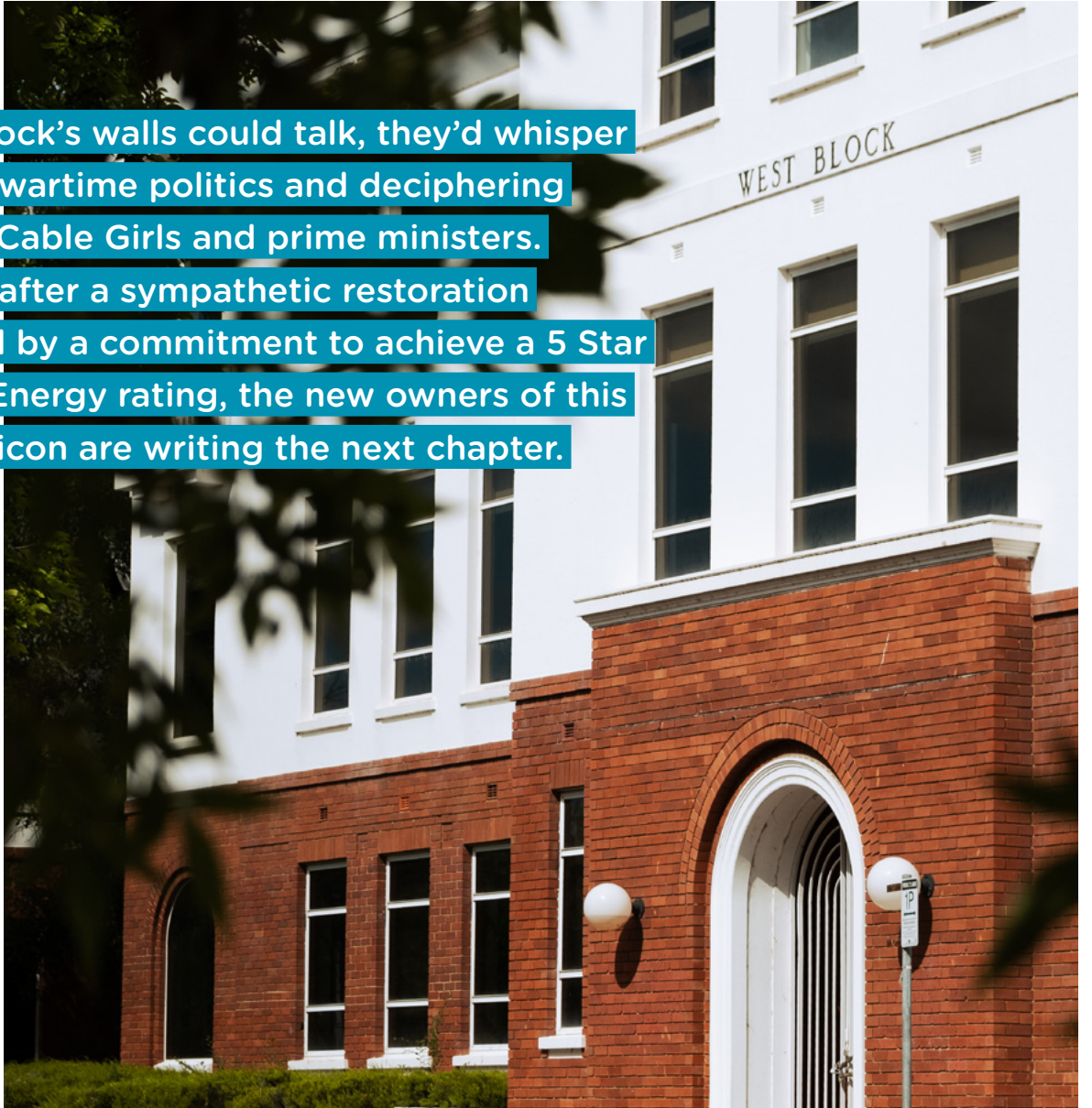


Writing a new chapter for West Block



If West Block's walls could talk, they'd whisper stories of wartime politics and deciphering codes, of Cable Girls and prime ministers. And now, after a sympathetic restoration supported by a commitment to achieve a 5 Star NABERS Energy rating, the new owners of this Canberra icon are writing the next chapter.

“NABERS is the ‘gold’ standard for sustainable office space. When we signed a NABERS Commitment Agreement, we gave everyone a ‘true north’. We have designed and delivered to achieve the gold standard because everyone had the same goal.”

- Kalen Foster, Head of Investments,
Oceana Property Partners

To understand the significance of West Block's upgrade, we must turn back the clock almost a century.

With its iconic red and white brick façade and elegant symmetry, West Block has been part of the Canberra landscape since its doors opened in 1927.

Designed by John Smith Murdoch – the government architect responsible for old Parliament House – West Block was one of the first buildings constructed in the Parliamentary Triangle. Aerial views of the nation's capital in the 1930s show West Block, neighbouring East Block and old Parliament House surrounded by sheep paddocks.

Writing a new chapter for West Block



Over the years, West Block has been home to the National Library, the Crown Solicitor, and Prime Ministerial offices, starting with Stanley Bruce. From his desk in West Block, John Curtin phoned Winston Churchill to commit Australian troops to World War II.

At the back of the site sits what was known as The Dugout, a World War II bomb shelter, and the workplace of the 'Cable Girls' who spent the war encoding and decrypting messages between Curtin, Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Heritage buildings like West Block are precious and irreplaceable. But they also need to be fit for the modern way of working and a net zero future.

Stars guide the way

West Block was occupied by the Australian Electoral Commission until 2015, before being sold to Canberra developer Geocon with plans to convert the three-storey office into a boutique hotel. After sitting empty for several years, Geocon sold the building Oceana Property Partners in February 2022.

“Our goal was to undertake a ‘light touch’ renovation to ensure the original building fabric was restored and respected, resetting the iconic building for continued office use for another hundred years.”

– Kalen Foster, Head of Investments,
Oceana Property Partners

To secure federal government tenants, OPP’s team knew it needed to work on the NABERS rating. In March 2022, OPP signed a NABERS Commitment Agreement – a contract that outlines an intention to design, construct and commission a building to achieve a specific NABERS Energy rating.

“Our NABERS stretch target was the basis of our upgrade strategy,” Kalen says. DeltaQ was enlisted to bring the building’s energy rating up to a minimum level of 5 stars. “We made investments on the basis of getting the best possible NABERS outcome.”

Net zero in government operations

The Australian Government released its [Net Zero in Government Operations Strategy](#) in November 2023. This strategy outlines new requirements for NABERS and Green Star ratings. Among the new requirements, from 1 July 2025, new leases for office space over 1,000 square metres will only be signed when a minimum 5.5 Star NABERS Energy or higher base building and tenancy NABERS rating can be met and maintained. This requirement will apply to refurbishments from 1 July 2026. Also from 1 July 2026, contracts to purchase or construct new office space must maintain a minimum 6 Star NABERS Energy rating.



FAST FACTS

West Block: A-Grade building

West Block is now an A-Grade office building with more than 8,000 sqm of net lettable area just 500 metres from Parliament House.

5 Star NABERS Energy target

Building owner Oceana Property Partners (OPP) signed a NABERS Commitment Agreement to achieve a 5 Star NABERS Energy base building rating in March 2022.

Restoration project with a stellar team

The sympathetic restoration was undertaken by a project team that included commercial design practice Capezio Copeland, energy efficiency experts at DeltaQ and project management consultancy ChangePM.

Past preserved, future primed

West Block always had good bones. Built in four separate ‘pods’, the building features classical-style proportions, with arcaded entrance screens and generous courtyards. Two symmetrical atriums flood West Block’s workspaces in natural light. Reflecting upon West Block, Kalen adds,

“We were blown away by how functional and flexible the floorplates were, considering it was designed in the 1920’s.”

– Kalen Foster, Head of Investments,
Oceana Property Partners

OPP took a “minimalist” approach to the renovation, carefully restoring the original heritage façade while upgrading building services to bolster energy efficiency and achieve its NABERS target.

Lifts were refurbished, and heritage lighting restored. Concealed Oregon timber columns were re-exposed, concrete detailing and iron work repointed. “The light touch approach lets the building’s history speak for itself,” says ChangePM Director, Michael Chant.

With the help of smart engineering and controls, new air handling units and clever design solutions, West Block is now on track to exceed its NABERS Energy target.

Electric dreams

One of the most impressive achievements of the renovation is hidden from view.

When OPP purchased the property, the chillers and cooling towers had been upgraded but largely unused while the building sat idle. “The plant was about seven years old, and it might have been tempting to pull it out and start from scratch,” says DeltaQ Managing Principal Consultant, Grace Foo. “But we felt strongly that, by sequentially testing and derisking, we could retain the plant, upgrade the parts we needed to, and make the most of what was already there.”

Most of the building’s energy requirements are met by the rooftop solar array. OPP has installed 100 kilowatts of solar panels, and the tenant agency is intending to install another 100 kilowatts.

And the building, while not yet fully electric, is future-ready. Several gas boilers “still had life in them and we think it is better, from an embodied carbon point of view, to retain them for now,” Kalen explains.

As part of OPP’s replacement strategy, building services have been designed for electrification and the head contractor’s brief required occupied spaces to be “ready for electrification”. When the time to replace the boilers arrives, the work can be undertaken at the plant level, with no disruption to tenants.

Writing a new chapter for West Block



NABERS



This partnership approach opens up a new chapter in West Block's history and sets up a Canberra icon for another century of stories.

“West Block shows how we can turn a preloved building from the 1920s, constructed at a time when energy efficiency wasn't the key focus, into a high-performing workplace with a high NABERS rating. By retaining as much as possible, including the central plant, we avoid embodied carbon and retain our history and heritage.”

– Grace Foo, Managing Principal Consultant, *DeltaQ*

A story of partnership

OPP's approach has delivered dividends. Cooined in a natural canopy of trees, flooded with natural light, and with spectacular outlooks around every corner, West Block oozes charm and character, while offering contemporary office amenities. There will be a wellness centre, business hub, and quality end-of-trip facilities. The Dugout, once the home of code breakers, is now a secure bicycle parking station.

Around 600 Australian Public Service staff will move into West Block in October 2024, and the tenant agency is now working towards its own NABERS tenancy rating.

“We see this project as a story about partnership,” Kalen Foster concludes. “It's a partnership between a building owner, project team and tenant – with our NABERS commitment keeping everyone on the same page.” This partnership approach opens a new chapter in West Block's history and sets up a Canberra icon for another century of stories.

Find out more about
[**NABERS Commitment Agreements**](#)