

Trams, Trials and Tribulations: the development of Cathedral Square, Christchurch 1900-18

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ABSTRACT: Cathedral Square Christchurch is the city's premier urban space. Yet it is without doubt the most debated and controversial two and half hectares of urban design space in the city. Set out in the shape of cross rather than a square, the last five decades of the nineteenth century saw just as much controversy over its design and use as did the entire twentieth century and on into the beginnings of the twenty-first century. Over this time its design has been the butt of jokes, the subject of constant political debate and subject of many learned articles, seminars and conference papers.

The period 1900 to 1918 was one of intensive design change as Christchurch moved into the era of electric trams, motor buses and motor cars. While handsome buildings grew on the square's perimeter during this period, in 1907 a less than attractive architecturally-designed transport shelter appeared in its centre causing architect Samuel Hurst Seager, a member of the Christchurch Beautifying Society, to describe it as a public building of "... appalling ugliness."¹

Inspired by the title "Tramway Trials and Tribulations - the saga of the tramway shelter"² this paper will examine the design issues surrounding Cathedral Square during the period 1900-1918 – a period that saw the first competition to improve the aesthetic reading of this space.

In 1847 John Robert Godley, together with Edward Gibbon Wakefield, were instrumental in the establishment of the Canterbury Association whose plan was to

found a colony in New Zealand upon high social and ecclesiastical principles, to carry out the religious and refined element, to transport from England a section of the people, to plant the Church of England in New Zealand and make the colony look just like home.³

The land the Association chose to settle was the vast plain east of the Southern Alps. The chief city of the settlement was to occupy Kā-pākihi-whakatekata-a-Waitaha – the wetlands – a

settlement and mahinga kai area for over a thousand years to Waitaha, Ngāti Māmoē and finally Ngāi Tahu. The surveying of this land from 1848 by the Canterbury Association was to change the social and geographical face of Canterbury forever.

The plan for the City of Christchurch, as surveyed by Captain Joseph Thomas and his assistant Edward Jollie in 1850, remains in the same form; a grid pattern of streets around a central square. That central square is today the city's premier urban space, yet it is arguably the most debated and controversial two and

half hectares of urban design space in Canterbury, if not the country. Over this time its design has been the butt of jokes, the subject of constant political debate, upheaval, redesign and the subject of many learned articles, seminars and conference papers – this one being no exception!

The earliest colonists had envisaged the square as home to a cathedral and Anglican college. These plans were eventually to come to fruition only in part and, unlike other areas of the city, developed very slowly. By the late 1870s, almost 30 years after official European

¹ Alexander *The Wire Web* p 28.

² Alexander *The Wire Web* p 28.

³ Thomson quoted, Brown *Visions of New Zealand* pp 160-161.

settlement, the square was more or less a waste land, the cathedral foundations, laid in 1864, were now an area of overgrown grass, the statue of Godley (1867) appeared somewhat marooned on its plot, there was a plantation of trees and a "fence in the shape of a Maltese Cross ... up until 1878 you could not separate the reserve from the road."⁴

The failure of the square to thrive was exacerbated by a period of economic downturn during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. However, the first decade of the twentieth century experienced substantial economic growth and this renewed confidence in the economy and stability of the province's future was reflected in the commercial architecture built around the perimeter of the square chiefly in either classical or Gothic Revival stylistic conventions. The "crowning glory" of the square, though still not completed by 1900, was the cathedral, a building Hurst Seager described in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* as, "when completed ... it will be without question the finest church in the colony."⁵

However, the "thorn in the side" of the

⁴ Williams "The Rebuilding of Cathedral Square Christchurch" p 8.

aesthetic development of the square as Christchurch City's premier public open space from its earliest planning inception to this day has been the practical consideration of transport. As "Mr Grundy" remarked to "the Critic" in *The Press* of 1864:

I have heard a suggestion attributed to the first Superintendent of Canterbury when the site reserved for the Cathedral was cut in two by Colombo Street being reunited through it – (pity that our squares should impede traffic) – that an exchange should be made viz., the Government Buildings placed there and the Cathedral built where these now stand.⁶

By 1900 the square was a hive of pedestrian and vehicle activity – steam trams, hackney and hansom cabs moving the public in and out of what was now the centre of the city in all senses of the word. In 1904-5, steam trams were replaced with electric tramways throughout the city making Cathedral Square the hub of the city's transport system with tram routes either passing through or terminating there. It soon became evident that provisions were necessary to accommodate this recent increase in traffic and to provide for the thousands of people the trams were bringing to the square on a daily basis.

⁵ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 484.

⁶ Anon. "Mr Grundy and the Critic – no 2" p 2. One of a

The Tramway Board's response was to erect a tram shelter in 1907, which contained passenger waiting rooms, a ticket office, bookstall, and a room for a cabman and carrier's telephone which was sited between the Godley statue and the cathedral, with permission from the council. This resulted in a heated public debate which was fought out candidly in local newspaper publications for 26 years until the issue was finally resolved after a design competition, a peripatetic statue, a Supreme Court case and subsequent appeal.

Objections to the shelter were raised by the public on two accounts of urban design – its general appearance, and the fact that it obscured the historically and artistically significant Godley statue, which was now flanked on one side by a tram shelter and on the other by a sanitary convenience. Residents and visitors alike noted the uncomfortable aesthetic character of the tram shelter, which was described by the Mayor Mr Holland as "that wretched tram shelter" a "blot on the landscape" and an "eyesore" which did not

number of articles examining local issues and attributed to JE Fitzgerald who was the first superintendent of Canterbury.

conform to ideals of "the city beautiful."⁷ *The Press* described the shelter as a "shed" which Godley disappeared behind and which disfigured the square.⁸

Samuel Hurst Seager, noted local architect and urban planner, who had also been a member of the Christchurch Beautifying Society since its inception in 1897, was one of the main detractors of the 1907 shelter and described it as a structure of "appalling ugliness."⁹ This was somewhat ironic considering his architectural firm at the time, Hurst Seager, Wood and Munnings had prepared the sketch plan, working drawings and specifications for the shelter as well as obtaining tenders and supervising its construction for the Tramway Board.¹⁰ However at this stage of research it is unclear what, if any, Hurst Seager's personal involvement in the actual design was.

A possible solution was to move the Godley statue, which the council decided to do when they accepted the Cathedral Chapter's offer of part of the cathedral grounds as an alternative site for Godley on 30 March 1908. However, due to the public outcry over the matter, and

pressure from groups such as the Christchurch Beautifying Association, the Canterbury Society of Arts and the Old Colonists' Association, Godley remained – for the meantime. "Although this change of heart gave Godley a ten-year reprieve, the decade did little to improve the aesthetics of his surrounding."¹¹

Talk of moving Godley arose again when the Christchurch Beautifying Association held the first of what was to be many competitions for a design to improve the layout of the square in 1916. The major focus of the design competition was a larger tramway shelter with provision for a small ticket office, inspector's room, ladies' retiring and cloak rooms with access to the extant underground lavatories.

As early as September 1913, the impending competition was mentioned in *Progress* where it was reported that the scheme was before Christchurch citizens for consideration.

There is to be a competition open to the world for the best scheme for the square improvement, if the scheme is gone on with, and it points to being one of the biggest and most necessary schemes yet projected in this Dominion.¹²

In October 1913 Hurst Seager presented his own ideas in *Progress* for how the improvement scheme for the square could be achieved, suggesting that a competition be held, again ambitiously inviting architects from all over the world to compete. *Progress* writers found it:

gratifying to know that there are professional gentlemen who are alive to possible improvements in our towns and cities, and for this alone Christchurch citizens should be glad to know they have a man among them capable of indicating improvements of this nature. A great deal has been done by the citizens from time to time in the way of beautifying Christchurch. It behoves them, therefore, not to let this opportunity slip of improving so important a part of their city.¹³

It was not until January 1916 that the competition was finally advertised in *Progress* as being re-opened, with a closing date of 31 March 1916.¹⁴

The competition brief, signed and presumably written for the Beautifying Association on behalf of the Assessor, Samuel Hurst Seager in July 1915, first discussed the present plan of the square and the environment, with particular

⁷ Anon. "Cathedral Square: Improvement Scheme" p 9.

⁸ Anon. "The Godley Statue" p 6.

⁹ Alexander *The Wire Web* p 28.

¹⁰ Alexander *The Wire Web* p 28. Invoice for £ 30.5.0 dated January 10, 1908.

¹¹ May ""On the Move"" p 106.

¹² Anon. "Canterbury Building Movement" p 649.

¹³ Anon. "Architecture and Building" p 703.

¹⁴ Anon. "Cathedral Square Competition" p 519.

attention to transport concerns. The competition was to provide "equally convenient and artistic shelters" that preferably did not block the view of the Godley statue. However, the position of the statue was considered to be "of secondary importance to the development of a thoroughly convenient and artistic layout of the Square." Hurst Seager's brief was surprisingly directive:

It is desired that the shelters should have a distinct architectural character; that they shall be in the nature of colonnades or arcades; the roof is to be flat and to be not higher than 10 feet except in terminal or central points where emphasis may be thought to be necessary to give dignity to the design.¹⁵

He even went so far as to indicate that stone or reinforced concrete coated with Fama be used in their construction.

The competition attracted seven designs that were put on public view at the Society of Arts Gallery. The first prize of £25 was awarded to the firm of Hart and Reese of Christchurch. The accepted design provided for a "D" shaped classical inspired colonnaded shelter with a concave facing the cathedral, and round buildings surmounted by domes at the

northern and southern ends.¹⁶

Despite Hurst Seager's hope that the winning design would be "carried out in its entirety as quickly as possible"¹⁷ it took the next 12 years to produce an advanced stage of working drawings. Nevertheless these 12 years were full enough of criticism, controversy and debate between *The Press*, the Tramway Board, council, the Beautifying Association and the general public. The issues were the unattractive design, the replacement of the 1907 tramway "shed," with an over-the-top architectural statement which elevated sanitary conveniences to the status of a temple in the middle of the city's premier urban space, the desecration of the Godley plot and the legality of council erecting any structure on the Godley plot combined with the threat of the loss of public open space.

The choice of this design in light of Hurst Seager's close involvement as the assessor is a curious and contradictory one, especially if we examine the intent of the article that prompted the title for this conference. Hurst Seager is critical of "ambitious attempts to reproduce the architecture of the Old World resulting in

shams and deceits" and criticises the Wellington Cathedral which he states is of the dimensions of a parish church but with the pretensions of a gothic cathedral.¹⁸ This then raises the question of how he could endorse such an inappropriate structure which was a blatant architectural quotation that did not make any attempt to harmonise with the buildings in the square, but rather added to the plethora and confusion of styles. Christchurch, under Hurst Seager's guiding hand was, in 1916, about to get a tram shelter and central city lavatories which by virtue of architectural expression were akin to the grandest folly in a Capability Brown English country house garden.

Despite what may now appear as contradictory views in Hurst Seager's thinking he remained an enthusiastic advocate for the winning design, and believed that if the scheme were carried out, with one or two minor alterations, it "would convert Cathedral Square into by far the most attractive civic centre in the Dominion, and which would be comparable with the best seen elsewhere."¹⁹ The raised domes of the design were seen by Hurst Seager as "giving the required relief and emphasis to

¹⁵ Christchurch Beautifying Association "Competition for tramway shelters"

¹⁶ Anon. "Cathedral Square: Improvement Scheme" p 9.

¹⁷ Anon. "Cathedral Square, Christchurch" p 667.

¹⁸ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" pp 482, 484.

¹⁹ Anon. "Cathedral Square: Improvement Scheme" p 9.

the design without clashing in any way with the view of the Cathedral."²⁰ However, and in hindsight regrettably, it was never built, for the juxtaposition of this great classical edifice with the cathedral may have produced several more decades of healthy Christchurch architectural debate.

Though the intent of this paper has been to focus on the trials and tribulations of the urban design of Cathedral Square up to 1918, the date Godley was finally moved from his plot to the cathedral grounds to accommodate the scheme, it is worth considering aspects of the debate up to 1928 when, despite Godley's removal a decade earlier, the debate still raged. It must be noted that an underlying debate was also running tandem to the tram shelter issues. 1918 had seen the end of the Great War and the city was also hotly debating the position and design of a war memorial within the square - a matter not resolved until almost the eve of World War II. While this is to some degree inextricably linked with the argument to remove Godley from the cathedral site, the complexity of the issue renders it the subject of another paper another time!

²⁰ Anon. "Cathedral Square: Improvement Scheme" p 9.

²¹ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 481.

Twenty-eight years had now passed since the publication of Hurst Seager's article in the *RIBA Journal* and 12 years since the announcement of the competition design and the argument that "we have no style, no distinctive forms of architectural art ... our cities are chiefly made up of architectural quotations"²¹ was still alive and well, and kept buoyant through *The Press*. In a letter to the editor published in *The Press* in January 1928, Hurst Seager responded to recent criticisms of his position on the matter and of the scheme:

It is idle to talk of "disfiguring our beautiful Square," nor is it a "site of dignity and beauty ... To a visitor accustomed to the beauty of the pre-planned schemes of the Old World our own Square is nothing but a heterogeneous collection of mediocre architectural units without any cohesion, without any thought for the beauty of the Square as a whole, and further disfigured by blatant signs and advertisements ... Our Square stands in violent contrast to the grace and dignity of the beautiful square to be seen in every capital - and in many of the towns - of Europe."²²

The citizens of Christchurch were quick to respond (within two days in fact), to Hurst Seager's defensive arguments for the new design with such quips as:

²² Seager "Correspondence" p 13.

²³ A Citizen "Correspondence" p 7.

a strange argument that because the Square has already been disfigured, we should disfigure it still more and heap a crowning indignity upon Godley and his friends by placing lavatories in the most conspicuous spot in the centre of our city, on what is, to some of us at least, hallowed ground."²³

And: "Mr Seager's plan to extend and perpetuate the indignities already committed does little credit to his perception."²⁴ Perhaps we should leave the last statement in this discussion on the merits of "lavatorial" architecture to the members of the Christchurch Beautifying Association who by 1928 were now critical of the scheme that had originated from their 1916 design competition and simply punned the statement "It is potty!"²⁵

The argument in 1908 clearly arose out of a need for conveniences to meet the growing demand of inner-city life and at the centre of the debate was a crucial matter that we still consider today – how to conserve and interpret the past for the present and ensure its retention for the future. Literally and physically at the centre of this debate was the statue to the Canterbury Associations representative and the man seen as the founder of Canterbury – John Robert Godley. The Godley plot was

²⁴ Gould "Correspondence" (12 January 1928) p 11.

²⁵ Hutchinson quoted, "The Square: City Council's Scheme" p 8.

considered sacred, and consequently not a suitable site for a building to be placed - particularly one containing lavatories, ornamental or not. It seemed at this point to have escaped the notice of those proposing the scheme that the Godley plot was a gazetted reserve for the purpose of housing the Godley statue alone and vested in the citizens of Christchurch by Queen Victoria herself! The whole matter could have been quickly and legally disposed of at this point. An editorial in *The Press* condemned the proposal with disbelief that the City Council would consider putting a "comfort station" on the site allotted to the Founder of Canterbury.²⁶ No consideration had been given to the original design inception of the placement of Godley in the square facing the cathedral that was now the physical manifestation of the aspirations of those early Anglican colonists.

It was an important turning point in the history of urban planning in the city, as "[t]he utilitarian urban planning requirements of a growing city were now being weighed against the significance of retaining an important part of the colony's social history."²⁷ However there

²⁶ Anon. "Cathedral Square" (1921) p 6.

²⁷ May "On the Move" pp 104-105.

²⁸ Progress "Correspondence" p 9.

were some residents who considered the practical needs of shelter and utilities to be more important than aesthetic considerations and retaining the Godley statue and plot intact. One correspondent named *Progress* wrote to the editor of *The Press*:

As the health and comfort of the people should be the first consideration in municipal matters, why so much about the Godley statue. The shelter shed and lavatories are surely more for the comfort of the people than forty statues.²⁸

Of considerable concern to the detractors, as expressed in the editorials of *The Press*, was the loss of such an important public open space and for "lavatorial" architecture! "It is discreditable to the City that, possessing so fine an open space in its very centre, it should allow it to be used as a tramway station and the site for a Lavatory Fortress."²⁹ The position of former Mayor, Mr Holland, was such that he unashamedly incited the public to prevent this from happening:

I hope the citizens of Christchurch will see to it that the remainder of the Square shall not be built over, and that they will rise up and prevent the Council from disfiguring the Square with a building of the sort proposed.³⁰

²⁹ Anon. "The Square" (21 November 1928) p 8.

³⁰ Anon. "The Square: Godley Statue Site" p 6.

³¹ Gould "Correspondence" (4 January 1928) p 7.

Mayor at the time, Mr Archer, was clearly not so concerned about the aesthetic niceties of urban design and the sanctity of open space principles, as made clear by George Gould in a further letter to the editor of *The Press* in January 1928 where he warned Mayor Archer that there was a danger of the conveniences becoming known as "Archer's Memorial" due to his support for the project. Gould compared the proposal to adorning one's front lawn with "an essential outhouse of which itself there is nothing to be ashamed," but which could easily be accommodated elsewhere.³¹

The debate even reached national proportions with "Cyrano" providing an Aucklanders' point of view in a letter to the editor of *The Press* in December 1921:

The Municipal glory of Christchurch is, if not Hagley Park and the gardens, Cathedral Square. This large space, dominated by the Cathedral, has presented magnificent opportunities for further treatment on noble lines, but the City Council has been more intent on making it a tram terminus than on developing beauty and civic dignity.³²

The fact that this was happening "in the middle of the only real city square in New Zealand –

³² Cyrano "The "Comfort Station"" p 2.

the centre of the life of a cathedral and university city!" left "Cyrano" speechless.³³ An editorial by *The Press* condemning the proposal described the removal of the Godley Statue as "the first violation of the integrity of the Square," and expressed the opinion that the city needed to "consider whether the time has not come to work back towards the restoration of the Square to that state of openness and grace which it was designed to keep."³⁴

Hurst Seager's 1900 pronouncement "we have no style, no distinctive forms of art ... our cities are chiefly made up of architectural quotations,"³⁵ was perhaps no more prophetic than when applied to the debacle of the design problems of Cathedral Square in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that this period saw the first design competition to improve the aesthetic reading of the square, it did not result in the rendering, as Hurst Seager put it in his article in the *RIBA Journal* of 1900, of a scholarly solution. Following the protracted public debate and ensuing case in the Court of Appeal, the offending shelter was finally demolished in 1931, enabling Godley to be returned to his rightful spot in April 1933. However, two

small, albeit temporary shelters were constructed from material salvaged from the demolished shelter, and although the trams had ceased to run by 1954 with the introduction of a public bus system, the shelters remained until 1973! Ironically the south shelter, "this appalling ugliness," is now a "heritage item" and has been reconstructed as part of the tramway system at Ferrymead Historic Park.

³³ Cyrano "The "Comfort Station"" p 2.

³⁴ Anon."Cathedral Square" (17 November 1921) p 6.

³⁵ Seager "Architectural Art in New Zealand" p 481.

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