

Parliament Buildings and the Sinking of the Titanic

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ABSTRACT: The RMS Titanic was the ultimate symbol of the power and ubiquitousness of the British Empire. Everything was in the finest Edwardian Classic style. The public rooms were sumptuous with a grand Baroque stairway leading into the Grand Salon. There was the first-ever on board swimming pool, a Palm Court, a Parisian Café and a lounge modelled after a room at the Palace of Versailles. On the evening of 14 April, 1912, the ship hit an iceberg. It took two hours and 40 minutes after hitting the floating ice for the ship to go down.

Construction of the Parliament Buildings in Wellington began in 1912. The finally approved design was an amalgamation of the winning competition entry of John Campbell and Claude Paton and the fourth placed design by Campbell and Lawrence. The design was in the distinct Edwardian Classic image of the British Empire but with only a little of the exuberance of some of Campbell's Imperial Baroque work. Interestingly, the building displayed some New Zealand character, most notably in the use of materials and in the Māori Affairs Committee Room. The building was not completed, half finished, until 1922.

This paper discusses the nature of the entries to the Parliament Building competition and the politics surrounding the event. It focuses on the architecture of John Campbell, most notably his affinity for the Edwardian Classical style. The paper explores the significance of the style in the New Zealand context and conjectures on other influences that might have held some sway. Finally, the paper suggests the building might have benefited from suffering a fate similar to that of the Titanic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The source for much of the information on the Parliament Building is Peter Richardson's PhD thesis "Building the Dominion: Government Architecture in New Zealand 1840-1922." I gratefully acknowledge Peter making this document available to me. All references are also sourced from this document.

Introduction

The Gothic versus Classical debate dominated the concerns of architects in Victorian Britain and hence, by removal, in New Zealand. At first, simplicity prevailed. Simple, well-proportioned Georgian buildings served for early domestic and secular purposes, while the precepts of the Ecclesiological Society served to guide what was proper at least for the Anglican Church. As the century passed concern grew further about how best or most appropriately to "clothe" the new buildings generated by the Industrial Revolution – banks, offices, factories, shops. In addition, the needs,

physical and spiritual, of the new middle classes had to be served. Attempts were made to link certain styles with certain types of buildings – Gothic for churches, Classical for public buildings. It was argued the Classical signified endurance, the Gothic aspiration.

After 1860, most architects felt free to choose and to vary their choice of style and their combinations. By the 1870s, it became possible to use several styles concurrently. A somewhat decadent abundance prevailed. Doric was seen as appropriate for government buildings and law courts (ironically or appropriately, the

Doric government building in Wellington is now a Law School) while Corinthian was deemed suitable for ballrooms. Eclecticism was seen as the best way forward. High Victorian Eclecticism included Jacobean, Elizabethan, Queen Anne, Scottish Baronial, Swiss Cottage, Tudor, Anglo-Italian. Other styles and variations appeared where much decoration became purely ornamental.

The Classical/Gothic debate of the nineteenth century was largely pseudo-intellectual and middle class. It has parallels with contemporary architectural discourse.

However, arguably, it reached its zenith at the turn of the century. In New Zealand, John Campbell, the first government architect, advocated for a distinctive and appropriate style for government buildings. Born and educated in Glasgow, Scotland he was familiar with the Scottish preference for the "Doric" of Alexander "Greek" Thomson or the Baroque qualities of the Scottish Baronial of Sir John Burnet. The imperial fervour of the turn of the century would have encouraged further his pursuit of an architecture to celebrate the strength, spirit and pervasiveness of the British Empire.

His choice was the Imperial Baroque. It was based around the Renaissance style of Sir Christopher Wren of the early eighteenth century, deemed by some to be the "national style – the vernacular of the country." There were many who argued its monumentality and exuberance were the appropriate expression of the spirit of the age. It was a style that was also adopted in Australia and Canada. However, while the style expressed the power and extent of Empire, the new century also brought rumblings of nationalism and independence. Campbell sought a style that expressed not only

empire but also nationhood. In the event, the Edwardian era also signalled the end of imperial majesty. The onset of the First World War changed the Golden Age from exuberance and abundance to one of austerity and restraint.

Architecture is an expression of society. Often, it reflects or tells the story of societal change even as analogy. This paper describes two events that reflected the spirit of the age, the aspirations of the outposts of empire, the realities of a changing world and the decadence of the Golden Age. The first event is the design competition and resulting construction of the Parliament Buildings in Wellington begun in 1912 but not completed, half finished, until 1922. The second is the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*.

Parliament Buildings

In December 1907, the timber wing of the Gothic Parliamentary Buildings, designed by William Mason and completed under William Clayton's supervision in 1873, was destroyed by fire. Left standing was Clayton's Government House building of 1871, and the west wing of 1883 and the General Assembly Library of 1898-91, both designed by Thomas

Turnbull. John Campbell, as Government Architect, immediately proposed designs for a replacement building – in the Imperial Baroque. However, the cries for a competition began to hold sway.

The competition for the design of the Parliament Buildings began in 1911. The decision to hold a competition flowed from a growing concern among architects that the office of the Government Architect was becoming too powerful and was effectively "shutting out" private architects from gaining commissions for government work. The design for the Government House by John Campbell, completed in 1911, had met with the derision of his peers being described by one as a "sort of £1-a-week boardinghouse."¹ Private architects welcomed the Parliament Buildings competition as an opportunity to reclaim a role in the design of government buildings as well as to design one of the most prestigious public buildings in the country.

However, all was not plain sailing. After the competition conditions were announced in 1911, the NZIA Council met in Customhouse Quay in Wellington to record protests from the

¹ Hon. Mr MacDonald *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*

(6 October 1908) v 145, p 907.

Auckland, Canterbury and Otago branches. Samuel Hearst Seagar from Christchurch proposed a series of remits to reflect the Institute's opinion that the conditions issued by the government were deficient.² The view was expressed that as the conditions allowed many different interpretations, it was impossible for architects to compete on a fair basis.

The remits presented to Council expressed two major concerns. Firstly, the Institute was unsure how judging would be done and by whom. It was of the view that a sole assessor should be appointed to judge that competition and that his judgement be final. There was discussion that the RIBA be invited to nominate the assessor. The second concern was about the lack of detail provided on the accommodation required. The Council felt the government should state clearly the approximate areas of all rooms and their preferred groupings. There was also some concern that the position chosen for the building on the site was not the best available.

In writing to the Under Secretary for Public Works, the NZIA enclosed a copy of the RIBA "Regulations for Architectural Competitions."

² Richardson "Building the Dominion" pp 322-324.

³ Press Association "The New Parliament Buildings" p 6.

⁴ Press Association "The New Parliament Buildings" p 6.

In his reply the Minister of Public Works, Roderick McKenzie, stated that the government was "not concerned about the RIBA in the slightest degree."³ He had misunderstood the Institute's reference to the RIBA as a plea to open up the competition to British architects. The NZIA's intention only was that the competition be in no way inferior to one run by the RIBA. However, McKenzie chose to beat the NZIA with the stick that if the government had intended that British architects compete "they would have advertised in Great Britain and Australia, but they had reserved the competition entirely for New Zealand."⁴

However, as Richardson has noted,

[i]n reality, the decision to restrict the competition to local architects was [not so much a burst of national feeling as] a thinly disguised attempt to limit the expense and administrative work involved in organising the competition.⁵

colleagues genuinely believed that the competition should be an occasion for indigenous architectural expression.⁶

⁵ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 323.

⁶ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 323.

⁷ Mr. Hornsby *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (5

Walter Buchanan, MP for Wairarapa, asserted that the country possessed all the skills to construct an impressive building. He struck the appropriate nationalistic tone when he asked his colleagues in the House of Representatives to consider why it is that we "always want to make out that there is no genius in New Zealand – that if you want something good for your money you must go outside New Zealand."⁷

Concern was also growing about the role of the Government Architect. An article in *The Dominion* of 7 April suggested that the lack of precision in the definition of the layout of rooms would

only increase [John] Campbell's chances since he was in a better position than others to know the Government's requirements. Campbell would have access, it was alleged, to information from officials whom he would know as ""Jones," "Brown," or "Smith"" but who would be "inaccessible behind barriers of official reserve" to other competitors.⁸

There were also allegations that it was Campbell himself who had written the competition conditions.

October 1908) v 145, p 875.

⁸ Anon. "New Parliament Buildings" p 2 cited, Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 322.

A further letter to McKenzie from the NZIA protested against the Government Architect being allowed to take part in the competition,

it being contrary to the Rules of the RIBA of which he is a member; also he is in possession of certain valuable data which is inaccessible to all other competitors and moreover it is believed his designs are being prepared during ordinary business hours and certainly at the Country's expense; that the Government be requested to give its assurance that the successful competitor shall be appointed to carry out the work unless it can be shown that he is not competent.

McKenzie conceded only minor points. The government agreed to one sole judge, but someone of their choosing. In the event, they chose Colonel Walter Vernon, an architect from Victoria, Australia, but did not disclose who the judge was until decision had been reached.

The competition conditions were amended so that only one prize could be claimed by an individual competitor and, although staff of the Architectural Branch were advised that they were not to prepare competition designs in working hours, or in government offices, they were not prevented from entering. Frustrated by its inability to persuade the Government to change the conditions, the [NZIA] Council ... voted to boycott the competition. This initiative, agreed to by ... only one vote [7-6] was of only limited success.⁹

⁹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 324.

¹⁰ W17/9, n. 9, p 2, cited Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

Thirty three competition entries were received by the closing date of 31 July. 18 were from NZIA members.

The Entries

It was felt that much would depend on the taste of the Assessor and that the most likely style to be preferred would be "Wrenaissance" – the Imperial Baroque. George Troup, the Railways Architect, felt the Imperial Baroque style was probably the most likely to succeed. He formed this view both cynically from the point of view of preparing a possible winning entry but also from the current argument that monumental character "should characterise all National buildings, and of all the architectural styles none do so better than the English Renaissance."¹⁰ In the event, Troup and William Gray Young submitted two joint designs. Their Classical Baroque design was reminiscent of Wren, more St Paul's Cathedral than Greenwich. For safety's sake, they also submitted a Victorian Gothic design "heavily influenced by Giles Gilbert Scott's Liverpool Cathedral"¹¹ (begun in 1903) though also reminiscent of the Westminster Houses of Parliament. For good

¹¹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

¹² c.f. Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 329, ftnte 121.

measure, Troup then produced a further entry on his own in Italian Renaissance style.

Joshua Charlesworth, who had won the competition for the Wellington Town Hall, produced an entry reminiscent of Wren's Greenwich Hospital as did Edmund Anscombe. The recent success of Brumwell's Belfast City Hall, based on the same source, had given them confidence.¹² Clere and Mitchell modelled their work on Knott's London County Council building begun in 1908 but avoided some of its perceived defects.¹³ Others used Kerr and Knight's Houses of Parliament for Victoria in Melbourne as their inspiration, John Campbell included. All were convinced suitable classical monumentality was in order.

Wren was also "the dominant influence"¹⁴ for the designs prepared by the staff of the Architectural Branch but the entries also "reveal[ed] a growing taste for French classicism."¹⁵ John Burnet's King Edward VII Galleries of the British Museum (1904-14) under construction when the

¹³ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 329, ftnte 121.

¹⁴ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

¹⁵ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

competition was held, had influence.¹⁶ Both entries submitted by staff of the Architectural Branch "reflected this new taste for Beaux Arts classicism."¹⁷ The winning entry in particular with its colonnades between centre and end pavilions reflected the east façade of the Louvre (1667-70) by Louis Le Vau, Charles Le Brun and Claude Perrault.¹⁸

Two entries, by William Gummer and by Samuel Hearst Seagar and GAJ Hart, represented more innovative tendencies. "Created by Gummer while he lived in London,"¹⁹ his symmetrical design with apsidal ends was rigorously "Beaux Arts." Interestingly, Auckland architects as ever concerned with their own interest interpreted "in a literal sense the condition that only New Zealand architects were eligible to enter the Parliament buildings competition[. They] attempted (unsuccessfully) to have Gummer's design disallowed."²⁰

Seagar, who at the turn of the century called for the creation of a distinctly New Zealand architecture, also rejected the exuberance of the ... Baroque ... in favour of ... French classicism. Working with G.A.J. Hart, he created a design

¹⁶ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

¹⁷ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

¹⁸ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 327.

¹⁹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 328.

²⁰ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 328, ftnte 116.

which depended more for effect on the massing of pavilions and a circular library than the boldly modelled colonnades and domes of the more exuberant Baroque entries.²¹

Seager's building, with "its relatively plain surface ... anticipate[d] ... the Stripped Classical works"²² of the 1920s and 30s.

In the event, Vernon, the Assessor, "had a distinct preference for the more exuberant Baroque entries."²³ Nevertheless, clearly in his eyes, "the entries submitted by staff of the Architectural Branch represented the middle ground acceptable to the politicians for whom the building was to be erected"²⁴ as well as his own taste. Notably, for all the nationalist implications of the competition and the designs, there was a notable absence of "any distinctly New Zealand imagery. The emphasis was instead on the erection of a suitably monumental building worthy of New Zealand's [individual] place within the "hierarchy of Empire.""²⁵

The Outcome

The results of the competition were announced on 27 September 1911. Inevitably, they "only

²¹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 329.

²² Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 329.

²³ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 329.

²⁴ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 330.

²⁵ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 330.

fuelled further speculation that staff of the Architectural Branch had an inside advantage."²⁶ Four prizes were awarded.

Campbell and Paton were awarded first prize and Campbell and Lawrence fourth ... [T]here is some uncertainty about the authorship of the first placed entry. According to one of Campbell's cadets, Walter Vine, Campbell was not involved in creating the design [Apparently,] it was the work of Paton and another of Campbell's draughtsmen, Alan Stevenson [later killed in action in 1917 serving with the New Zealand Engineers].²⁷

The submission was "entered in Campbell and Paton's names "owing to certain regulations" ... the relatively common practice of attributing the work of a junior in an architectural office to the principal."²⁸

Whatever the authorship, the Architectural Branch were clear winners over the private architects. Tension increased between the two and between those members of the Institute who had entered the competition and those who had not.

²⁶ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 325.

²⁷ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 325.

²⁸ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 325.

Six members of the N.Z.I.A. resigned their membership of the Institute on 15 December 1911 [including William Turnbull] ... [A] further two [resigned] in February 1912. None provided any written explanation of their action but ... whether the success of the Architectural Branch staff or the failure of the NZIA members to honour the boycott [were decisive] the competition was divisive.²⁹

In a conciliatory move, a letter was sent from the NZIA congratulating Campbell on his victory and stating that their argument about his inclusion in the competition was in no way personal but was a matter of principle, part of their concern about the "general conduct" of the competition. Amazingly, Campbell was also offered a seat on the NZIA Council. He declined, commenting that he might too resign.

Although the President of the NZIA visited Campbell and reported to the Council of the Institute that he would not "for the present press his resignation," in fact Campbell quietly allowed his membership to lapse.³⁰

"Following the competition, the first-placed entry was revised under Campbell's direction."³¹ The finally approved design was an amalgamation of both Campbell and Paton's winning entry and that of Campbell and Lawrence that had achieved fourth place. "The

plan of Campbell and Lawrence's ... entry was, with some minor alterations, substituted for the plan of the first placed scheme."³² Symmetrical about the central entry and principal dome was to the north both chambers in one half (to be erected as the first stage of construction) and in the other, to the south, the library and Bellamy's (to be built as the second stage).

The Parliament chamber itself was to be the same size and dimensions as its British model and counterpart. However, unlike the British 630 MPs who are accommodated on long benches, New Zealand's MPs enjoyed the luxury of desks and double charabanc seats, some covered appropriately with wool seat covers. The elevations were also revised. Cupola were added to the corner pavilions and the design of the entrance pavilion revised to include free-standing columns. Like the floor plans, the completed elevations more closely resembled those of the fourth placed entry.

Erection of one "half" of the building – the northern wing and entrance – was begun to the Architectural Branch's design in 1912, though the dome and cupolas were omitted from the design to reduce costs. The Public Works Department put in the foundations for the building by day

labour and the Christchurch firm Hansford, Mills and Hardie secured the contract for erection of the superstructure. The firm agreed to complete ... construction by December 1915 but [in fact] work was not finished until 1922. Problems with the supply of marble and difficulties importing steel during the First World War [caused the principal delays] As a consequence, the building itself came to symbolise the Dominion's war effort, the House of Representatives, occupied for the first time in October 1918, being dedicated to those who lost their lives serving their country.³³

"Despite the distinctly British imagery the building [nevertheless] has ... [some] New Zealand character. In keeping with government policy and the realities of war time construction, New Zealand materials were used whenever possible."³⁴ The building was faced in part

with New Zealand stone (Coromandel granite for the base and Kairuru marble for the walls) and mainly South Island rimu was used for interior joinery. It is nevertheless mainly the Maori Affairs Committee Room ... [that provides] a uniquely New Zealand character. Situated off the western corridor of the building, it is a *whare rununga* (assembly house) notable for its fine ornamental ceiling and carving by Te Kiwi Amohau, assisted by Te Ngara Ranapia, both of the Arawa tribe.³⁵

Notwithstanding the use of New Zealand building materials and incorporation of Maori art forms in one room, British and British imperial connections dominate in the

²⁹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 325.

³⁰ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 326.

³¹ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 331.

³² Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 331.

³³ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 332.

³⁴ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 332.

³⁵ Richardson "Building the Dominion" pp 332-333.

completed wing. In a symbolic gesture of imperial solidarity, the Speaker's office was lined with a Canadian bird's eye maple and walnut gifted to New Zealand "to bond the Dominions." Other materials and fittings not found in New Zealand were imported from Britain, mainly from the suppliers of the Auckland and Wellington Post Offices – the leadlight domes by the Luxfer Prism Company Ltd., London, and the lamp standards and possibly the gates to the grounds by Birmingham Guild Ltd ... [as] examples.³⁶

The Titanic

The RMS "Titanic" epitomised the advances made in shipping during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. It was bigger and mightier, stronger and faster than any of its predecessors. Built for the British White Star Line, it was the ultimate symbol of the power and ubiquitousness of the British Empire. The Titanic was pronounced unsinkable. It began life as the largest moving object on earth. 900 feet long with four funnels each 22 feet in diameter, the ship was the height of an eleven-storey building. She weighed 46,000 tons.

The Titanic was built for luxury and speed. There was the first swimming pool ever aboard a ship and a special crane to help load and unload cars. There were Arabian-style Turkish baths, a gym, a squash court. The public rooms

were sumptuous with a grand stairway equal to anything the nineteenth century could offer leading into the Grand Salon. Everything was in the finest Edwardian Classical taste. There was a Palm Court, a Parisian café and a lounge modelled after a room at Versailles. The ship's rudder was as tall as a mansion, the engines could produce 50,000 horsepower to move the ship at 23 knots. There was enough electricity to power a small town. On her decks were 20 lifeboats, four more than required under British Board of Trade regulations. 64 lifeboats would have been needed to accommodate all the passengers. These were deemed unnecessary as they would spoil the lines of the ship

The ship's maiden voyage began on April 12 from Southampton en route to New York. There were 2,227 on board of which 735 were of the first-class. On the evening of 14 April, at 11.40pm, the ship hit an iceberg that ripped a huge rent in the starboard section of the vessel. The boat sank in 13,000 feet of water, two hours and 40 minutes after hitting the floating ice.

670 immigrants in the third-class or steerage were trapped below decks in doors kept locked by order of the US Immigration Department. By

the time this group of passengers broke free, most of the lifeboats available had been slipped from their davits. Many people died quickly in the cold water, others were dragged down by the giant whirlpool, the huge vortex, of the ship which tilted to a 90 degree angle before plunging to the depths. Isador Straus and his wife, part owners of Macy's department store in New York and the tycoon Guggenheim were among 10 millionaires who perished. Captain Smith went down with his ship, but the Chairman of the White Star Line showed no courage and jumped into a lifeboat.

705 people survived, about one third of the ship's complement. Most survivors were women and children. Kate Winslett was one of them but Leonardo di Caprio went down with the ship. One woman survivor was quoted as saying, "The ship was not only a ship, but a time capsule, and it could be said she took the glittery, self-indulgent golden age with her to the grave."

Reprise

The sinking of the Titanic and the construction of the Parliament Buildings in Wellington reflect their time in history and the societies that created

³⁶ Richardson "Building the Dominion" p 333.

them. The Titanic was an expression of the confidence and indestructibility of Empire just at a time when that world was to change forever. Its sinking was unbelievable and disastrous, a symbol of the terrible destruction that was to follow in the First World War and the end of an abundance that had seemed eternal for some. The Parliament building too has been a symbol of its time. The design aspired to nationhood within Empire, but the realities of war and then austerity, has meant that New Zealand's certainty about its place in the world has stayed on hold for quite some time. The Parliament building has never been completed, though it was mooted in 1954. The old Government House was demolished in the 1970s and replaced by the Beehive in 1982. The Parliament building, refurbished in 1999 remains incomplete, uncertain about what it is, additive, not whole. Like New Zealand it lacks confidence even yet about its identity. Perhaps the building might have benefited from suffering the fate that befell the Titanic.

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