



Historic Grand Hotels

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When we think of historic grand hotels, we think of marble columned foyers, potted palms and grand staircases, sumptuous ballrooms, crystal chandeliers; grandeur, opulence and charm in every sense.



LEFT | National Trust CEO, Martin Purslow criticised Heritage Victoria for its support of the redevelopment project of the 1883 historic hotel, C Holmes.

There are many hotels across the world just like that, and indeed the Windsor Hotel (originally called 'the Grand') in Melbourne, built in 1888, has many of these features. It is certainly the last of the grand 19th century city hotels in Australia, but how does it compare with others around the world, both surviving and long gone?

The development of the 'grand' hotel as we understand it reached its zenith at the end of the 19th century. Hotels at the beginning of that century were often converted and connected to houses (Browns Hotel, London, begun in 1837, is one of the most famous still in existence). But by the 1850s specialised large hotels were being built. In the UK, the 'railway hotels' were attached to railway termini in London, while in the US, the bustling port city of New York featured the biggest and best in hotel options. While they offered superior services for the moneyed traveller, hotels generally consisted of a large collection of small bedrooms, with shared 'closets' (toilets) and bathing facilities clustered at the end of the hall on each floor, and private suites, lounges, and dining rooms, rather than grand ballrooms or public lounges. The Langham in London (1865, 400 bedrooms, the largest in the world at the time), and the famous Gothic-style Midland Hotel (1874) attached to St Pancras Station, were arranged this way.

While the Windsor was not quite as large or grand as European or North American city hotels, it featured a grand staircase and a sumptuous dining room, lifts, and many private lounges to serve the guests in the 300 (small) bedrooms. Comparatively, the Windsor is a relatively rare surviving 'grand' hotel of the 1880s, with only relatively minor internal alterations (such as the addition of the ensuite bathrooms for every room).

It was the next generation of hotels that finally achieved the level of the truly sumptuous. The first was perhaps the original Waldorf-Astoria in New York, built in 1897. It featured grand everything – 1300 rooms (most with bathrooms) over 14 floors, marble columns, gilt chandeliers, and potted palms in the stained glass roofed 'peacock alley' connecting the many restaurants, bars, cafés and parlours. The hotel had come of age, not only as a luxurious place to stay, but a place that was desirable for locals to frequent, 'the' place to be seen.

Equally luxurious and ever larger hotels soon followed around the world, many of which have survived mostly intact. Good examples include New York's Plaza Hotel (1907), the Ritz in London (1903), the Taj Mahal, Mumbai (1903), and the Fairmont, San Francisco (1907). 'Heritage' hotels of a comparable scale to the Windsor are also mostly a few years younger, such as the Balmoral, Edinburgh (1902), the King Edward, Toronto (1903), or Brown's Hotel, Denver (1892). Other famous luxurious hotels are even later, such as the Peninsula, Hong Kong (1928, recently greatly altered), London's Dorchester (1931), or the second Waldorf-Astoria (1930).

No grand hotels were built during this period in Australia, since the boom of the 1880s had produced more than enough large 'luxury' hotels to fill most needs for decades. The Windsor, however, is the only survivor.

Rally to save the Windsor

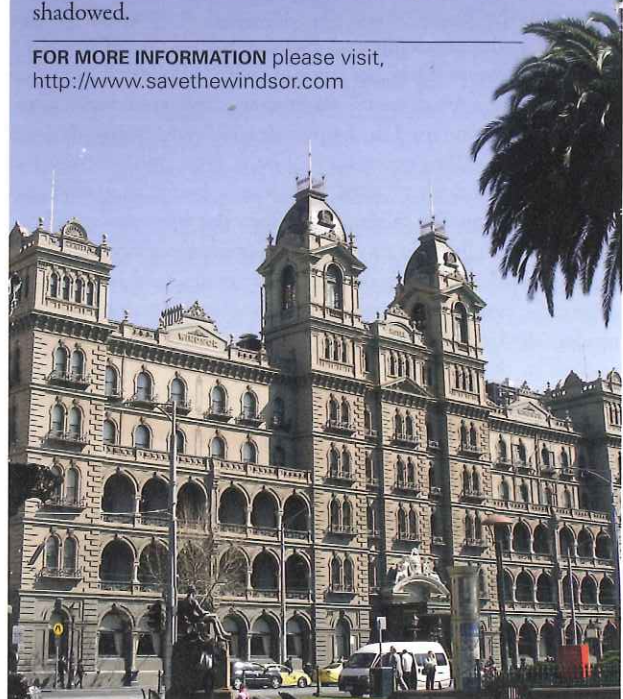
The National Trust of Australia (Vic) is considering legal action after the Victoria State Government approved the controversial redevelopment of the historic Windsor Hotel, in Melbourne on 19 March.

Depicting the fiasco surrounding the Windsor Hotel Precinct as a 'Mad Hatter's Tea Party', the Trust staged a protest rally on the steps of Victoria's parliament where National Trust of Australia (Vic), Chief Executive Martin Purslow criticised statutory authority Heritage Victoria for its support of the project and called for an overhaul of the planning system.

Hundreds of people supported the rally and Australian Greens leader Bob Brown vowed to take the protest against the redevelopment of the historic Hotel to federal parliament.

The development allows for more than 40 percent of the Hotel to be demolished and for the erection of a 91metre, 27 storey tower, to accommodate 332 rooms, roof top swimming pool and three cafes. The area is zoned to allow a maximum of 23 metres to ensure that the historic precinct is not over shadowed.

FOR MORE INFORMATION please visit, <http://www.savethewindsor.com>



ABOVE | Windsor Hotel, Melbourne. R Storey.

OPPOSITE | Waldorf Astoria Hotel, circa 1914-1920. W Davis Hassler. Museum of the City of New York.