

## "further proof of the robust nature of the local economy"\*: macroeconomics as architectural driver of Palmerston North's Civic Administration Building

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**ABSTRACT:** The Civic Administration Building in Palmerston North is often rated the ugliest building in the city. Dreamed of at the start of the 1970s, it was seen as eventually being the physical manifestation of Palmerston North's big city status (once Hamilton had been defeated). By the time it was completed at end of the decade it was a monument to austerity, having survived rampant inflation and central Government controls, and proudly declared as a "solid, practical unobtrusive building."\* This paper explores how the macroeconomic conditions of the 1970s shaped this transition from dream to practical necessity.

Palmerston North's Civic Administration Building appeared at the end of the 1970s. It began life as an idea at the start of the decade to celebrate the centenary of the city – a time full of promise for the future, including a vision of endless growth leading to Palmerston North's surpassing of Hamilton as New Zealand's sixth largest city. By the time it was constructed the social and political context had changed significantly – economic pressures weighed heavily across the country and inflation was the highest New Zealand had ever experienced.

This paper puts forward the economic and social drivers that created the Civic Administration Building as a piece of architecture. It largely ignores the architects, instead focusing on the macro-economic milieu of the 1970s and how this generated the architecture that still stands at the centre of

Palmerston North City. The writing here is done by the decade, not the architect.

You could say this makes it vernacular architecture – authorless and anonymous – as Bernard Rudofsky would have it.<sup>1</sup> You could say that this is a social and economic history of a building, rather than architectural history. However, to understand the architectural value of the Civic Administration Building you need to understand the economic and political context and how it altered original intent in terms of the client, architect and community. Arguably this has made the Civic Administration Building more valuable as a piece of architecture than if it had been built as originally intended. Without this context, most people who look at it today simply call it an "ugly building." By understanding its

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<sup>1</sup> Rudofsky *Architecture without Architects*.

\* "Civic Centre. City proud of huge concrete structure" p 15.

context, people might instead start calling it "ugly architecture."<sup>2</sup>

### Putting the City on the Map<sup>3</sup>

Capping off 100 pages of Palmerston North history was a one-page article titled "Metropolitan Status in 21st Century."<sup>4</sup> The article asks "By the year 2000 we might confidently expect a population of 100,000. What would Palmerston North look like in 2070 A.D. with a population of half a million?"<sup>5</sup> An advertisement back on page 17

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Jorge Otero-Pailos argues that we tend to assign the architecture of a building to the original architect, but when we look at a building over time we can see that architecture emerges at different moments. This can transform over time or emerge and stay constant. See Adjave et al. "On Architecture and Authorship" np.

<sup>3</sup> "Putting the City on the Map" p 3.

<sup>4</sup> "Metropolitan Status in 21st Century" p 98.

<sup>5</sup> "Metropolitan Status in 21st Century" p 98.

by Union Travel hazards a guess – a monorail sweeps out of the picture toward the viewer and the only buildings visible are ten to 12 storey Corbusian-like tower blocks. The optimism is matched in Palmerston North City Council's advertisement 60 pages later, noting that "With your help the second century will see rapid change and aggressive progress."<sup>6</sup>

This wave of optimism for the future washed over planning for the new Civic Administration Building. In 1969 the Town Planning Committee was already thinking big when it said the new building should be eight to ten storeys high "so that it would be the highest building in the Square. So that it would befit its role as the City's principal building."<sup>7</sup> They had been spurred on by the Reynolds Plan of May 1969 – a report providing proposals for the central area of Palmerston North from the Auckland firm of Kingston Reynolds Thom & Allardice. This report provided Council with the evidence it needed to be the driver behind economic development in Palmerston North. Revamping the town's central square required

<sup>6</sup> "Great cities can only be built by people" p 79.

<sup>7</sup> "Thoughts of the Town Planning Committee" p 1.

shifting vehicle access to the outside of the Square, with any risk of an activity vacuum developing being countered by cultural and civic buildings providing "centres of activity within the Square," enlivening the whole space.<sup>8</sup> The Reynolds Plan also more directly stated that "[t]his substantial part of the central City, publicly owned, makes it possible for Council to take the initiative in renewing the City and thereby encourage the redevelopment of adjoining areas."<sup>9</sup>

The decision to stage a centenary-year nationwide competition for the design of the Civic Administration Building spoke to the building's predetermined position as Palmerston North's centrepiece. The fact that it was the richest architectural competition held in New Zealand up until that time also spoke to how Palmerston North wanted to be seen – this was no regional backwater, but a metropolitan centre deserving quality architecture.<sup>10</sup> It was going to be bigger than

<sup>8</sup> Kingston Reynolds Thom & Allardice *Central Area Proposals* p 62.

<sup>9</sup> Kingston Reynolds Thom & Allardice *Central Area Proposals* p 13.

<sup>10</sup> The "Reynolds Plan" noted that in 1969 Palmerston North was New Zealand's eighth largest city, and since 1901 had exceeded the national growth rate in all but one period (Kingston Reynolds Thom & Allardice

Christchurch's 1966 competition which gained it one of New Zealand's neo-Brutalist masterpieces from local Christchurch firm Warren & Mahoney. The Palmerston North Council also sought the view of Wanganui City, who told them that the outstanding result in the delivery of their War Memorial Hall proved the worth of a competition.<sup>11</sup> The Town Clerk of the City of Hastings fed Palmerston North's confidence when he said "the magnitude of your City's project of \$1.75 million dollars would indicate that you could contemplate a wider competition than a purely local one."<sup>12</sup> In his foreword to the competition booklet, Mayor Desmond Black set out the Council's intention that the building should "be a focal point for the City and realising the architectural importance of this project it has been decided to invite registered architects to submit their proposals in open competition."<sup>13</sup>

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*Central Area Proposals* p 18). Extrapolation to see Palmerston North break into the top four or five cities was easy to do with this evidence.

<sup>11</sup> City Engineer, Wanganui City Council to City Engineer, City of Palmerston North (letter) "Design Contest."

<sup>12</sup> Town Clerk of City of Hastings to City Engineer, City of Palmerston North (letter) "Re. Design Contest."

<sup>13</sup> City of Palmerston North *Architectural Competition*.

One hundred and eleven architects or architectural firms uplifted the competition conditions, and 29 schemes were received by the December 4, 1970 close-off date.<sup>14</sup> The competition even went international – a scheme was received from IB Glover in Wisconsin in the United States of America, though this international flavour was a little diminished by Mr Glover's dad living in Palmerston North. The composition of the jury reinforced the national importance of the competition – alongside IB Reynolds and Mayor Black were the President of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, KD Marshall, and Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at Auckland University (the only architecture school in New Zealand at the time), Professor AA Wild. Announcement of the winners of the largest architectural competition to date was reserved for the New Zealand Institute of Architects' annual conference of 1971, which was held in Palmerston North. In amongst asparagus rolls and an evening hangi at a local farm, the status of the conference (and Palmerston North) was upheld by an overseas speaker – Professor of Architecture Ole Dybbroe from Denmark.

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<sup>14</sup> Reynolds to Town Clerk, Palmerston North City Corporation (letter) "Architectural Competition."

Centrality was reinforced by the public announcement of the competition winner, with the *Dominion* newspaper saying the design "will become the new "heart" of Palmerston North."<sup>15</sup> Opponents played with the notion of centrality as well – when foundations were begun Councillor Kelliher was reported as saying "Every thud is like a stake being driven into the heart of Palmerston North. It's bloody sacrilege."<sup>16</sup> The heart referred to was the Square, nearly five hectares of open space in the centre of the city, which at the time was divided into five distinct areas by busy traffic. The Square had been part of Palmerston North since its inception, developing an almost sacrosanct status to some portions of the population. The Reynolds Plan suggested extending any new administration building into the Square in order to achieve a sense of scale in the otherwise "[i]nappropriately large central spaces."<sup>17</sup> Rather than seeing such protrusion as a way to lessen the scale and help draw people into the public space, leader of the opposition Councillor Kelliher stated that "[t]he heritage of the people of Palmerston

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<sup>15</sup> "Father and son win competition" p 3.

<sup>16</sup> "Desecration of Square begins" p 1.

<sup>17</sup> Kingston Reynolds Thom & Allardice *Central Area Proposals* p 37.

North has been raped."<sup>18</sup>

Confidence and optimism found material expression when the foundations for the Civic Administration Building were started in 1974. It provided Mayor Elwood with bargaining leverage as he worked to bring other large developments to Palmerston North.<sup>19</sup> By 1976 there were four tower cranes working around the Square, "further proof of the robust nature of the local economy."<sup>20</sup> At the end of 1977 – still three years before the completion of the Civic Administration Building – the local press reported on how the shape and look of the city had changed so dramatically in the preceding decade. "Central to the whole movement is the city's own Civic Centre – the centre of much controversy and discussion from quarters right around the community."<sup>21</sup> It was almost as though a prophecy had been fulfilled, a physical manifestation of belief, that Palmerston North would finally have buildings higher than a single-storey in the centre of the city.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "People's heritage has been raped" p 1.

<sup>19</sup> Elwood, Pers. Comm.

<sup>20</sup> "Editorial" p 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Shape of City" p 1.

<sup>22</sup> Elwood, Pers. Comm. This was also symbolic of two other "threats" to a vital central city being seen off in

**Lurking behind most problems in 1970 was inflation.<sup>23</sup>**

Then the long drive down the hills, through Taihape and Mangaweka, Hunterville, Marton, Feilding then through Palmerston North. Here there was more evidence of the general decline of the country: a massive building project had been started on the disused railway land near the Square, and then abandoned in the financial crisis and slump of the 1970s. Grass, weeds and shrubs were sprouting amongst heaps of rusting girders and stained ferroconcrete skeletons. The same sort of thing could be seen in almost any town in New Zealand: an air of drabness and decline and reaction. They drove on, not talking much.<sup>24</sup>

Craig Harrison's novel *Broken October* was written in the mid 1970s, almost a decade into his time lecturing in the English Department at Massey University's Palmerston North campus. The novel's tones of civil unrest are a bleak extension of the economic difficulties New Zealand was going through at the time. The economy had begun to decline in the

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recent years – first a 1960's proposal for an Eastern Distributor that would have seen a raised motorway built less than two kilometres from the Square and would have bypassed the central business district, and a competing vision for the main retail area to be based around a street that came off the north-eastern end of the Square (Broadway Avenue).

<sup>23</sup> Bassett *The State in New Zealand 1840-1984* p 322.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison *Broken October* p 44.

1960s, and took further hits in the early 1970s with Britain's quick shift away from New Zealand exports and the first oil crisis. Debt, unemployment and inflation were all moving upwards. In 1972 political parties campaigned on schemes to drive growth, and in 1975 it was about big spend-ups. "The stark reality," politician and historian Michael Bassett writes, was that no-one "had any remedy for the economic setback which the Institute of Economic Research called "the deepest and most prolonged post-war recession amongst the industrial capitalist countries"."<sup>25</sup>

Into this swirling milieu the Civic Administration Building was born and built. In 1983 the *Evening Standard* reported that the final cost of the civic and convention centres was \$10.6 million (including architect's costs).<sup>26</sup> The Civic Administration Building itself claimed \$8.09 million of this, and nearly \$1 million was spent on equipment and furnishings. Four years earlier Mayor Elwood had avoided saying what the Civic Administration Building cost, instead proudly noting that its value now was \$11.2 million (and that the cost if started in 1979 would be

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<sup>25</sup> Bassett *The State in New Zealand* p 322.

<sup>26</sup> "The final cost..." p 16.

\$15.2 million – giving ratepayers \$4 million of value).<sup>27</sup> At the start of the decade the Civic Administration Building was priced at \$2.5 million, and by 1973 a \$4 million loan needed to be raised to cover construction costs.<sup>28</sup>

Following the announcement of the winning scheme in mid 1971, Mayor Black exhorted his colleagues to quickly approve a construction start since inflation was running at \$1,000 a day.<sup>29</sup> In reality (and hindsight) this was a low estimate, at \$1,000 a day a \$2.5 million building in 1970 would only cost you \$6.15 million by 1980. The rampant inflation over the 1970s meant \$2.5 million in 1970 would end up as \$7.6 million in 1979 – an increase of \$1,400 a day.<sup>30</sup> If the *Evening Standard* journalists in 1983 had used their calculators they'd have seen that \$10.6 million was a bargain – a \$4 million cost in 1973 when the first loan for the Civic Administration Building was raised equated to nearly \$15 million by 1983, an increase of just over \$3,000

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<sup>27</sup> "Major asset for Manawatū region" p 14.

<sup>28</sup> "\$4m Civic Complex for P.N, City Council adopts Plan" p 1.

<sup>29</sup> Patience "Labour Pains" p 14.

<sup>30</sup> Calculated using the Reserve Bank of New Zealand's inflation calculator. This assumes CPI, a start of \$2.5 million in quarter one of 1970, and ending at quarter four in 1979.

a day.<sup>31</sup>

The Sydney Opera House was opened in 1973 – ten years later than originally expected and 1,400% higher than originally budgeted for.<sup>32</sup> Mayor Elwood stated in 1976 that he would "not allow a Sydney Opera House situation in Palmerston North," and nor did he.<sup>33</sup> While Utzon's bold design won the judges over (or at least Eero Saarinen if the tales are to be believed), the selectors in Palmerston North never let cost escape their sights. They praised "the realistic approach to the problems of staging, cost and income bearing factors" and that the winning scheme "showed a commendable concern with the budget set."<sup>34</sup> Even when the jurors started to allow themselves to be swayed by design elements, they quickly corrected back to cost:

The jury admires and commends the skill and degree of formal inventiveness correctly applied to the various elements and intervening spaces at pedestrian level. On

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<sup>31</sup> Assumes a start of \$4 million in quarter one of 1973 and ending at quarter four in 1983.

<sup>32</sup> Flyvbjerg et al. "Delusion and Deception in Large Infrastructure Projects" p 171.

<sup>33</sup> "We'd never be paying off a Sydney Opera House ..." p 2.

<sup>34</sup> "Palmerston North Architectural Competition Winning Design" pp 158-159.

the other hand it questions the need for extending this richness of texture and form so vigorously throughout the upper levels of the office block. This could lead to demands on the budget in first cost, and continuing expenses in maintenance beyond reasonable limits for a public building.<sup>35</sup>

Such pragmatism was not just a local obsession. KD Marshall retired as President of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in April 1971, with judging of the Palmerston North competition one of the last major tasks he completed as president. Marshall was acutely aware of New Zealand's financial situation, noting in his outgoing address that he considered the architectural profession was "contributing to a national weakness in the economic sense."<sup>36</sup> In a tone almost akin to rallying for a national cause, he called on architects to take a more responsible attitude toward the spiralling wages and costs in the construction industry.

Marshall had spent the previous four years as a member of the Building Industry Advisory Council, a sector committee of the central planning-focussed National Development Council. This group worked hard to avoid the

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<sup>35</sup> "Palmerston North Architectural Competition. Specific Comments."

<sup>36</sup> Marshall "President's Address" p 154.

re-imposition of heavy-handed government control measures, and by 1971 had greatly improved building statistics to the point where the industry could successfully conduct economic self-management. Timing of projects was closely monitored to avoid overheating the labour market, thereby avoiding the extension of "fairly coarse weapons" such as centrally mandated project deferrals.<sup>37</sup>

In this context it is no surprise that such macroeconomic concerns would find expression in a design competition at a local level. While not altering the form of the building, the cost debate did alter the material treatment of the Civic Administration Building. The winning architects originally argued for a higher standard of finishing to be applied, with the trade-off being less building. Such frivolity was not going to be tolerated, with the jury holding "the contrary view that facilities and floorspace are more important

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<sup>37</sup> Marshall "President's Address" p 154. In 1971 the deferrals had eased back to range between 6 and 12 months, and represented less than 1% of the total building demand. Marshall credited this to the improved statistical information having "taken the steam out" of building programming.

than fine finishes."<sup>38</sup> In a report to the Finance Committee and Town Planning & Property Committee in 1971 the Town Clerk of Palmerston North City Council noted that in order to comply with the rigorous conditions of the contract the winning design had to be worked "on the basis of a minimum standard of finish."<sup>39</sup> Forced to curb their ideal in order to meet budget, the architects submitted a final design involving poured concrete to be board finished without plaster or paint, and constructional walls done in self-finish concrete block.

By 1973 their ideals had been forgotten – in a letter to the editor of the *Evening Standard* the architects responded to criticism by asking whether members of the public would have preferred they "chosen to provide less building, but with fancy finishes?"<sup>40</sup> The cost-induced finishes eventually became the star, with Mayor Elwood pointing out that "the marble of the 1980s – fair-faced concrete" meant that the Council avoided a painting

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<sup>38</sup> "Palmerston North Architectural Competition Winning Design" p 159.

<sup>39</sup> "Administration Building"

<sup>40</sup> Patience & Patience "Letters to Editor, Civic Centre Complex" p 21.

maintenance bill of more than \$100,000.<sup>41</sup> Palmerston North's Brutalist centrepiece, you could say, was created as a cost measure.

**Hitler would have loved it.**<sup>42</sup>

Ugly, monstrosity, sticking out like a sore toe, heavy and sombre, stark, awfully severe, Elwood's erection – all were terms used to describe the Civic Administration Building in the 1970s. When debating whether to sell the building in 1999, one councillor noted that it had won an award for being one of the ugliest buildings.<sup>43</sup> One resident stated that the ugliness of the building was part of the reason there were few ratepayers willing to fight against its sale some 20 years after being completed.<sup>44</sup> More recently a Palmerston North City Council senior landscape architect called the building "ugly" in a report to a Council committee, and noted that it "does not function effectively."<sup>45</sup>

The concrete finishing was one aspect of the

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<sup>41</sup> "Major asset for Manawatū region" p 14.

<sup>42</sup> "A proclamation" p 4. This comment was made in relation to a viewing platform that overlooked the Square, from which the journalist noted could be used to address subjects gathered below.

<sup>43</sup> "City eye" p 2.

<sup>44</sup> "Legal fight in wind. Anger over civic centre sale" p 2.

<sup>45</sup> "'Battleship' to get facelift" p 1.

building that came in for particular attention by detractors. Reporter Robert Johnson reflected on the completed Civic Administration Building in 1979 and wrote "I still think the main building is ugly, an unrelieved concrete mass."<sup>46</sup> Two weeks earlier a letter to the editor agreed that "while the building does take some getting use [sic] to it should be improved when ivy is grown over it as the Mayor has suggested."<sup>47</sup> Perhaps sick of comments about concrete, Mayor Elwood stressed that "it's the people who are of prime importance not the materials used in the building."<sup>48</sup> In a December 1979 article titled "City proud of huge concrete structure," the *Dominion* unsubtly called the Civic Administration Building dated, referring to its surrounding context of "ultra modern rather spectacular office buildings."<sup>49</sup> The *Tribune* commented that it wasn't "the lovely Castle promised by the officials," but instead "A GREAT BIG BLOB OF CONCRETE!!"<sup>50</sup>

Responding to comments in 1973 that the

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<sup>46</sup> "Reporter's tour of Civic Centre" p 4.

<sup>47</sup> "Letters to editor. Don't knock it ..." p 11.

<sup>48</sup> "Major asset for Manawatū region" p 14.

<sup>49</sup> "Civic Centre. City proud of huge concrete structure" p 15.

<sup>50</sup> "Talk around the magical Square" p 8.

building project was a delusion of grandeur, Council officers used a technical assessment defence to declare "our conclusion is that the design is an appropriate balance between what the Council wanted and what it could afford."<sup>51</sup> Descriptions of the building reflected this practicality – in 1979 it was described as a "solid, practical unobtrusive building."<sup>52</sup> This image of practicality also reflected an expectation of Council austerity which sometimes came out as a defence of its plain styling or as a criticism of potential extravagance.<sup>53</sup> In August 1973 a series of five photographs were published in the *Evening Standard* showing cramped working conditions that Council officers were enduring, with a clear undertone of the new building being a practical necessity.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Civic Complex Report."

<sup>52</sup> "Civic Centre. City proud of huge concrete structure" p 15.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, a photograph caption to a construction image in *Evening Standard*, which stated "Native timbers would improve the general appearance of the complex, which, in itself, was a public building" and controversy over nearly \$1 million being spent on furnishings. "\$800,000 is sought for centre furnishings" p 1 and "The final cost ..." p 16.

<sup>54</sup> "The rabbit warren Palmerston North is pleased to call City Hall" p 2.

Such images of restrained practicality placed limitations on the desired rebranding of Palmerston North. In 1970 the *Dominion* wrote of Palmerston North's 16 months of centennial celebrations as "a long while for a city that is something less than renowned for the good time it gives its visitors."<sup>55</sup> The article pointed out that Palmerston North struggled to think like a big city, clinging to the attitudes "of an overgrown country town."<sup>56</sup> Despite the Civic Administration Building being a centrepiece to centennial celebrations and crucial to commercial revival and growth, its image never leapt to such heights. In 1979 Mayor Elwood summed it up well when he said "We will lack the glamour of a town hall but we will have a civic centre relative to life in Palmerston North and the Manawatu region."<sup>57</sup>

Twenty years later Mayor Jill White defended the Civic Administration Building as having its own identity and that "Belatedly, this building does mean something in this town."<sup>58</sup> She seemed like the only person willing to make a stand against the building being sold

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<sup>55</sup> "Plain and fancy" p 11.

<sup>56</sup> "Plain and fancy" p 11.

<sup>57</sup> "Major asset for Manawatu region" p 14.

<sup>58</sup> "City eye" *Evening Standard* (27 July 1999) 2.

to a hotel developer, her fellow councillors having less romantic views. Even Mayor Elwood reached back to 1970's practicalities, saying no building was forever, that the Civic Administration Building had no intrinsic value and if "the council's circumstances have changed, and the price is right, so be it."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the most telling judgement on the image of the Civic Administration Building was that despite three attempts to sell it, the numbers never stacked and a deal could never quite be brokered. Headlines would shout "City's civic centre to become a luxury hotel" or "Luxury hotel planned for council building,"<sup>60</sup> the emphasis on luxury playing with the public's view of the existing practical plainness of the building. That the transformation was never achieved perhaps speaks to how far they were apart image wise – turning a solid, practical unobtrusive building into a five-star luxury hotel was too big an ask.

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<sup>59</sup> "Controversy dogs civic building" p 3.

<sup>60</sup> "City's civic centre to become a luxury hotel" p 1. "Luxury hotel planned for council building" p 6.

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