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New International Selection
Full Documentation Fiche 2003

International working party for
documentation and conservation

of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the
modern movement

composed by national/regional working party of: NEW ZEALAND

0. Picture of building/ group of buildings/ urban scheme/ landscape/ garden



depicted item: Wanganui Civic Centre, with Veterans' Steps in foreground
source: Wendy Pettigrew
date: 22 March 2010

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1. Identity of building/ group of buildings/ landscape/ garden

1.1 Data for identification

current name: Wanganui Civic Centre

former/original/variant name: Wanganui War Memorial Hall and Forecourt.

number(s) and name(s) of street(s): Queens Park, Watt Street

town: Whanganui

province/state: Wellington

post code: 4500 block: Town of Wanganui Pt res E lot: sections 548 & 549

country: New Zealand

national topographical grid reference: BL32

current typology: ADM, MON (administration & monuments)

former/original/variant typology: ADM, MON (administration & monuments)

comments on typology: An exemplar for a new hybrid typology integrating War Memorial and Civic Hall.

1.2 Status of protection

protected by: Listed in Wanganui District Plan Heritage Inventory, Item 319, effective 4 December 2009. National significance recorded by Registration as Historic Place under Historic Places Act 1993.

grade: Historic Place – Category 1

date: 05/02/1999

valid for: whole building

remarks: This is the highest category of registration for New Zealand. The integral importance of the War Memorial Hall Forecourt and plaza for its modern design, the overall civic composition, and the presence it affords the War Memorial Hall is not yet recognised or protected. The Memorial Hall forecourt was originally conceived as a town square.

1.3 Visually or functionally related building(s)/site(s)

name(s) of surrounding area/building(s): Whanganui Regional Museum, Veterans' Steps, New Zealand Wars Memorial, Sarjeant Gallery, Queens Park

visual relations: The War Memorial Hall is important for creating and facing onto a civic-scaled public plaza. It faces the Robert Talboys' designed Whanganui Regional Museum on the other side of the Plaza. The War Memorial Hall completes the Samuel Hurst Seager designed classical civic centre. With the Museum opposite, the Hall frames the Veterans' Steps and New Zealand Wars memorial, which gives access to the Donald Hosie designed neo-classical Sarjeant Gallery in the north-east and the Maria Place city cross-axis to the Cooks Gardens landscape reserve to the south-west.

functional relations: The Wanganui Civic Centre operates as a stand-alone facility providing meeting, concert chamber and hall facilities for the city. It also contains a caretaker's flat in the upper part of the roof on the northern side. The Centre has a minor contemporary programmatic connection to the Sarjeant Gallery and is associated with the other cultural facilities and memorials in Queens Park, including the Alexander Library by Hood and Duffell. Its memorial function is focused on a World War II Book of Remembrance on a black polished granite plinth within a main ceremonial sanctuary space. It provides a memorial connection to the Veterans' Steps (New Zealand Wars memorial) and the Robert Talboys' designed World War I Memorial Cenotaph.

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other relations: The building is located in the lower reaches of the city's major central park. Its designed roofscape is an architectural landscape visible from the upper reaches of the park. The building forms the major street edges to Watt Street to the south and east.

2. History of building(s) etc.

2.1 Chronology

commission or competition date: 10 February 1956 competition results advised

design period(s): 1956 -1958

start of site work: 14 Sept 1958

completion/inauguration: 25 April 1960

2.2 Summary of development

commission brief: An open competition called by the Wanganui City Council circa September 1955 and closing 31st Jan 1956.

design brief: For a new War Memorial Hall and Layout of Queens Park.

building/construction: Construction contract signed Feb 1958. Foundation stone laid and construction began Sept 1958.

completed situation: Completed for opening on Anzac Day [25 April] 1960.

original situation or character of site: Site previously occupied by wooden Drill Hall, an Army facility which also served for more than 80 years as a civic centre for social and fundraising functions. It was demolished in 1957.

2.3 Relevant persons/organisations

original owner(s)/patron(s): Wanganui City Council [Mayor EA Millward]

architect(s): Newman, Smith & Greenhough

(Geoffrey Newman, Gordon Smith and AC Greenhough. Gordon Smith was supervising architect)

landscape/garden designer(s): n/a

other designer(s): n/a

consulting engineer(s): AJ Macdonald

building contractor(s): Pepper and Fromont

2.4 Other persons or events associated with the building(s)/site

name(s): Returned Serviceman's Association and the Wanganui Scottish Memorial Hall Society, also Rotary and William McAlpine Duncan Estate.

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Fundraising event(s): period: 1954 -1960, included Miss Personality contest.

2.5 Summary of important changes after completion

type of change: Generation one: Alteration/renovation/restoration/extension/other: Internal remodelling of foyer. This consisted of changing the design of the series of wall mounted lights to the upper foyer, and adding new low diagonal timber bulkheads above the Pioneer Room and Concert Chamber entries, and a diagonal series of acoustic tiles below the waffle slab ceiling and over the silicate brick walls to the Pioneer (Supper) Room. The Pioneer Room floor was also carpeted to a grid pattern that clashes with the original clarity of the space and this was repeated in the next generation of maintenance. The exterior was also altered from the original white and black to a postmodern exterior colour scheme of creams, greens and reds. Generation two: The clear south foyer window glass in the vicinity of the Book of Remembrance was replaced with coloured leadlight glass art. Generation three: Internal remodel of foyer, toilets, kitchen (including kitchen windows) and increased disabled access, with addition of a lift and handrails to main staircase.

date(s): Generation one: early 1980s(±). Generation two: 2001(±). Generation three: 2004(±).

circumstances/ reasons for change. Generation one: To upgrade lighting and to address acoustic issues in the supper room. Generation two: To enhance the architecture's memorial qualities. Generation three: To address accessibility and maintenance issues.

effects of changes: Generation one changes: These changes all fight the original design and intentions and should all be removed and restored back to the original design. The acoustic issues to the Pioneer Room walls can be addressed more sensitively than by covering parts of the brickwork with clashing 1980s diagonal panels. The next exterior maintenance cycle could restore the original colour scheme given the will of the Whanganui District Council. Generation two changes: Although detracting from the original clarity of the design, the new windows have been undertaken relatively sensitively and are separate elements within the original structure and augment the ongoing memorial use. These should remain. Generation three: These have been undertaken relatively sensitively and should remain, except the horizontal transoms in the new kitchen windows, which should be removed or painted black. The extension of a new enclosure for a grease trap on the first floor balcony should be removed. The carpet to the Pioneer Room should, in its next maintenance cycle, be replaced with a plain carpet with no feature lines marking out the building's structural grid, or it should be restored to its original parquet floor.

persons/organisations involved: Generation one: Architect Bruce Dickson. Generation two: Mayor Ron Russell. Generation three: Architect Eddie Belchambers.

3. Description of building(s) etc.

3.1 Site/building character

'The design theme of the whole is one of a clean lined, white, floating block related to the hill of Queens Park and the existing civic buildings'. The War Memorial Hall is a pure, clean modernist block floating on pilotis above an expansive geometric paved civic courtyard. The main bulk of the building is contained in a white block, 236 by 111 x 20ft high poised 11ft above a level forecourt on a 25ft by 25ft grid of circular pilotis. The interior consists of a Main Hall [110ft by 105ft] 27ft high with clerestory windows and seating for 1000 people, a Concert Chamber seating 400 people in tiered seats below a shaped copper clad dome, a Pioneer (supper) Room with brise soleil block screens 5 ft outside the glass line on two sides. A spacious vestibule with a glass fronted sanctuary houses a Book of Remembrance constantly lit on a

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black polished granite plinth. It is constructed from suspended and cantilevered concrete composite waffle floor and roof slabs, purpose designed and constructed large format white silicate brickwork cladding with dark horizontal and light vertical pointing to emphasise the building's horizontal lines.

3.2 Current use

of whole building/site: A major city hall, auditorium, conference and meeting venue.

of principal components (*if applicable*): The Forecourt civic courtyard plaza operates as a town square, accommodating occasional larger events in the life of the city.

comments: The building is still operating as a Civic Hall and is functioning more or less as originally designed. Proposals to change its use to a library and to incorporate an information centre into its architecture have occurred in the past but have not been advanced. Its historic value is increasingly recognised within Whanganui city and nationally.

3.3 Present (physical) condition

of whole building/site: The building has been adequately maintained, but has had challenges including three roof membranes within its life to date, and including an engineering proposal to put a curved roof on it in the early 1990s to resolve its roof problems. The historic status of the building prevented this occurring. Its exterior cladding of purpose designed and constructed white silicate brickwork is in places cracked as a result of settlement of the cantilevered floor slabs.

comments: Generally the building is substantively in good original condition. The relatively low utilisation of the building and its large areas has resulted in periodic appraisals of its efficiency and possible ways to improve the frequency of use. The structural systems used are adventurous and below the current requirements for similar buildings.

3.4 Note(s) on context, indicating potential developments

Indicate, if known, potential developments relevant for the conservation/threats of the building/site.

None known

4. Evaluation

Intrinsic value

4.1 technical evaluation:

The building utilises innovative structural systems to achieve its architectural intentions. Specifically it uses a waffle roof slab system incorporating solid column caps in a mushroom format to allow the columns to be set back five feet from the building edges, and the roof and floor slabs to cantilever by five feet. The cladding of purpose designed and constructed silicate brickwork is innovative and unique to this building as far as can be determined at this time.

4.2. social evaluation:

The building is significant socially. It is an exemplar of a hybrid typology integrating a War Memorial and Civic Hall. This was achieved through combined community and national funding collaboration. Its social impact through its modern aesthetic was very significant. The legacy of powerful buildings such as Wanganui's War Memorial Hall is to remind us of the importance of holding firm to objectives, and increasing our commitment and rigour. Today it is easy to overlook the difficulties involved in producing

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work of this quality. The cultural climate 40 years ago was much less tolerant of deviation from prevailing attitudes and mainstream practice. Retrospectively, we may see this building as fitting neatly into the international modernist genre and, as such, as a conformist building. Yet in a broader, less exclusively architectural context, it was an extraordinary challenging project in its break with tradition [GARDYNE]. Nationally it was a decisive and confident boost to a weakened post-war profession exactly when it was needed [STACPOLE & BEAVEN, *New Zealand Art; Architecture 1820 – 1970* p88].

4.3. Cultural and aesthetic evaluation:

The building is significant culturally and aesthetically. It appears as a key entry in all the New Zealand architectural histories and is regarded by commentators as being perhaps New Zealand's fullest and finest public expression of mid-century international Modernism [GATLEY *Long live the modern; New Zealand's New Architecture 1904 -1984* p99]. The project was designed in London by New Zealand architects. The international modern influence remains clear in the clarity and purity of the expression of its modern aesthetic. It is evidence of the directness of influence and application of modernist ideas to a New Zealand context.

Comparative significance

4.4 canonical status (local, national, international)

The building's design is the result of a winning entry to a national architectural competition that received 42 entries and prompted the following summary in the competition jury report: "We have every confidence that this design will result in a building of which the city of Wanganui will be justly proud, not only today but in the years to come." The significance of the building has been recognised by the award of a NZIA Gold Medal in 1961 and the NZIA's 25-year award in 1998.

4.5 historic and reference values:

The Wanganui Civic Centre is considered to be one of the finest examples of New Zealand modernist architecture, and at the time of its construction in 1955-1960 was a radical departure from the norm for civic memorial buildings in New Zealand. The proposal to build a suitable memorial in Wanganui to those who had lost their lives in the Second World War was first formally suggested in 1945. Following the war, the government offered subsidies for the construction of war memorials around the country, with a strong preference for 'living memorials' such as community centres. The government offered the Wanganui Council £50,000 for the new memorial hall. The community raised the remaining money for its construction, which included contributions from the Returned Servicemen's Association and the Scottish Pioneers. It has cultural and symbolic significance as the city's main war memorial [NEW ZEALAND HISTORIC PLACES TRUST REGISTER NO 7442]. The building was highly influential. It formed the centrepiece of an extended body of modern work in Wanganui including direct influence on the design of the City Council Chambers by Wilson, Belchambers Low and Associates [1964 -1968]. The War Memorial Hall design is clearly influenced by canonical international modern works as is noted in a number of commentaries: GATLEY, CLARK & WALKER, SHAW, MITCHELL.

5. Documentation

5.1 archives/written records/correspondence etc. (state location/ address):

Wanganui District Council Archives, 101 Guyton Street, PO Box 637, Wanganui 4500.

5.2 principal publications (in chronological order):

Gatley Julia Ed. *Long live the modern: New Zealand's new architecture, 1904-1984*. Auckland University Press, 2008, pp. 98-99

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Clark, Justine and Walker, Paul. *Looking for the local: architecture and the New Zealand modern*. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2000, p. 52.

1998 NZIA Resene Awards for Architecture: 'this year's national award winners and finalists'. *Architecture New Zealand*, May/June 1998 pp. 46-47, 55.

Cochran Chris. *Wanganui Heritage Study*, Wanganui War Memorial Hall; register item Q2, November 1990.

Gatley, Julia, 'War Memorial Hall', in Gatley Julia (Ed.), *Long live the modern: New Zealand's new architecture*, 1904-1984. Auckland University Press, 2008, pp. 98-99.

Shaw Peter. *New Zealand architecture: from Polynesian beginnings to 1990*. Hodder & Stoughton, Auckland, N.Z. 1991, pp. 152-153.

Mitchell, David and Chaplin, Gillian. *The elegant shed: New Zealand architecture since 1945*. Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1984, pp. 64-65.

Stacpoole, John and Beaven, Peter. *New Zealand Art; architecture 1820-1970* A. H. & A. W. Reed, Wellington, 1972, pp. 75, 88.

Newman G.C. 'Memorial Halls that serve the people'. Architecture and building supplement *New Zealand Herald* 7 November 1962, pp. 4-5.

Annual Dinner and Presentation of Awards. *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* Vol 29, no3 April 1962, p. 71.

Symes Fred C. 'City has great public spirit, Wanganui Constructs'; supplement to *Contracting and Construction* Oct 1961. Breckell and Nicholls, Auckland, pp. 47-51.

Wanganui War Memorial Building: A remarkable Building. *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* Vol 27, no7 August 1960, pp. 167-180.

'Wanganui War Memorial Hall'. *Home and Building*. Vol 23, no 3 August 1960, pp. 70-72.

'Wanganui War Memorial'; Supplement publication to the *Wanganui Chronicle* 25 April 1960 p 1-15

Wanganui War Memorial Hall Competition Report of the Jury of the Award. p 33 – 37. Auckland School of Architecture, archive ref s648.

'Wanganui War Memorial Hall Competition: illustrations of premiated designs'. *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* Vol 23, no3 April 1956 p 61-66

'Architectural Competition for a war memorial hall and layout of Queens Park at Wanganui'. *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* Vol 22, no6 July 1955 p 126-127

5.3 visual material (state location/ address)

original visual records/drawings/photographs/others: Wanganui District Council Archives, 101 Guyton Street, PO Box 637, Wanganui 4500.

recent photographs and survey drawings:

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film/video/other sources:

5.4 list documents included in supplementary dossier

n/a

6. Fiche report

name of reporter: Mark Southcombe

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date of report: August 2009; revised following peer review in October 2010 by Wendy Pettigrew

examination by DOCOMOMO national/regional section

approval by wp co-ordinator/registers correspondent (name): Dr Ann McEwan

sign and date: 4 April 2012

examination by DOCOMOMO ISC/R

name of ISC member in charge of the evaluation:

comment(s):

sign and date:

ISC/R approval:

date:

wp/ref. no.:

NAI ref. no.:

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