

"distinctly in a nineteenth-century style" Samuel Hurst Seager's Christchurch Municipal Offices

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ABSTRACT: In 1887 Samuel Hurst Seager described his recently completed Christchurch Municipal Buildings, as being "distinctly in a nineteenth century style." The building was the result of an architectural competition and was the architect's first commission following his return to New Zealand after a period of study in Britain. From a twenty first-century perspective we recognise the Municipal Buildings as a precocious New Zealand example of the Queen Anne style that had come into vogue in Britain in the 1870s. Seager, however, clearly aimed to present his building not as belonging to a particular style from the past but as a representative design of the age in which it was built. Where we see an eclectic amalgam of sources drawn from British and European architecture from the late seventeenth-century onwards, Seager saw a synthesis of motifs that produced a picturesque effect appropriate to the building's site. For Seager, it seems, eclecticism was indeed the style of the nineteenth century. Drawing on contemporary sources, including the architect's description of the building that accompanied his competition entry, this paper examines Seager's design in the context of late nineteenth-century discussions of architectural style but also within the specific context of Seager's personal search for a resolution of the nineteenth-century "dilemma of style."

For nineteenth-century architects the question, "in what style shall we build?" was one of the inescapable problems of the age. As George Gilbert Scott observed, "the peculiar characteristic of the present day, compared with all former periods is this – that we are acquainted with the history of art."¹ Unlike their eighteenth-century predecessors, who were largely content to work within the pre-ordained discipline of the classical style, architects of the Victorian age had at their disposal an almost limitless range of stylistic options that extended beyond the canonical western styles of classical and Gothic to exotic styles ranging from the Arabic to the Indian and Chinese. This diverse range of styles could be employed to express social status, denominational difference, national identity,



Figure 1: Samuel Hurst Seager, Christchurch Municipal Building, South elevation (*The Builder* (3 March 1888): 159).

¹ Scott *Secular and Domestic Architecture* p 263.

as with the Gothic in Northern Europe and Colonial New Zealand, or to represent specific building types associated with the modern age.

The ingenuity required to adapt Gothic or Classical forms to the new requirements of public buildings, such as railway stations or museums, forced architects to think about these styles in new and creative ways. Both Pugin and Gilbert Scott celebrated the flexibility of the Gothic style and championed its capacity to meet the needs of the modern age. Gothic, argued Scott could be "developed" as "free, comprehensive and practical; ready to adapt itself to every change in the habits of society, to embrace every material or system of construction, and to adopt implicitly and naturally, and with hearty goodwill, every invention or improvement, whether artistic, constructional, or directed to the increase of comfort and convenience."² Scott's great triumph of developed Gothic was the Midland Grand Hotel that provided the frontispiece to St Pancras Station, a many-spired, turreted and gabled pile that boldly incorporated iron in its

² Scott *Secular and Domestic Architecture* p vi. See also Bergdoll *European Architecture* pp 196-203.

construction and embraced every modern convenience. Implicit in the concept of "development" was the idea of eclecticism.

Twenty years before the first travellers occupied Scott's magnificent hotel, another passionate Gothic Revivalist, Alexander James Beresford Beresford Hope, had articulated the concept of "progressive eclecticism" in a series of books and articles. For Beresford Hope progressive eclecticism would occur within a firmly Gothic framework since Gothic architecture was both Christian and English.

In the style of the future ... very much will be borrowed from Gothic ... [But] it will incorporate the beauties and conveniences of all other styles ... it will be as massive as Egyptian ... as light as Saracenic ... and ... proportioned like a Grecian temple.³

By 1865 Beresford Hope, as President of the RIBA, occupied one of the most prestigious positions in British architecture and eclecticism had become a defining characteristic of Victorian architecture. As an architecture of synthesis, eclecticism reflected the volatile character of the age. Writing in the *Quarterly Review* in 1862 Beresford Hope described a world of artistic turbulence and

³ Beresford Hope quoted, Crook "Progressive Eclecticism" p 57.

change.

Art is in a transitional state; the minds of men are in a transitional state ... Empires are crashing, new worlds are forming ... And in the midst of all this real zeal and turmoil, there is the grand figure of Christian, progressive, European, and especially English art, rising higher and higher from the dark and surging waters of the ocean.⁴

In spite of Beresford Hope's confidence, the universal, progressive Gothic architecture he envisaged never emerged as the dominant Victorian style and by the 1870s it was being supplanted by a different kind of eclectic architecture, the Queen Anne, in which the freedom of planning, that had been an essential part of the Gothic Revival, was welded to a vocabulary of forms drawn from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In a survey of British architecture published to mark 50 years of Queen Victoria's reign in 1887, the architect, Basil Champneys, identified a new synthesis of Gothic and Renaissance forms as one of the most progressive directions in British architecture.

[I]t is the Renaissance which, in very various forms, is now engrafting itself on the revived Gothic. We saw

⁴ Beresford Hope quoted, Crook "Progressive Eclecticism" p 59.

how the thin end of the wedge was introduced, how an element of later English Renaissance was combined with mediaeval construction. Since then the history of our domestic Art is to be found in a constantly increasing proportion of the Renaissance element in the amalgamation. It was not long before a more classical feeling was manifest in the picturesque forms which Mr. Shaw had derived from old English Gothic. Soon, too, a study of the domestic architecture of the Low Countries and of Germany led to the introduction of fantastically shaped gables and quaint brick ornament. As a typical instance of this influence we give Mr. Shaw's Alliance Offices, Pall Mall, perhaps the best as well as one of the most conspicuous examples of "free classic."⁵

Shaw's design, and others like it, suggested to Champneys that "a new form seems to be growing up which may be the germ of an original and harmonious style in the future."⁶

It is against this background of British architectural thought that Samuel Hurst Seager's description of his Christchurch Municipal Building as being "distinctly in a nineteenth-century style" needs to be considered.⁷ Seager's description of his own building is contemporaneous with Champneys' article on the architecture of

Queen Victoria's reign and he had only recently returned from a period of study in London during which time Shaw's Alliance Assurance Office, St James' (1881-83) was completed. It is tempting to see in Seager's description his belief that the Municipal Offices also exhibited the beginnings of Champneys' "original and harmonious style in the future."⁸

In order to understand how Seager came to this conclusion it is necessary to briefly look at his early career and the experiences leading up to the completion of what was his first, and probably still his best-known, building. Seager was born in London in 1856 and emigrated to New Zealand with his parents in 1870. His father was a master builder and he became one of Christchurch's leading contractors. Following his father's death in 1874 the young Samuel Hurst Seager continued to manage the firm until 1879, by which time it had completed construction of the first block of permanent buildings for Canterbury College. The experience of working with the architect, Benjamin Mountfort and overseeing the construction of

one of the city's most important Gothic Revival structures must have had a major influence in determining a change of career path. From 1879 to 1882 he worked as a draftsman for AW Simpson and then for Mountfort, while also attending courses at Canterbury College. From 1882 to 1883 he studied architecture in London, at University College, the South Kensington School of Art, the Architectural Association and the Royal Academy. Seager proved to be an exceptional student and from 1883 to 1884 he was invited to lecture at the South Kensington School of Art. He also became an Associate of the RIBA in 1884. During May and June of that year he travelled through Belgium and probably further afield. During these travels he made sketches of buildings that caught his interest, as well as studies of subjects from urban life. His focus in these sketches is on just the sorts of buildings that had influenced the recent work of architects like Norman Shaw and Sir Ernest George in London, including Shaw's Alliance Assurance Building that had been completed the year before.⁹

⁵ Champneys "The Architecture of Queen Victoria's Reign" p 209.

⁶ Champneys "The Architecture of Queen Victoria's Reign" p 209.

⁷ "Opening: Municipal Buildings" p 6.

⁸ Champneys "The Architecture of Queen Victoria's Reign" p 209.

⁹ For a concise survey of Seager's career see Lochhead, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* pp 463-464. See also Lochhead "The Architectural Art of Samuel Hurst Seager," and Lochhead "An Architectural Tour" pp 3-11.

By the time he returned to Christchurch in 1885 he had not only extended his architectural training at some of the leading schools in the English-speaking world, but had also broadened and deepened his knowledge of both historical and contemporary architecture. The Christchurch City Council's decision to hold a competition to obtain a design for new Municipal Offices came at just the right moment for the ambitious and talented young architect to make his mark. Seager was just 29 years old but he had already gained experience as a building contractor, he had worked in the office of New Zealand's leading Gothic Revival architect, from whom he would have received a thorough grounding in Puginian principles, and he had spent two years in the capital of the Empire during a period of fertile architectural creativity. If colonial Christchurch seemed rather dull in comparison with Imperial London, he was ready to initiate change.

The circumstances behind the construction of the Municipal Building can be briefly told. In 1879 the Christchurch City Council decided to build a Town Hall and Municipal Chambers in Market (now Victoria) Square. A competition was held and JC Maddison's

Italianate design was pronounced the winner. However the estimated cost exceeded the budget of £20,000 by £10,000 and the proposal was abandoned.¹⁰ By 1885 the unsatisfactory state of the council's premises, the former Land Office on the corner of Oxford Terrace and Worcester Street, had become unsupportable and on 16 November it was decided to seek designs for municipal offices costing no more than £5,000.¹¹ A competition was advertised on the following day with entries to be submitted by 30 November.¹² On 7 December, at a special meeting of council, the design submitted under the motto "Design with beauty, build with truth" was announced as the winner, the architect being revealed as Samuel Hurst Seager.¹³ The selection committee's decision was unanimous but it was clear that cost was also a determining factor. Almost immediately Seager's plans drew criticism on the grounds that it did not occupy the whole site as stipulated in the completion brief but also on account of the unexpected choice of brick as the principal material. "With regard to exterior architecture," wrote "Critic" in *The Press*:

¹⁰ Brittenden *A Dream Come True* p 18.

¹¹ "City Council" p 2.

¹² "To Architects: Municipal Offices" p 1.

¹³ "News of the Day" p 2.

I don't like it nor could I like anything in that style. It may be made to look very pretty by tile roofs and combinations of color [sic], but architecture in cities where coal is consumed should not be dependent upon colors [sic] for beauty.¹⁴

In a city where public buildings had, in recent years, been constructed in dark grey basalt, the bright orange of brick and terracotta must have come as a shock. But "Critic" was also disconcerted by the lack of regularity in the building, identifying the main staircase as symptomatic of this problem. This was:

only 4ft wide. It ends on a landing, from which you ascend a second flight 6ft wide, then along another landing to a door only 3ft wide. Nothing could possibly be worse conceived than this where all should be even, consistent and roomy. Such a staircase for a public building, and such an entrance to a public Council Chamber, is out of all character.¹⁵

Seager had already anticipated some of these criticisms in the letter he had submitted along with his competition entry.

I have chosen this style of architecture as being the only one which will harmonise fully with the fine trees with which it will be surrounded. Any Classic or even formal

¹⁴ Critic "Correspondence: The Accepted Design for the Council Chambers" p 3.

¹⁵ Critic "Correspondence: The Accepted Design for the Council Chambers" p 3.

Gothic would look very out of place as they would have to be of stone or at least have much stone in them which would form too striking a contrast with the green trees, and more over to produce a similar effect they would cost very much more money than the work I have designed.

This building looked at from all sides will have a very picturesque appearance with plenty of light and shade in the mass while the dressings— which it is intended to form of rich red terracotta and the ornamental bricks will give a variety in details which will repay close examination.

Seager summarised his aims under three headings:

- 1st The convenience of those who will have to use it;
- 2nd To produce a building which shall harmonise with the picturesque situation in which it is to be erected; &
- 3rd To reach these ends with the least possible expenditure consistent with thoroughly good, and substantial work.¹⁶

The issue of cost remained a point of contention and in January 1886 Frederick Strouts wrote to the council complaining that his entry has been disregarded in the

¹⁶ Samuel Hurst Seager to the Mayor and Councillors of the City of Christchurch, N.Z. Christchurch City Inward Letters, 1985. No 1230. The letter is reprinted in full in Wilson ""Design with Beauty"" pp 38-39.

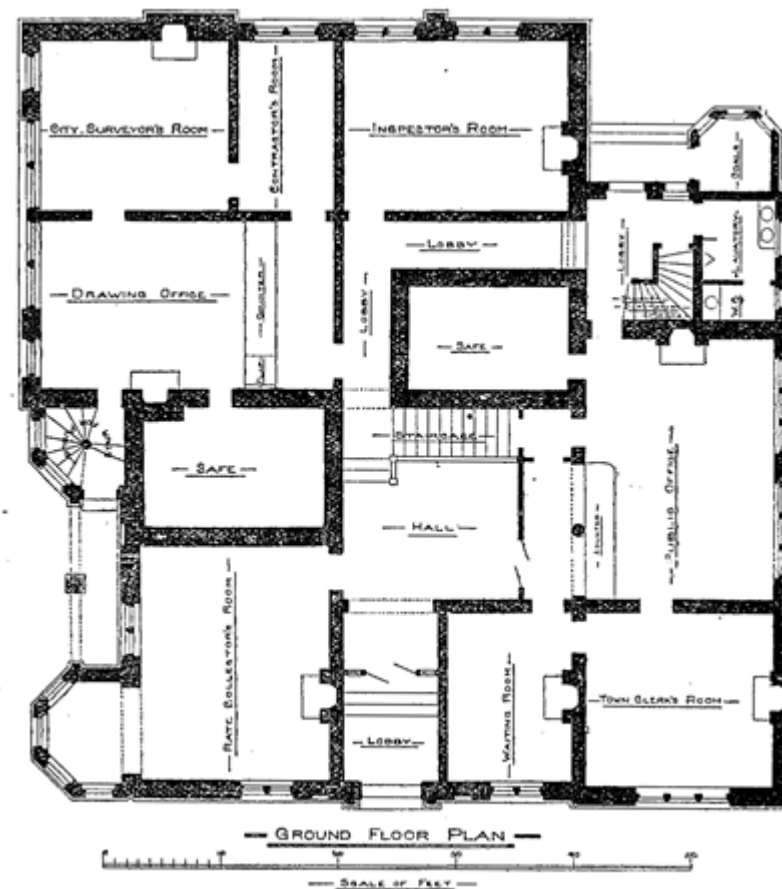


Figure 2: Samuel Hurst Seager, Christchurch Municipal Building, Ground Floor Plan. (*The Builder* (3 March 1888): 158).

assessment of the competition because of a belief that it would exceed the budget of £5000. Strouts argued that it was well known that his entry was the selection committee's preferred design and claimed that he had a tender indicating that it could be built within

the council's budget. The council remained unmoved and on 16 March 1886 the foundation stone of Seager's building was laid.¹⁷ From the date on which council decided to proceed with the new Municipal

¹⁷ "The New Municipal Offices" p 2.

Buildings on 16 November, to the day on which the foundation stone was laid, only five months had elapsed.

In spite of the criticism in the press and the attacks from fellow members of the profession Seager's design was greeted in some quarters in a more positive light. The *Lyttelton Times* reported that the design was:

[b]ased upon the French renaissance and sixteenth century work to be found in Holland and Belgium. This style, it may be remarked, is rapidly coming into favour in London and other English cities ... The appearance of the building is chaste, yet picturesque, and should harmonise well with its surroundings.

[Internal arrangements] have evidently been planned with considerable care, and seem well suited for the requirements of the work to be carried on within the building.¹⁸

In spite of these more positive comments further difficulties arose in August 1886 when Cr Andrews claimed, during a council meeting, that the structure was unsound and demanded an independent professional report on the design and construction of the building. Andrews' motion was passed and a Commission of Inquiry comprising the architects, Benjamin Mountfort and John

¹⁸ "Proposed Municipal Offices" p 5.

Whitelaw, and the engineer, Edward Dobson, was set up to look into the claims. They reported back to a special meeting of council on 6 September, their report effectively endorsing Seager's design and the work of the contractors. Some changes to the structural system of the main council chamber roof were suggested as a means of ensuring that there was no risk of the exterior walls spreading, but they also took the exceptional step of appending a letter addressed to Seager himself.

We wish ... to place on record our admiration of the very full, complete, and even profuse, drawings, details, and specification, prepared by you for the work; which furnish amply sufficient evidence (to those who have the knowledge of such matters) of your artistic knowledge and abilities, as also of your indefatigable care and industry.¹⁹

Seager must have been gratified by this endorsement of his professional skills by leaders of the local building professions but Cr Andrews remained unrepentant, resolutely voting against acceptance of the commission's findings.

The building was completed without further

¹⁹ "City Council. Special Meeting: Report on the New Buildings" p 4.

incident and opened on 24 March 1887, construction having taken just one year.²⁰ The building marked a significant change in the character of Christchurch's public buildings with its sophisticated use of brick and terracotta decoration, relieved by details executed in Oamaru stone. The oriel window above the main entrance in Oxford Terrace is surmounted by a triangular pediment and there is a profusion of classical details throughout the building. There is also a hint of Aesthetic Movement sentiment in the use of terracotta panels of floral motifs, including sunflowers which embellish the chimneys. The cut and moulded bricks, along with the terracotta panels were produced by the Deans family's Glentunnel Brick, Tile, Terra-Cotta and Pottery Works and marked a significant advance in the quality and variety of local brick making. Seager had worked in close collaboration with the brickworks and provided designs for terracotta panels, which the company advertised in its catalogue.²¹ One feature of the building that received little contemporary comment was the inclusion on

²⁰ "Opening: Municipal Buildings" p 6.

²¹ Wilson ""Design with Beauty"" p 26. The catalogue was published as John Deans, et al., *Glentunnel Brick, Tile, Terra-Cotta and Pottery Works Catalogue*, Christchurch, [n.d.]. A copy is held by the Deans family.

the south elevation of terracotta statues of "Concord" and "Industry" by the English sculptor, George Frampton. Frampton was one of the leaders of the English "New Sculpture" movement who eventually became a member of the Royal Academy in 1902 and was knighted in 1908. Seager was perhaps reflecting on his own experience of the artistic attitudes of local politicians when he noted in 1900 that:

the terra cotta figures of Industry and Concord ... are excellent early works of Mr George Frampton, A.R.A., which, though some-what severely criticised by worthy councillors when placed in position ... can, now that their author has risen to so eminent a position, be seen to possess a considerable amount of beauty.²²

In the same article Seager compared RA Lawson's Dunedin Municipal Building with his own more modest design. These comments go to the heart of his architectural philosophy.

In status and position the Municipal Building at Dunedin has ... every advantage. It is built of white stone, and forms, in spite of the commonplace type of Renaissance which has been followed, a fairly imposing work.

In striking contrast to this stands the modest red-brick

²² Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 486.

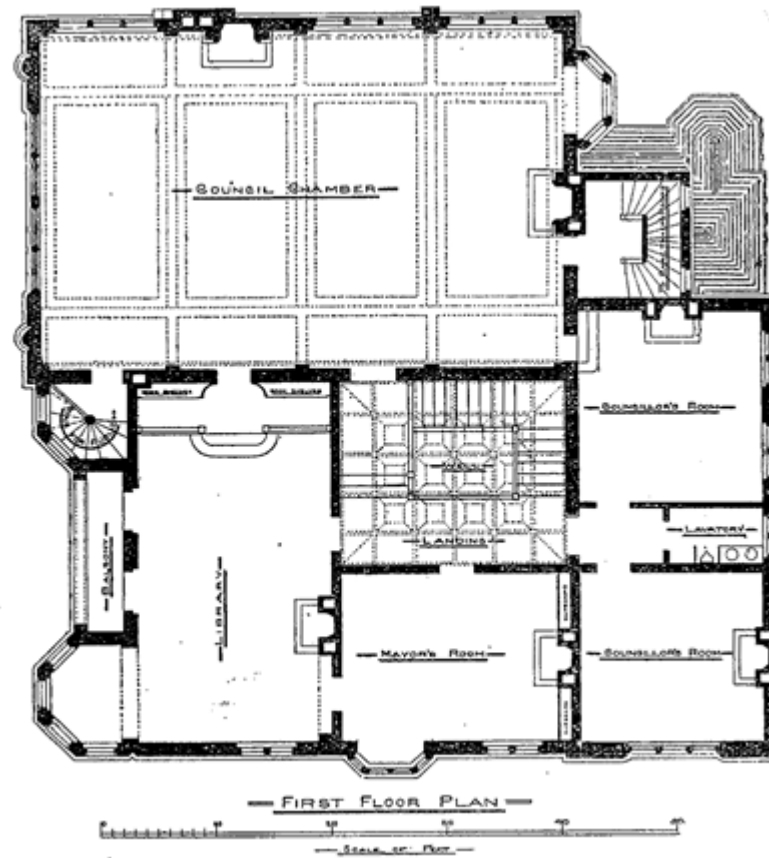


Figure 3: Samuel Hurst Seager, Christchurch Municipal Building, First Floor Plan (*The Builder* (3 March 1888): 158).

and red-tiled building of Christchurch. Here the actual needs of the council have been met in the most economical way, and the arrangement of essential parts depended upon for effect.²³

Implicit in Seager's comments is his belief that use should determine the form of a building

²³ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 486.

and that the style of the building should grow out of the requirements of the brief. This did not mean, however, that historical references should be abandoned. Rather, he believed that an architect whose mind was filled with the riches of the past could draw at will from earlier solutions to meet the needs of his own day. This was the essence of the doctrine of

progressive eclecticism. For Seager the style of the nineteenth century was, in reality, an outcome of the principles of design in which he believed. He made this clear in his well-known essay on New Zealand's architecture to 1900.

By judicious selection and careful adaptation there is scarcely a modern requirement which cannot be met by adaptation of ancient forms, and the delight we experience in the reproduction is in exact proportion to the wisdom of the choice and the scholarly rendering that the work displays. Herein lies the chief cause for regret, for in our colonial practice the majority of buildings show that the choice has not been wise, and far too often the rendering is anything but scholarly. Inappropriate selection is seen on all sides, leading to a system of exogenous building, which, growing from without, leaves the essential internal arrangements to be fitted in as they may – ambitious attempts to reproduce the architecture of the Old World resulting in shams and deceits, which place the works in which they are seen far outside the region of art.²⁴

At the basis of Seager's approach was the Puginian belief that the design of a building began with the plan and only after spatial requirements had been met could the elevations be generated that would reflect this internal logic. In spite of the commitment of Pugin, and his own mentor, Mountfort, to the

Gothic style, this was an approach to design that transcended a particular historical style. Although Stacpoole and Beaven suggest that Mountfort may have been disconcerted by Seager's design for the Municipal Buildings, he was, as we have seen, full of admiration for Seager's "artistic knowledge and abilities."²⁵ Far from being disconcerted by Seager's approach, Mountfort would have understood immediately that his former pupil was following the same principles that informed his own approach to design. A feature of the Municipal Building's river bank site is that all four elevations are visible and each is distinctly different from the others, a product of Seager's commitment, not just to picturesque effects, but, to allowing the internal arrangements of the building dictate its external appearance.

If Mountfort had not already come to the realisation that it was possible to follow Puginian principles without recourse to Gothic forms, the Municipal Buildings would have convinced him that this was the case and he demonstrated his recognition of this fact with his design for the Canterbury Society of

Arts Gallery in 1891. Located just two blocks north of the Municipal Buildings, the CSA Gallery was, perhaps, an even more telling response to the nineteenth-century problem of style than Seager's building. Here the architectural effects come solely from the rhythm and proportions of the blind bays of the exterior walls and from the colour and patterns of the brickwork. References to historical styles have been completely eliminated. In this regard the CSA Gallery is equally "in the style of the nineteenth century."

The architectural dialogue between these neighbouring buildings by the elderly Mountfort and the young Seager, initiated over 120 years ago, was brutally terminated in 2012 by the gratuitous destruction of the CSA building following the Christchurch earthquakes of 2011. Although badly damaged and extensively propped, the Municipal Buildings survive, to be restored and strengthened, we can only hope, by the successor of the council that commissioned it in 1885. Nevertheless, its future value has inevitably been lessened by the destruction of Mountfort's creative response.

²⁴ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" pp 481-482.

²⁵ Stacpoole & Beaven *New Zealand Art: Architecture 1820-1970* p 49.

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