

"These depressed times": architectural and decorative strategies in Christchurch in the financially stringent years of the early 1890s

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ABSTRACT: In 1893 *The Press* commended Charles Clark for his "energy and faith in the future of Christchurch" in commissioning Collins & Harman to design a new building in Cathedral Square in Christchurch "in these depressed times." The first half of the 1890s saw the continuation of the long depression that had marked New Zealand the previous decade. In contrast to the abounding intensity that can be inferred from the broad descriptions of New Zealand architecture at the end of the nineteenth century, architectural endeavours at this time were often constrained by limited opportunities and restricted budgets. This paper considers Christchurch architecture of the early 1890s in the context of these financially stringent years, examining most closely the practice of Armson, Collins & Harman.

1879-96 is generally acknowledged as the years the "long depression" afflicted New Zealand, although there was variation of duration and extent between provinces.¹ Recognising that some economic historians have denied its existence as a depression, James Belich prefers to call this period the "long stagnation" which marked the nation's transition from an extractive to a sustainable economy, from being a net importer to a net exporter. These years saw greater poverty, unemployment, the highest rates of bankruptcy the nation has ever experienced and a net migration loss for the years 1885-90.² The inflow of both private and public capital slowed to the point that government interest payments and outflow of returns to British investors outweighed new borrowing.³ Compared to the 1870s, when credit flooded

the country, in the 1880s and '90s, with notable exceptions, foreign credit for investment in high capital ventures, such as commissioning architecture, and local willingness to risk investment, all but dried up.

While investment and economic growth in Canterbury did not completely grind to a halt in this period, they certainly slowed. "People are afraid to increase the volume of their present investments," said a member of a financial house in Christchurch in 1893; "People in the country are carefully watching their expenditure and are keeping it down to a low limit," said another.⁴ This attitude had a corresponding effect upon architects practicing in Christchurch. Primary figures practicing architecture in Christchurch in the first part of the decade included Benjamin

Mountfort (1825-98), the firm of Armson, Collins & Harman, Frederick Strouts (1834-1919) and Joseph C Maddison (1850-1923). Samuel Hurst Seager (1854-1933) had joined the "Exodus" to Australia, settling in New South Wales in 1890.⁵ By 1892, however, the economic situation in Sydney was as lean as the one Seager had left in New Zealand. In his president's address to the Sydney Architectural Association that year on "The Future of Architects and their Art," Seager said:

It seems to me especially necessary when in the midst of such depressing times as the present – times in which, but very few practising architects are able to do more than pay their expenses, and large numbers of architectural draughtsmen are day by day applying vainly for employment – we should pause to ask

⁵ His exodus was not of long duration, Seager returned to Christchurch to teach architecture and decorative design at the Canterbury College School of Art in 1893. See Skinner "An Architect Abroad" pp 71-78.

¹ Sinclair *History of New Zealand* p 168.

² Belich *Paradise Reforged* pp 32-35.

³ Belich *Paradise Reforged* pp 34, 62.

⁴ "Trade of Christchurch" p 3.

ourselves if the position of the disciples of art can by any action of our own be raised to a level high enough above the dashing waves of adversity, to enable them to carry on their mission in safety.⁶

The fact that architects were affected by the economic temperature of the day is best demonstrated by an analysis of the Register of Commissions from the long standing firm of Armson, Collins & Harman.⁷ As one of the largest architectural firms in Christchurch during this period they undertook work throughout the South Island and occasionally in the North Island. When William Barnett Armson (1834-83) died he left unsigned the agreement he had had drawn up to take John James Collins (1855-1921) into partnership, forcing Collins to find the money to buy the practice. Taking Richard Dacre Harman (1859-1927) into partnership in 1887 covered £150 of the cost, but Collins reportedly had to sell his pony and trap and his new house to

⁶ While acknowledging the economic conditions, Seager actually placed as much blame on architects' own actions for their present state, identifying what he saw as an, often justified, absence of public trust as being responsible for the lack of work. *Sydney Architectural Association Magazine* (1892):6.

⁷ One of Christchurch's architectural dynasties, the practice was started by WB Armson in 1870 and called Armson, Collins & Harman from 1887-1928/1931.

fund the balance.⁸ The Register of Commissions records 1887 as the firm's financial nadir, a year they signed contracts worth a total of £1,464.⁹ While the value of the practice was clearly substantial, Collins' income at this time was not extraordinary; Sydney was not the only city in late nineteenth-century Australasia where practicing architects were scarcely able to do more than pay their expenses.

The Armson, Collins & Harman Register of Commissions lists the contracts, including unbuilt projects, the firm entered into annually from 1871 to 1976. While it does not give the percentage of the commission received and hence the exact income of the practice, it still provides a financial record and a means to track the financial health of the practice, as well as recording clients, building types and the extent of the commissions received. In three of the first five years of the 1890s annual commissions totalled less than £9,000. While these were undoubtedly improvements on the black year of 1887, they actually form part of a 15-year period from

⁸ [Collins] *Century of Architecture* pp 16, 18.

⁹ Armson, Armson Collins & Lloyd, Armson Collins & Harman, Collins & Son, *Register of Commissions 1871-1976*.

1884-98 when the practice never handled more than £16,200 in one year; in over half of those 15 years they failed to reach £10,000. This 15-year period was Armson, Collins & Harman's "long stagnation" flanked by far more prosperous years: the average total commissions per year for the period was just over £10,000, the five years prior saw annual commissions average nearly £35,000 and the five years following over £32,000 per annum.

It could be suggested that the practice's downturn was in fact a result of Armson's death in 1883 and a subsequent loss of confidence in the practice, however this is belied by the fact that when clients could find or justify the credit, they still chose to use it for new buildings, additions or improvements designed by either Collins, Harman or Lloyd. The Bank of New South Wales, for example, was a recurrent client: in 1879 they commissioned Armson to design additions for the Christchurch branch, and from Armson, Collins & Lloyd in 1883/84 new branches in New Plymouth, Nelson and Timaru and fittings for the Auckland branch. Further commissions followed in subsequent years but they were far more modest: in 1886 for additions to the Whanganui branch; minor repairs to a branch in 1889; a flurry of work in

1890 in Opihi (near Geraldine), Christchurch and Naseby but nothing again until 1898. This pattern of commissions and the fact that the practice was still doing work for the bank in the 1930s reinforces the argument that Armson, Collins & Harman's "long stagnation" was a result of the national, and indeed global, economic situation.

Armson, Collins & Harman's largest commercial project in the first years of the 1890s was Charles Clark's statement of "energy and faith in the future of Christchurch": the New Zealand Government Life Insurance building in the north-west corner of Cathedral Square, commissioned in 1893.¹⁰ An auctioneer and land agent, Charles Clark (1824-1906) had previously commissioned Armson to design his offices in Hereford St in 1870 and was also a close friend to RD Harman.¹¹ The Cathedral Square contract was let to James Tait for £3,640, making it the second largest commission the architectural practice handled in the first five years of the decade. The design followed the widespread Victorian mode established by Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) of adapting the

¹⁰ "Mr Charles Clark's New Buildings" p 6.

¹¹ Lochhead "Buildings for Charles Clark" p 11; [Collins] *Century of Architecture* p 19.

form and motifs of Italian Renaissance *palazzi* to an ordinary street front elevation.¹² While this approach was in common use in Christchurch, this façade of bluestone, Mount Somers and Oamaru stone was a particularly pleasing and controlled example: it was firmly modelled, with its rusticated ground floor sharply defined, and regular, contained flourishes across the elevations in the form of the capitals of its superimposed orders, patera on the first floor, pronounced keystones in the arched windows and strong hood-moulds above the square, and a crowning cornice, contributed measured yet lively decorative elements.¹³

Despite the confident message in its architecture, Clark's building was a deviation from the norm of Armson, Collins & Harman's register of commissions in the early 1890s. The comparable buildings for importers and manufacturers Strange & Co's department store on Lichfield and High

¹² Dixon & Muthesius *Victorian Architecture* p 18.

¹³ It was demolished in 1960 and replaced by Collins & Son's glass curtain walled office building for the same clients. For further descriptions, see Lochhead "Buildings for Charles Clark" pp 11-12; "Mr Charles Clark's New Buildings" p 6; and Minehan et al. *Round the Square* p 15.

Streets also pursued the Italianate model, albeit initially faced in brick and stucco rather than stone, but development was accretive, with the commissions for Armson, Collins & Harman's additions to the large site spread between 1892, 1893 and 1895 having a combined value of £4,553 with further, and more extensive designs constructed in 1898 and 1899 at a cost of £13,536.¹⁴ Other commercial buildings built at this time to designs by the practice included the Christchurch Press building in Cashel Street, which was initially designed by Armson in 1879. Construction of a variation of the ground floor of three-storeyed Venetian Gothic design took place in the same year, however it was not until 12 years later, in 1891, that *The Press* was in a position to complete it and the finished building was officially opened on 27 February 1892.¹⁵ In 1895 as soon as the company showed a credit, they "immediately let a contract ... for additions to the Cashel Street premises ...".¹⁶

¹⁴ Gifford "Strange's Buildings" pp 2-3; Lochhead "Buildings for Charles Clark" p 12; *Industries of New Zealand* pp 337-339; "Messers W Stranges & Co" p 5; "New Victoria House" p 9.

¹⁵ "The Press" Company's New Building" p 5; Glengarry, "Christchurch Press Buildings" p 4.

¹⁶ [O'Neil] *The Press 1861-1961* p 100 quoted in Glengarry, "Christchurch Press Buildings" p 4.

Additional commercial work was carried out for Charles Hunter Brown, a former Member of the House of Representatives and owner of extensive property in Christchurch, with several commissions worth a combined total of £3,763 executed between 1891 and 1893.¹⁷ This included a Gothic styled building of brick and stone in High Street for Hulbert and Sons, completed in April 1892 to the cost of £1,344.¹⁸ Opportunities for the architectural practice followed the sporadic and constrained growth spurts of local business and the willingness of loan-providers to chance investment.

In addition to the scattering of larger commercial commissions mentioned, during that first half of the 1890s charges on commissions for large and medium sized houses in town and country for the colonial upper and middle class of Canterbury were the bread and butter of the firm and were equally responsible for keeping Armson, Collins & Harman afloat. With the inclusion of a small number of supplementary or farm buildings for properties or estates belonging to members of the Rhodes family, around half of the commissions that passed through the

¹⁷ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* v 3, p 93.

¹⁸ "Messers Hulbert and Sons' New Premises" p 3.

practice in these years were gleaned from designs from this source.¹⁹ Jim McAloon has established that there was plenty of money to be made by astute colonists in Canterbury in the period 1840-1914, in rural and urban contexts, although much depended on "early arrival [in the colony] and on state-backing in securing land" and the establishment of a hard-working family network.²⁰ While the long depression had forced many to retrench during the 1880s and early 1890s when agricultural prices had fallen and credit was restricted, the wealth of some individuals and families was so extensive even the stagnation of the economy failed to prevent them releasing funds for commissioning and constructing new houses, additions and auxiliary buildings on their estates.

Arthur EG Rhodes (1859-1922), a solicitor who had inherited a huge fortune and knew how to make a good return on it, had Armson, Collins & Harman design a building a year for his property in Merivale from 1890-1894.²¹ Although three of these consisted of modest

¹⁹ Approximately £25,000 of the nearly £55,800 total combined value of commissions for these five years came from domestic and estate sources.

²⁰ McAloon *No Idle Rich* p 181.

²¹ Rice "Bags of Gold" pp 7-18.

structures (vinery, lodge and stables), after Rhode's 1892 wedding to Rose Moorhouse, the last two in 1893 and 1894 involved moving the existing house and constructing additions to result in the Old English splendour of Te Koraha, all at a combined cost of £5,190. Rhodes could easily afford this large picturesque, half-timbered house with its ornamented bargeboards, mullioned windows with leaded lights and tall, strongly modelled chimneys: by the end of the nineteenth century he was a major frequent mortgage financier, having granted 25 mortgages, one more than the Bank of New Zealand in the same period.²² The price of £4,013 for the 1894 additions was the single largest commission Armson, Collins & Harman received in the first half of the 1890s.²³

Two other large houses were designed by the practice during these years, both in 1891: GE Rhode's house Meadowbank in Ellesmere, and the large house at Longbeach, south of

²² McAloon *No Idle Rich* p 44.

²³ The house was extended again in the same style in the first years of the next century, when Rhodes played host to the Duke and Duchess of York and Cornwall. In 1923, a year after Rhodes' death, it was sold to the four Gibson sisters to accommodate their expanding girls' school, Rangi Ruru.

Ashburton, for John Grigg (1828-1901) contracted out at £2,753 and £3,412 respectively. Grigg had initially developed his large farm in partnership with his brother-in-law, Auckland financier and founder of the Bank of New Zealand, Thomas Russell (1830-1904). Russell's withdrawal in 1882 did not deflate Grigg, who continued to introduce innovations and intensify the project to drain the swampy property. The kiln and brickmaker employed to make drainage tiles also produced the bricks for the tumbling asymmetrical form of the Queen Anne homestead with its dressings picked out in the obligatory cream of Oamaru stone.

McAloon's thesis is confirmed in brick and stone – it was the older, long established, upper class colonial families who were in a strong financial position, and able to commission architecture when all the British-sourced funds were evaporating. These far from modest dwellings, however, scarcely fit McAloon's contention that the colonial rich were characterised by their inconspicuous consumption.²⁴ That said, they were cast into the shade by the grand opportunities for Christchurch architects that flourished later in

²⁴ McAloon *No Idle Rich* p 181.

the Liberal era. At the other end of the decade, Christchurch witnessed the construction of Daresbury Rookery (1897-1901), Hurst-Seager's huge English Domestic Revival house for the wine and spirits merchant George Humphreys (1848/9-1934), and the house believed to be the largest wooden dwelling constructed in New Zealand to date: Holly Lea (1899-1900), designed for Allan McLean (1822-1907) by Robert William England (1863-1908). McLean's 47,865-acre Waikākahi estate in Waimate sold to the Government under the Land for Settlements Act 1892 for £322,947 in 1898, and it has been suggested that in Holly Lea, "McLean sought some recompense for the loss he felt at the forced sale."²⁵

If such a well-connected and highly regarded practice as Armson, Collins & Harman experienced and survived 15 fallow years, it may be safely said that other Christchurch architects had similar experiences, although they may have had different strategies for survival. By the 1890s, Maddison was well established as an architect of industrial buildings, virtually dominating the field in

²⁵ Christchurch City Council Town Planning Division *The Architectural Heritage of Christchurch 3: McLean's Mansion* p 5.

Christchurch and its surrounds. He had been canny enough to secure himself a reputation as the architect of a new, expensive and increasingly sought-after building type: freezing works. Mechanised refrigeration enabled the first voyage of frozen sheep to Britain in 1882, and although the nascent industry was beset by complications (most significantly the limited availability of credit) land-based freezing works were built.²⁶ A large freezing works cost around £50,000 and in 1906 it was reported in *The Weekly Press* "from freezing works alone during the last few years, works costing £397,000 have passed through Mr Maddison's hands."²⁷ Maddison's first was in 1882-83 in Belfast for the Canterbury Frozen Meat Company. The design of his most important surviving industrial building dates from 1890: Wood's Mill in Addington. Constructed in brick in the stripped and restrained classical style both typical of Maddison and considered appropriate for an industrial building, the four storey, six-bay mill with recessed windows framed by ashlar arches was carefully engineered to withstand the weight

²⁶ See Belich *Paradise Reforged* pp 54-58.

²⁷ "Mr. J.C. Maddison" p 44, quoted in Christchurch City Council Environmental Policy and Planning Unit *The Architectural Heritage of Christchurch 9: Wood's Mill* p 9.

and action of the heavy machinery. Another notable commission from that time was the Nurses Home he designed for Christchurch Hospital in 1891, which was not constructed until 1894-95 and opened, after much public fundraising, in May 1895.²⁸ It was extended in 1907 and 1911 but regardless of the corner tower with its turret, the otherwise plain Elizabethan design of the original two-storey brick building with its somewhat severe stone dressings proclaims its institutional status.

To his "erratic" and idiosyncratic career, in 1893 Frederick Strouts added a three-storey brick warehouse in Lower High Street for the New Zealand Drug Company.²⁹ Now demolished, photographs give an impression of a reserved classical commercial exercise in brick with recessed windows similar to those used by Maddison in industrial buildings.³⁰ Strouts discovered that same year that one of the difficulties of designing architecture in an economic slump was convincing clients of the worth of your knowledge and skills and getting paid for them. He was reduced to pursuing one client, a Mr Whittle, as far as the

²⁸ Wilson *Lost Christchurch* p 57.

²⁹ Mane-Wheoki "Strouts, Frederick" unpaginated; "City Improvements" p 5, column 1.

³⁰ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* v 3, p 257.

Supreme Court to recover £168 13s 9d as fees for preparing plans. "The defended alleged that the charges made were exorbitant, and that all the plaintiff was entitled to was for actual work and labour done."³¹ The judge in the matter, his Honour Justice John Denniston and the defendant's lawyer, one Mr Kippenberger (probably Philip Kippenberger of Acton-Adams & Kippenberger), had an interesting discussion over the matter of architects' charges. Denniston could not agree with Kippenberger's assertion that charging a commission on the value of the building was wrong and recalled the reply of a noted sculptor to a query from Sir Charles Russell about one of his works:

"How long," said Sir Russell, "did it take you to knock this off?" "About a day." "Then," said Sir Charles, "you charge £200 for a day's labour." "Oh no," was the reply, "I charge £200 for the result of twenty-five years labour and experience."³²

Denniston decided in Strouts' favour, and asked Whittle to pay the architect £106 13s 9d and costs.

The most elaborate commercial building

³¹ "News of the Day: Supreme Court" p 4, column 5.

³² "Architects' Fees: an Interesting Discussion" p 6.

constructed in Christchurch at this time was a retail warehouse on Lichfield Street for the Australian family firm of importers Sargood, Son & Ewen. Designed by the Melbourne practice of Lloyd Tayler & Fitts in 1893, it seemed money was no object in this case. Often described as being of a "commercial, classical style," the warehouse was in fact completely distinct from the commercial designs typical of Maddison or Armson, Collins & Harman at the end of the nineteenth century.³³ Aside from the symmetry of its form, its detailing sat it firmly within the Queen Anne style: strong, lively rhythms created by the constructional polychromy of brick contrasted with Mount Somers stone and the receding and projecting movement of the elevations, highly decorative stonework, the enriched, steeply pitched, gabled roof, carved keystones and the Corinthian capitals of the iron support columns on the interior.³⁴ Sargood, Son & Ewen was established in Melbourne in 1848 and expanded rapidly

³³ Cosgrove "Warehouse with Style" Weekend p 11, is one example.

³⁴ The highly decorated pitched roof was removed in stages after 1931, as it posed an earthquake risk. In 1974 the central entrance was shifted to the left hand side of the front elevation. See Cosgrove "A Warehouse with Style" Weekend p 11.

across Australasia, opening its first New Zealand branch in Dunedin in 1863.³⁵ The company was in a position to build a sophisticated and expensive building on this scale because the situation in Australia before 1890 was markedly different to that in New Zealand. Their primary economic context, in which they thrived, was the Australian "long boom" of 1850-90, which drew New Zealanders there in an "Exodus" and was the reason for New Zealand's net migration loss to Australia from 1885-90.

In the last decade of his life, Mountfort, as "architect of Canterbury," scarcely needed to be concerned with how he was going to pay his bills during a period of stagnation. In 1890-91 as Canterbury College architect he made his penultimate addition to the College site, the Mechanical Engineering Laboratory, and in 1892 he was commissioned to design a church for the Church of England mission in British North Borneo.³⁶ His architectural career at this time, however, was not untouched by the economic downturn.

The story of the design and construction of the

³⁵ Carrie & Ross "Proposed requirement for a heritage order" unpaginated.

³⁶ Lochhead *Dream of Spires* pp 208, 283.

first permanent home of the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA) is a good illustration of the impact of the economic situation on architectural practice in Christchurch during the early 1890s. In 1890 Mountfort agreed to design the first gallery for the CSA, of which he was a founding and very active member, without any expectation of a fee. When tenders exceeded the funds raised by the Society, Mountfort revised his plans for a stone building and, as asked, produced designs for one constructed of brick. The approved design was constructed for £1,250 and the gallery was opened in November 1890. The consequences of the economic demands upon Mountfort's design is well described by Ian Lochhead:

the gallery that was built confounds every expectation, for it reveals no trace of any historical style. The gallery's street facades present a series of windowless bays surmounted by a cornice of projecting bricks... [and the] walls are treated as series of overlapping planes, the band of light coloured bricks that runs through the recessed panels seeming to pass behind the piers that divide the walls into bays... Mountfort transformed a utilitarian screen wall into an effective façade, ...[his] gallery went beyond the nineteenth-century dilemma of style to an elemental architecture generated by the practical exigencies of building with limited funds.³⁷

³⁷ Lochhead *Dream of Spires* pp 286-287.

Within four years, however, the Society's fundraising expectations were buoyed and for a further £1,500 the CSA was able to build an extension to Mountfort's gallery according to a decorative Venetian Gothic design by RD Harman of Armson, Collins & Harman. The brief called for the inclusion of a ballroom, and with its sprung floor the new permanent collection gallery was hired just for this purpose, providing the CSA with a ready source of funds. Although also constructed in polychromatic brick, Harman's historicist design was vastly removed from Mountfort's and with larger funds available, he chose to spend them on the easy effects created by elaborate detailing.³⁸

In his survey of the history of New Zealand architecture, Peter Shaw categorises the architecture of the period 1880-1920 as "the architecture of prosperity."³⁹ There is no denying that the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth saw the design and construction of many large, expensive and richly detailed buildings in a range of styles and building types in locations across the country. As an

³⁸ May "Touch of artistry in first CSA Gallery" Weekend p 14; Hendry *More homes of the pioneers* unpaginated.

³⁹ Shaw *History of New Zealand Architecture* pp 57-78.

analysis of Armson, Collins & Harman's Register of Commission demonstrates, however, there is solid evidence that rather than being the simple beneficiaries of affluence, architects practicing in the closing years of the "long stagnation" were receiving fewer commissions, many of them of lower value. Although certain sectors of Canterbury society could easily afford to commission vast houses of dizzying array, there were a number of specific instances in Christchurch when the development, construction, and even design of architects' endeavours, were directed by privation rather than prosperity.

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