The 102-foot Australian invasion of Central Wellington in the 1920s

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ABSTRACT: A significant change to the building bylaws by the Wellington City Council in the early 1920s allowed for the design and erection of much taller buildings in the central city than had previously been permitted. Coupled with the use of steel frames and concrete floors, buildings started to reach eight or nine storeys; not tall by American standards, but regarded as skyscrapers in a city where three- and four-storey buildings were still the norm.

The fact that several of the most prominent of these new buildings were designed mainly by Australian architects, both in the 1920s and the early 1930s, does not seem to be widely known, or has been partially concealed by quoting the local supervising architects as the prime movers in the planning. Some of the buildings were erected to house branches or Wellington head offices of Australian firms but others were solely for New Zealand clients. The firm of A & K Henderson of Melbourne led the way with their 1926 design of the T & G Building (now Harcourts) on Lambton Quay, in association with Atkins and Mitchell. Australian born and trained Llewellyn Williams had already designed the tall, but narrow, Druids Chambers further to the north and went on to oversee more tall structures in the next few years. Hennessy & Hennessy, also Australian, pioneered Wellington Art Deco designs in the early 1930s. Both the building techniques and the architectural styles employed showed strong American influences, particularly the tripartite form developed in Chicago. At first the massing of Inter-War Stripped Classical was employed, later followed by the more flowing lines of Art Deco.

Local architects were not slow to accept the new challenges required in the construction of taller, more massive buildings. The firm of Atkins and Mitchell was responsible for the DIC Building (now Harbour City Centre) in 1928 whereas JM Dawson had planned the Hope Gibbons Building, a rather more traditional structure, in Dixon Street in 1925. He was also responsible for Wakefield Chambers on the corner of Wakefield Street and Taranaki Street in 1928.

The huge new commercial buildings of the 1920s took advantage of the increasing availability and affordability of electric power for lighting, heating, lifts and the pumping of water. Telephones could be fitted in every office; central heating started to be installed, and there was better fire-fighting equipment. Steel-framed buildings were less susceptible to earthquake shocks. Many of the buildings we describe here are still standing, although often modified for other uses. They have become iconic structures reflecting the marked advances of the 1920s era.

In this paper we discuss the emergence of what can be regarded as the first genuine high-rise buildings in the centre of Wellington; their construction techniques, styles, and who designed them. This phase of the city's growth related to increasing land prices putting pressure on owners to maximise the use of their inner-city sections, and was facilitated by the introduction of new building height limits by the City Council. It also reflected trends across the Tasman, which were in turn influenced by American architecture.

A classic black and white photograph of Wellington looking south-eastwards from the Wadestown end of Tinakori Hill taken "prior to 1931," according to the Alexander Turnbull Library's attribution, shows most of the dozen or so high-rise buildings of the 1920s. Not that they were particularly high, at eight or nine storeys, but they tended to tower over their Victorian and Edwardian predecessors. They represented a new era of construction in Wellington and new developments in commercial and office accommodation.

New Zealand lagged behind Australia in the growth of high-rise buildings; major Australian cities such as Sydney and

Melbourne started growing upwards much earlier. The *Evening Post* as early as May 1911 noted how Sydney was "adopting the American system of rushing skywards … This policy is largely based on the American axiom that "Ground is cheaper in the air than it is in the street.""[1] There are numerous accounts detailing the rapid increase in land values which urban areas experienced from the turn of the twentieth century. The prosperity experienced in the early 1900s-1910s saw population growth, and a consequent increase in building put pressure on the scarce land available to house more people. From 1906 to 1911, for example, 26,000 new buildings were erected in Sydney and its suburbs.[2] The only way for developers to maximise the return on land was to erect taller buildings. Interestingly one early newspaper also claimed that high rise buildings offered the same benefits that were used to sell suburban sections; at the top "the din of city traffic is completely lost – all is as quiet as in a suburban retreat, as for the air, again the rural freshness is suggested, and the light is better than more lowly, old fashioned buildings."[3]

Revision of planning regulations allowing new buildings to be erected to a height of 132 feet (for steel and concrete construction), and 110 feet for others, were introduced in 1916 in Melbourne.[4] In Sydney, a "Height of Buildings Act" was passed in 1912, allowing construction to a maximum height of 150 feet. However, the horse had already bolted; a building called Culwalla Chambers, designed by the firm of Spain & Cosh, had reached 170 feet before the Act came into force.[5] Concrete-encased steel frames became relatively common, following earlier trends of iron and steel frame buildings in America - particularly using the Romanesque and other styles modified for the embryonic skyscrapers of Chicago. Hence Australian architects gained experience with such designs both before and during the First World War.

Prior to the end of the war, central Wellington had just two steel-framed buildings that we know of; the Public Trust building dating from 1908-9, designed by Government Architect John Campbell with American advice, and the Cadbury factory in Ghuznee Street, also 1908, by Hoggard & Prouse. Both were of modest dimensions, with the Public Trust the taller, at four storeys with a five-storey corner tower. The move towards much taller, simpler, but more massive-looking buildings began slowly with the partial opening of the State Fire Insurance Building on the corner of Lambton Quay and Waring Taylor Street in 1921 when the ground floor was already occupied but the remainder of the cladding was continuing. At eight storeys, this still did not reach the heights of new buildings overseas. The architects were said to be Hoggard, Prouse and Gummer, although Jack Hoggard's name was later removed from the foundation stone.

The *Evening Post* on 18 June 1921 announced the imminent arrival of the skyscraper: "With the vast structure of steel raising its gaunt skeleton high against the skyline to the south of Courtenay Place, the day of the skyscraper seems inevitably to have dawned in Wellington."[6] This was the Colonial Motor Company Building by JM Dawson. Not long after, the first building to break the 100-foot height barrier on Lambton Quay was completed; Druids Chambers, almost diagonally opposite State Fire Insurance,

[1] "Sydney Sky-Scrapers" p 12.
[2] "Australia Today" p 2.
[3] "Sydney Sky-Scrapers" p 12.
[4] Goad *Melbourne Architecture* p 110.
[5] Jahn *Sydney Architecture* p 78.
[6] "Structures in Steel" p 9.

finished in 1923. This office block was designed in Stripped Classical style by Llewellyn E Williams. Williams was Sydney-born and trained, having moved to Wellington in 1917. At first a junior partner with F de J Clere, he set up independently in 1923. He went on to design several more tall, massive office blocks such as the Levy Building on the corner of Manners and Taranaki Streets (jointly with Crichton & McKay in 1926), Courtenay Chambers, Civic Chambers and Medical Chambers, now Kelvin Chambers (the latter on The Terrace), all in 1927.

Architects in Wellington were relatively slow starters when it came to the design of what were then regarded as skyscrapers. As had been experienced in Australia, the main driver for increasing the height of buildings was rapidly rising inner-city land values. It is apparent that the start of a new round of relatively high rise building in Wellington was delayed until the early 1920s in contrast to major Australian cities. Local newspapers give the impression that building height restrictions were not revised upwards by the City Council until that time, and/or people were generally unaware of what the height limits were. In actual fact a maximum limit of 102 feet had been set by Bylaw as early as 1908, following recommendations only briefly reported in the *Evening Post* on 30 November 1907.[7]

By 1908, the recent boom in building in Wellington, (particularly in the suburbs) was over and a "bust" cycle was developing. A further minor peak would follow during the First World War, but shortages of labour and materials probably deterred developers from making significant changes to the central business district. At that stage too, many local architects looked more towards Britain for ideas rather than the USA, and, although there were some exceptions, it appears that the field was left open for Australian individuals and firms to move in. Local architects were however not slow to take up the ideas and produce their own tall buildings (particularly JM Dawson, CH Mitchell, and Crichton & McKay). A further disincentive to would-be redevelopers of the CBD was the Government introduction, in June 1920, of restrictions on the supply of available building materials, particularly cement, bricks and timber, through a permit system, with preference given to builders of dwellings. This lasted until March 1921, despite vehement protests from architects and others.

Correspondence in the newspapers indicated poor knowledge of the height restrictions in place in the early 1920s. Restrictions were challenged or questioned by architects and developers, particularly in the light of the tall structures being built overseas. Several local articles referred to American skyscrapers or the Americanisation of Sydney.[8] RW de Montalk wrote about the possible effects of fire and earthquakes on tall buildings, stressing that steel frames and concrete or reinforced concrete were much safer than constructions of brick and timber, regardless of height.[9] Development was said to be curtailed by restrictive height limits. "Town Planner" lamented in the *Evening Post* in May 1920 that "Unfortunately for Wellington, up-to-date regulations governing the height and style of our city buildings have never been drafted."[10] The editor of the magazine *Building Progress* seemed to be of the same opinion.[11] As mentioned, the maximum height allowable was already a little over 100 feet,

[7] "Local & General" p 4.

[8] "Americanising Sydney" p 9.

[9] de Montalk "To the Editor" p 4.

[10] "Height of Buildings" p 4.

[11] "Prospects of the "Sky-scraper"" p 8.

allowing buildings of up to nine stories; significantly higher than earlier buildings, but much lower than the skyscrapers in parts of America. Behind the scenes, the City Engineer wrote a discussion paper in March 1920 about the possible need to get legal power to control building types and heights within the main business areas of the central city.[12] The advantages were seen as improving the appearance of certain streets, but the disadvantage was that excessive regulation might hamper progress. Hence no new regulations were introduced at that time.

After L E Williams led the way with Druids Chambers, the next significant building was by the Melbourne firm of A & K Henderson. They designed the Australian Temperance and General Mutual Life Assurance Society head office at 203-213 Lambton Quay in 1926. Known today as the Harcourts Building, it is a nine-storey block with a concrete-encased steel frame, reinforced concrete floors, and brick infill panels. Although showing some residual classical touches such as the low- and high-level balconies supported by consoles, it is basically a Commercial Palazzo or Stripped Classical design divided into a base, shaft and capital in the Chicago style and has much in common with their 1926 premises for the same firm in Collins Street, Melbourne. The local supervising architect was C.H. Mitchell who went on to design the DIC building in 1928 (now known as the Harbour City Centre) with K Henderson as consulting architect. Of similar height and using very similar construction materials and methods, this building continues to dominate the block of Lambton Quay between Brandon and Panama Streets.

The Australian influence continued into the early 1930s with the design of the Art Deco Prudential Insurance Building by Hennessey & Hennessey in 1933 at 332-340 Lambton Quay. The same firm went on in 1934 to design the now-lost Colonial Mutual Life Building just around the corner at 117-129 Customhouse Quay. This was a modern modification of the Romanesque style, with bizarre but attractive ornamentation. The same style was utilised by the firm for other CML buildings in Australia, some of which have been cleverly adapted for modern uses, such as a boutique hotel in Brisbane.

The eventual commencement of the erection of moderately high-rise buildings using structural steel frames, large windows and concrete floors inevitably gave rise to the evolution of different architectural forms, as it had in the United States some 20 to 30 years before. Conservative architects still tended to conceal the expression of the building's skeleton, some using genuine stone facing, as with the AMP Society building by Clere & Clere (1925), who made it look like a giant palazzo (Inter-War Commercial Palazzo in the Australian classification). Others expressed the verticals as pilasters and filled the spaces below windows with new forms of spandrels. Many adopted the common Chicago vertical subdivision of buildings because it gave an aesthetically pleasing form reminiscent of the Greek column. However, the classical elements were stripped right back, sometimes only remaining around entrances or at cornice levels. Depending on the remaining degree of classical ornament, these buildings either fit mainly into Inter-War Free Classical or I-W Stripped Classical categories.

Some have actually gone from one to the other with removal of features regarded as otherwise likely to fall off during earthquakes. Hence the Harcourts Building would probably be regarded as a rather mild form of Commercial Palazzo, while the Harbour City

[12] Engineers paper (March 1920).

Centre would have originally been Free Classical because all the giant columns and pilasters had correct Corinthian capitals. The Prudential building is clearly Inter-War Art Deco in style, disregarding the relatively recent excrescence built onto its roof. The now-demolished CML building was, by complete contrast, built in Inter-War Romanesque style using artificial stone as a facing material and interesting details copied from mediaeval art forms.

Although the 1920s in central Wellington were regarded by some of the contemporary newspapers as a boom period or a new era in building, the reality was that it was a time of financial uncertainty once the guaranteed prices paid for agricultural produce by the UK during the war ceased. Certainly, a number of large new buildings did tower above their surroundings and some much lower ones were built strongly enough for extra floors to be added later, but significant areas, such as the west side of Lambton Quay, mostly retained their Victorian and Edwardian structures. By the late 1920s, the looming depression of the early '30s was already being felt and it was only the big Australian firms that continued with building insurance offices into those latter years. It took another world war and a long recovery period before the real skyscrapers that we see today were to dominate the central city skyline.

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