

Sailing too close to the wind in the 1880s

Adrian Humphris, Wellington City Archives & Geoff Mew, Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT: The 1880s and early 1890s have been widely recognised as a time of depression in New Zealand. While well-known architects with substantial clienteles were generally able to survive the downturn in business, others struggled to make ends meet, showed signs of extreme stress, or occasionally resorted to sharp practices. Few in-depth studies have been able to show the broad spectrum of architects working in Wellington at a particular time as, until recently, it has been extremely difficult to accumulate the necessary data. The introduction of *Papers Past* has considerably simplified this task. We can now find and assess almost all the architects who made the news in different ways. Although more than 30 men claimed to be Wellington architects in the 1880s, not all of them were working. Some, such as Frank Mitchell, produced relatively large numbers of plans throughout the decade; many others appear to have been less successful, and to have turned their hands to other activities, for better or worse.

In this paper we select a few of the more colourful "architects" residing in Wellington in the 1880s. Our candidates range from the aforementioned Frank Mitchell, through to Christopher Walter Worger, who being bankrupted in Christchurch, moved to Wellington in 1889. Leaving no record of any building designs, he had gone to Dunedin by 1906.

Another enigmatic character was James Henry Schwabe, who escaped Dunedin and a rather public humiliation for Wellington in the late 1870s. Similarly, we discuss the erratic behaviour of WJW Robinson, also escaping scandal in Dunedin to practise in the capital. Charles Zahl we find making a fleeting visit in early 1887, before absconding with a large sum of investors' money *en route* to Rio de Janeiro or Britain. We finish with the case of Ernest Wagner, released into the community after a year's hard labour in 1880. He never practised as an architect again - preferring, or being forced, to live as a farmer in the country south of Auckland. The examples we discuss are the exception rather than the rule. Of the bankruptcies recorded at the time, few came from the upper echelons of society. Some architects who were later prominent in Wellington moved offshore to better conditions in Australia (such as Joshua Charlesworth), whereas others, such as William Turnbull, were protected to some extent in successful partnerships in which they had a junior role.

Introduction: Overview

The 1880s have been widely recognised as a time of depression in New Zealand, with hard times continuing into the early nineties. While well-known architects with substantial clienteles were generally able to survive the downturn in business, others struggled to make ends meet, showed signs of extreme stress, or occasionally resorted to sharp practices. With signs of a return to economic prosperity in the mid-1880s, the numbers of architects practising or present in Wellington increased. However an oversupply of city

houses resulted from this upswing as population growth was not enough to fill them - there was a further slump from 1889 to the early-1890s. In fact it would not be until the turn of the century that electrification of tramways would drive a new surge of building, this time in the suburbs.

Boom and Bust: the Wellington Building Cycle

Although the effects of the depression were definitely felt in the capital, to an extent it was insulated as the result of developments over

the previous two decades. Wellington's economic base had been significantly augmented by the relocation of central administrative services from Auckland in 1865. The concentration of government administration and expenditure in Wellington increased further with the abolition of the provincial governments in 1876. The relocation of civil servants had a flow-on effect for the private sector, as businesses then located their head offices or major branches in the capital to gain the advantages of proximity to central government. Vogel's expansionist

policies of the 1870s led to a huge increase in public works, the manpower for which was provided by an influx of immigrants attracted by the economic buoyancy of Wellington, and who shifted there when they were no longer required on land clearing and other development. This led in part to the rapid increase in population, but also contributed to large-scale unemployment when prices for exported produce declined sharply in the 1880s.

Statistical returns by Wellington Borough Council give some idea of the increasing number of dwellings in Wellington City from the mid-1870s. Although the returns were often estimates and their accuracy cannot be guaranteed, they show the periods of rapid growth of the late 1870s and 1880s, interspersed with downswings in activity in between. From 1875 to 1879, the number of dwellings in the city nearly doubled; over the same period the population grew from 11,160 to 20,563.¹ This growth did not continue however, and post-1879, building stalled until 1885. The lack of activity was reported in the

¹ Building numbers calculated from Wellington City Council Rate Books, 1875/76 and 1879/80. Population figures taken from Statistics of the Colony of New Zealand, 1875 and 1880.

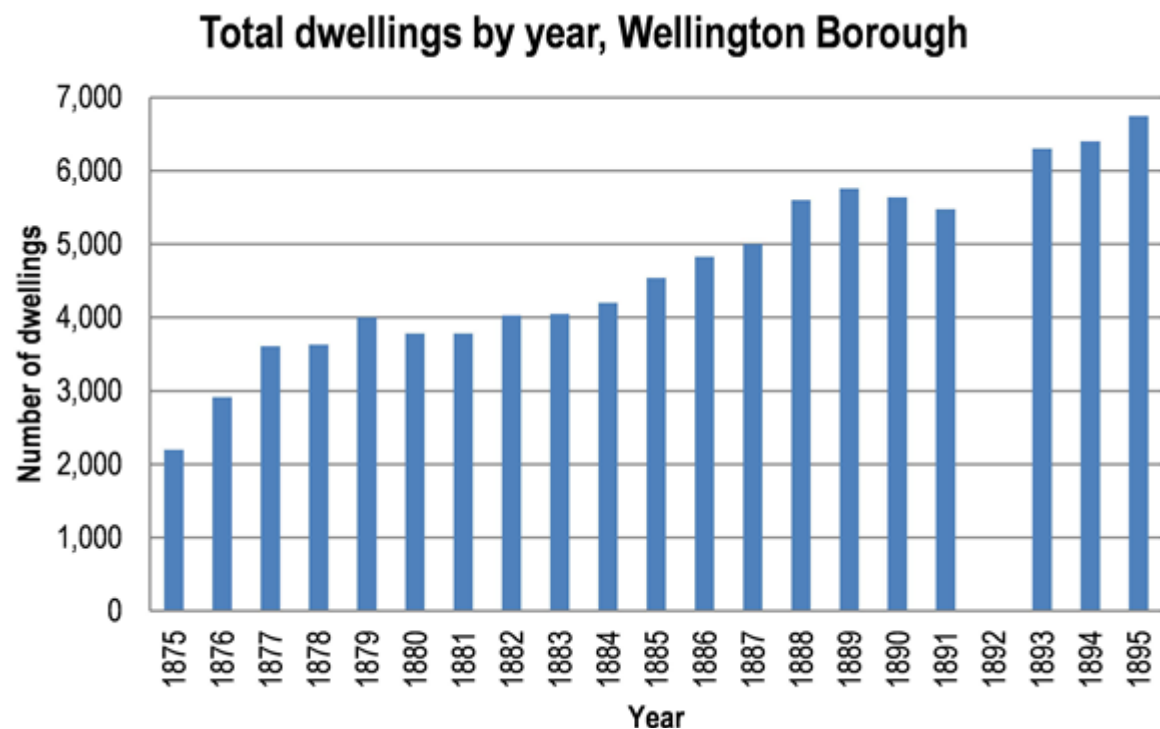


Figure 1: Total number of dwellings in Wellington Borough by year. Data provided was for the year ending 31 March, with the exception being when census data was used (1881, 1891). Source: Colonial Government, *Statistics of New Zealand*, volumes used for 1875-1895.

papers of the time, and was felt across the region. The *Wairarapa Daily Times* in July 1879 commented on carpenters and small contractors not being paid on completion of construction work, with some sustaining serious losses. By 1880 building activity was reportedly at a standstill.²

² "The Wairarapa Daily. Tuesday, July 29, 1879" p 2, "The

Despite this there was some optimism. Increases in timber being brought into Wellington by rail in April 1880 were reported as a sign of improvement in the building trade, "which for several months past has been in a very stagnant condition."³ In December

Wairarapa Daily. Friday, January 30, 1880" p 2.

³ "The Tramways Case" p 2.

1881 a report on the sale of 30 residential lots comprising the Levy Estate on Mount Victoria noted the auction was:

the first large sale of building sections in the city since the depression set in 3 years since, and it is hoped from the increased activity now displayed in all commercial matters, the result will prove an index that the people of Wellington have faith in the future of our city.⁴

There was no quick recovery however, and the depressed times continued.

The City Council was also seen as not helping the situation. "Progress" complained in the *Evening Post* in March 1880 that the Corporation was "the sole cause of the stagnation in the building trade ... [the Councillors] have imposed upon us a building regulation, which has stopped the building trade altogether."⁵ Building regulations had been altered to control building materials used across the city, in response to concerns around the risk of fire from a large, densely packed wooden city. In particular a large fire in Manners Street in 1879 destroyed 30 buildings.⁶ The building regulations were further modified in November 1881, and

⁴ "The Sale of the Levy Estate" p 3.

⁵ "The Building Regulations" p 2.

⁶ Arnold *New Zealand's Burning* p 192.

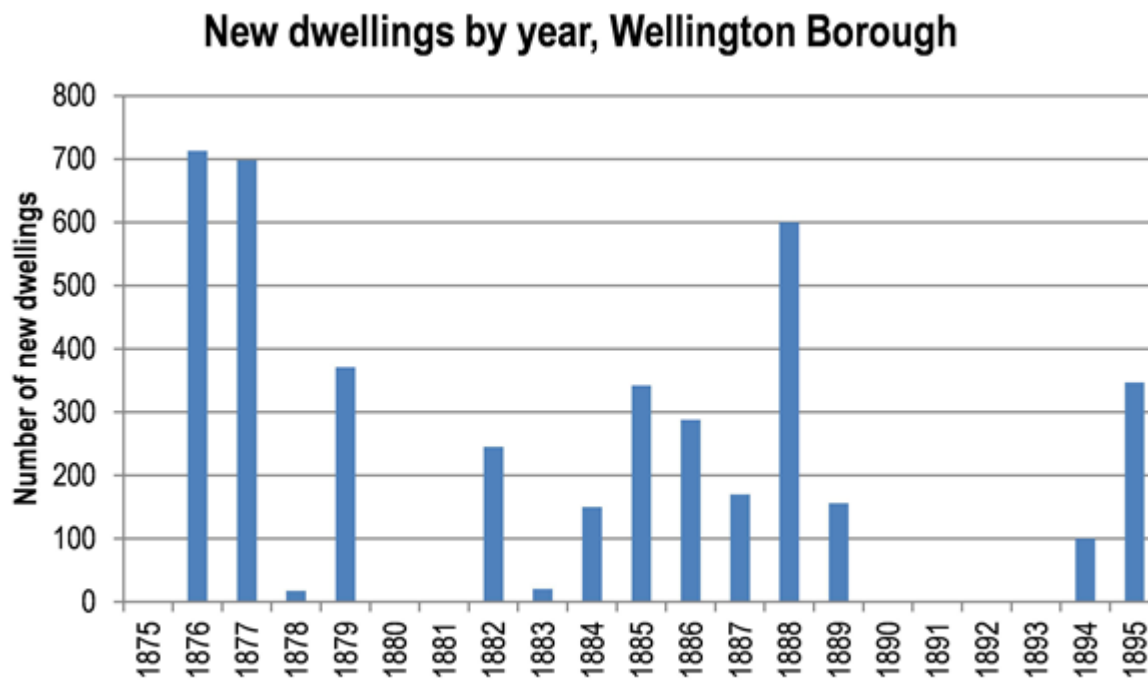


Figure 2: New dwellings in Wellington Borough by year. Data provided was for the year ending 31 March, with the exception being when census data was used (1881, 1891). Source: Colonial Government, *Statistics of New Zealand*, volumes used for 1875-1895.

appear to have been weakened, possibly in an attempt to keep building going in the ensuing depression. Many architects and others subsequently publicly notified the council through advertisements in the newspapers (particularly in 1883) that they were applying for relaxations in the building regulations before commencing new work, or even in some instances placing tenders to commence

the new work at the same time.

As late as October 1884 it was reported that the building trade was still "far from brisk."⁷ The regular comments on Wellington's new architectural achievements that were prominent through the 1870s were conspicuous by their absence into the 1880s.

⁷ "Fires in Invercargill" p 2.

The completion of Dr Buller's new house on The Terrace got a mention in March 1883 due partly to its £3,000 build cost, and partly its complex Victorian Italianate style.⁸ 1885 saw only two reports of new buildings; shops and dwellings in Willis Street for Jacob Joseph, and a "Scotch Pie Shop" in Manners Street designed by Charles Tringham.⁹

Conditions began to improve from 1885 and the following years saw an upswing in activity. That year the Wellington & Manawatu Railway Company's line had reached Paremata and its trains provided a means for potential commuters to travel from Johnsonville, Khandallah and Ngaio into the central city and back. House construction began in these areas, starting the gradual suburbanisation of what had until then been largely rural areas. Other peripheral minor settlements near Wellington, such as Karori, Island Bay and Kilbirnie, were showing signs of slow growth and attracting some land speculators. The monthly *Wellington Landed Property Guides* prepared by T. Kennedy Macdonald & Company in mid-1885 reported healthy activity in the building trade, in

⁸ "City Improvements" p 3.

⁹ "Untitled" *Evening Post* (2 May 1885) 2; "The Original Colonial Scotch Pie Schop [Advertisement]" p 4.

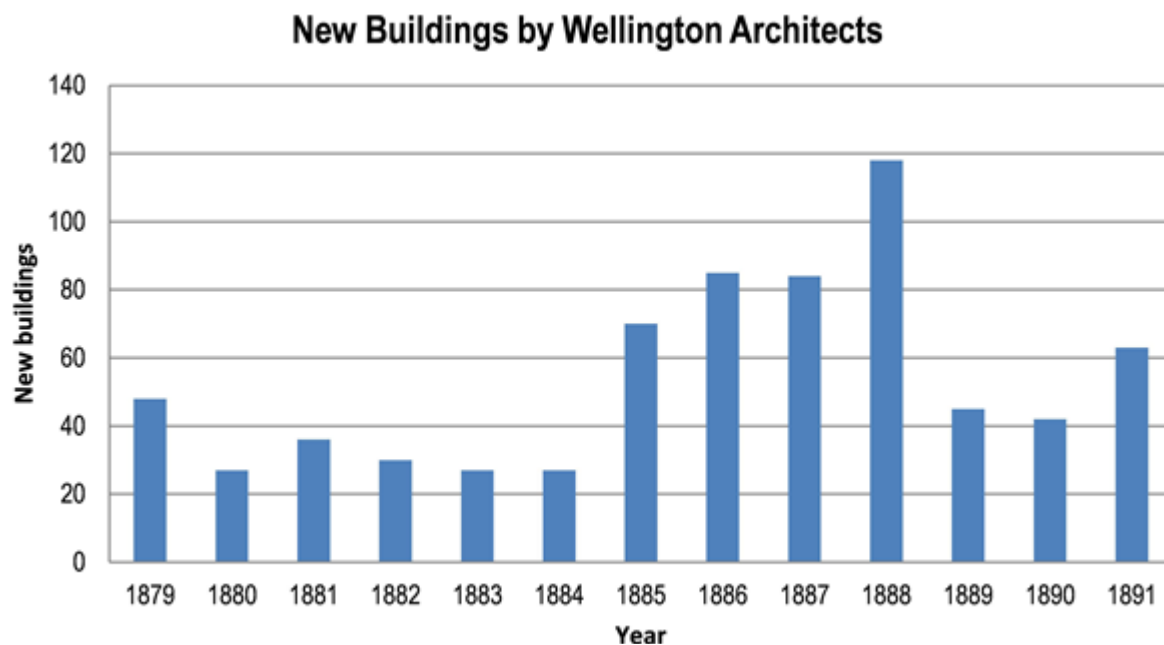


Figure 3: New buildings designed by architects practising in Wellington, 1879-1891. Source: *Papers Past*.

particular commenting on the number of houses being built in new suburbs, and especially in Petone.¹⁰

Wellington City Council and the Harbour Board commenced work on the Te Aro Reclamation in 1885. This was a significant infrastructure project which added to the feeling that prosperity was returning and work was increasing; all the indications were of great activity in the building trade in the

¹⁰ "Proposed Reconstruction of the Harbour Board" p 2.

coming year.¹¹ 1888 appears to have been a significant year for construction, significantly up on the past few years. In January 1889 Councillor Williams praised the increasing property value in Wellington, and referred to the fact that 431 new buildings were put up in the city in the past year. He also commented on how Wellington was more insulated from hard times compared to other parts of the country.¹²

¹¹ "Evening Post. Thursday, December 31, 1885" p 2.

¹² "Vital Statistics" p 2.

That Wellington had felt less impact from the depressed times of the 1880s was reiterated in a subsequent article discussing the lack of unemployment relief work, or worker agitation, the city had seen compared to other large centres in New Zealand. "If there has been hardship arising from inability to find work, it has been rather in semi-genteel occupations than amongst the horny-handed sons of toil."¹³ The article also noted Wellington had not had as deep a depression in the building industry as other centres, where there had been

an almost total cessation of building operations, a fact which has of course affected the artisan population and caused a considerable exodus. In Wellington, however, building necessitated by legitimate demand has been brisk.¹⁴

It appears this optimism was short lived however, as the following year, once again, building activity slumped. Even the 238-lot subdivision of the Wellesley Block in Newtown could do nothing to stimulate on-going growth.¹⁵ It seems as though the rate of building increased more rapidly than population growth, leading to supply

¹³ "Progress and Prosperity" p 2.

¹⁴ "Progress and Prosperity" p 2.

¹⁵ *Plan of Subdivision of Wellesley Block* [unnumbered]

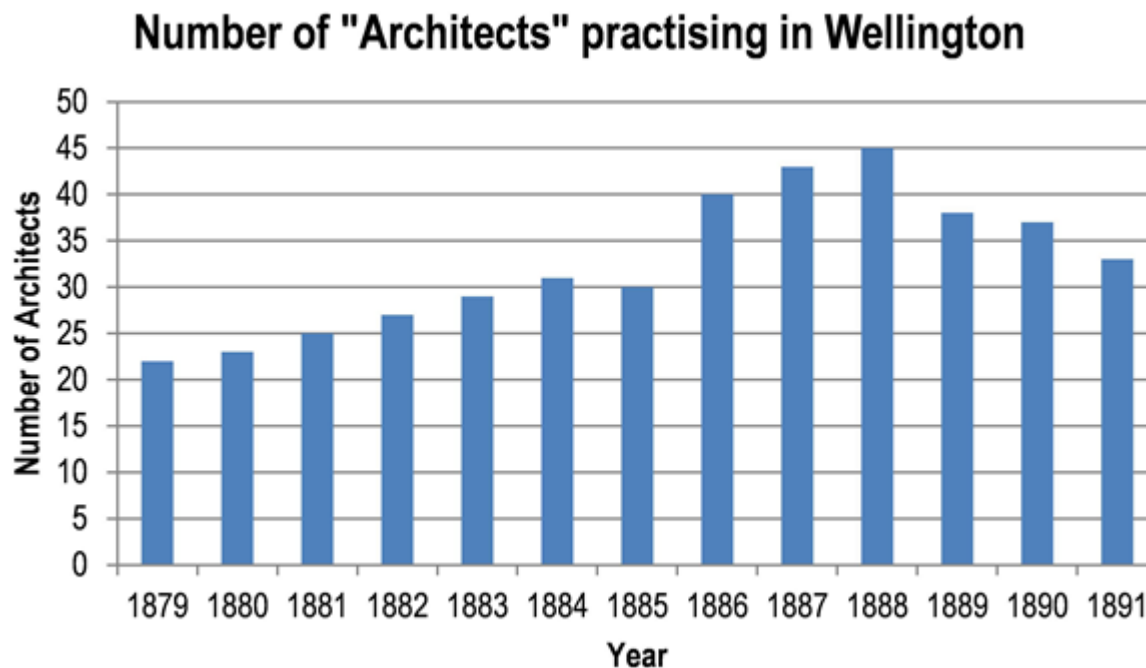


Figure 4: Number of individuals found practising as or referring to themselves as architects by year. Source: *Papers Past*.

outstripping demand. This contrasts with the previous bust in the 1880s, caused by a general faltering in the overall economy.

Statistical Basis and the business of Architects

So how were these trends reflected in numbers of architects and the status of the profession in Wellington? The following section looks at both output of design work by them through the 1880s, their varying

numbers, and how they managed the changing demand for work.

Results from searching newspaper tender notices and other records documenting buildings designed by architects practising in Wellington during the 1880s show a similar trend to that of the building industry as a whole. They experienced the same slump in work during the early 1880s followed by the same upswing, then fall in activity during the

late 1880s. However, it is noteworthy that neither boom or bust were quite as severe. Several factors could explain this. Firstly, we are dealing with a relatively small sample; even in our peak year of 1888 we have only found 118 architect-designed dwellings; statistics for that year suggest some 600 new dwellings being constructed (or at least the 431 buildings noted by Councillor Williams). Secondly, the range of clients who could have afforded to use architects could well have been more insulated against the depression than other people; despite the downturn, the numbers of people who could afford or choose to commission architectural designs may have remained more stable, or not decreased as sharply as the numbers of speculative developers, builders or people getting the work done by builders alone. Another aspect relevant to these figures is the number of people practising or claiming to practice as architects over this period. The following trends are picked up by our data:

- (a) Over the early 1880s, despite decreases in building work due to the depression, the number of people claiming to practice as architects actually increases.
- (b) The mid- to late-1880s boom sees a corresponding increase in the number of

architects.

- (c) After this period, despite a slight decrease, the number of architects remains relatively high, definitely much higher than the early 1880s.

On face value the figures suggest an influx of architects into Wellington, peaking in the late 1880s as the work available increased. While the number of architects practising declined after 1889, numbers still remained higher than the years before the boom. To better understand the nature of "architects" in Wellington through the 1880s they can be split into two distinct groups.

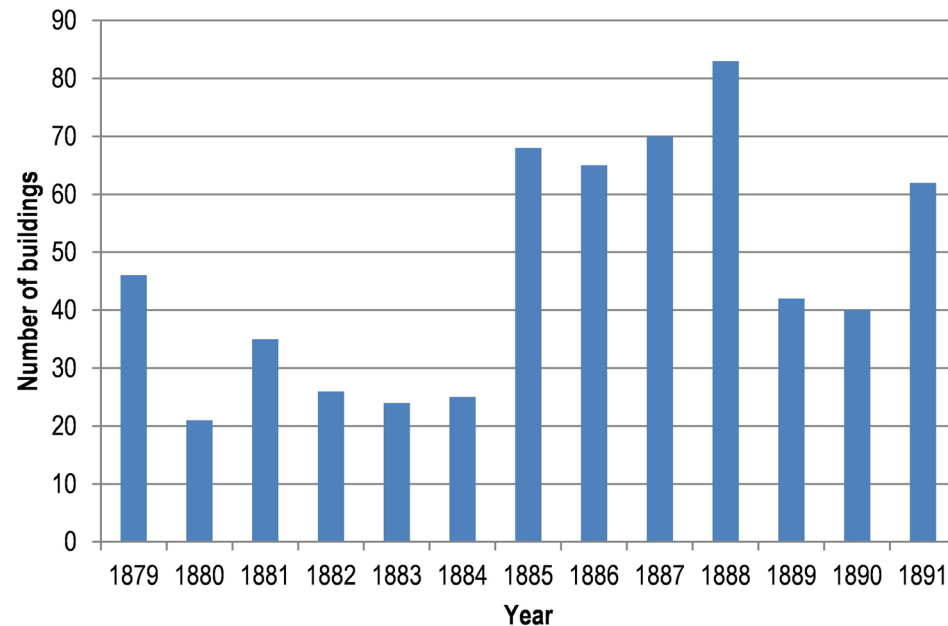
- (a) The "career architects," who set up practice and proceeded (or at least intended to proceed) to build up a reputation and career focusing on architecture, and
- (b) The "drifters," who may have dabbled in architecture, or for a short period thought of building a practice, but who came from different backgrounds and pursued a broad range of careers or vocations.

Splitting our architects into these groups gives us two dozen individuals in our "career" group, and just over 40 individuals who

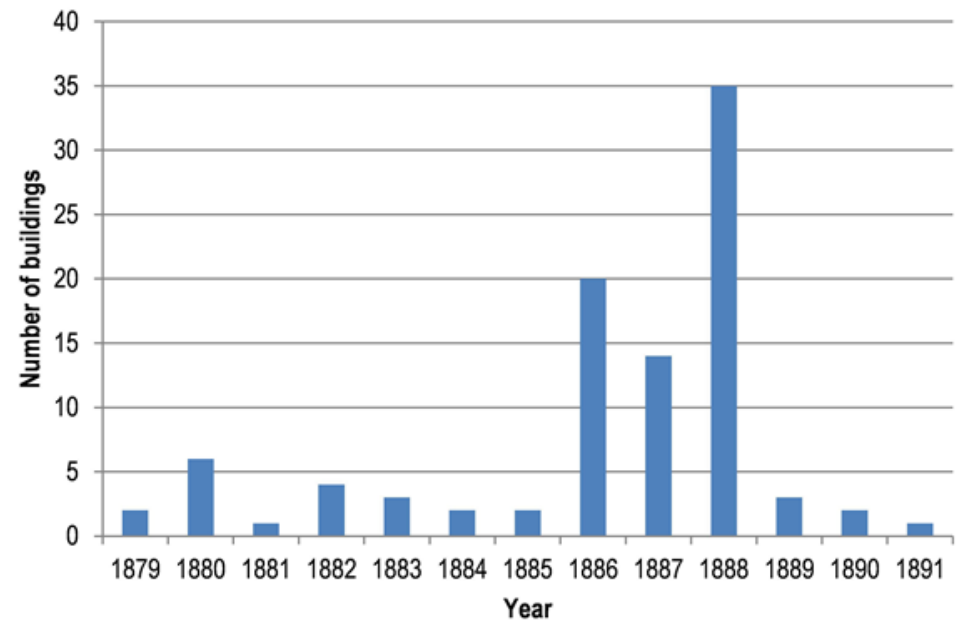
dabbled in or "drifted" into architecture during the 1880s. It is clear that the career architects accounted for the majority of building designs, particularly through the first half of the 1880s. Despite a large number of "architects" advertising or listing themselves in the profession, very few designs actually seem to have been forthcoming from our second group. This is further reinforced when we look at the broad range of descriptions used or given by these architects over time; permutations and combinations of "Carpenter, Builder & Contractor, Building Supervisor, Undertaker, Clerk of Works, Surveyor, [Civil] Engineer, Building Surveyor, Land Agent, Painter, and Brick-Maker" all appear regularly alongside "Architect," with one individual more helpfully being a "practical architect." Architecture appears to have very much been an addition to a broader repertoire of skills. JW Bragg, Photographer & Illustrator, for example, also added Carpenter, Surveyor, Civil Engineer and Architect to his advertising; diversifying in tough times to get work.

The notable exception to this trend is in the years 1886-88, where building work peaked. With increased work, everyone would have done well, and further hopefuls would have

**Buildings designed by 'career' Architects,
Wellington**



**Buildings designed by 'drifter' Architects,
Wellington**



Figures 5a & 5b: Graphs comparing numbers of buildings designed by "career" architects and "drifter" architects in Wellington, 1879-1891. See text for definition of these two groups.

been attracted to the profession. The figures however are slightly misleading; of the 58 dwellings designed by our "drifters" in 1887-88 15 (or 25%) came from the hands of two so-called "architects":

- (a) 7 dwellings in Thorndon designed by William Henry Herd
- (b) 8 dwellings on Taranaki Street designed

by Frederick James Pinny

Take these away and the remaining 43 buildings reflect the output of around 30 individuals. Both Herd and Pinny, despite the number of designs found by them, appear to have been involved in speculative building developments. Herd was probably really a builder, who later turned to farming; all the

tenders where he advertises as "architect" were in Newtown over 1887-88, and possibly for the same subdivision. Pinny was a builder who later moved successfully into selling musical instruments; again his entire output was produced in 1887 and 1888 with eight dwellings in Taranaki Street, a further eight in Mt Victoria, and a church in Newtown.

A number of other trends can be seen emerging over this period. With an increase in architects also came an increase in government jobs, meaning more structured work was available. Work for the City Council, Harbour Board and central Government meant stability for architects; a number of architects identified over this period were in such jobs.

We have discussed how individuals diversified the range of skills they offered to increase commissions and assure revenue, but there was another source of potential income that we have not been able to quantify - the additions and alterations to buildings. While the number of new building commissions declined and advertising by architects increased, work on additions and alterations may have provided the basic income needed to sustain architects during the harder times.

To seek work in the harsher times, local architects also expanded into the wider Wellington region, or sought commissions across the country. Many architects were still transitory and did not spend all their careers in one centre. We have recorded a number of architects migrating to Wellington during the late 1880s mini-boom including the Jacobsen

Brothers, F de J Clere, James O'Dea and Francis Penty.

This leaves us with our "drifters," men who dabbled or tried their hands at architecture, struggled to make ends meet, showed signs of extreme stress, or occasionally resorted to sharp practice. We finish by documenting a select few of the less salubrious men who turned their hands to architecture, and will be remembered in the footnotes of history not by the quality of their architecture but by the trouble that went with them.

1880s Architects, Mills & Boon style

Our first candidate is Ernest Wagner, described by the papers as a "handsome German architect [who was] doing a fair business, but lived fast."¹⁶ He had first advertised as a civil engineer, architect, surveyor and land agent in Wellington in 1878, and tenders suggest a moderate amount of architectural work followed. In 1879 however, he was caught passing falsified cheques, and imprisoned for a year's hard labour.¹⁷ His fame revolved more around the romantic story in connection with his trial. He

¹⁶ "A Wellington Romance" p 2.

¹⁷ "Wellington News, Wellington April 8" p 2.

was engaged to a young woman who arrived on the same ship from England.¹⁸ Despite his shady character, "[w]ith the usual blindness of a woman in love, she could not see his faults" the papers reported, asserting he was not clear on "the subject of English banking transactions."¹⁹ The young couple was even planning to wed; unfortunately, Wagner's arrest came the day before their wedding.²⁰

His bride-to-be stood by him however, bringing him delicacies while in jail and staying at the court throughout the trial, promising to work hard while he was inside so once released they could move to another country where they were unknown.²¹ Whatever became of Wagner's mysterious fiancé is a mystery, as she vanishes without trace when he was convicted. Following his release in 1880 Wagner never practiced as an architect again, preferring to live as a farmer in the country south of Auckland.²²

James Henry Schwabe was a somewhat more

¹⁸"A Wellington Romance" p 2.

¹⁹"A Wellington Romance" p 2.

²⁰"A Wellington Romance" p 2.

²¹"A Wellington Romance" p 2.

²² Research from Auckland Electoral Rolls, 1881 and 1887.

enigmatic character who came to Wellington from Dunedin under a cloud for having attempted to horsewhip a newspaper editor for defaming his character in the late 1870s.²³ He appeared to make a good start as an architect in the capital, but things rapidly began to go wrong. In February 1879 James was involved in a road accident when crossing the Rimutaka hill in a dogcart with a Major Edwards.²⁴ In March the same year he was apparently selling his furnishings by auction because he was said to be departing for England.²⁵ Whether he went or not is uncertain, but he was certainly in Wellington later in the year. Finally, towards the end of 1879, along with a Mr Benson, he established a Dunedin company said to be of "Architects, Insurance Brokers, Financial and General Commission Agents."²⁶ He appears to have remained in Wellington a while however, as his address, according to an advertisement, was care of the Star Hotel. The sole achievement by this partnership that we have found was in connection with the invention of a match holder that would only dispense one

²³ "Passing Notes" p 13.

²⁴ "Evening Post. Friday, February 7, 1879" p 2.

²⁵ "Thursday, 13th March, At 2 o'clock [Advertisements]" p 3.

²⁶ "Parents and Teachers" p 2.

or two matches at a time, thus preventing bar patrons from going home with a box full!²⁷ The company was short lived, and by September 1881 Schwabe had given up and joined the Armed Constabulary in Taranaki.²⁸

Another Dunedin architect looking to escape his past was Joseph Wilson Robinson. He was alleged to have forced his attentions on a well-to-do young woman on a Dunedin street; her brother had later struck him on the back and hands with a cane, leading to a charge of assault. The brother was let off with a nominal fine, but the newspaper reporting of the case made Robinson very unpopular in Dunedin. Robinson attempted to sue the proprietor of the *Evening Star* for libel (as a result of the anxiety caused, "his health was undermined, he was confined to bed and unable to attend to his duties for 21 months") but was unsuccessful.²⁹ Arriving in Wellington in 1886, his practice lasted until 1892, but had a relatively low output of buildings, probably because he seemed to be almost continually involved in litigation. His main opponent was the builder JA Hougue, with claims and

²⁷ "To Hotel-Keepers and Others [Advertisement]" p 4.

²⁸ Armed Constabulary Description Book. Archives New Zealand. Wellington. Micro 6429.

²⁹ "A Libel Case" p 2.

counter-claims involving alleged poor workmanship, withholding of progress payments, and non-adherence to specifications. In some instances, there were also public brawls between them. Clearly, Robinson was mentally unstable. In October he presented a rambling complaint to the House of Representatives in terms of his alleged grievances, and in December 1892 was committed to the Asylum, being certified insane.³⁰

Our final character is Charles - or Carl - Zahl, who came to Wellington from Sydney in January 1887 posing as a well-off architect who intended investing in the city.³¹ He purchased land by deferred payments in Horner Street, Newtown, where he commissioned the building of 11 brick houses using different tradesman on a labour-only basis.³² Later he employed Atkins & Clere to design a terrace of two-storeyed semi-detached houses on his behalf.³³ The bubble burst on the 11th of April 1887 when the

³⁰ "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" p 2.

³¹ "A Clever Bolt" p 2.

³² "Tenders wanted for Brickwork and Carpenter work [Advertisement]" p 3.

³³ "To Builders. Tenders are invited" [Advertisement]" p 3.

Evening Post reported that Charles had found an excuse to leave a creditors' meeting the previous Saturday - and had rapidly boarded the SS Kaikoura which immediately sailed for Rio de Janeiro and England. A large number of creditors, mainly unpaid tradesmen, were owed a total of £770.15.6.³⁴ Atkins and Clere were included, being owed £20, presumably for their plans. Nothing more was heard of Mr Zahl, if that was indeed his name.

³⁴ "A Clever Bolt, Wellington Tradesmen Victimised" p 2.

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