

## Two drawings by William Pitt

---

Pictures Collection H31053 and H31055

Acquired 1968

One of the early purchases made with the assistance of the Friends of the La Trobe Library was two large, gilt-framed ink-and-watercolour works, created some 80 years earlier in the office of the prominent 19th-century architect William Pitt.<sup>1</sup> While the paintings were accomplished works of great beauty, they were more than just admirable works of art. They proved significant in understanding the design processes of two major Melbourne landmarks: the Princess Theatre and the Federal Coffee Palace (later the Federal Hotel). Their significance as historical documents lies in the important fact that neither work depicts the building in a form known to us today.

The Princess Theatre design proposed by Pitt does not show the flanking pavilions, which are known to be an integral part of the constructed building. The inclusion of the projecting pavilions, which probably were added in the final design to provide additional internal space, resulted in a bigger, bolder Spring Street elevation than that shown in the original design.

While the building shown in Pitt's perspective retains a stylistic similarity to the finished building, his Federal Coffee Palace design bears no resemblance to the Boom-style building completed in 1888. The Pitt design represents an early exploration into the potential of the more progressive English Queen Anne Revival style. It is an aesthetic far removed from the stuccoed and heavily ornamented style of architecture seen in the completed coffee palace building.

The Federal Coffee Palace was designed by competition winners Ellerker and Kilburn in conjunction with the second-placed William Pitt, but ambiguous and misleading 19th-century press reports have led to confusion over the architectural authorship of the building. Many references attribute the design of the exuberant exterior to William Pitt alone, but the design is stylistically consistent with other works designed by Ellerker and Kilburn, and tenders were called from their office. The Pitt design indicates that he might have taken the view that the predominant Boom style was in decline and as a result chose to pursue a different and less extravagant aesthetic.

The two works purchased by the Library provide valuable insights into the design of two iconic Melbourne buildings. Their survival presents us with a unique opportunity to appreciate not only what was but also a vision of what might have been.



Top: William Pitt, Entry for the Federal Coffee Palace design competition, King Street elevation, c. 1885. Pictures Collection, H31055

Above: William Pitt, Perspective drawing of the Princess Theatre as originally designed, c. 1885. Pictures Collection, H31053