

## Architecture and Art in the Pages of the NZIA Journal to 1918

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**ABSTRACT:** While Adolf Loos had declared in 1910 that architecture and art were two different things, the architectural profession in New Zealand continued to think of architecture as one of the arts for decades after that date. This paper will examine this issue for the period from 1912 to 1920 as revealed in the pages of the *Journal of Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*. John Ruskin, always recognised as a major influence upon the Arts and Crafts Movement, is shown to have been a forceful influence behind the wider thinking of the architectural profession in New Zealand throughout this period. This influence concerns matters of style and decoration, materials and, above all, the integrity and commitment of the architect. Several lectures delivered to regional institutes and recorded in the journal are examined to reveal on the one hand a confidence that architecture was even perhaps the greatest of the arts but also that recent developments in materials and construction desperately called for the profession to find a new approach.

In his 1910 essay, "Architecture," Adolf Loos claimed that architecture is not art.

Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else, everything which serves a purpose should be excluded from the realms of art,

he maintained.<sup>1</sup> As Loos' writings were not familiar to an English readership until well into the twentieth century, his distinction between art and architecture would not have been known in New Zealand during the period covered by this paper. If it had been it would certainly have been dismissed here as the utterances of a philistine, a "builder" rather than an "architect."

The pages of the *Journal of the Proceedings of the*

*New Zealand Institute of Architects* (to give it the full title of its earliest years) attest to the enduring traditional belief (which goes back to antiquity) that architecture was one of the Fine Arts. In a lecture to the Technological Branch of the Otago Institute in 1917, Leslie Coombs included a quote from American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to the effect that architecture was, moreover, the greatest of the arts:

To build! To build!  
That is the noblest of all the Arts.  
Painting and sculpture are but images  
Are merely shadows cast by outward things  
On stone or canvas having in themselves  
No separate existence. Architecture  
Existing in itself, and not seeming  
A something it is not, surpasses them  
As substance shadows.<sup>2</sup>

architecture as foremost of the arts: "I believe architecture must be the beginning of arts, and that the others must follow her in their time and order." Ruskin

A more immediate influence on the New Zealand architectural profession than antiquity or Longfellow was English writer and critic, John Ruskin. Hardly an issue of the journal is without a reference to Ruskin from its inception in 1912 till 1917. Ruskin's influence upon the Arts and Crafts Movement, whether in Britain, the US or in New Zealand, is axiomatic; but his influence was far wider than that suggests.

If Loos was to distinguish between art and architecture, Ruskin's distinction was between architecture and mere building. It is decoration, he argues in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, that raises building to the level of architecture.<sup>3</sup> It must be appropriate decoration and reference nature. He saw its

*The Seven Lamps of Architecture* p 205.

<sup>1</sup> Loos "Architecture" p 45.

<sup>2</sup> Coombs "On the Architecture of the Renaissance" p 57.

<sup>3</sup> Ruskin *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* p 9. Ruskin saw

role as a reminder of higher things in an age increasingly dominated by industry and commerce (the counting-house, as he would have put it). The period this symposium focuses on (more than half a century after Ruskin's early and important texts on architecture) continued to accept this dogma.

"A little ornament is a good thing, in its place," asserted Basil Hooper in a paper read to the Otago Institute in 1912; "but it must be of the very best" – and a plain background would be beneficial.<sup>4</sup> Mr Mandeno went further: "Good ornament in the right place is absolutely essential to good architecture," he argued in 1914.<sup>5</sup> Mr Hawcridge, more Pugin than Ruskin, called for decorated construction.<sup>6</sup> In a series of lectures entitled "What is art and who are artists?" that span 1916 and 1917, Samuel Hurst Seager was clear that architecture was an art like poetry, music and the rest; but there was a doubt present in his mind whether what was being produced in New Zealand really qualified. In Ruskinian language he asked, "Can the lamp of art burn for us?"<sup>7</sup> It is clear that he would have liked it

to do so. For all these men, there were conditions on the use of ornament or decoration – they did not distinguish between these words – and their opinions are a distillation of AWN Pugin's and John Ruskin's concepts of "truth" and "life" in architecture, with a bit of Owen Jones thrown in for good measure.

Above all, for Hurst Seager, "the lamp of art" cannot burn unless the architect *likes* what he is doing. The architect will be imbued with love of his art; art is in the "language of his soul."<sup>8</sup> Too often architects look upon their calling as a profession whereby they are enabled to exist, argued Seager. A quote from Ruskin along similar lines is to be found in the September 1916 issue of the journal: "Is your art first with you? Then you are artists ... [but] if your money and your fame are first with you, you are mechanics and drudges."<sup>9</sup> For Hurst Seager (as for Ruskin), we can only love what we do if it is "true"; and clearly this was not always the case in the contemporary world.

Seager's voice was not alone on this point.

Most passionate are the words of Englishman, Clutton Brock. Extracts from a pamphlet by him, published first by the Design and Industries Association in Britain and reprinted in *The Architects' and Builders' Journal*, are included in the *NZIA Journal*, December 1916. In Ruskinian tones, Brock called for a

religion of workmanship, if workmanship is to be good; and a religion of design if there is to be good design. It never is good unless both designer and workmen do their best for the sake of doing it...when we have that, we shall have art soon enough.<sup>10</sup>

The problem was, of course, that all these high-minded commentators in New Zealand and in Britain could see about them too much building that they considered shams. "It is only in modern times that good and bad have been erected side by side," Hurst Seager asserted.<sup>11</sup> There was a discrepancy between the decoration that they fervently believed in, the materials that were used, and the society that the buildings served. Leslie Coombs, who wrote frequently on architectural history and style, made an analogy with fashion in a 1916 paper. Since the seventeenth century, he

<sup>4</sup> Hooper "Reasons in architecture" p 35.

<sup>5</sup> Mandeno "Truth and Simplicity in architecture" p 72.

<sup>6</sup> Hawcridge "The Aesthetics of Architecture" pp 97-107.

<sup>7</sup> Seager "What is art and who are artists?" no. 4, pp 46-

47.

<sup>8</sup> Seager "What is art and who are artists?" no. 1, pp 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal of Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* (September 1916) p 6.

<sup>10</sup> "The Modern Gospel of Good Work" pp 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Seager "What is art and who are artists?" no. 4, p 47.

observed, there had been advances aplenty in construction technology that had not been matched by advances in style. Architects changed their preferred style frequently during their careers, as people change their clothes. The choices had no connection to construction, or, indeed, to the modern world. Surely, we can invent a suitable finish for steel and ferro-concrete, materials now being widely used, he pleaded – a finish, moreover, "that will not only be suitable for the construction, but suitable also as an indication of the times!"<sup>12</sup> Is our culture less than that of the Greeks? he cries rhetorically. "Let us do more than copy old work ... In course of time a new style, better for our purposes than anything we at present have, will develop."

The very first issue of the *Journal of the Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* had contained notes from a report of the German Concrete Association in reference to steel frame construction versus reinforced concrete. Comments from the New Zealand editors (R Bacon and GG Schwartz) followed, arguing that a new style was indeed developing in the field of ferro-concrete

<sup>12</sup> Coombs "The Styles of Architecture" p 6.

<sup>13</sup> "Notes from a Report of the German Concrete Association" pp 51-52.

construction where the material's monolithic nature (unlike steel) was conducive to such a development. Using German examples to demonstrate their point (the new market hall in Breslau was one), the editors found

no attempt to assimilate the styles and orders of architecture evolved in the process of time from the use of stone and brickwork, timber and iron,

but a direct response to the new material itself. Ignoring examples such as Auckland's Grafton Bridge, they, by contrast, condemned local practice for clothing ferro-concrete in masonry or brickwork as was the case with steel frame construction. The greatest difficulty was to induce the public to see beauty in the expression of strength and proportion without the aid of mouldings or ornament suggestive of the mason's chisel.<sup>13</sup> The readership was invited to express its views; but no correspondence ensued. Similar opinions were expressed occasionally in subsequent issues, however. In 1914, the committed ornamentalist, Mr Mandeno, admitted that Ruskin himself had realised the inevitability of a new style appropriate to the widely used new materials, and repeated the observation that

<sup>14</sup> Mandeno "Truth and Simplicity in architecture" p 72.

<sup>15</sup> Orbell "The Suitability of the several styles of architecture" pp 54-56.

public education was essential before there would be change.<sup>14</sup> Even a prize-winning student essay called "The Suitability of the several styles of architecture to various kinds of buildings" (a fairly standard account of associationism – Gothic is most suitable for churches, for instance), occasionally noted decorative forms in current architecture that were at variance with the structural necessities the building purported to fulfil. It was published in the journal's first issue, 1912. Its author was Dunedin student, Ivan S Orbell.<sup>15</sup>

Poor Ivan Orbell was killed in north France in 1915. His portrait was included in the July issue of the *NZIA Journal* that year.<sup>16</sup> By 1916 there is a depressing air to the publication. Various writers tried to be brave about the role of architects in war-time: there was very little work. The February 1917 issue included an article on German trench architecture.<sup>17</sup> It is in this context that the writing equating architecture with religion appeared. It is also when Hurst Seager delivered his series of lectures on art, mentioned previously, where he had asked so fervently if the "lamp of art" might burn for us here in New Zealand,

<sup>16</sup> "Institute Roll of Honour" p 25.

<sup>17</sup> "[German Trench Architecture]" pp 51-53.

[h]ere, where there is nothing to compare with those marvellous works produced out of the glowing intelligences given to men of old? Can we be made to see that those things which help us simply to exist are much less useful to us than those which set the glories of the universe more brightly before us?

(by which he meant good decoration). Seager did not directly address the issue of ferro-concrete honestly treated, but he did have suggestions for a distinctively "New Zealand architecture." Like his predecessors, Seager saw nature as the artist's and architect's guide – a source greatly to be preferred over quotations from historic styles. He had touched on the subject in his important essay on "Architectural Art in New Zealand," published in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* in 1900, when he mentioned a case of decoration based on New Zealand flora and fauna, the first such attempt he had come across.<sup>18</sup> Seventeen years later he was pushing this local solution further:

if we only observed more fully the beauties spread out in this our adopted land so lavishly for our welfare, if we

<sup>18</sup> Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 490.

<sup>19</sup> Seager "What is art and who are artists?" no. 4, p 47.

<sup>20</sup> Jones *The Grammar of Ornament*. See in particular chapter 20, "Leaves and flowers from nature" pp 154-157.

<sup>21</sup> Jones *The Grammar of Ornament* p 157. Nature was to

looked beneath these for the underlying principles which are beneath them all, and used them as a standard for our guidance and instruction,

then soon we would know what was true and what false.<sup>19</sup>

When he talked of "looking beneath" the surface appearances of local "beauties" for the "underlying principles" beneath them all, Hurst Seager reiterated nineteenth-century concerns. In Owen Jones' encyclopaedic compendium of decorative detailing, *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856, but distributed to design schools well into the twentieth century, it had been suggested that local plants would serve as well as the traditional ones of the ancient world (the acanthus and honeysuckle) as guides to designers in search of a new style.<sup>20</sup> Picking up on this, Frank Lloyd Wright had looked to the plants of the prairies in his quest for an appropriately American type of decoration. But Jones' intention was not the copying of natural forms for ornament – holding the mirror to nature (as with the example Seager

be "conventionalized." Proposition 13 from *The Grammar of Ornament* is quoted (in elaborated form) by Mr Hawcridge in his lecture "The Aesthetics of Architecture" p 103: "Flowers, animals, human figures or other natural objects must not be used as ornaments but

alluded to in 1900 or the flax flower crockets and kaka corbels of Lippincott) – but that nature – anywhere – demonstrates certain principles that designers would do well to emulate: "see how varying the forms and how unvarying the principles," wrote Jones.<sup>21</sup> Through study of nature's principles – not replication of her precise forms –

a new style of ornament may be produced independently of a new style of architecture; and moreover, that it would be one of the readiest means of arriving at a new [architectural] style,

was Jones' argument;<sup>22</sup> by which he meant, an architectural style founded on sound, structural principles. Seventy years later, in *The Decorative Art of Today*, 1925, Le Corbusier was to develop this line of thought to its extreme when he included a sectional drawing of (amongst other creatures) a flower, labelled "Nature: organs which function" as a demonstration of nature's honesty. In nature, "Everything serves a purpose," he argued.<sup>23</sup> Architecture should take this lesson from nature but not her forms.

conventional representations founded upon them."

<sup>22</sup> Jones *The Grammar of Ornament* p 155.

<sup>23</sup> Le Corbusier *The Decorative Art of Today*. p 178.

When Hurst Seager directed the readership of the *NZIA Journal* to the study of New Zealand's indigenous plants, he shared with others a wish that this country might forge a style of its own, even if he had in 1900 specifically rejected the use of Māori motifs as a solution to that problem.<sup>24</sup> Study of nature would supply the answer. With Owen Jones, Hurst Seager no doubt believed that,

Although ornament is most properly only an accessory to architecture, and should never be allowed to usurp the place of structural features, or to overload or to disguise them, it is in all cases the very soul of an architectural monument.<sup>25</sup>

In 1900, Seager had argued that,

with a knowledge of the principles which govern ancient work it is possible only to the most gifted to free themselves from the forms in which these principles are embodied.<sup>26</sup>

Seager would have drawn back from (the most-gifted) Le Corbusier's position, however. Study of nature's principles not her details, leads to abstraction for which Seager and the New Zealand public were as yet not quite

ready. It was to take another 20 years or so for the nationalist quest to find a solution to New Zealand architecture that went beyond the study of our flora and fauna, because, in that nineteenth-century way, architecture was still "art" and for New Zealanders at this date art was still figurative.

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<sup>24</sup> Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 490. Seager wrote that though Maori art was certainly the only historical art New Zealand had produced, "these,

though excellent examples of the savage art are scarcely suitable as standards on which to found our national taste." In this he differed from commentators such as

Alexander Hamilton and James Cowan.

<sup>25</sup> Jones *The Grammar of Ornament* p 154.

<sup>26</sup> Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 481.

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