

The Langham Private Hotel: an iconic merger of architecture, urbanism, and decoration in Edwardian Newtown

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ABSTRACT: Completed in 1908, the Langham Private Hotel in Newtown, Wellington - now known as Ashleigh Court - embodied optimism and grand ambition indivisible from its surrounding community. The building was designed to have maximum visual effect on a high-profile triangular site and was conceived during the suburb of Newtown's heady days of rapid and substantial expansion in the decades around the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Located within a precinct composed mainly of two-storey, timber commercial buildings, the three-storey masonry building housing ground-level stores and a hotel far outstripped its neighbours in size, materials, and architectural articulation. The masonry wedge with its continuous façade along two street fronts featuring superbly executed plaster decoration could only impress.

This paper will explore how the Langham Private Hotel's excellence in design resulted from an enlightened merger of architecture, siting, and decoration within Newtown's otherwise uniform commercial streetscape. It will consider its relationship to the typology of plastered, masonry commercial buildings that came to define modernity and progress in late-Victorian and Edwardian Wellington. Finally, it will attempt to understand the ambitions and meanings present in its eclectic plaster decoration that would have been evident to contemporaries. In nearly every design dimension, the Langham Private Hotel can be considered an apex of urban design in Edwardian New Zealand.

Introduction

Completed in 1908, the Langham Private Hotel in Newtown - now known as Ashleigh Court - embodied optimism and grand ambition indivisible from its surrounding community. The building was conceived during Newtown's heady days of rapid expansion in the decades around the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Located within a precinct composed mainly of two-storey, timber commercial buildings, the three-storey masonry building housing ground-level stores and a hotel far outstripped its neighbours in size, materials, and architectural articulation. It was designed to have maximum visual effect on its high-profile triangular site: a masonry wedge with a continuous façade

along two street fronts that featured superbly executed plaster decoration.

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considered an apex of urban design in Edwardian New Zealand.¹

The Rise of Newtown

The Langham Private Hotel is arguably the most prominent architectural cornerstone marking the commercial centre of Newtown, one of Wellington's earliest, largest, and best-known suburbs. William Mein Smith laid out what became Newtown in 1840 as town acres in the original plan for Wellington, which included the acute-angled lot at the corner of Riddiford and Rintoul Streets. Existing Māori pā and kāinga, including Te Aro Pā, were located further north and were oriented to the

¹ This paper is drawn in large part from a larger and more detailed study on the building: Jacobs "Ashleigh Court, WELLINGTON (List No. 1335, Category 1)."

waterfront, and even sites of cultivation do not appear to have extended as far to the south as Newtown, although the area would have been travelled through to access the settlements on the South Coast.² The town acres that would come to make up Newtown and Berhampore were in an outlying part of Wellington as surveyed and the area remained thinly populated by households engaged in farming for the first generation of European settlement.³

The sparse settlement of Newtown gave way to more intensive suburban development beginning in the 1870s. The broad, comparatively level valley made rapid subdivision and construction a better prospect than on other outlying areas. Employment opportunities, increased amenities, and better access all catalysed Newtown's establishment as a residential suburb and commercial hub, highlighted by such milestones as: the relocation of Wellington Hospital, announced in 1876 and completed in 1881; the opening of the Newtown Hotel in 1876; the extension of the tramline along Riddiford Street to a terminus at Constable Street and the opening

of Newtown School, both in 1879; the construction of a fire and police station in 1880; the opening of Newtown Park in 1881; and the creation of a branch of the post office in 1885.⁴ These events also coincided with the increased use of the prosaic "Newtown" for the physical locale, rather than "South Wellington."⁵

The fortunes of Riddiford Street rose with those of Newtown. All of the land in Newtown had for the most part been subdivided into sections by 1889 with the parcels on or nearby the tramline popular for residential and commercial development. In 1904, horse-drawn cars gave way to electric trams in 1904, which made the suburb both convenient and affordable to workers. As blocks further away from the tramline filled with houses, Riddiford Street became even more intensively developed with retail establishments. In short order, Newtown became a self-contained shopping destination that, in terms of density of retail outlets, was only outpaced by Cuba Street, Courtenay Place, and Lambton Quay. It is within this

context of feverish development that the Langham Private Hotel came into existence.

The Genesis of the Langham Private Hotel

Building contractors John Thomas Hawthorn and Colin Campbell Crump became associated with the prominently located triangular property at the intersection of Riddiford and Rintoul Streets in August 1898. At that time, they entered into a 21-year lease with landowner Lucy Mary Compton that included an option to buy.⁶ They may have become familiar with the site and its potential while they developed a commercial premises for a chemist across Riddiford Street in 1898.⁷

Hawthorn and Crump were in active partnership between 1897 and 1908, sometimes in collaboration with Colin Crump's brother, the well-known speculative builder Harry Crump.⁸ Among the small number of documented Hawthorn & Crump works in Wellington, the Langham Private Hotel was by far the firm's most ambitious

² Grouden "162 Riddiford Street, Newtown" p 6.

³ WCC "Newtown Central Shopping Centre Heritage Area" p 9.

⁴ Humphris & Mew *Ring Around the City* pp 30-31; WCC "Newtown Central Shopping Centre Heritage Area" pp 10-11.

⁵ Humphris & Mew *Ring Around the City* p 30.

⁶ Lucy Mary Compton to John Thomas Hawthorn and Colin Campbell Crump (lease) 18 August 1898; see also "Land Compulsorily Taken" p 6.

⁷ WCC "Castles the Chemist" np.

⁸ WCC "Hawthorn and Crump" np; Department of Internal Affairs. Death register no. 1930/3786 np.

project. Colin Crump retired from contracting and building activities around the time that the building was completed and later served in public office before his death in 1930.⁹ John Hawthorn's activities after Crump's retirement up to his death in 1936 remain obscure.

The site seems to have remained underdeveloped when, in 1902, Wellington City Council acquired the property as part of the widening of Riddiford Street. The subsequent compensation to the land owner and the leasees became the topic of complicated court proceedings.¹⁰ The resolution of the case also saw Hawthorn & Crump purchase the property, minus the road reserve, from the city in November 1903.¹¹ The outcome also required the removal of a "dwellinghouse" that was located in part of the property transferred to the city for the road widening.¹² The Thomas Ward map documents that no building was present in

1892 and it is not known whether Lucy Mary Compton had previously constructed the dwelling or whether Hawthorn and Crump did so under their lease.

On the newly resized and cleared site Hawthorn & Crump envisioned something much bolder and in keeping with the intensive development trends along Riddiford Street. In January 1904, they initially proposed a wedge-shaped, two-storey building of masonry construction with no basement that was estimated to cost £4,000.¹³ The plans show four shops on the ground floor and a public hall with men's and women's toilets on the first floor. There were no exterior wall elevations included in the set, but the verandah appears in plan, elevation, and section, which shows it stopping just after turning the corner onto Rintoul Street. The stunted verandah and location of the door for the public hall on Riddiford Street indicates

that the building was conceived to principally address the more important thoroughfare.

More than two years passed with presumably no activity occurring on the site when in the autumn 1906 Hawthorn & Crump submitted an even more ambitious three-storey plus basement design for consideration by the city.¹⁴ As with the earlier scheme, retail shops occupied most of the ground floor, but the upper two levels now accommodated a hotel. The building not only featured an additional storey, but also had an enlarged footprint. The original proposal had four shops on the ground floor and a straight party wall between Riddiford and Rintoul Streets. Space for the stair up to the public hall was borrowed from the area of one of the stores. The new design took in additional land to the south - presumably now the entire parcel - and the party wall was angled following the

⁹ "Who's Who, City Council Candidates" p 9.

¹⁰ "The Right to Compensation" p 5; "Land Compulsorily Taken" p 6.

¹¹ The Mayor, Councillors and Citizens of Wellington to John Thomas Hawthorn and Colin Campbell Crump.

¹² Deed (Release of Compensation Claims), made between Lucy Mary Compton; John Thomas Hawthorn and Colin Campbell Crump.

¹³ Plans, specifications, and related correspondence as part of the application submitted by Hawthorn & Crump. The cover letter is dated 13 January 1904 and the cover and specifications are stamped by the City Engineering Department 25 January 1904. The two tinted drawings are not dated, but details link them to the other submitted documentation.

¹⁴ Specifications for "Shops and Private Hotel" and "Balcony to Shops and Private Hotel" at the corner of Riddiford and Rintoul Streets are stamped "April 5, 1906." Although undated, there are four of five sheets (basement plan appears to be the one missing) of an accompanying set of drawings that correspond to the building specs and one drawing associated with those for the "balcony" (verandah). Plans, specifications, and related correspondence as part of the application submitted by Hawthorn & Crump.

property line. The enlarged ground-floor plan accommodated five shops plus a central hallway extending fully between Riddiford and Rintoul Streets and containing the stair. The upper levels included all public spaces, bedrooms, and service areas required for a hotel and a substantial cellar under the entire building was envisaged, which would have included necessary storage for the hotel.

At present, Hawthorn & Crump's reasoning for so dramatically altering the development scheme for the parcel is not conclusively known. The Newtown branch of the city library opened less than a year prior to the submission of their first proposal. The building featured "a large hall ... fitted with a platform and seating accommodation for 150 to 200 people ... with anterooms for both ladies and gentlemen," a description of a space not unlike the one originally proposed by Hawthorn & Crump.¹⁵ Perhaps they believed that Newtown could support two such spaces and later reconsidered. Still, their turn to a hotel as an alternative was a possibly risky one in terms of investment. By 1906, the residents of Newtown had already backed a prohibition of licensed premises and this goal

¹⁵ "Wellington South Free Public Library" p 2.

would be fully accomplished just a few years later.¹⁶ The proximity of Athletic Park, slightly further south along Rintoul Street, might have been enough to consider a hotel for the property regardless of an impending liquor licensing ban.

The high level of architectural ambition evident in the scale and design of the building almost certainly would have involved an architect or, at the very least, a very highly skilled draftsman.¹⁷ However, the drawings are unsigned and no other evidence at present confirms an individual or firm. James Bennie is a tempting architect to consider as he was involved in the design of at least two other buildings on wedge-shaped sections in Wellington. Yet, the drawing style used for

¹⁶ "Another Hotel for New-town" p 8; "Newtown's Will Over-Ridden" p 6; "The Hotels to Close Soon" p 13.

¹⁷ Historians Geoff Mew and Adrian Humphris, the latter also the Team Leader at the Wellington City Archives, are confident that an architect or skilled draughtsman designed the building. Hawthorn & Crump's drawings of proposed houses and building alterations contemporary with the Langham Private Hotel were relatively simple and straightforward, and were conceivably by the hand of the builder-developers themselves. In contrast, the more artistic and detailed ones would have necessitated a professional level of training in drawing. Humphris Pers. Comm.

the Langham Private Hotel's plans is distinct from the one used by Bennie around the same time for other buildings.¹⁸

If Bennie can likely be eliminated for simple associative reasons, then a few others can be introduced as intriguing possibilities using the same approach. Aspects of Edward Blake and Joseph Burr's drawing and lettering styles are similar to the first unbuilt or second realised schemes for the site.¹⁹ Blake was one of the more prolific Wellington architects around the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Burr was a celebrated draughtsman, and later architect, who around the time of the hotel's design worked for Blake's firm with Francis Penty.²⁰ Finally, William Chatfield who "had a reputation for designing buildings of great strength and with High Victorian forms of plaster decoration" was also active at the time of its design and construction.²¹ Additionally, Chatfield lived in Island Bay from the late-1880s and must have been quite familiar with Newtown and its development.

¹⁸ Humphris Pers. Comm.

¹⁹ Mew and Humphris *Raupo to Deco* p 164; Humphris Pers. Comm.

²⁰ Mew and Humphris *Raupo to Deco* pp 89, 166.

²¹ Mew and Humphris *Raupo to Deco* p 70.

Construction appears to have taken longer than anticipated. The east elevation submitted with the 1906 drawings includes a central plaque bearing the year "A.D. 1906," but major construction dragged on through 1907, the year ultimately recorded on the building.²² Finishing work and the interior fit-out seems to have taken even longer as the Langham Private Hotel did not open for business until May 1908.²³ Even then, completion of the interiors and the business opening seems to have been rushed as the *New Zealand Times* reported in September 1908 that the

hostelery [sic] has recently been taken over by Mr J. Russell ... [and] has been converted into an up-to-date house, having been renovated throughout, as well as being refurnished from top to bottom, with new furniture.²⁴

The Design as Considered

In devising an eye-catching building for the site, the architect or designer would have immediately benefited from the section's location and shape as well as prevailing

architectural trends for commercial buildings. The building is not merely a conventionally-designed edifice altered to fit the requirements of an unconventional site. Rather, it is one where architecture and siting merged and equally informed the final composition. The result was a building that is best understood as a continuous façade that enlarges the sense of the streetscape. Successful works such as this do not passively exist on the sidelines as attractive, yet static components of their environments, but rather are essential to the active definition and identity of a place. A mundane building on a unique site or an attractive building on a conventional site is not empowered with the special level of impact as a building shaped by both its architecture and siting combined.

The building's assured presence was further underscored by an ornate, continuous verandah along the ground floor that originally curved around the acute corner, providing shelter for the footpath and a spacious terrace off the hotel's first-floor rooms. This feature and its location was favourably described 10 years after its construction: "it is a comfortable, clean, bright, and cheerful spot, encircled by a balcony 12ft wide, from which and from the flat roof there

is a wide and beautiful view north and south."²⁵

Augmenting the effects of form and siting was the Langham Private Hotel's plaster decoration. Lacking sources of quality building stone for fashioning street façades, architects and builders most often turned to plaster for late-Victorian and Edwardian commercial buildings in Wellington.²⁶ An architect-writer in 1907 commented on the role of plaster finishes in contemporary architecture:

in the process of erection we see a rough brick structure raised without form ... certainly without architectural form, and void of any beauty whatever. The builder, so far as construction is concerned, has done his work ... [and] the building might be ready for occupation. Now a transformation takes place ... [and the building receives] new and imposing garb [crafted in stucco].²⁷

Some critics thought the "new and imposing garb" lacked design integrity and such street façades tended also to defy stylistic categorisation; however, preoccupation with applying a formal architectural style to a building of this period is foolhardy as it

²² The discrepancy between the date in the drawings and in the completed building was noted in Cain "Ashleigh Court Private Hotel (Former)."

²³ "Wanted Known" p 1.

²⁴ "Langham Private Hotel" p 13.

²⁵ "Social Gossip" p 14.

²⁶ Humphris and Mew *Ring Around the City* p 21.

²⁷ "Interesting Criticism" p 4.

overlooks the meanings present in eclectic and visually busy compositions of the commercial vernacular.

In his recent study of late-nineteenth-century New York City tenements, Zachary Violette challenges readers to consider how period observers understood the rampant use of applied decoration, which articulated buildings that were "unmistakeable signs of improvement and even communal identity."²⁸ The number decorative components, rather than their cohesive representation of a style, signalled

position within the social and economic hierarchy: buildings with more ornament were associated with the wealthy and power institutions, while those with less or none were associated with the poor and working class.²⁹

While the particular context of Violette's study - the ornament utilised on residential tenements in New York City's late-nineteenth century ethnic immigrant neighbourhoods - is distinct, the broader meanings are wholly applicable to Wellington and, more particularly, the Langham Private Hotel in Newtown.

²⁸ Violette *The Decorated Tenement* p 23.

²⁹ Violette *The Decorated Tenement* p 90.

By the time of its construction, Wellington's central business district was in the process of being rebuilt in masonry, mostly brick, and the material's association with progress and permanence was already well-established. The capital of New Zealand was shrugging off the modest and largely plain timber commercial buildings of the colonial period and proudly reinventing itself as a modern and attractive city on the make. Furthermore, the builders' decision to develop the site with a masonry building reflects their ambition for the project and their confidence in the continued prosperity of Newtown.

The Langham Private Hotel's plaster decoration featured a melange of architectural details common to popularised Renaissance design, including: banded rustication; alternating triangular and segmental arched pediments; oversize keystones; cornices, beltcourses, and bands of dentils; fluted pilasters with squat Ionic capitals; swag-draped plaques; and masses of foliage. Identifiably classical and organised in a way that nodded to the quintessential building of Renaissance urbanism - the palazzo - the composition's aesthetic excesses and multiplicity of layered components was decidedly Edwardian. Within the context of

Edwardian Wellington, the large, prominent, and highly-decorated Langham Private Hotel would have lent a measure of social respectability and legitimacy to a new and vast neighbourhood populated primarily by the temperate and prosperous members of the working class and lower-middle-class.

Over the intervening century, this architectural cornerstone has been home to a range of businesses, retail on the ground floor and mostly residential on the upper storeys, including a period as a hostel for convalescing soldiers during the First World War. Despite this disjointed history, the building appears to have never been seriously threatened by demolition even while large swathes of Wellington's Victorian and Edwardian heritage was levelled beginning in the 1960s because of perceived earthquake risk as well as the demands of a commercial building boom that radically transformed the city centre.³⁰ Perhaps its survival was dumb luck, or perhaps it was a tacit understanding its successful design and its importance to the identity of Newtown. Two years ago, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga recognised

³⁰ For a full discussion of this transformation, both demolition and new construction, see *Hometown Boomtown*.

these and other heritage values during a review of the List entry, which resulted in its elevation from a Category 2 to a Category 1 historic place. Heritage New Zealand also provided financial support for its seismic assessment and strengthening, assuring that this significant example of excellence in Edwardian architecture and urbanism survives into the future.

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