

Late Bloomer: The Live Centre of Whangarei 1875-1909

Kerry Francis, ScALA, School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, UNITEC, Auckland

ABSTRACT: The length of Bank Street between Vine and Water Streets and Rust and Cameron Streets Whangarei was, during the 1890s, the commercial and administrative centre of the fledgling town. The most significant presence in this block is now McDonalds.

In 1885 eastern side of the street contained the Melbourne Drapery, the Post Office and the County Council Building. The west side sported the Bank of New Zealand. All of these buildings were timber and single storied. The depression of the late 1880s and early 1890s stalled building activity in the North until late in the decade. The fires of 1899 and 1900 destroyed large parts of the adjoining Cameron Street and it wasn't until the turn of the century that this part of Whangarei changed into a zone with a new scale of building and a materiality to reinforce it and resist the spread of flame.

Also significant in this re development was the role of the Auckland Architect Edward Bartley. He had designed the All Saints Anglican Church in Kamo, a northern suburb in 1886 and his hospital design experience brought him again to Whangarei in the late 90s where he was responsible for the erection of a new hospital in 1900. Two new shops in the Bank Street block were completed in the same year followed by a new joint Whangarei County and Municipal Building in 1902 and a further block of shops in 1905. Subsequently, in 1908, the Post Office was rebuilt in brick to two stories and this area remained a significant commercial and administrative hub of the town until the removal of the Whangarei County to Rose Street in 1937 and the Post Office to its new premises in Rathbone Street in 1967.

This paper will examine these developments and discuss the architectural sophistications that accompany them.

Introduction

This paper is the third in a series on the architecture of Whangarei. Like the previous papers, this one explores the manner in which the architecture of a place changes as a result of the developments brought about by the trajectory commonly referred to as progress and by developments within the discipline of architecture itself.

The research for this paper has been predominantly carried out through the examination of photographs held in the archive of the Whangarei Museum as there are no building records of the period known to me. I am deeply indebted to the staff at the Museum for their help in finding and allowing me access to these images.

Bank Street, Whangarei 1886

It is March 1886 and you are standing at the corner of Bank and Cameron Streets, Whangarei, looking south.¹ On your left the Melbourne Drapery and Clothing House, timber and originally two storied, is now truncated to a single storey by the fire of November 9 1885² but still retains its corner verandah. Tucked in behind the Drapery, you can just make out the gable end of the new Post and Telegraph and Money Order Office which has replaced the original building on the site (the first purpose built Post Office of 1875) which has also been replaced after destruction by a fire of 1885.³ It is surrounded by significant trees. Next to the Post Office stands the Whangarei County Council Office, a single storey, double gabled building surrounded by a white picket fence. This building also contains the Whangarei Harbour Board offices, the Public Library and it is used by the Whangarei Borough Council for their meetings and administration. On the corner of the block, where you turn left into Vine Street, is an inelegant single storey shed, mute, its gable (in contrast to its above mentioned neighbours) runs parallel to the main street. Its massing defines the corner in an urban manner but its post and rail fence speaks more of the country suggesting some supporting function for the organization's rural constituency. Over Vine Street, on the directly opposite corner, stand the offices of the local newspapers, the Northern Advocate and the Gumdiggers Weekly.

Turning to your right (to the west) on the corner of Bank Street and Rust Lane (later Rust Avenue) is the Bank of New Zealand. Opened on the site in 1882, the building also sustained considerable damage in a fire of 1885.⁴ A group of suited men are asymmetrically arranged in front of the building. ⁵Three are located on

¹ Photograph 68/99/67 Whangarei Museum

² *Northern Advocate* Saturday July 17, 2004, p6. Caption on photo #55 Drummond /Te Wake Collection.

³ Keene *Between Two Mountains* p187.

⁴ Griffin *BNZ Whangarei : A Century of Service 1876-1976* p23.

the street outside the white picket fence whose posts echo the building's pilasters in spacing and contour. (The chimney too seems implicated in this game of repetition) The other three are arranged on the steps in the space between the Bank and the fence. The Bank building occupies the corner site but does not extend its bulk to any of its boundaries. The Bank, like its municipal and infrastructural neighbours the County Council building and the Post and Telegraph Office on the other side of the street, maintains a respectful distance from the street and is surrounded by significant trees. The white picket fence maintains the boundary line controlling entry to the building. Further south the verandah of the Marshall store wraps around the corner of Bank Street and into Water Street. The verandah posts are right on the kerb line and the building's bulk is right on the boundary line.

In 1886 in the centre of Whangarei we have a clear formal distinction between those buildings that are involved directly in commerce (retail) and those that are municipal or infrastructural. The retail buildings (the Melbourne Drapery and Marshall's Store) abut the boundary line and their transitional space (the verandah) is in the public domain (the footpath) whereas in the case of the municipal and infrastructural buildings their transitional space (the porch) is within the boundary of the site. The simply gabled Post and Telegraph Office has a transitional space that is a clearly articulated form (a verandah) set back from the boundary. The County Council building and the Bank are also both set back from the boundary but their transitional spaces are contained within the body of the building.

It is interesting to look back, in this respect, at the original Post Office building of 1875. ⁶This building, "a telegraph station/post office/residence designed by Government Architect W. H. Clayton and built by Mr. Reed"⁷ has a gable parallel to the street and a verandah provided by a continuation of the main roof pitch. It sits clear of all boundaries and the relationship with the street is mediated by the line of the County Council picket fence and a hitching rail. Like its 1885 successor its location on the site and its formal and scalar qualities are predominantly domestic.

If we now fast forward to the next century -to 1909 we will see a new Post and Telegraph Office ⁸that is located, again, back from the edge of the site, and again, with a fence mediating between it and the street. The difference between this fence and the 1875 and 1885 versions is that the fence is now made of wrought iron on a concrete base wall and it curves, it sweeps into the entrance of the building. The Post and Telegraph Office is now a two storey building in a Free Style⁹, its articulated quoining contrasting with the pebble dash finish on its upper elevation. There are still chimneys in evidence and the gable remains visible on the front elevation as a pediment.

The period from 1900-1930 has been described as the "golden age of the post office".¹⁰ Political support from a succession of Postmasters General resulted in an increasing capital expenditure on post office infrastructure and services throughout the country. A bar graph on page 12 of Robertson and Brown's *Post and Telephone Offices of Northland* clearly indicates this phenomenon showing the number of post and telephone offices open in Northland rising rapidly to peak through this period. The pressure to provide these communications services would, I imagine, have been driven by the same sorts of arguments currently used to support general access to internet broadband. It was a necessary modernization demanded by both personal and business interests of the time.

⁵ Photograph 69/95/599 Whangarei Museum.

⁶ Photograph 66/95/0 Whangarei Museum

⁷ Robertson and Brown *Post and Telephone Offices of Northland* p324.

⁸ Photographs 68/96/132 and 68/96/179 Whangarei Museum.

⁹ Apperly, Irving, Reynolds *Identifying Australian Architecture* Sydney: Harper Collins 1989 p136

¹⁰ Robertson and Brown *Post and Telephone Offices of Northland* p11.

But the building's appearance is ambivalent with regard to this agenda. Whilst larger in scale than its predecessors, the 1908 Post and Telegraph Office still retains a domestic persona. Its vestigial gable, evident chimneys, boundary setbacks and its fence (albeit materially different) all speak of the domestic. The buildings attempt to fuse the Arts and Crafts tradition with the design of larger more commercial buildings may have placed it within the discourse on modernity but it does not seem to have enhanced its urbanity.

This is in contrast to the trajectory of the adjacent local government buildings. The original 1878 building,¹¹ as we have discussed, was single story and timber, twin gabled to the street with at least one transverse gable behind. It was slightly setback from the street behind a white wooden picket fence and it was entered through a curved topped opening beneath a minor gable nestled between the two major gables. The building housed the County Council Offices, The Whangarei Harbour Board, The Public Library and Reading Room. The Whangarei Borough Council after it was formed in 1896 held its meetings in this building.

In September 1902 the Borough Council and the County Council were in negotiations to provide a new building to house both councils, a public library and reading room.¹² Auckland architect, Edward Bartley, was commissioned to design the building and in the 25 October issue of the New Zealand Herald he called for tenders for the Erection of Municipal Buildings in Brick, Whangarei. The Whangarei County and Municipal Building appears to have been completed in mid 1903 and the Public Library and Reading Room were formally opened at 3pm on 17 September 1903.¹³

Edward Bartley had worked in Whangarei before. In 1886 he had designed the All Saints Church in Kamo¹⁴, now a northern suburb of the city. In 1900, when the Whangarei Borough Council of was considering whether to turn an existing cottage home for the destitute elderly into a hospital, Edward advised against it but offered to provide plans for a new hospital, nurses home and boiler house plus supervision for free.¹⁵ Needless to say, the offer was gratefully accepted and the Whangarei Hospital was opened in April 1901.¹⁶

Bartley's architectural repertoire was wide.¹⁷ He had originally trained as a cabinetmaker/builder with his father in St Helier, Jersey in the Channel Islands where he was born. He migrated to New Zealand in 1854, aged 15, with his elder brother, Robert and his family. Initially he worked as a builder. For a time he was in partnership with Edmund Mathews a former Clerk of Works with the Department of Royal Engineers before he began to work on his own account in 1870 and began to apply for purely architectural work as well as construction contracts. From 1870 he earned a reputation as a dependable master builder whilst at the same time honing his architectural skills. In 1878 he added the word "Architect" to his business description.

When he came to Whangarei at the turn of the century he was an experienced builder and architect and at the top of his game. He had designed a number of churches including the Jewish Synagogue in Princes Street, commercial buildings in the central city and Karangahape Road and was Architect to the Auckland Hospital and Charitable Aid Board.

¹¹ Photographs 66/35/3/5 and 67/2/522b Whangarei Museum.

¹² Bartley *Colonial Architect* p77.

¹³ Handwritten notes, Author unknown. Topic Files: Town Board and Borough Council minutes 93/102/54 Whangarei Museum

¹⁴ Bartley *Colonial Architect* p139.

¹⁵ Bartley *Colonial Architect* p65.

¹⁶ Bartley *Colonial Architect* p66.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Meg Bartley for both the biographical information on Edward Bartley and for initially alerting me to the number of buildings that Bartley had designed in Whangarei

This new Municipal Building makes no pretence about its relationship with the street.¹⁸ It is located right on the property line to this boundary and entry is through a centrally located arch top opening, up 3 risers, to porch contained within the body of the building. The institution has moved from the domestic imagery of its earlier gabled and timbered building to one that is plastered brick, solid and squat upon its site. The arch top form is continued either side of the entry as window openings, the lower portions of which double as signs advertising the building's use. These windows are separated by square pilasters that terminate in Corinthian capitals under a simple entablature. The upper floor repeats this three bay rhythm but this time the window openings are narrower and rectangular. Again they are separated by square pilasters this time fluted in their top third. The pilasters terminate in Corinthian capitals but the entablature is more elaborate with close spaced dentils and topped by parapet with small urns on the column centres. There is a flag pole mounted on the parapet in the centre of the façade and the name "Whangarei County and Municipal Buildings" is emblazoned across the frieze in letters suitably solid and dependable.

Edward was also busy on the other side of Bank Street because records show that a month after the Whangarei Hospital tenders had been advertised he was again advertising a job for tender in Whangarei.¹⁹ This time it was for a brick building in Bank Street for a Mr. W. Bentley the Chemist and was to be located alongside the Bank of New Zealand.

The building for Mr Bentley, the Chemist, was two storied and made from brick faced with Portland cement plaster.²⁰ Above the verandah, three arch topped, double hung windows were joined by a bead line at the spring point of the arches. A similar bead line joined the heads of the keystone elements. Fluted, square relief columns defined the very outside edges of the facade. They terminated in a capital, supported a bracket and a corbelled parapet. A simple cornice with dentils sat between the brackets and above a frieze which repeated a symmetrical pattern of two rectangles about a centrally placed circle. This was a pragmatic commercial classicism, a style that Bartley had honed in the streets of Auckland city.

Bartley's next project was the new building for J. Marshall and Sons further south on the same side of Bank Street and completed in 1905. The original building was single storied timber and wrapped around the Water Street /Bank Street corner. Bartley provided his clients with new premises in "brick and iron"²¹ that asserted its commercial presence on the corner. Finished in cement plaster it is an awkward piece of commercial classicism. The south elevation with its doubling up of the central window works better than the east where the pediment of the aediculed central window is steepened to fit the geometry. The Greek Revival influence no doubt pleased the Marshalls whose grocery and hardware business would have received a fillip in status. Today the Marshall Building still stands on Bank Street but, like its near neighbour, recent earthquake strengthening exercises have seen its parapet removed along with substantial parts of its entablature.

Bank Street, Whangarei 1909

If we now return to our vantage point on the corner of Bank and Cameron Street in 1909 and look south significant differences in the appearance of the street will be clear.²² The buildings are now predominantly two storied and constructed from brick. The exceptions to this are the two buildings in the foreground. On the left the Draper and Clothier which will be redeveloped into a two storey brick building in 1912 and the Bank of New Zealand on the right stays in its wooden form until 1924. The retail buildings all now colonise the public realm (the footpath) and use it as the transitional space for entry to their premises. This

¹⁸ Photographs 81/3/6 , 91/90/4 ,04/10/152/82 Whangarei Museum.

¹⁹ Bartley *Colonial Architect* p170.

²⁰ Photographs 68/58/173, 89/11/2n and 69/18/37/17 Whangarei Museum

²¹ LINZ DP 3539

²² Photograph 96/167/68 Whangarei Museum

verandahed space is dark and generally hides the presence of inhabitants (unless they come forward to the sunlit edge) as if in this (photographic) world there is something murky about the experience of trade and exchange. The verandah is shared amongst a number of retailers so it is unclear to the observer which shop is being entered.

Contrast this with the BNZ on our right and the contrast is very graphic, almost a sectional drawing, because we see the picket fence on the boundary line. We know the Bank is set back from this fence just out of shot and in front we see Mr. Bentley's Chemist Shop built to the boundary with its verandah to the kerb edge. The relationship of the BNZ to the street in this photograph is the same as that between the original (1878) County Council Building and the street. The new County and Municipal Building has now, like the retail buildings, moved forward to the street boundary line. But it still maintains the entry as an unmediated opening in the body of the building. Peter Kohane and Michael Hill²³ suggest, with regard to doors, there are two sorts of movement "namely the entry into the structure and then circulation within it" and that this results in two different kinds of doors the large and usually arched entry door and the squared off circulation door "of a height commensurate with a standing figure". If the arched door is the entry door, the point of transition between the profane domain of the street and the sacred or in this case specialized domain of the enterprise then there are clearly different architectural approaches evident. Entry to the County and Municipal building is in the open, visible and thus observable.

Interestingly this openness seems to encourage the use of the buildings as sites for posed photographs. In the collection at the Whangarei Museum there are very few images of people posing outside the retail shops. If there are people in the images, they are almost always moving or there apparently unintentionally whereas, conversely, almost all of the shots of the three non retail buildings have people posing in front of them.

While the 1908 Post Office building may have been the result of a new stylistic fusion its failure to engage in a meaningful urban manner with the street is painfully obvious in this photograph. It is setback from the street exposes the unplastered brick wall of the County and Municipal building to full public view.

Finally there is one thread that runs through this story that I have not spent much time on but which is, none the less, an important factor in the consciousness of this place. In 1884 fire reduced the two storey Cafler's Building on the corner of Bank and Cameron to a single storey, the original Post Office was burnt down and replaced in 1885. On Saturday night, 29 January 1899²⁴ a major fire destroyed 10 premises on the eastern side of Cameron Street and a year later another fire destroyed most of the shops on the west side of Cameron Street.²⁵ These fires resulted in the Whangarei Borough Council designating this inner city area a "brick zone" to stem this cycle of destruction but the threat of fire may well have been a force that contributed to the turn of the century architectural changes that I have described in this paper.

Those of you who are more mathematically inclined may have noticed that this paper does not mention a date within the decade that is the subject of this symposium. This portion of Bank Street, either fortunately or unfortunately depending on whether you were a business owner or are an architectural historian, remained in a steady state during this decade and it was not until the beginning of the new century that the continuing threat of fire and the presence of Edward Bartley combined to sophisticate the town. In terms of the decade of the 1890s Whangarei was a late bloomer.

²³ Kohane and Hill "The Decorum of Doors and Windows, fifteenth – nineteenth century" p2

²⁴ "Great Fire in Whangarei" Northern Advocate, Saturday February 4, 1899 p5.

²⁵ Keene *Between Two Mountains* p103

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