including: Adcock Brothers; P.R. Allen and Co.; Aplin Brown and Co. Ltd.; Rundle Brothers and Co.; and at least 15 Chinese storekeepers.²⁴ This goes some way towards explaining the diversification of business interests. By 1891 '...the AMP Society, Leviathan Tin Co., Daly Proprietary Copper Co., and Alice Hills Gold Mining Co. had been added to the Mart's agencies.'²⁵ Notwithstanding the diversity, the depression of the 1890s had a devastating effect on most businesses in Palmerston and many were declared insolvent. One consequence of the difficult times was that the Mercantile Mart was mortgaged to the Commercial Bank in April 1892. Two years later J.A.V. Brown left the partnership for Western Australia and in January 1895 the business went into voluntary liquidation.

²¹ Rich, op.cit., p.7. Solomon continued in business until March 1891 when he was declared insolvent.

²² Ibid. p.10. Refer to Rich pp10-11 for a more detailed summary of the lives of these three men.

²³ Ibid, p. 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

The *Northern Territory Times* reported that:

As a trading concern the company is now to all intents and purposes dead and it is a serious reflection on the colony that such concerns should find it necessary to close their doors...at one time it gave great promise of returning large profits...however of late dull times attacked the company in a vital part and hence its downfall.²⁶

At the insolvency hearing aspects of the company's conduct was criticized by the judge and the result was that Adcock was suspended from business for nine months, Brown for six months and the assets of the company were sold off. The Mercantile Mart was offered for sale in December 1895 '...as a reversion of lease, at a rent of £50 per year, the lease to expire in May 1904.'²⁷ Jenny Rich notes that J. Hendrie '...may have taken over the Mart for a few months.'²⁸

Browns Mart

When V.V. Brown's six month suspension was served, in February 1896, he returned to the Mart with the *Northern Territory Times* reporting that:

Our estimable townsman Mr Victor Voules Brown has arisen superior to his recent misfortune and this week presents his business card to all and sundry. This time he is launching out "on his own" in a line well within his experience and his undoubted popularity should guarantee him a solid slice of whatever trade is going.²⁹

The present Browns Mart takes its name from Victor Voules Brown (1841 – 1910). V.V. Brown came from South Australia in late 1876 and during his 34 years in the Territory, he:

...built Fannie Bay Gaol (in 1882) and Christ Church (in 1902); he was also a Councilor, Chairman and Clerk of Palmerston District Council, local agent for Eastern and Australian Steam Ship Co. President of the Northern Territory Reform Association, foundation President of the Northern Territory Racing Club...member of the Board of Advice for the local school, member of the local Church of England congregation and an office bearer of many local sporting and community groups....In the early 1900s he became known as 'Daddy Brown', probably because he loved children and had eighteen of his own (seven by his first wife Julia nee Solomon, who died in Palmerston in 1881, and eleven by his second wife Eliza Sarah nee Tuckwell, who was the daughter of Northern Territory pioneers Ned and Eliza Sarah Tuckwell.)³⁰

Brown's business ventures at the Mart during this time were similar to his earlier ventures. Rich notes that 'E.O. Robinson (Customs Office and Trader) held the lease on the Mart briefly in 1896 then, in July 1896, it was transferred to V.V. Brown.' The building was known as the Mercantile Auction Mart or the Mercantile Store at that time but it became known as Browns Mart or Daddy Brown's Auction Room when Brown took over the lease.³¹

Considerable damage occurred to Browns Mart in 1897 when a cyclone struck Darwin. The *Northern Territory Times* was to report that '...Mr V.V. Brown's big stone offices, late the Mercantile, tumbled into ruins and Mr Brown had a most providential escape...'³² A

²⁶ *Northern Territory Times*, 25 Jan 1895.

²⁷ Rich, op. cit., p. 9.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Northern Territory Times*, 28 February, 1896.

³⁰ Rich, op. cit., p. 10.

³¹ Ibid, p. 11.

³² *Northern Territory Times*, 23 January 1897, cited in Rich, p.11.

contemporary photograph³³ shows the extent of the damage following the cyclone. The building lost its roof and a large proportion of the side wall was destroyed. It was the following year, May 1898, that '...tenders were called for a stone mason and carpenter to rebuild the Mart...' ³⁴ In July of 1898 the *Northern Territory Times* was to report that '...repair work was proceeding satisfactorily under contractor Ruthven.' ³⁵ When Browns Mart was repaired V.V. Brown continued business as usual. In December 1900 he was to construct a small shed alongside the Mart where he operated a sawmill supplying timber '...of any size'. ³⁶

V.V. Brown was to become involved in several business ventures in Palmerston including importing goat skins and mining, and he acted as the agent for several insurance companies. He was the Clerk of the District Council for many years and the Mart became a popular venue for public meetings of all manner while remaining a venue for regular auctions. When V.V. Brown died in February 1910 the *Northern Territory Times* noted that Mr Brown:

...had taken a more or less active part in every movement of a public character – political, social or sporting...his sunshiny, cheerful and optimistic temperament made him generally popular with all who personally knew him. ³⁷

Following V.V. Brown's death, his son Emanuel Victor Voules Brown (1866 – 1950), the oldest surviving child of V.V. Brown and his first wife Julia, took over the running of the business and operated from Browns Mart. While he was actively involved in the business and social life of the community over a period of 55 years Jenny Rich notes that he failed to achieve the same level of popularity or respect that his father had before him. Nevertheless, the business appeared to prosper and grow. On 3 October 1912 ownership of the site was transferred to E.V.V. Brown. By the 1930s E.V.V. Brown, then in his 60s withdrew from many of his business activities. In 1935 he subdivided the site, and constructed a house on one of the two sites. ³⁸ From this time the stone building was referred to as 'Old Man Brown's Building; Man Brown's Building; Brown's Building or as Browns Mart.' ³⁹

In March 1937 another strong cyclone struck Darwin, however, damage did not appear to have been as extensive as has been reported in the various journals and it is probable that Browns Mart survived relatively unscathed although Jenny Rich notes that the roof may have been lost or damaged. ⁴⁰ Whatever damage occurred must have been minor because in May 1937 E.V.V. Brown leased the Mart to the Bank of New South Wales while the Bank's new premise, further down Smith Street was being completed. The Bank remained in the building until March 1940.

E.V.V. Brown was to continue his various business concerns from his house next door to Browns Mart with his last advertisement appearing in the *Northern Territory Times* in July 1940. Soon after this he left Darwin and retired in Adelaide although he was to retain ownership of the Mart until 1946. When the Bank departed for their new premises in January

³³ Held by the Northern Territory Library.

³⁴ Rich, op.cit., p.11.

³⁵ *Northern Territory Times*, 22 July, 1898, cited in Rich, p.11.

³⁶ Rich, op.cit., p.11.

³⁷ *Northern Territory Times*, 25 February 1910.

³⁸ Rich, op.cit., p.15. Rich notes that E.V.V. Brown built the house.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.15, Rich (1988) cites a Heather Harris who 'thinks it [Browns Mart] may have lost its roof. See *Northern Territory Times* 12 March 1937.

1941 Solicitors G.W. Michell and H.J. Foster took over the premises. The following year the armed forces resumed the entire southern area of the peninsular, including Browns Mart, for military purposes. By the early 1940s the site was substantially developed with Jenny Rich noting that:

In January 1942 the buildings on Lot 411 comprised: the Mart, a shop and dwelling built by E.V.V. Brown in 1910 and an office and dwelling built by E.V.V. Brown in 1935 – they were collectively known as ‘Brown’s Buildings’. In addition, there were some galvanized iron out-buildings, including two storage sheds, four lavatories, four bathrooms and several water tanks. Immediately behind the Mart was a galvanized iron and fibro dwelling 36 feet by 14 feet with a kitchen.⁴¹

Jenny Rich was to suggest several other uses for the Mart over the years including a brothel during the Second World War years; a boarding house; offices of Motor Vehicle Registry and rooms for the Legislative Council. While contributing to the local character and colour of the building, there is no firm evidence to suggest any of these activities occurred in Browns Mart as Jenny Rich acknowledges. Nevertheless, these activities have been associated with Browns Mart and further research may reveal the veracity, or otherwise, of the claims.⁴²

During the initial bombing of Darwin in 1942 and subsequent bombing raids throughout the Second World War Browns Mart remained relatively unscathed although it suffered from looting and many of the other buildings on the site were demolished. From 5 January 1943 Browns Mart was occupied by the Royal Australian Navy and used as a torpedo workshop with E.V.V. Brown paid £145 rent for its use. In August 1944 a report on Browns Mart compiled by A.R. Miller, the Northern Territory Surveyor General, noted that:

All improvements removed except the main stone shed 75 [sic] feet by 34 feet, now occupied by the Australian Navy and used as a torpedo workshop. The shed has been renovated internally and is now in most excellent condition. Navy will be moving heavy machinery into the shed and have already installed steel girders just under the plates running the full length of each side with a cross girder at the front connecting them. This work has not in any way damaged the building but the girders are supported by wooden posts. The shed is not ceiled but has a cement floor. Internal partitions have apparently been removed. In the corner of the building facing Smith Street there is a small stone wall room 15 feet by 15 feet...the walls internally have been cement treated and painted and the roof looks very sound. Outside the building is fretting in one or two places but not seriously...a well maintained property.⁴³

On 17 January 1946 the Commonwealth Government resumed all freehold land in Darwin, including lot 411 and Browns Mart, for which E.V.V. Brown received £7150/19/- compensation. This act marked the end of the Brown family’s association with the building. Although the military occupation of Darwin ended in 1946 the Navy retained Browns Mart for many years, resisting the N.T. Administration’s attempts to obtain the building. By July 1952 however, the Navy had vacated Browns Mart and it was handed over to the N.T. Administration after which the Crown Law Office moved into the building.⁴⁴

At this time the interior of Browns Mart was partitioned to form several offices located each side of a wide central corridor that ran through the building from front to back. Conditions were initially quite poor with the acting Government Secretary noting that ‘...the building had

⁴¹ Australian Archives, NT Branch, F46: Lot 411, cited in Rich, 1988, p18.

⁴² See Rich, op.cit., p.18 for a further discussion of these activities. She notes that there is no confirmed evidence of these activities, suggests some alternative interpretations and concludes that these uses remain ‘an unproven aspect of the building’s history’.

⁴³ Australian Archives NT, F46: Lot 411, cited in Rich, op.cit., p:20. (Emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Rich, op.cit., pp 20-22.

no lavatory accommodation and the water supply was not connected.⁴⁵ This was rectified the following year when a separate toilet was built and by 1960 'an iron store room was erected at the rear of the building' using salvaged materials from other government buildings.⁴⁶ The Crown Law Office remained at Browns Mart until mid-1965.

A number of organisations have been suggested as the next tenants of Browns Mart including the Port Authority, Darwin City Council and the Police. While the first two are unconfirmed, the Police moved into Browns Mart in April 1966 and remained in the building until November 1970 when they moved into a new Police building on the corner of Mitchell and Bennett Streets. The Police Commissioner, WJ McLaren, noted that:

...there were no extensive renovations carried out before the Police moved in but the building was treated for termites...there was a corridor from the front to the rear, with offices on each side and partitions to just above head height to allow circulation of air from the fans. The Commissioner's office, in the right rear corner of the building, was fairly small, with one window which could not be opened because the air conditioner was fixed in it. The office's inner walls were of light material and it had a ceiling.⁴⁷

When the Police vacated Browns Mart the building's future was uncertain. Many felt it would be demolished to make way for parkland surrounding the proposed Civic Centre to be built in Cavenagh Street. The Museum and Art Galleries, then occupying the Old Town Hall opposite, wanted the building for storage. The Darwin Theatre Group suggested the building should be used as a community theatre and many agreed. Support came from several organisations and individuals including the well-known Melbourne architect and critic Robin Boyd who noted that:

The demolition of this building would be a very short sighted act. No one could claim that it is an architectural masterpiece, but it is unquestionably a superior product of its time and a fascinating fragment of Darwin's history. At the time it was built...Sydney, Melbourne and other southern cities were being almost suffocated by late Victorian Baroque ornamentation. Yet here in Darwin is evidence of a new Colonial beginning as simple and innocent as the first buildings of Sydney nearly a full century earlier or of Melbourne half a century earlier. If Darwin is looking ahead to a more important future role in Australia, it seems to me that she must first take a more responsible attitude to her own irreplaceable historical relics.⁴⁸

The proposal of the Darwin Theatre Group to use Browns Mart as a community theatre was accepted and on 13 November 1970 the Administrator, Fred Chaney, announced that Browns Mart would become a 'little theatre'. The land was excised from the Civic Square project and a small block, Lot 4993, created in place of lot 411. In October 1971 a Board of Trustees was appointed to manage the building in its new role as a community theatre. The first board comprised Ken Conway (Chairman), Lyn Serventy, Lawrence Ah Toy, Grant Tambling, Christopher Nathanael, Peter Spillett and Ken Waters. Management of Browns Mart passed to the Board on 16 November 1971.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Rich, op.cit., p22. Australian Archives, NT F1. 52/126.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Cited in Rich, op.cit., p23.

⁴⁸ Darwin Theatre Group inc, *Browns Mart: Feasibility Study for a Theatre*, Darwin Theatre Group: Darwin 1969, p.18. Also cited in Rich, op.cit., p.24.

⁴⁹ Rich, op.cit., p24.

Browns Mart in more recent times

From its first production in 1972 Browns Mart has been a successful small theatre providing a venue for a range of theatre productions that includes classic drama, comedies, musicals, modern drama, pantomimes and revues. While several organisations have used the building the Darwin Theatre Group Inc. was initially the main user. In late 1972 Architect Peter Dermoudy was commissioned to design a new theatre layout and an administration block to be located at the rear of Browns Mart. Dermoudy found that the 'back wall had been modified, the double doors had been removed and there was a galvanised iron lean-to out the back...'⁵⁰ Tenders were received for the construction of stage one of the administration block, comprising toilets and a plant room, in 1973. The flat ceiling in Browns Mart—a legacy of Crown Law days—was removed, the existing toilets were removed and the air-conditioning contract was let in early 1974. Cyclone Tracy however, caused considerable damage to Browns Mart when it struck Darwin on 25 December 1974. The building lost its roof cladding and the interiors were badly damaged by water, although the stone walls remained intact.

Clive Lucas, a conservation architect, presented a report on Darwin's historic buildings in February 1975. In the report he concluded that Browns Mart should be conserved. Echoing the words of Robin Boyd some years earlier he stated that the features of Browns Mart were:

...none save simplicity and good materials. Like the old Town Hall opposite, the style is Victorian Italianate but here the style is much looser and the character more suggestive of a colonial outpost. The stone walls are enriched by plastered quoins, architraves and sills. The roof is hipped and the building is six bays long. Originally there was a wagon doorway at the rear. There are double doors at the front and side which are replacements. The wooded casement windows are probably original. There is a nasty addition at the back.

[The building is]...located on a corner site surrounded by a park in the heart of the civic section of the city. Its relation to the old Town Hall opposite is important. Like the Town Hall, any use involving additions would be unsatisfactory. The interior is not important and therefore any subdivision is not a problem. It could be used as offices or used as a place of assembly. It is evidently intended to use it as a theatre and this is quite compatible so long as the external appearance is not changed.⁵¹

Clive Lucas noted that Browns Mart was a building of architectural and historical significance and as such should be preserved. In 1975, Architects Oldham, Boas, Ednie-Brown & Partners and Peter Dermoudy in Association, undertook conservation works to Browns Mart. Work included the provision of new roof framing and cladding, structural upgrading, installation of a mezzanine floor, provision of change rooms and other facilities to be used by the theatre.

The conservation work was completed in stages as funding became available with Jenny Rich noting that:

A completely new structural frame of steel and timber was erected internally using the original walls as 'veneer'. The windows were blocked up (although this is not obvious from the outside), and air conditioning was added.⁵²

⁵⁰ Rich, op.cit., p.25. The lean-to, noted Rich (on p.25), was probably the one added by the Crown Law Office c1960.

⁵¹ Clive Lucas, C., *Report on the historic buildings of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy*. Prepared for the International [sic] Committee of the National Estate, 1975. cited in Rich, op.cit., p.27.

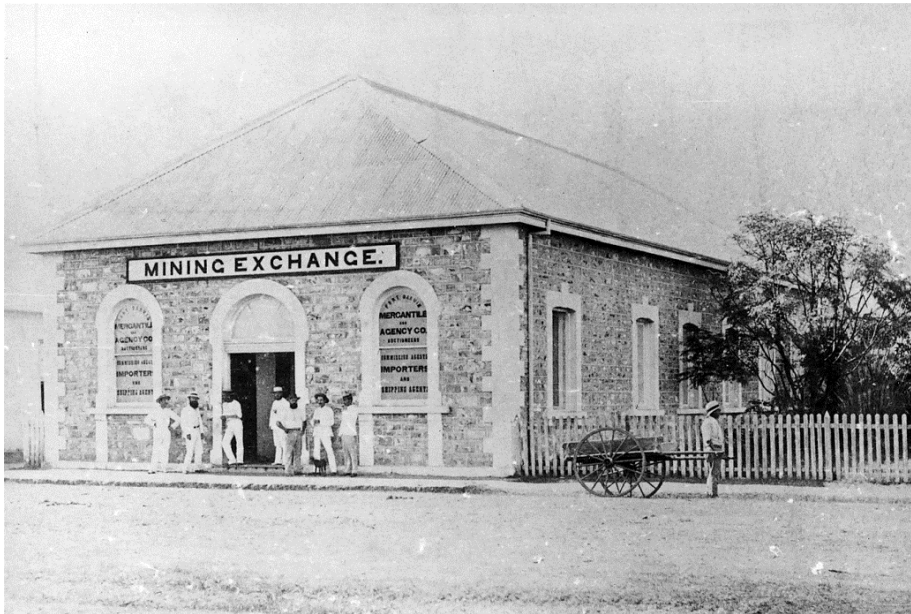
⁵² Rich, op.cit., p.28.

In late 1977 a lean-to office and store at the back of Browns Mart was demolished and further conservation works undertaken to repair the stonework and conserve the timber windows. The Administration Building was completed at the rear of Browns Mart in the same year and appears to have incorporated the earlier toilet and plant room constructed in 1973 by Peter Dermoudy. The linking roof between the Administration Building and Browns Mart was added the following year. During the centenary year, 1985, the site was extended to 955 m² reportedly for 'the preservation and protection of historical interest' and the site renumbered as Lot 5438.⁵³ In 1990 the Administration building to the rear of Browns Mart was extended to form storage and office areas. The design of this building is sympathetic to Browns Mart and reflects some of the detailing of Browns Mart.

Browns Mart continues to be used as a small 'black box' theatre providing a venue for local and sometimes visiting theatre groups. In 2008 a review of the management structure of Browns Mart was undertaken as part of a wider review into community theatres throughout the NT. An interim Board of Trustees was appointed while a new management structure was being developed. Browns Mart is currently managed by Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory.

⁵³ Refer NT Government Gazette G49 11/12/1985. Cited in Rich, *op.cit.*, p28.

Additional Photographs



*'Smith Street, Palmerston, 1888'.
Image: NT Archives, NTRS 3165-74 Foelsche Collection.*



*Mining Exchange after the cyclone of 1897.
Image: Bleeser Collection, National Library of Australia.*



*Browns Mart façade, Smith Street.
Image: David Bridgman*



*Browns Mart from Civic Park.
Image: David Bridgman.*

Further Reading

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