

NEWS

Plumb's Chambers gets \$1 million restoration

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RIGHT, the building before the restoration process began.

QUEENSLAND property developer McConaghy Group is steadily progressing in its restoration of the historic Plumb's Chambers building on Fitzroy Street.

The \$1 million restoration is being guided by experienced Brisbane-based heritage architect Andrew Watson, who has a master's degree from the UK in building conservation.

Work on the building is being carried out by up to 10 tradesmen who are on site each day, including a six-man team of expert stonemasons led by George Francis who have been flown in from Sydney.

Mr Watson said the restoration had followed the process laid down in the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, also known as the Burra Charter, which provides a best practice standard for managing cultural heritage places in Australia.

"It has taken years to get to this point and it's been a long period of review, assessment, design and then documentation in order to make sure that we are doing the utmost we can to conserve the building appropriately," Mr Watson said. "We went through a series of approval processes with the State Government because it's a state heritage listed building and eventually received approvals in regards to the approach we have taken to conservation and adaptation."

Mr Watson said the object of the restoration was to preserve as much of the original building as possible.

"We want to try to do as much as is necessary but as little as possible to the existing building," Mr Watson said. "And then we also need to adapt it so it can be used in the 21st Century."

"It's about working out the balance between maintaining those parts that are important and culturally significant while making it a functioning building."

"There is no point conserving a building if it has no end use because buildings are best conserved when they are in use. As clients, McConaghys have at all times attempted to do the right thing by the building by following the correct processes."

Final result

When fully restored, Plumb's Chambers will be transformed from a dilapidated, vacant old building into a fully functioning office or retail adapted heritage building.

"Like so many old buildings, the more you uncover the more you discover problems," Mr Watson said.

"But this is a building that is worthy of the conservation that it's going through and I think the end result will be a credit to McConaghys."

"The two storey building will appear as it was: a 19th century sandstone building restored and conserved and back in use."

McConaghy Group is currently aiming to complete the restoration by mid-year, however, they are determined not to cut corners in order to achieve a deadline.

Mr Francis said this was emphasised to him from the start of the job.



Workers deconstructing the western wall, stone by stone.

"I've worked with a lot of people but these guys have been great," Mr Francis said. "When Mr McConaghy himself, Robert McConaghy, came out to the site and saw the extent of the work that was going on, he just said to me: 'I want this done right, don't cut any corners. Do it properly.'"

"Most people wouldn't do that. But he is about keeping this building for the future and keeping it looking good and keeping it part of the local community which I thought was great."

McConaghy's has an excellent track record with heritage building restoration, having painstakingly dismantled and moved the Wesley Uniting Church from Guy and Grafton Streets, Warwick to its present site at Scots PGC College, to allow its construction of the current shopping centre in 1997.

McConaghy Group is dedicated to bringing a first class shopping centre environment to regional towns to provide centres the community can be proud of.

The Group has been a corporate citizen of Warwick since 1984 when it opened the original town shopping centre as Woolworths and a few specialty shops.

In 1998, McConaghy transformed the centre to its current size and layout.

The three steps of restoration for Plumb's

HERITAGE architect Andrew Watson said the building suffered from three main problems:

- The western wall was structurally unsound and in danger of falling down
- The woodwork of the building had been severely attacked by white ants
- The building suffered from rising damp

1. Western wall rebuilding

According to stonemason George Francis, who has recently completed the restoration of one of Sydney's oldest homes, Cleveland House in Surry Hills, the western wall of Plumb's Chambers was leaning out almost 180mm.

"It was about to fall over onto the driveway," Mr Francis said. "So McConaghys went out and built a gantry so it wouldn't fall over."

After making the building safe, McConaghys and their engineers determined how to rebuild the wall permanently.

"We deconstructed it stone by stone, numbering every single stone that came off the building



The internal rooms of the iconic building are severely dilapidated.

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doors have cracked. We're going to reinstate new lintels and just make sure the building is safe for the next hundred years."

Mr Francis said restoring heritage buildings was his life's vocation.

"I do this sort of work all over Australia. It's more a sort of labour of love than anything else. I love what I do," Mr Francis said.

"At Plumb's Chambers I've picked up where someone 150 years before me has started off. All I'm doing is a little bit of maintenance work on someone else's wonderful work."

2. Termite-damaged woodwork

Mr Watson said a large proportion of the timber in the building, including structural woodwork, had been destroyed by white ants.

"The damaged woodwork includes the timber floor on the ground level, a lot of the timber work to the front veranda, and probably close to 50% of the upper floor timber as well," Mr Watson said.

"There were also a number of timber beams and timber lintels supporting openings in the shop front in particular that were in a very poor condition as well."

"Of course, with termite damage supporting sandstone blockwork sitting above it is a concern."

"We had damaged timber joists on site that were eaten away with hardly any remaining connection to the walls."

"As a result there's been a lot of need for careful removal and replacement or reinsertion of timberwork."

Mr Francis described the process of restoring the woodwork.

"They've got a team of carpenters here that are meticulously taking the building apart," Mr Francis said.

"If there's a bit of timber they can salvage they're salvaging it. And it is a slow process."

"All the front beams of the building were completely demolished by white ants. They had to bring in steel fabricators to support the building while the big beams were replaced with the same sort of timber."

"It really is a labour of love. It's not a fast process by any means. ."

"So they're taking their time, doing it properly and to their credit it's going to be a beautiful building when it's finished but I reckon they've got six months work to bring it back to where it should be."

where it was, bringing it all down back to the ground," Mr Francis said.

"Then we poured a new footing under it and brought the wall back up exactly the way it was, every single piece. We fixed the broken stones, reinstated the new lintel, and brought it back up again."

Mr Francis said his work was now 80-90% complete but the team expect to be on the site for another few weeks doing further restoration on the remaining stonework.

"We are still here going around and doing the repair work on the rest of the building," Mr Francis said.

"There are broken stones and stones that have weathered away over the years. We've got a lot of movement in the building where a lot of headers over the

Where possible the team are matching timbers with those they are replacing, which are typically hardwoods, although in some cases this is not possible such as where the original wood was cedar which is now protected.

3. Rising damp

Another problem facing the team was a serious problem with rising damp, which had contributed to the destruction of the ground floor timberwork and plaster interiors.

"We need to give it dry feet because at the moment it's got wet feet," Mr Watson said.

"To achieve that we are trying to make sure that water is shed away from the building. At the moment, there are stormwater drainage issues around the base of the building and if water pools around it this can enter the building and result in rising damp."

"We're taking measures to prevent water settling around the building as a starting point and we're allowing the walls to dry out."

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