

The Style of the 1890s: Art Nouveau design in New Zealand Architecture

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ABSTRACT: The influence of Art Nouveau on New Zealand architecture has generally been considered to be negligible but its impact was nevertheless significant during the period from 1890 to the outbreak of the First World War. Across a wide range of building types, from large scale public buildings to modest houses, Art Nouveau-inspired door pulls, dados, embossed ceilings, leaded glass and tiles abound. This paper explores the largely hidden presence of Art Nouveau in New Zealand architecture of this period and considers the reasons why buildings that otherwise have little connection with the style incorporate features that are often strikingly disparate in aesthetic terms. Is this because New Zealand architects and builders simply did not understand the aesthetic implications of their actions? Was it a consequence of remoteness from centres of architectural innovation or the result of purchasing items, magpie-like, from architectural catalogues? Or was it, indeed, the result of a desire to achieve an aura of "instant sophistication"?

In the history of European architecture the decade of the 1890s is synonymous with the emergence of Art Nouveau. From Brussels to Paris and Vienna, as is well known, a new architectural style emerged that exploited the ductility of metal to create sinuous, curving forms, the plasticity of terracotta to make new shapes, the brilliant colours and permanency of fired glazes to produce dazzling patterns and the translucency of coloured glass to transform effects of light. Art Nouveau drew inspiration from nature and incorporated stylised plant forms yet also relied heavily on new industrial processes as well as on traditional craftsmanship. While it had much in common with the traditional styles of the nineteenth century it was also conceived as a self-conscious rejection of historicism and an attempt to create a new style for the modern age. As a term Art Nouveau has been used to define the entire period in western

architecture for c1890 until c1914,¹ but a stricter application of the term Art Nouveau confines it to the architecture and design of France and Belgium, although Jugendstil in Austria is closely related and regional variants of the style can be found as far afield as Finland and Russia. By 1914 it had run its course in Europe. In Britain it was regarded with some suspicion although in Scotland the Glasgow school, and in particular the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald, had much in common with Art Nouveau.

Art Nouveau was more than just an architectural style. It impacted on every aspect of the fine and applied arts, influencing the graphic design of magazines as well as the style of the tables they rested on and the

electric lamps that provided light to read them by. It was a style well adapted to the new concept of total design and it spread internationally through the print media, which had itself been transformed in the late nineteenth century through new printing processes and means of graphic reproduction. Inevitably Art Nouveau reached New Zealand, although it arrived late and its impact on New Zealand architecture was curious. There are scarcely any New Zealand buildings that can be described unequivocally as Art Nouveau in style yet there are dozens of buildings where Art Nouveau has a presence, although this remains largely unacknowledged.² My intention here is to draw attention to this hidden, or at least, unrecognised, presence of Art Nouveau in

¹ *Art Nouveau Architecture*.

² Phillips and Maclean *In the Light of the Past* pp 65-81 devote a chapter to Art Nouveau glass in New Zealand houses.

New Zealand architecture in the decades immediately following the period in which the style emerged in Europe, and to try to understand why the style was employed in the way that it was.

My first example is a very modest one, although I think it illustrates the uncertain, and perhaps haphazard use of Art Nouveau motifs in New Zealand building. "Burnhouse" at Lakeside, near Leeston on the Canterbury plains, was built as a farmhouse around 1905. Nothing about the exterior of the building is exceptional for its date and the plan is entirely conventional, with a central hall and rooms on either side. The two front rooms with bay windows are formal in character and have fireplaces opposite the bays. The room on the right has a fireplace with tiles depicting traditional picturesque landscape motifs, which probably evoked memories of "home" for the family of Scottish descent who built the house. However the cast iron hood above the grate has a floral motif in relief that is unmistakably Art Nouveau in inspiration, creating a curious discrepancy between the conservative imagery of the tiles and the contemporary style of the metalwork. It is worth remembering that fireplaces such as this were supplied in made-up form, making

it hard to pinpoint the moment at which the decision was made to create this incongruous juxtaposition of styles. In the opposite room the situation is reversed. Here the tiles are clearly Art Nouveau in style, whereas it is the cast iron fireplace that is the more traditional element in the composition. I cannot say whether the family which sat in front of these fireplaces ever contemplated these stylistic discrepancies. I suspect they simply enjoyed the warmth and possibly looked up occasionally from reading a novel by Sir Walter Scott to rest their eyes on the flames and a glimpse of Highland landscape.

It could be objected that such a building is not representative of an informed architectural response to Art Nouveau; that it is merely a compilation of parts selected at random from a catalogue of building materials and combined without regard for consistent aesthetic effect. What is surprising is that the same phenomenon can be found in the work of contemporary architects.

Sir George Troup's Dunedin Railway Station (1904), is one of the most admired early nineteenth-century New Zealand buildings and is generally characterised as being Edwardian Baroque in style, although it owes

much to EW Mountford's Sheffield Town Hall of 1890-97. Troup's booking office continues the Baroque theme of the exterior in glazed terracotta, but on closer inspection this stylistic consistency breaks down. Passengers entering the busy ticket hall probably didn't pause to examine the door pulls but had they done so the Art Nouveau design would have struck them as novel, and scarcely in keeping with the overall character of the rest of the building. Had they ventured to the gallery above they would have discovered a New Zealand Railways-themed leaded glass windows in which a steam train advances through clouds of Art Nouveau decorative motifs. Above, the pressed metal coved ceiling continues the Art Nouveau theme. Stylistically the gallery forms a different environment of delicate, sinuous forms that is completely different from the robust baroque elements of the booking hall below.

Was this contrast of styles and effects deliberate or accidental? Did Troup simply leave the choice of door furniture and ceiling panels to an adventurous young draftsman in the Department of Railways architectural section? Was the pressed metal ceiling simply ordered from the latest Wunderlich catalogue without thought for its appropriateness? Or,

perhaps stretching credibility, this stylistic hybridity was intentional, a deliberate attempt to undermine the weight of Imperial authority as New Zealand moved towards dominion status and greater political independence? More realistically, the Dunedin Railway Station may simply be a more eclectic design than we can fit into normal stylistic categories; a building which draws from the distant and recent past to create a synthesis of styles and motifs that is representative of New Zealand in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

The introduction of seemingly casual incongruities into buildings that appear to present a consistent stylistic language also occurs in the Theatre Royal in Christchurch, designed by the Luttrell Brothers in 1907. The façade is Italian Renaissance in style and the interior retains much of its baroque decoration although it was extensively rebuilt in 1928.³ Most surprising in this context, however, are the pair of bull's eye windows on either side of the auditorium at gallery level. Here, beneath a hood moulding of baroque decorative motifs, is a leaded glass design of a poppy that is strongly Art Nouveau in character. Again we find the new style

³ Lochhead "A Drama in three Acts" pp 46-47

appearing in an unexpected and seemingly incongruous location.

Leaded glass was, in fact, one of the principal media through which Art Nouveau impacted on New Zealand architecture. Good examples can be seen in Christchurch cinemas; the Luttrell's Liberty Theatre of 1917 incorporated a large leaded glass window on its Cathedral Square façade. Filled with swirling flowers and vines this window had been hidden from view since the theatre was altered by Francis Willis and renamed the Savoy in 1953.⁴ It was only rediscovered when the theatre was being demolished. Less extensive, although no less Art Nouveau in style, is the leaded glass of the Harbour Light Cinema in Lyttelton, dating from 1916. Here the architect was JS Guthrie.⁵ The Liberty had elements of Art Nouveau in its façade, especially the illuminated sign at the top of the building which incorporated the distinctive whip-lash swirls associated with the style, but it was the Wellington cinema specialist, Henry E White, who designed Christchurch's most recognisably Art Nouveau cinema, the Strand (later the Plaza) in Cathedral Square, again in 1916.⁶ Like the

⁴ Minehan *Round the Square* pp 32-33

⁵ Taylor "List of Christchurch City" p 6

⁶ Minehan *Round the Square* pp 60-61

Liberty, the Strand was demolished in the 1990s and its original appearance is only poorly documented. Perhaps more Jugendstil than Art Nouveau in inspiration, the Strand's façade incorporated stylised masks, floral motifs and geometric elements in a combination that avoided reference to any historical style. The Cathedral Square façade of the building was progressively lost with successive changes to the building but on its Hereford Street façade fragments of its original Art Nouveau decoration survived until the building was demolished in 1990.

Along with cinemas, domestic architecture was another area where Art Nouveau designs flourished. The relationship between the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau is particularly close and so it is hardly surprising to find an architect such as Basil Hooper designing windows that have all the hallmarks of Art Nouveau.⁷ Hooper's Fisher house in Dunedin of 1908 incorporates floral motifs in the sidelights of the entrance which are characteristic of the style, although the stylised forms of the stair window have a more geometric quality. This tendency

⁷ See Allen *Motif and Beauty* for a detailed account of Hooper's career, including illustrations of his stained glass designs.

towards an abstract, geometric approach can also be seen in a later design for the entrance hall windows of the Watson House (1913), also in Dunedin. The consistency in design between Hooper's Fisher and Watson houses suggests that the architect designed his own stained glass but this was probably not a widespread practice. More commonly leaded glass designs were purchased from the stock patterns of the window manufacturers, who themselves followed the fashion trends that would ensure sales.

This was probably the case with Hatherley in Christchurch, which includes an unusually large collection of Art Nouveau-inspired leadlight windows. The house itself, designed by Clarkson and Ballantyne in 1911, is a typical example of the large, timber-built, Arts and Crafts-influenced houses of the period. The leaded glass windows share motifs and design features with those of the entrance of Hooper's Fisher house, suggesting a common source, possibly even a common maker may lie behind these designs in Dunedin and Christchurch. The Christchurch windows are distinctive, however, in the way in which curving lead lines are used to represent the stems of the flowers. Art Nouveau motifs at Hatherley are not confined to leadlight

windows as fire surrounds incorporate tiles of remarkably sophisticated design which, in their attenuated forms, evoke the works of the Glasgow School.

Window designs such as those at Hatherley were almost certainly being made by graduates of art schools such as the Canterbury College School of Art. The influence of Art Nouveau in the school is clearly evidenced in the designs by Leonard Booth for the school's publications from the first decade of the new century (although the syllabus also had a strong emphasis on the Arts and Crafts).⁸ The focus of New Zealand's art schools during this period was on the applied and decorative arts and this was almost certainly a factor in Art Nouveau being regarded as a style that belonged to what William Morris called the "lesser arts" rather than to architecture. The fact that much of this work was carried out by women may also have had some impact on its lack of status.⁹ A style that was thus admissible for leadlight windows, ceiling decoration or door

⁸ See Calhoun *The Arts & Crafts Movement in New Zealand* p 85 for an illustration of Booth's 1909 design. This cover design was used for several years.

⁹ Calhoun *The Arts & Crafts Movement in New Zealand* p 77 ff.

pulls would not have been regarded as appropriate for an entire building, except perhaps a building devoted to entertainment such as a cinema.

Examples of Art Nouveau design available in New Zealand would also have been restricted to the applied arts, confirming a predisposition to think of the style primarily as one used for decoration. Yet this does not adequately explain the use of Art Nouveau decorative elements in a building such as the Dunedin Railway Station which is otherwise in an historical style diametrically opposed to Art Nouveau. By the early nineteenth century eclecticism had become such an ingrained part of architectural design thinking that the possibility of combining historical motifs with the new forms of Art Nouveau may not have seemed as incongruous as it does today. For an architect like Hooper, on the other hand, who had just returned to New Zealand from England in 1904, the combination of styles in the booking hall of the new Dunedin station must have reminded him that he had indeed, returned to the provinces.

A further reason for the refusal of New Zealand architects to adopt Art Nouveau more consistently were the European origins

of the style. At a time when New Zealand's national identity was still closely linked to notions of Britishness, Art Nouveau was manifestly a foreign style.¹⁰ A hint of foreign stylishness could be admitted, perhaps, as long as Britishness remained the dominant element. At the cinema, where exotic spectacles were to be expected, a more relaxed approach would have been more acceptable.

The appearance of Art Nouveau glass in domestic settings was at least in part a response to a growing desire for more artistic homes. As *Progress* noted in 1907, in an article on stained and leadlight glass, there was now a "general desire for more artistic surroundings in the home... [and] in this special work the Dominion has more than held its own."¹¹ The article illustrated, as an example of a "Modern Leadlight," a design by the Christchurch firm of Bradley Brothers in which the influence of Art Nouveau is unmistakable. Such windows may well have been regarded as an advance on the "strident effects of instant sophistication" that had characterised the previous decade. As *Progress* pointed out:

¹⁰ Lochhead "Politics of Empire..." pp 42-48.

¹¹ "Stained Glass and Leadlight Work" p 63.

the present style of decorative architecture has demanded special study for the production of leadlights in keeping with the general character of buildings. ... The old crudeness has given place for the most part to good design and soundness of colouring ... [and] these products assure the stained glass industry a prosperous future in relation to private houses.¹²

Art Nouveau, the style of the 1890s, certainly brought a new sophistication to the decorative aspect of New Zealand architecture, even if the application of the style was sometimes haphazard and incongruous. But perhaps it is just this "do it yourself" and "she'll be right" approach to the use of Art Nouveau that gives the style's contribution to New Zealand architecture its particular character.

¹² "Stained Glass and Leadlight Work" p 63.

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