

Temperate Modernity: The Whangarei architecture of Alfred Morgan in the 1930s.

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Introduction

This paper stems from my interest in how the ideas and forms of international modernism are translated to a local architectural context. In 2003 I was teaching the history of modernism to students studying for the National Diploma of Architectural Technology (NDAT) at Northland Polytechnic in Whangarei and looking for ways to engage these students who are in the main not academic.

I gave them a project to research, record and present the dates of construction and names of the architects of the buildings in the main streets of Whangarei City. These records provided material that allowed us to discuss, with reference to a local context, the ideas and forms that were generated in other parts of the world.

Their research highlighted the significant number of buildings in the central city area that had been designed by Alfred Morgan and more importantly that these buildings seemed to show a move from the Georgian roots of the earlier buildings towards a language of international modernism. This paper examines several 1930s Morgan designed buildings in Whangarei with emphasis on the Public Library, the Ayling Building and J.W.Court's Building and uses these existing buildings and newspaper and magazine articles to illustrate this shift. It also outlines Morgan's professional relationship with Horace Massey who was the associated architect on the Library project.

Whangarei Public Library

Whangarei's New Public Library was opened by F.W. Reed esq, Officier de l'Instruction publique on Thursday 12 November, 1936 at 3pm.¹ The opening ceremony address by Reed, an Alexandre Dumas scholar of world wide reputation, was preceded by musical selections from the Municipal Silver Band, congratulatory speeches, floral bouquets, a hymn and the "Presentation of the Gold Key and Handing Over of the Building to the Mayor and Citizens by the Architect, Mr. A.P. Morgan, A.R.I.B.A., representing the Architects, Messrs. Morgan of Whangarei and N.L. Massey of Auckland." ²

Whangarei had a population of 7152³ people, an architect ⁴and a Dumas scholar. It also now had a fine new library and two years later the NZIA awarded this building the 1938 Gold Medal.⁵

Newspaper reports of the time described it "as one of the most modern and artistic buildings of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere"⁶ and "The ultimate in modern design."⁷

But what does modern mean in this context? The lead article in the evening edition of the local paper, *The Northern Advocate* began with praise for the building and a brief background history of the planning for the library. The first descriptive passage, tellingly, referred to the structure.

¹ *Official Programme*, Opening Ceremony, Whangarei Borough Council 12 November 1936. Northland Room Whangarei Public Library.

² *Official Programme*

³ *Library Service*, unacknowledged notes , Northland Room, Whangarei Public Library

⁴ In fact Robert B. (Barney) Finch was also in practice in Whangarei at the time and responsible for the new Whangarei County Council Chambers (1937), Rose Street which bear a strong formal similarity to the Library.

⁵ Walker (ed) *Exquisite Apart* p37

⁶ "New Whangarei Library" *The Northern Advocate* 11 November , 1936

⁷ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre" *The Northern Advocate* 12 November , 1936

The building is a reinforced concrete frame structure with a face brick exterior, with pressed stone dressings to windows and doors. The concrete frame is designed on earthquake resisting principles and the roof trusses are back braced with angle iron steel and other members to take reverse stresses in the event of a shake. So although the building is in the form of a large interior, of the shape of a T, all wall heads are adequately tied together to resist vibration or shake.⁸

The country and the profession were profoundly affected by the 1931 Napier earthquake.⁹ There existed a collective anxiety about the seismic performance of buildings in earthquakes. *The Northern Advocate* reporter was reassuring all concerned that this issue had been thoroughly dealt with by the architects and the local authority.

The reporter then noted that the library featured "a new form of egress [and we assume ingress] as far as Whangarei was concerned...the provision of revolving entrance doors. In admitting one person at a time, the doors prevent dust and draft from entering the building"¹⁰. This new form (I will gloss over the use of the word 'form' here as I will return to it later in the paper) was discussed in terms of hygiene (dust prevention) and control of internal environment (draught prevention). Hygiene gets further acknowledgement with the design of bookcases which are finished with a "semicircular coping to throw off dust and prevent the collection of dirt and rubbish as frequently seen on the usual flat tops of bookcases."¹¹ Further, the reading racks in the newspaper room were "flush mounted and suspended to the walls, with the consequent elimination of supports and legs taken down to the floor, which makes for easier cleaning."¹²

There was a side article in the same edition which was a report of an interview with the Borough electrical engineer, Mr J.W.Dawson. The article was headed "LIGHT AND HEAT- MOST MODERN DESIGNS"¹³ and Mr. Dawson was reported as having "spared no effort to secure the best possible effects in artificial lighting" and that this system had been described by a visiting literary authority as the "most complete and scientifically arranged that he has seen."¹⁴ His enthusiasm did not end there!

"On the walls of the principal rooms will be noticed a small contrivance, which Mr. Dawson explains is a thermostat – an instrument which automatically regulates the heat in the various rooms at a point which the administration finds advisable."¹⁵

Mr. Dawson was understandably proud of the servicing of this new building and the headline justifiably described it as modern.

But modernity here is equated with seismic performance, hygiene and building services. There is little discussion in these newspaper reports about the library's aesthetic or formal modernity.

And I think it is easy to see why. The library has a central entry, pushed forward from the main face of the building. The architraves surrounding the door, made from pressed stone, are decorated with classical motifs. There are three multipane windows located symmetrically either side of the entrance whose architraves are similarly decorated. These windows are 4'10 ½" wide and 9' 2" high and sit within a wall that is made from a red brick laid in a stretcher bond topped with a 3" plastered parapet capping. These are typical characteristics of the Neo Georgian or Georgian Revival style. Yet this building is currently the only building in Northland on the preliminary register of the organization devoted to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement (DOCOMOMO). So what is it about the building that could possibly result in its inclusion?

⁸ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre"

⁹ See Walker "Shaky Ground" pp27-32 and pp34-37 for general discussion about this point.

¹⁰ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre"

¹¹ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre"

¹² "Whangarei's New Literary Centre"

¹³ "LIGHT AND HEAT- MOST MODERN DESIGNS " *The Northern Advocate* 12 November, 1936

¹⁴ "LIGHT AND HEAT- MOST MODERN DESIGNS "

¹⁵ "LIGHT AND HEAT- MOST MODERN DESIGNS "

We can see that it does not adhere to the principles of the '*Five points of a New Architecture*' as outlined by Le Corbusier¹⁶. There are no *pilotis*, there is no *plan libre* (*free plan*), no *facade libre* (*free façade*), no *fenetre en longueur* (*strip window*) and certainly no *toit jardin* (*roof garden*). Equally, there is no evidence of the principles that those other champions of modernism, Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, outlined in their 1932 publication '*The International Style*'.¹⁷ The building is more notable for its opposition to these principles. It is firmly rooted to the ground, it has load bearing walls which are more mass than void. The openings are vertically proportioned, multipaned and the architraves decorated. *Home and Building*, February 1939¹⁸, described it as " a charming study of a building in the traditional manner",

We have to look a little further back in Morgan's career to gain some insight into this. Alfred Percy Morgan was born in Brixton, London on the 22nd March, 1893¹⁹. The family emigrated to New Zealand and settled in Avondale, Auckland.²⁰ Alfred moved to Christchurch, attended Christ's College (1905-1909)²¹ and later returned to Auckland where he studied at the Auckland Architectural Students Association.²² The Georgian influence in the Public Library can be traced to Morgan's time at the AASA where he was tutored by Noel Bamford and Roy Binney, two New Zealand protégés of the great English eclectic architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.²³

During World War 1 he was overseas in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He stayed on in London after the end of the war to further his architectural studies and was admitted as a member of the RIBA. Here he met up again with Horace Massey and the two collaborated on projects including several entries in the Daily Mail Ideal Bungalow Competition under the practice name, Massey, Morgan and Shearley and a development at Hanworth Park garden suburb as Massey and Morgan Architects.²⁴ Morgan returned to New Zealand and is recorded as being in partnership with Massey in Massey, Morgan, Hyland and Phillips in Auckland in 1922 and later in the twenties being involved in the partnerships of Bloomfield, Owen and Morgan and Owen and Morgan.²⁵ The first recorded work in Whangarei that I know about was the refurbishment of the Whangarei Ladies Club in Rust Avenue in 1924 as part of the partnership of Owen and Morgan, a building I talked about in a paper at last years symposium.²⁶

The Whangarei Public Library was a major commission for Alfred Morgan. He had lived in Whangarei since 1923 and practiced in that city. In 1931 he had married Gwen Hosking, a member of a well known local family.²⁷ He had, along with J.O.Owen, designed the Plunket Rooms (now the Whangarei Art Museum) in Cafler Park, Whangarei in 1927.²⁸ By the mid 1930s he was well established at a number of levels in the city. Why did he invite Horace Massey to be involved in this project? Was it because of his long friendship with Massey and the recognition of the complexity and scale of the project or did he feel that Massey could add a new dimension, a fashionably modern dimension to this project?

¹⁶ Curtis *Le Corbusier Ideas and Forms* p69

¹⁷ Hitchcock and Johnson *The International Style Architecture Since 1922*

¹⁸ "Gold Medal Award for 1938" *Home and Building* February 1939 pp23-25

¹⁹ Birth certificate, Morgan family archive

²⁰ Morgan, Richard Personal communication , interview, 9 July, 2005

²¹ Teal, Jane Personal communication, email, 9 November, 2006

²² Ashford "Art and Architecture" p1-2

²³ Ashford "Art and Architecture" p1-2

²⁴ Morgan Practice Archive

²⁵ Shepherd Collection O97e and M847a

²⁶ Francis "Wrapping the Present" pp12-16

²⁷ Morgan 9 July, 2005

²⁸ Ashford "Art and Architecture" p1-2

The Whangarei Public Library was opened on the 12 November 1936. The working drawings for the building are dated August- September 1935²⁹ and appear to have been produced in Massey's office. Then from September – December 1935³⁰ Massey's office was producing the working drawings for Cintra Flats. We all know that working drawings are preceded by long periods of sketch development so in broad terms we could describe these two projects as having been designed at the same time. Cintra Flats were hailed in *Building Today October-December 1936* for their modernity. It was a modernity described as:

...a new consciousness of air and light and sunshine, a new concern for health and a desire for freedom,....³¹

Further on we note that :

... the interior of Cintra... is designed to get the greatest amount of sunshine, light and air.³²

Then on the last page of the article there was a plan of a curved fronted living room of one of the flats with an arrow from the radial centre of the room piercing the windows and indicating the view. The text alongside described the sensual luxury of these apartments.

Cintra pampers sunworshippers. Every living room has almost an entire wall of windows which fold back, and leave wide, uninterrupted areas open to light and air and satisfy our thirst for sunshine* * * * The windows are cleverly placed to provide harmonious occult balance, and to make the most of the glorious views..³³

The sunshine (and light and air) was admitted with open sashes but the arrow on the plan reminds us that the vector works equally well in the other direction as sightlines radiate from the interior of the space. These health and hygienist concerns were a strong part of the modernist agenda and I suggest that in the collaboration between Morgan and Massey this motif of radiating light was transferred between Cintra Flats and the Library.

So the most interesting modernist aspect about the Library is not so much the (contested) conservatism of the façade (I will talk about this later), the integrity of its structure or the innovation of its servicing but rather the application of this embedded diagram of radiating light. This figurative light emanates from the central control desk from which the books are issued or reshelved providing the perfect built metaphor for enlightenment through reading. The layout of the book stacks as arms radiating from the issues desk embeds this idea in every process within the stack room. This diagram functions in both directions. The library staff receive questions and give answers. They are looked at and they look out. "The central librarians' desk placed on the central axis of the building"³⁴ can supervise the spacious interior.

The intellectual health of the citizens was maintained by this process of literary enlightenment but real light was also a concern of the architects. The "central stack room is lit by a large skylight, glazed with sandblasted glass, above which a light well has been constructed in the roof to give ample diffusion of light."³⁵ Physical health as well as intellectual health was catered for in this modern library.

The revolving entry door, mentioned earlier for its utilitarian qualities, dust and draught prevention, was also located on the central axis and can be read as the same formal diagram with four spokes radiating from the centre. It absorbs and distributes the patrons both in and out of the Library... sweeps them in and then sweeps them out, in a tidy and hygienic way of course. This motif, this radiation from the centre was used by the Architects to control the flow of people as well as the flow of information.

²⁹ Massey File, AU Architecture Archive

³⁰ Massey File, AU Architecture Archive

³¹ "Cintra" *Building Today* October-December 1936 pp19

³² "Cintra" *Building Today* October-December 1936 pp19

³³ "Cintra" *Building Today* October-December 1936 pp 21

³⁴ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre" *The Northern Advocate* 12 November 1936

³⁵ "Whangarei's New Literary Centre" *The Northern Advocate* 12 November 1936

I want to return, now, to the (contested) conservatism of the façade. There is plainness to the Whangarei façade and whilst plainness is a quality that is often associated with the Georgian, plainness of surface is also a quality that is attributed to modernism. The Whangarei facade is a taut skin which maintains tight control over the location of ornament which occurs only around the apertures. The junction between façade and sky is mediated only by a 3' plastered capping. The wall appears thin and light. So you can read it as a modernist wall with traces of classical Georgian ornament or you can read it as a Georgian composition of extreme plainness. This is a building that is activated like a figure ground illusion. Like the two faces and the vase in the illusion our readings alternate between traditional and modernist.

Ayling Building

Just down the road on the corner of Rathbone and Cameron Streets is a two storey commercial building with shops downstairs and offices over. In the late afternoon sun you can faintly make out the trace of the word Taylors under the palimpsest of Ayling. The asymmetrical layout is the result of the reuse of letters from the previous name.

1936 was a busy year for Alfred Morgan. He was designing this building whilst the Library was in construction. He employed the same coloured brick and the same stretcher bond as the Library. But there is a significant formal shift. The emphasis is now on the horizontal and the building curves around the corner. The wall above the street canopy is divided into three bands - plaster, brick, then plaster again. The top band is further subdivided by recess and moulding. The top junction between plaster and brick is mediated by a simple bead and the bottom junction to the lower plaster band becomes a continuous sill moulding. The material change, the articulation of these points of change and the further subdivisions within the upper band all support this emphasis on the horizontal. Plaster covers over part of the brickwork and smoothes the top and bottom bands.

Unlike the Library, there is no articulation of the architraves although the locations of the window openings within the mass of the wall are still discrete. These windows are all contained within the strip of exposed brickwork and so could be seen as kind of de facto strip window or at the least a recognition of its formal potentials. There are other clues to a shifting design sensibility. All the windows are the same size and spaced the same distance apart from two exceptions. The corner window is larger and curves round the corner to follow the form of the building. Then if you look closely at the window above the entry to the first floor level you will notice that the subdivision pattern is different from all the others. There is evidence of Mondrian and De Stijl in this pattern. (If Mondrian was in view, maybe also, was J.J.P. Oud and his Hook of Holland housing scheme) Cleverly, Morgan maintained the bottom row of panes in the same pattern as the other windows but then subtly rotated the left hand side of the composition.

This building is a complex mix of influences. The above mentioned de Stijl window is set in a plastered wall, a kind of residual portico that consciously disrupts the flow of the horizontal on this façade. It is vertical in its emphasis, it projects from the main surface of the building and it is finished wholly in the same material. It even has a vestigial entablature over the de Stijl window! With a little judicious squinting we could see this façade as formally very similar to that of the library. The decorative parapet over the street intersection could be Classical or Spanish Mission and it also includes an Art Deco chevron. This sort of eclecticism within one building project indicates to me that Morgan was searching for a new language based on modernism but, unable to throw off pressures of his present, added back in elements of the familiar.

This is the opposite approach, I would suggest, to that of the library which was primarily about a stripping away of ornament from the existing classical Georgian model.

Victoria Bridge

Morgan's work during the 1930s was prolific and diverse in both type and location. During this period he was the Board Architect for the Whangarei Hospital Board and he produced buildings at Whangarei, Kawakawa, Kaitaia and Rawene. He was active for the National Bank and the Bank of New Zealand.³⁶ He designed Hotels and Head Offices and even provided ornamentation for the new Victoria Bridge over the Hatea River in Whangarei in 1936.

An additional expense has been incurred in ornamenting the balustrades and piers with the object of combining architectural beauty with a structure primarily designed for utilitarian purposes. For this purpose an effective design was prepared by Mr. A. P. Morgan, architect, under the supervision of the borough engineer.³⁷

Beauty must be controlled by the utilitarian hand of the engineer.

Housing

"Today the architect, to suit varying conditions, designs different, and sometimes complicated, floor plans and translates them into many different styles. Anything from Elizabethan, Spanish mission, Colonial or Georgian to the latest functional designs may be required of him."³⁸

Alfred Morgan also designed individual houses, streets of houses and blocks of flats. I will briefly describe two blocks of flats. They are important for two reasons. First because they are beautiful examples of watercolour presentation work that we very rarely see these days. Secondly because they reinforce the quote above from *Building Today* about the plurality of styles that an architect of the period was required to be conversant with.

The first block of flats is in Kamo Road, Kamo, a northern suburb of Whangarei. These single storey three bedroom flats have been designed in the English Cottage style with Marseilles tile roofs which have been exquisitely rendered, half timbered gables to the porches and shutters on some of the windows.³⁹

The second project is for a two storey block of eight flats in Bank Street, immediately above the city centre. This time the building is designed in the Spanish Mission style. However, this is just one version. There are several different style versions for this project, including one in the ubiquitous Georgian style. They all utilize the same plan⁴⁰.

What is noticeable is that formal elements of modernism do not appear to be evident in this or other domestic work that I have so far viewed. The fact that the house Alfred Morgan designed for his own family was in the Georgian style would suggest that the stylistic shift that this paper examines was restricted to his more public and commercial work.

J.W. Courts Building

This department store, located on the corner of Cameron and Walton Streets, was commissioned in 1939 and documented in 1940. With two storeys of showrooms, offices for management and directors plus sewing, fitting and staff rooms the building occupied an area of 10,000 square feet. An article and photographs appeared in *Home and Building*, June of 1943 under the headline "A Modern Store at Whangarei." This article described evidence of a further shift towards Le Corbusier's five points of a new architecture.

³⁶ Morgan Practice Archive

³⁷ "New Victoria Bridge Opened Today" *Northern Advocate* Tuesday 10 November, 1936

³⁸ Versatility in two New Remuera Homes, Tradition and Modernism, *Building Today* July-September, 1937, p9 This article compares two houses of contrasting styles designed by Horace Massey.

³⁹ Morgan Practice Archive

⁴⁰ Morgan Practice Archive

For instance in order to provide an unbroken expanse of show window space on the ground floor, the front piers were arranged to carry the floors above on the cantilever principle.⁴¹

So the *façade libre* (free façade) came to Whangarei but only where the store faced the main retail (Cameron)street. When the building turned the corner into Walton Street , a street inhabited at the time by petrol stations, moderne car sales showrooms and farm supply stores it reverted to locating the structural piers at the boundary. This intersection marked the change between the retail zone of Cameron Street and the more commercial zoning of Walton Street. The modernist free façade was utilized at street level in the shopping zone but lapsed when the same building fronted a street of different propriety.

The same lapse was not true of another modernist element the *fenetre en longueur* (strip window). Like the Ayling Building this facade curved around the corner. But unlike the discrete window openings of the Ayling Building this fenestration was continuous. It ran in a band from one end of the building to the other; from Cameron Street around to the service court off Walton Street. It was interrupted only by an emphatic deepening at the intersection corner and again at the service court end where additional light was required for the sewing and fitting rooms and the staff lunch room. Just above the street canopy even the toplights that provide additional natural light for the ground floor showrooms were almost joined together in a strip.

The multiple bandings of the Ayling Building produced by different materials and articulations through moulding and recess were reduced here to a simple linear parapet capping and a continuous drip mould over the strip window. The solid wall surface was homogeneous, smoothly plastered, reinforced concrete.

Finally, it is interesting also to note the different ways in which these two buildings were named. The lettering in both cases was plaster in positive relief and designed by Alfred Morgan. That on the Ayling Building was stacked vertically, located at the apex of the corner and used a type face with a *serif* very similar to Times New Roman. The Court name, on the other hand, was stretched horizontally, located on the flat sections of the building façade and in a type face *sans serif*. There was a change from vertical to horizontal layout, from a static location at the apex to a dynamic location on the flat and from a traditional to a utilitarian type face. Each characteristic of naming; layout, location and type face reveals a shift consistent with that occurring in the architecture.

Conclusion

These three major buildings by Alfred Morgan cover a spread of 5 years from the middle of 1935 until the middle of 1940. The Whangarei Public Library was described as traditional by *Home and Building* in 1939 yet ends up on the register of an organization devoted to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement (DOCOMOMO). It is a building that vibrates between these two design modes. It is a building ornamented only around the edges of its openings. It is a building half dressed. It is a building that is being stripped. It is a building in the act of becoming something else.

The Ayling Building is more eclectic. It is a cocktail (animated maybe) that mixes several styles and hints at a new trajectory. Whilst the interest in the horizontal is evident the other influences conspire to blur the reading as modern. J.W. Court's Building takes this horizontal emphasis and literally runs with it where the Ayling Building was only prepared to stroll. Its homogeneous surface, strip glazing and free façade mark it as clearly modernist.

These buildings are not revolutionary statements, not an expansive coming out of modernism in the provinces but rather a period of five years of thoughtful and craftsman like exploration and absorption of some of the formal and technical possibilities of a new design paradigm. During the 30s, in these projects in Whangarei, Alfred Morgan moved from the Georgian roots of his early career to a kind of temperate modernism.

⁴¹ "A Modern Store at Whangarei" *Home and Building* June 1943 p27

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