

KLOSTERS



of Darby Street

For over 30 years Darby Street was the spiritual home of Klosters. Carol Duncan dives into the dusty archives to discover the history of the "old place"



When Harry Kloster, the founder of Klosters, went to America in 1924 to see for himself what was happening in the burgeoning automotive industry, he must have come back to Australia brimming with ideas. The belief that "the motor car is a luxury", was passing and an entirely new era of marketing was dawning.

An early entrepreneur in the Australian automotive industry, Harry set about building his business, importing vehicle bodies, creating an assembly industry in Australia, and adding sales, marketing, and customer service arms. His time in America would have given him a firm understanding of how the automotive industry was handling the shift in perception of the motor vehicle from luxury item to affordable transport for everyone.

The iconic Art Deco Chrysler Building in New York City was built for Walter Chrysler who wanted a building that reflected all the Chrysler Corporation represented. Although Harry wouldn't have seen the Chrysler Building on that visit - construction didn't start until 1928 - images would have quickly made it to Australia and stressed the role a building can play in building a brand for the people.

The motor vehicle showrooms in which cars were now being sold to "everyman"

were themselves temples of luxury. The dream Harry brought to Australia was of making cheaper transportation possible "to farmers and settlers". After housing, a car is still one of the most expensive purchases a person will ever make. It is important to make customers comfortable with that.

The showroom represents not just the car, but the company, the staff, the salesperson and, in many cases, the standard of ongoing care and customer service that a purchaser might expect. Within modern architecture, the sales environment needs to reflect the customer's preferences.

This is not as simple as it might seem when you consider an increasingly segmented market and the requirement for an outlet to cater for a range of clients and their needs - potentially everything from the car for a young driver to a high-end luxury consumer.

And what about after-sales service?

Parts? A workshop? Prestige outlets may offer a cafe, wireless internet connections and merchandising.

We can't go back and read Harry Kloster's mind, but it was apparent that these factors were considered as he started to create the different elements of the Kloster business. As early as 1924, Harry commissioned Sydney architects Waterhouse & Lake to design a "kiosk" for Standardised Motors Limited in Ashfield.

By the time Harry started to expand the company into Newcastle he must have had a clear vision of what it took to provide an elegant backdrop to his beautiful offerings. From the initial premises at 335 Hunter Street in Newcastle, Harry very quickly moved to ensure the construction of more

"This new building in Darby Street was going to bring to Newcastle all of the glamour of the American automotive industry"



MAIN Extensive lighting and the highly polished floors of the state of the art Darby Street showroom circa 1936 ABOVE The original architect's vision

flood-lit at night, is an example of the ever-present advertising features of the facade." Harry Kloster made sure the iconic V8 logo would be noticed by everyone in Newcastle.

"The shop fronts are faced with black Carrara marble. Windows, arranged to give maximum view into the showroom, are constructed out of minimum size chromium frames. The entrance porch will be marble and tiles, and the doors will be silver ducoed with chromium handles," the plans continue.

"The showroom, designed to show Ford products to the best advantage, will have Beale polished wood floors,

the walls and ceilings lined with acoustic plaster, and illuminated with a novel, indirect lighting system.

"The executive offices, arranged at the back of the showroom, are of maple and plate glass. The general office is located on a mezzanine floor. The colour scheme will be the same as used in the Chicago Ford Exhibition building - ivory, two-tone of blue and vermilion for accents.

"The rear portion, with a decorative facade to King Street, will be devoted to workshops, car wash, and lubrication."

After moving from the original Hunter Street premises, no expense was being spared to ensure that the latest model Fords, fresh from the Australian Ford factory in Geelong, were being displayed to their best advantage. Advertising illustrations and photographs from the time show the beautiful design of the English De-Luxe Ford just prior to the move to the Ford Pilot and Coupe of the 1940s and the Consul and Zephyrs of the 1960s.

The Darby Street showroom guaranteed a premium customer experience that >>



"appropriate" surrounds for his business, and in 1936 Harry instructed the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo) to build a brand new building for Kloster Limited.

He specified a showroom "with frontages to Darby and King Streets, Newcastle, presenting many attractive features".

This new building in Darby Street was set to bring to Newcastle all of the glamour of the American automotive industry and was

designed by well-known Newcastle architects FG & AC Castleden, which had been responsible for Newcastle's iconic Ocean Baths, along with Sydney architects EC Pitt & AM Bolot.

"The exterior of the building is to be faced with specially made texture-faced bricks and pressed stone panels," the plans read.

"Large letters of Monel metal, expressing the function of the building, which will be

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was befitting of every little boy's dream, including Geoff Valentine: "My father used to regularly take me to the Darby Street showroom. There were a couple of steps to get inside the showroom and beautiful, shiny polished boards on the floor. As a young bloke I was always intrigued as to how those lovely cars got in there."

As he grew up Geoff realised they actually brought the cars in from the King Street side of the building. There is still evidence of these service bays there today.

Geoff became an electrician and worked for NESCA in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "I used to walk to work and would pass the Kloster showroom, I remember the incredible smell. It was a very distinctive smell of leather and new car. I really liked the Ford Zephyrs.

"Darby Street was very different in those days. It had repair shops and trade shops, and opposite was Frederick Ash's old hardware store. Further along the street, beyond a few terrace houses, were the wool stores which were gi-normous," Geoff recalls.

"And right down the other end towards the city near Civic Park, there were old foundries which were very smelly and a place that used to do chrome plating. The Heinz Beans factory was down there too."

Darby Street proved a good location for the company. "Hunter Street was the hub of the city. Everybody who went to town and anyone coming off the ships would

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During the 50s and early 60s Klosters' Darby Street showroom was alive, fulfilling Newcastle's craving for the motor car

walk past the showroom, so it was very central," Geoff says.

The original showroom built for Klosters still exists in Darby Street, sadly without the glorious "Ford V8" logo above it.

Since Klosters moved away in the mid-60s, the building has hosted a range of tenants. Geoff remembers the building becoming an "upmarket billiard hall" at one stage, but it now operates as a surfboard and surfwear store.

Roy Lee purchased the property in 1990.

"I bought it straight after the earthquake," he says. "It was a real mess. It was empty when I bought it but I believe it may have been an army surplus store, and prior to that, a billiard hall."

Roy says reminders of the building's original purpose remain. "There is some evidence of the motoring heritage at the back on King Street, including a painted "Service" sign on the wall." An old safe even provided several of the photographs used in this article.

Before he sold the property Roy had enquired about redeveloping and was informed the frontage was protected. At least the face of this iconic Darby Street institution is set to be preserved.

The building is currently owned by Warren Fraser of Fraser Motorcycles - the largest motorcycle retail chain in Australia - which specialises in Harley Davidson.

One can only suspect Harry Kloster's son Harley would be pleased! ♦

Share your memories of Klosters.
Email us at gomag@kloster.com.au