

"That building with the palm trees": Wellington Central Library

Kerryn Pollock, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

ABSTRACT: Athfield Architects' postmodern Wellington Central Library (1991) represented the firm's entry into public architecture. Part of the Civic Square development, and Aotearoa New Zealand's largest construction project at the time, it was a propitious turn away from the corporate work that went from boom to bust in the wake of the 1987 share market crash. The library was a critical and popular success, winning three major awards and becoming known as "Wellington's living room." Fast forward to 19 March 2019, and it was closed with a few hours warning due to seismic concerns. Fears for its future prompted a public nomination for the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero. This paper will explore the building's history, design and heritage values.

Christmas came early for Wellington in 1991 when the 18,800 sqm new central library was opened by Governor-General Dame Catherine Tizard at a public event on 9 December.¹ The centrepiece of the city's new civic centre, imaginatively named Civic Square, Athfield Architects' library was a public and critical success. Library usage increased by 80% and book borrowing by 40% in the year or so after the building opened, with *New Zealand Home & Building* magazine reporting

the record crowds that have flocked to the new Library, which has gained rapid and wide public recognition as "that building with the palm trees" are testimony to the fact that the brief has been successfully met.²

Visitor numbers remained impressive, with around 1.1 million visitors per year in the 1990s, rising to an average of 1.3 million in the

¹ WCC "Wellington Central Library. The Building: Facts and Features of Interest"

² Bartley "Radical Departure" p 89.

2000s and slightly fewer in the 2010s.³ In the twenty-first century it was the second most visited public building in Wellington after Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand.⁴ Julia Gatley has written about the ultimate measure of popular success: "teenagers flood[ing] in after school, to socialise under the guise of doing homework."⁵ Public libraries are inherently popular but the building's well-known identity as Wellington's communal living room – connoting a place that fosters sociability, manaakitanga and relaxation – showed that this association rested on more than its basic function.⁶

³ Wellington City Libraries Annual KPI reports.

⁴ WCC "Proposed Future of the Central Library Consultation" p 171.

⁵ Gatley *Athfield Architects* p 206.

⁶ WCC "Wellington Central Library Building and Service Update and Building Remediation Options" p 25.

On the critical side of the popularity ledger, the building won three major awards, the Carter Holt Harvey Architectural Award, Environmental, in 1992, and a New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) Wellington Branch award and National award the following year.⁷ The Branch award citation was lyrical in its praise and correctly predicted the iconic qualities the building would come to be recognised for:

Absolutely positively urban: confident yet humane, quirky with a critical edge. This complex building artfully presents a distinct visage towards two separate public spaces. Fronting the Civic Square, a glassy serpentine wall slides past the angular flank of the old library. Soft fluid lines are realised with machined precision. Brittle surfaces and crisp details amplify generations of difference between the two neighbours. The west elevation proclaims civic grandeur to a bustling commercial thoroughfare. The envelope is rendered sheer and massive. The street wall is breached

⁷ "NZIA-Resene Awards for Architecture: Wellington Branch" p 18; Gatley *Athfield Architects* p 206.

by a lofty portal which has been ennobled by giant metallic nikau palms, which combine stateliness and whimsy to produce a signature for the whole Civic Centre.⁸

In 2007 the Architectural Centre included it in an unranked list of Wellington's 10 best buildings.⁹ Last year architect Pip Cheshire described it

as a major building in ... Ian Athfield's body of work. ... The success the central library has enjoyed as an innovative and popular library, social hub and key public building is due in no small part to Athfield's unique design,

while Angela Foster of the NZIA Wellington branch spoke of it as

an outstanding example of the architecture of its era, a postmodern milestone in the continuum of Wellington architecture that stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.¹⁰

Both of these recent opinions were publicly expressed after the library's sudden closure on 19 March 2019. The doors were shut at 8:30pm, with the announcement only having

⁸ "Wellington Library, Civic Centre, Wellington" p 54.

⁹ Dickens "Structures in our Midst: Wellington's Best Buildings" p A6.

¹⁰ Cheshire "Letter to the editor" p 15; Foster "Save our Library from the Wreckers" p 16.

been made earlier that afternoon.¹¹ The decision to close was made after changes to government seismic performance guidelines and the commissioning of an engineering assessment that raised concerns about the library's precast hollowcore concrete flooring system. This was a common flooring type in buildings constructed between the 1980s and 2000s, and one which had failed in other Wellington buildings of similar design during the Kaikōura earthquake in 2016.¹²

For your average library goer, me included, the building's closure was shocking and devastating. It is hard to think of another place in the city where anyone could go, for as long as they wanted (within opening hours), at no cost and no questions asked. It was warm and (mostly) dry, with plenty of chairs (not entirely comfortable but perhaps that means they were shared more). A couple of days after it shut, Wellington writer Gem Wilder captured the library's broad appeal:

There would be toddlers playing in the kids' section while their caregivers read them picture books, or just

¹¹ Wilder "Can we Fill the Void Left by the Wellington Central Library" np.

¹² Barton "Editorial: Chris Barton on Longevity" np; WCC "Wellington Central Library Building and Service Update and Building Remediation Options" pp 17-18.

sat back for a welcome breather in a safe and welcoming space. The desks that lined the enormous stretch of windows along the length of the back wall of the library would be filled with students, studying or being tutored. There would be people reading the paper, senior citizens on their way from the drop-in centre, businesspeople returning books on a quick break from work, people heading to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, and Clarks cafe upstairs, feeding and caffeinating the hordes.¹³

In May 2020 Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga (HNZPT) received a nomination to enter the library onto the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero ("the List") from Wellington property developer Richard Burrell.¹⁴ The nominator's aim was:

Specific identification of heritage value for the central library building and surrounds, retention of these values long term for the community. Recognition of the library's contribution as a cornerstone of Wellington City Civic Square Heritage Area – the library is a unique example of a thriving, functional heritage space. Incorporation of heritage values into any strategy or plan for earthquake strengthening and site rehabilitation through sensitive engineering design/assessment techniques. Finally, "future-proofing" the central library's survival by prioritising its full retention.¹⁵

¹³ Wilder "Can we Fill the Void Left by the Wellington Central Library" np.

¹⁴ Burrell "Application for Entry on the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero. Historic Places and Areas. Wellington Central Library."

¹⁵ Burrell "Application for Entry on the New Zealand

Wellington's Libraries and the Civic Centre

The first library in Aotearoa New Zealand was likely the Port Nicholson Exchange and Public Library, which opened in Wellington in May 1841.¹⁶ Members had to pay a subscription fee to borrow books and the financial position of the library was precarious. It closed in 1842 and reopened later that year, only to close again in 1843. A new library opened in 1850 and from then Wellington has always had a library. In 1893 a grand, purpose-built public library constructed by the Wellington City Council (WCC) opened on the site of the current administration building at 101 Wakefield Street.¹⁷

The library was joined by a magnificent neoclassical town hall designed by noted architect Joshua Charlesworth in 1904. This established the area as the emerging civic hub of Wellington.¹⁸ A new library opened on the north side of Mercer Street in 1940 and was followed by the Municipal Office Building

Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero. Historic Places and Areas. Wellington Central Library" p 2.

¹⁶ Millen "Libraries: Public libraries" p 1.

¹⁷ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 4.

¹⁸ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 5. This building is Wellington Town Hall, List No. 3275.

(MOB) on the west side of the town hall in 1951.¹⁹ The 1893 library was demolished on completion of the new library.²⁰

By 1951 Wellington had a collection of civic buildings in close proximity but, unlike Christchurch for instance, no civic centre where people could gather *en masse*. A triangular piece of land in front of the MOB was landscaped and named "Civic Centre" as a first step towards a dedicated public space.²¹ The land between Harris, Victoria and Mercer streets and Jervois Quay was zoned as a civic centre in 1964 and the council bought properties as they came up for sale. In the early 1970s the town hall was slated for replacement with a new hall and convention centre.²² Called the Michael Fowler Centre after the then-mayor, the Warren and Mahoney-designed, "vaguely Brutalist" building took years to reach fruition, opening in 1983.²³ The Charlesworth town hall was

¹⁹ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" pp 7-8. The 1940 library – now the City Gallery – is Wellington Central Library (Former), List No. 1451.

²⁰ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 7.

²¹ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 8; *Evening Post* staff photographer "The Civic Centre, Wellington."

²² WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 8.

²³ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 11. The foundational work took much longer than anticipated

saved from demolition after the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and other advocates lobbied the council, following a widely supported community campaign.²⁴

A number of civic centre concepts were drawn up in the early 1980s.²⁵ These were reviewed in 1986 and a single concept plan was created. The proposed civic centre consisted of a new, bigger library, the conversion of the 1940 library into an art gallery, the refurbishment of the MOB, a new administration building, a central square created by the partial closure of Mercer Street and a bridge to the waterfront.²⁶ Fletcher Development and Construction won the contract and engaged architects Maurice

due to the challenges posed by building on reclaimed land.

²⁴ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 9. This chronology explains the obvious lack of design connections between the two buildings.

²⁵ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 11.

²⁶ Gully et al. "Wellington Public Library Development Plan Report Prepared for the Wellington City Council." The 1940 library had become too small by the mid-1960s and some services were off-site. A proposal to extend it was abandoned in 1970 after an investigation concluded its design inadequacies would not be compensated for by an addition. A new library was instead recommended as part of the long drawn-out civic centre proposals.

Tebb, Gordon Moller and Ian Athfield.²⁷ The new library would be Athfield's responsibility.

Design

The work of British architect and library designer Michael Brawne (1925-2003) informed the brief for the new building.²⁸ Brawne identified four basic principles in library design: movement and circulation, supervision, storage, and enticement. To his mind these were shared with the likes of supermarkets and the brief consciously positioned the new library with the retail sector, rather than the traditional government or municipal sector.²⁹

The principle of enticement was particularly influential on the Wellington library's design. The site, between busy Victoria Street and the proposed civic centre, was chosen for its proximity to pedestrian and vehicle traffic in the way supermarkets were. In keeping with

²⁷ WCC "Civic Centre Heritage Area" p 9; Gatley *Athfield Architects* p 204.

²⁸ McKeon "Wellington Public Library" p 20.

²⁹ Note that Athfield himself used the word "supermarket" in relation to the library. Davis "Creating and Making the Wellington Public Library 1987-1991" np.

contemporary thinking, the building was to be free of the features traditionally associated with libraries, such as forbidding, closed façades, yet architecturally distinguished from surrounding buildings so its function would be clear, and people drawn inside. As described by City Librarian Brian McKeon:

Ideally the passerby [sic] should gain an impression of what is happening inside the building without entering ... The entrance should proclaim itself, be at ground level, and be easy to negotiate. ... there should be an inducement for the visitor to move further into the building and explore.³⁰

Ian Athfield researched the notion of "threshold fear," when people hesitate to enter institutions like museums, galleries and libraries because they feel unwelcome for any number of reasons.³¹ He visited new libraries in the United States and Scandinavia on a study tour and witnessed the benefits of accessible, open-plan buildings.³² The new Wellington building was to encourage visitors inside through conscious design.

How was this realised in the design?

³⁰ McKeon "Wellington Public Library" p 22.

³¹ Athfield "Lecture on the 20th anniversary of the Wellington Central Library" np.

³² Dale "Opening Windows on the Wide World" p 7.

Overlooking Te Ngākau Civic Square, the sinuous glass façade of the east elevation's ground, first and second floors satisfied the requirement to entice people inside by putting the interior on show. A guiding design principle was permeability between the library, Victoria Street and Te Ngākau Civic Square. Libraries typically had only one entrance/exit for security reasons and it was thought that this would rule out a direct connection with the Square.³³ The solution was an internal mezzanine floor skirting around the library proper, which acted as an internal path between the Square and Victoria Street.³⁴ Described at the time as a "radical move for a library," the mezzanine included a café and bookshop, both of which were intended to draw non-library users into the building.³⁵ The purpose-designed interior, furniture and fittings, were part of the enticement ethos.

It has been argued that the lack of direct access between the building and square at ground level on this elevation has inhibited public use of the square; nevertheless, this internal pathway has long been a handy

³³ McKeon "Wellington Public Library" p 24.

³⁴ Gatley *Athfield Architects* p 206.

³⁵ Bartley "Radical Departure" p 90.

shortcut. Improving public flow was much discussed during the Wellington City Council (WCC) public submission process regarding the central library's future in 2020 and preliminary designs by Athfield Architects to open the building up on the Harris Street and Te Ngākau Civic Square sides were published in September of that year.³⁶ Ian Athfield himself expressed disappointment that the square was not livelier in the evening and acknowledged the role the buildings may have played in this.³⁷

Heritage Values

For an historic place to be entered onto the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero, it must be assessed as having aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, cultural, historical, scientific, social, spiritual, technological, or traditional significance or value, or a combination thereof.³⁸ The next step is to determine whether it is a Category 1 or 2 historic place.³⁹ The nominator believed the library could merit recognition as a Category 1 historic place and NZHPT's

research and preliminary assessment indicated this place met this threshold.⁴⁰

The draft summary finding of the listing proposal report was that the Wellington Central Library possesses outstanding heritage significance which rests on its architectural, historical and social values. As a much-lauded postmodern building, it occupies a special position in Aotearoa New Zealand's architectural landscape. Its most striking feature, the collection of nīkau palm columns, is part of the cultural fabric of Wellington. As a major work of esteemed architect Ian Athfield and his firm, it is firmly associated with a very significant figure in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century history of Aotearoa New Zealand architecture. In addition to the critical approbation this building has received, it had a high level of public use and associated esteem. In addition to a place to access books, magazines, music and technology, it was valued as a meeting point, relaxation spot, and warm and inviting haven on a cold day.

Public submissions on the proposal were

invited and 25 were received. 16 were in support and 9 in opposition. One submission raised issues with the heritage assessment and this will be carefully worked through.

What Next?

On 28 October 2020 Wellington City councillors voted to remediate the library to the highest level ("Option C").⁴¹ Overall, public consultation showed this option and a new building ("Option D") were equally popular.⁴² Remediation will likely include design changes along the lines of those proposed by Athfield Architects noted above. Preliminary design specifications refer to protection of existing building elements, the stair and void balustrades and original items such as the artwork, furniture, shelving, carpet and light fittings.⁴³ Option C will be added to the draft Long-Term Plan, which will be put out for public consultation in March 2021.⁴⁴ With respect to the listing process, all public submissions on the proposal will be presented to a sub-committee of Te Poari o Te Pouhere Taonga, the Board of

³⁶ WCC "Let's Talk Wellington" np.

³⁷ Athfield "Lecture on the 20th anniversary of the Wellington Central Library" np.

³⁸ HNZPTA Section 66(1).

³⁹ HNZPTA Section 66(2)(3).

⁴⁰ Pollock "New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero: Report for a Historic Place: Wellington Central Library" pp 26-28.

⁴¹ WCC "Let's Talk Wellington" np.

⁴² WCC "Central Library gest strengthening vote" np.

⁴³ Athfield Architects, "50% Preliminary Design Outline Spec: Option C Wellington Central Library" p 4.

⁴⁴ WCC "Let's Talk Wellington" np.

HNZPT, followed by the entire Board, which will likely make a final decision in early 2021. WCC elected not to make a submission.

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