



showcasing SA Heritage Places

former MTT No.1 Converter Station

52-60 East Terrace

SAHR 10986 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place on 14 February 1985

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The former No.1 Converter Station is associated with the history of public transport in South Australia.

Built in 1908, it is linked with the foundation years of the Municipal Tramways Trust (MTT) and, as the first and most substantial converter station, played an essential role in the electrification of Adelaide's tramway network.

The building is also a noteworthy example of early twentieth century industrial architecture in South Australia.



former MTT Converter Station, 1982

TRAMS IN ADELAIDE:

As the flattest capital city, and therefore one of the best suited to horse-drawn transport, Adelaide was one of only two Australian cities (with Brisbane) to develop horse trams to any significant degree. In fact, Adelaide is recognised as the pioneer city of an enduring Australian tram system, with the first horse-powered service opening from Adelaide to Kensington in 1878.

Soon there were nine companies operating about 100 trams across the city. The lines remained horse-powered until the MTT was formed in 1906 to electrify them. This electrification involved the rebuilding of the whole system, with new track and infrastructure laid throughout the city and suburbs.

[View](#) detailed information about trams in Adelaide, including routes and tram types

MUNICIPAL TRAMWAYS TRUST:

On 22 December 1906 an Act of Parliament established the Municipal Tramways Trust (MTT), chaired by [Alex B. Moncrieff](#), with the specific responsibility of electrifying the old horse-drawn tramway system.

One of the MTT's early decisions was to construct a dedicated powerhouse in Port Adelaide, linked to a converter station within Adelaide. The supply of electricity was crucial and so, until their own powerhouse was completed, the Trust entered into a contract with the Adelaide Electric Supply Company for the temporary supply of power from their powerhouse, which was adjacent to the No.1 Converter Station on East Terrace. This contract lasted four years, until 7 June 1911, when the MTT Powerhouse was opened adjacent to the Port Adelaide wharves.

[View](#) further information about the history of the Municipal Tramways Trust.
View an [image](#) of the MTT's Port Adelaide powerhouse under construction.

NO.1 CONVERTER STATION:

Plans to electrify Adelaide's tramways included the construction of a main depot building at Hackney, new tram lines, electric tram cars, a powerhouse and, critically, converter stations to change the alternating electric current to the required voltage for the trams.

By January 1908 the site for the MTT's first, and most substantial, converter station had been determined. This was land on East Terrace, north of Pirie Street, comprising the whole of a property then known as 'Whittles' and part of 'Haywards'. Tenders were then received for the demolition of buildings on the purchased blocks.

The architectural firm of English & Soward was appointed on 30 January 1908 to design and document the new building. Their drawings were completed and signed off, on 12 May, by the MTT's Chief Engineer, [W.G.T. Goodman](#), destined to remain Chief Engineer and become General Manager from 1908 - 1950.



*East Terrace façade of MTT Converter Station (left) with Adelaide Electric Supply Co Converter (right), 1925
B 2588: State Library of SA*

Tenders for the construction of the converter station were opened on 23 June, with the selected contractor being C.H. Martin, who tendered at £8,248. Wiring, equipment, etc. were all tendered separately.

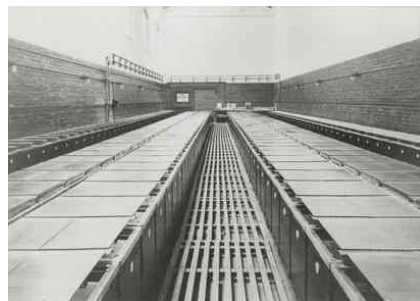
The building was completed and functioning by 30 November 1908, when the first electric tram was taken for a trial run along North Terrace. The installation of equipment and minor work continued until June 1909.

The official opening of Adelaide's first electric tram route, from Adelaide to Kensington, was on 9 March 1909. Under the guidance of Mr Goodman, Mrs Tom Price (wife of the then Labor Premier), drove the first tram, which is now preserved at the [St Kilda Tramway Museum](#).

The MTT powerhouse at Port Adelaide ceased generating power on 30 June 1956, at which time No.1 Converter Station also ceased operation. Equipment and machinery were removed and in 1963 the building was purchased by the Electricity Trust of South Australia (ETSA). It was used as a store until 1984, when it was partially renovated to accommodate offices.

ARCHITECTURE:

The former No.1 Converter Station is an imposing feature on East Terrace. It was designed in Romanesque Revival style, similar to that made popular by American architect Henry Robson Richardson, during the latter part of the nineteenth century.



*Interior of Tramways Converter Station, 1909
B28819: State Library of SA*

The substantial building combines red-brick walls, granite plinths and arch surrounds, and sandstone and slate decorative effects. The façade to East Terrace has a circular archway to the entry door and six matching circular arched windows, with cast iron frames and reinforced glass panes. A decorative parapet conceals the saw-tooth galvanised iron roofs behind.



Foundation Stone, east façade

The rugged and decorative stonework of the façade returns a short distance on the north and south sides. This is typical of the period, which tended to a grand façade with a lesser treatment to the side and rear walls. Windows on the north and south walls had triangular flyscreens added in 1922.

The polished granite foundation stone on the east façade displays the date of construction, 1908, and two symbols – a Maltese cross and a six-pointed Star of David. An explanation for these symbols has not been found.

ASSOCIATED STATE HERITAGE PLACES:

Two other places associated with the Municipal Tramways Trust are entered in the South Australian Heritage Register – the former **MTT Hackney Tram Depot, including the Goodman Building and Tram Barn** (SAHR 12349), which is now part of the Adelaide Botanic Garden complex; and the former **Henley Beach MTT Converter Station** (SAHR 14633), which is currently the Scout Heritage Centre.

Adjacent to the former No.1 Converter Station, within the precinct bounded by East Terrace, Grenfell Street, Pirie Street and Devonshire & Tam O'Shanter Places, are two other imposing industrial buildings of the early twentieth century. One, the **former Adelaide Electric Supply Company Power Station** (SAHR 10984) is directly linked with the history of No.1 Converter Station, being the source of electrical supply for the first four years of the converter station's operation. This building is now Adelaide's National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Tandanya. The other State Heritage Place in this precinct is the **former Adelaide Electric Supply Company Converter Station** (SAHR 10985).

