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An Untraditional Perspective of Tradition

The Lessons of Gummer and Ford in Architectural Education and Designing for New Zealand. A Unitec Research Project

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Abstract

Tūāpapa Rangahau, the Research and Enterprise Office at Unitec Institute of Technology, focuses on opportunities, challenges and problems in a wide variety of subjects. In 2020, the authors proposed a research project devoted to Gummer and Ford – an architectural firm founded in 1923 in Auckland by William Henry Gummer (1884–1966) and Charles Reginald Ford (1880–1972). Although one of the most prominent practices in New Zealand architectural history, which designed numerous iconic buildings, the firm remains strikingly under-researched in New Zealand architectural historiography, as do their 1920s–40s traditionalist contemporaries. Marking the centenary of Gummer and Ford’s establishment, 2023 is recognised as a milestone in New Zealand’s architectural calendar. The paper reflects on the three stages of the Unitec research project devoted to Gummer and Ford (2020–23) that is envisaged to build up to this date. The project aims to test and create links between historical research, architectural education, design practice and the New Zealand community.

Introduction

In his seminal book *American Architecture and Urbanism*, Vincent Scully argued that preservation and continuity are not inconsistent with the new.¹ To use his exact words, “single civilization is based largely upon the capacity of human beings to remember, the architect builds visible history.”² However, not that long ago, during the period c. 1910–1960s, these builders of visible history decided to renounce centuries of architectural tradition, dismissing it as inappropriate, even harmful for the needs and expression of the modern conditions. In the process, traditionalist forms of architecture became equated with backwardness and conservative modes of thinking. The consequences are far-reaching – today, almost a century later, the mere idea of drawing from architectural history is ridiculed by most members of the profession. The interest in beautiful architecture inspired by history, however, persists. It is present among a number of practising architects, clients, and students. In the case of the latter, unless a student of architecture is lucky enough to encounter a sympathetic

1. Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1969).

2. Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (1969; repr., San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013), 22.

Published originally by Praeger, the book was reissued by Henry Holt in 1988 with an addendum by Scully, and then reprinted again, in original form without the addendum, by Trinity University Press in 2013. Citations here refer to the 1988 edition; see also Paul Goldberger, “Vincent J. Scully Jr. (1920–2017),” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 2 (2018): 133–37.

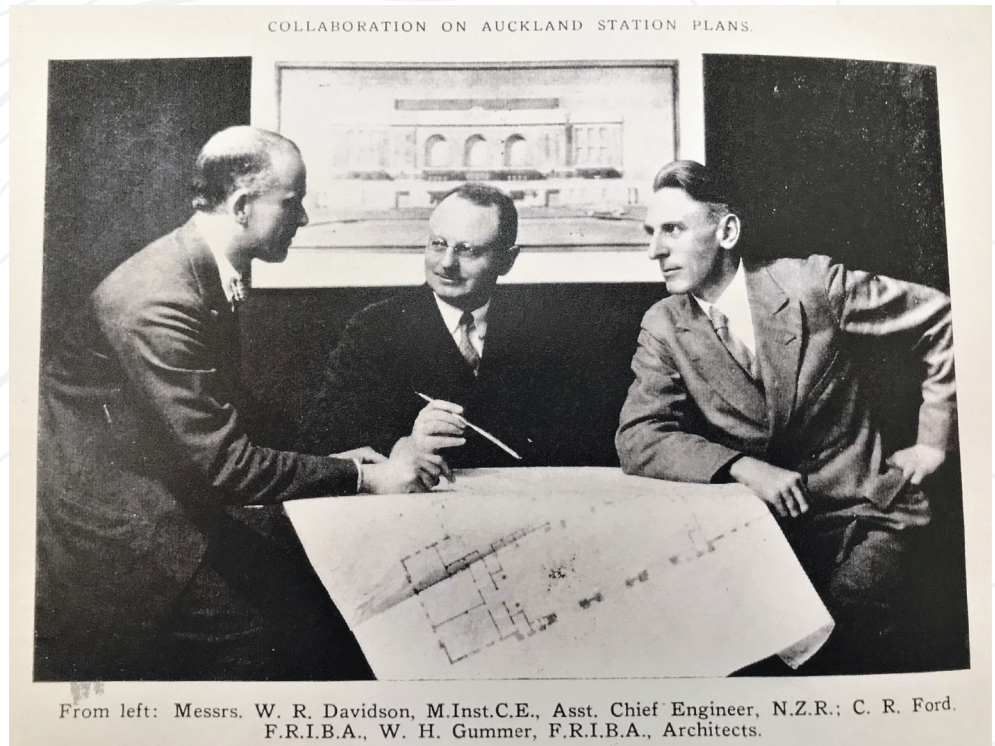


Figure 1: “Collaboration on Auckland Station Plans,” *The New Zealand Railways Magazine*, December 1930: 19, from Bruce Petry, “The Public Architecture of Gummer and Ford” (MArch thesis, *The University of Auckland*, 1992).

tutor, the thought of learning from the past is most often cut off at the root. At the same time, ironically, students are asked to draw from the past experiences, i.e., the precedent study, for their projects. Thus, the concept of continuation has not been erased from the creative process. The student and the practitioner alike can rely on the past; it is just that certain formal solutions are off limits. We believe that traditional architecture deserves a place in the pool of acceptable design inspiration; it should be allowed as a desirable example from the past. To do this, we must first remember what was forgotten and evaluate its suitability for the present needs. In this country, we will start with a three-year project focused on the practice that has often been described as New Zealand’s most eminent from the interwar period – the firm of Gummer and Ford. The project will start in 2021 with a thorough research of Gummer and Ford’s design principles and methods. The results will serve as the basis of a design studio that will be run at the Unitec School of Architecture in 2022. Finally, the architecture of Gummer and Ford, research and the

student work will be shared with a broader audience in 2023, at the exhibition that will mark the centenary of the firm’s establishment in Auckland. In sum, the project aims to connect historical research, architectural education, practice and the New Zealand community.

Gummer and Ford was an architectural firm founded in 1923 in Auckland by William Henry Gummer (1884–1966) and Charles Reginald Ford (1880–1972). Various researchers of architectural history agree that the firm can be considered one of the most prominent practices in New Zealand architectural history.³ Charismatic and influential, Gummer and Ford played an essential role in the professionalisation of New Zealand architecture, founded earthquake construction techniques, and contributed to the development of the country’s institutionalised architectural education. They were both passionate about developing a “type of design which seems to be expressly influenced by New Zealand conditions.”⁴ The practice spanned nearly forty years designing numerous iconic

3. See, for example: Terence Hodgson, *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* (Wellington: Grantham House 1990), 48; Bruce Petry, “The Public Architecture of Gummer and Ford” (MArch thesis, The University of Auckland, 1992); Peter Shaw, *A History of New Zealand Architecture*, rev. ed. (Auckland: Hodder Moe Beckett, 2003), 19, 67, 88, 90, 111–15, 146, 197; Paul Waite, *In the Beaux-Arts Tradition. William Gummer Architect*. Exhibition catalogue (Napier: Hawke’s Bay Cultural Trust, 2005); Denis Welch, in the *New Zealand Listener*, described the firm as “the best architectural practice of all time in New Zealand.” Denis Welch, “The Best of New Zealand,” *New Zealand Listener*, August 4, 2007.

4. William Gummer and Reginald Ford, “Small House Competition,” *NZIA Journal* (December 1931): 117.

buildings, including the two biggest commissions in New Zealand at the time, the Auckland Railway Station (1930) (Figure 2) and the National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum in Wellington (1933–36). Eighteen of their buildings have been registered as significant historic places by Heritage New Zealand. In 2006 an exhibition of their work was staged at The University of Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery. Yet the firm remains strikingly under-researched in New Zealand architectural historiography, as do their 1920s–40s traditionalist contemporaries. This period also marked a high level of construction activity internationally, shaping built environments of the various countries from the Western cultural sphere. Housing important public institutions, successful businesses, or high-end apartments, traditionalist structures are recognised for their heritage value across the world. In contrast, scholarly references on the topic are so scarce that only one monograph dedicated specifically to the traditionalist architecture of the period has been published to date – *Architettura Tradizionalista* by the Italian scholars Giorgio Pigafetta, Ilaria Abbondandolo, and Marco Trisciuglio.⁵ In New Zealand, early-twentieth-century traditionalist architecture is a topic that has been treated asymmetrically in previous scholarship as merely the precursor to 'true' modern architecture.⁶ It is time this architecture received appropriate scholarly attention.

So, what is it that we are trying to achieve?

The Project: An Untraditional Approach to Tradition

As mentioned in the paper's introduction, this project revolves around three main goals – to expand knowledge, to leave a mark on contemporary design practices and to reach out to the broader community. The project was conceived as a response to the perceived gap in knowledge of traditional architecture, both in New Zealand and internationally. The aim is to set the foundation for the appropriate exploration of New Zealand architectural history, one that will significantly contribute to our society's understanding of its culture, identity and history. In addition, the project will contribute to a more comprehensive image of pre-Second World War architecture internationally. The project is part of our wider efforts to popularise twentieth-century traditionalist architecture worldwide, and, among other issues, debunk the myth that traditionalist architects



Figure 2: Façade of Gummer and Ford's Auckland Railway Station. Photograph: Cameron Moore

sacrificed functionality, site responsiveness, or structural expression to outdated notions of beauty. The project will also explore the application of historical research and knowledge in contemporary architectural teaching and design practice. In the long term, further development of the practices initiated by this project could place New Zealand on the world map as one of the few countries who offer this type of education to architectural students. Consequently, architects trained in New Zealand will be able to appropriately respond to a broader range of clients.

Marking the centenary of Gummer and Ford's establishment and the final phase of this project, 2023 is recognised as a milestone in New Zealand's architectural calendar. The three stages of the project build up to this date: 1. Investigation, 2. Application and Education, 3. Celebration and the Community.

1. Investigation

Using a starting point that William Gummer was the design virtuoso of the duo, the first phase of the project – Investigation – starting in 2021, explores Gummer's design principles and method. Specifically, this project investigates Gummer's thinking about architecture. The main question

5. Giorgio Pigafetta, Ilaria Abbondandolo, and Marco Trisciuglio, *Architettura tradizionalista: architetti, opere, teorie*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Jaca Book, 2002).

6. This trend is slowly changing. In 2020, Milica Mađanović completed a PhD thesis about twentieth-century architecture in New Zealand, at the University of Auckland, "Architectural Historicism Revisited: The Case of Twentieth-Century Traditionalist Architecture in Queen Street, Auckland."



Figure 3: Gummer and Ford, Dominion Museum, National Gallery and Carillon Campanile, Wellington; presentation perspective 1929–30, University of Auckland, School of Architecture Library, from Bruce Petry, “The Public Architecture of Gummer and Ford” (MArch thesis, The University of Auckland, 1992).

to be answered is what theoretical ideas and attitudes informed Gummer’s approach to architectural practice.

The investigation is based on Gummer’s designs, as well as interviews and articles published during the interwar period in daily newspapers such as the *New Zealand Herald* or the *Auckland Star*, as well as the two major architectural magazines from the period – *Progress* and *Journal of the Proceedings of the NZIA*. Although Gummer’s architectural interests varied – he wrote about issues as diverse as bridge construction, architectural education and the importance of architectural history – his tone always remained didactic. Gummer never intended to devise a corpus of architectural theory, he wrote from the perspective of a practising architect who wished to share his experiences with the other (sometimes less experienced) members of his profession. However, theoretical information that Gummer provided distinguishes him from other architects of the period, allowing us to understand the thinking behind the design and thus making his work an ideal case study for the exploration of early-twentieth-century traditionalist architecture.

The first stage of the project will produce two outcomes. On one hand, the research conducted during this phase will result in the first published monograph about the practice,

which will provide an essential tool for the scholarly dissemination and broader recognition of Gummer and Ford’s – and inextricably New Zealand’s – twentieth-century architecture. If New Zealand architectural historians wish to represent the firm’s architecture internationally, at conferences or publishing in academic journals, they will need to have a range of appropriate scholarly references at their disposal. The monograph will directly cater to this need. On the other hand, the research from the first stage of the project will serve the development of the content that will be taught at Unitec’s School of Architecture.

2. Application and Education

This brings us to the second phase of the project – Application and Education (2022). The second stage entails a one-semester elective design paper based on the design principles and methodology of Gummer and Ford. In his article “12 Ways to Reform Architectural Education,” Mark Alan Hewitt persuasively argues for teaching young architects proportional and grammatical systems associated with classical architecture, Chinese traditional architecture, and other non-Western systems, “which may soon prove to be linked to schemata in the brain.”⁷ Contemporary traditionalist architecture constitutes

7. Mark Alan Hewitt, “12 Ways to Reform Architectural Education,” *Common Edge*, September 6, 2020, <https://commonedge.org/12-ways-to-reform-architectural-education/>; *ArchDaily*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.archdaily.com/941809/12-ways-to-reform-architectural-education>.



Figure 4: Gummer and Ford, Dilworth Building, 1825–27, Auckland. Photograph: Cameron Moore

an important field of problems in the recent history and theory of architecture. Since the 1980s the number of practising architects who are designing using traditionalist principles in architecture has increased.⁸ Thus, its growing presence in the midst of the continuously evolving field of contemporary architecture calls for a study into its genesis and modes of representation. It also invites a synthetic analysis of the main problems of the presentation of ideas

underpinning traditionalist architecture, together with the formulation of a comprehensive set of notions related to this modern phenomenon.⁹ Furthermore, to respond to the growing demand observed in clients, as well as to maintain the standards of the architectural profession, schools of architecture need to prepare their students better. At Unitec's School of Architecture students will have the opportunity to learn about traditionalist design principles,

8. Elizabeth Meredith Dowling, *New Classicism: The Rebirth of Traditional Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004); Branko Mitrović, *Learning from Palladio* (New York: Norton, 2004); Andreas Papadakis, *Classical Modern Architecture* (London: Terrail, 1997); Richard Economakis, ed., *Building Classical: A Vision of Europe and America* (London: Academy Editions, 1993); Andreas Papadakis and Harriet Watson, eds., *New Classicism Omnibus Volume* (London: Academy Editions, 1990); Robert A. M. Stern, *Modern Classicism* (London: Thames & Hudson; New York: Rizzoli, 1988); Thomas Gordon Smith, *Classical Architecture, Rule & Invention* (Kaysville, UT: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1988); Charles Jencks, *Post-Modernism. The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1987); David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture* (1986) (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005); Thomas Gordon Smith, *Vocabulary, Proportion and Invention in Contemporary Classical Architecture*. Lecture org. by the Chicago-Midwest ICA&CA (Chicago: Driehaus Museum, April 2010); INTBAU. *New Palladians*. Exhibition (London: September 2008), www.intbau.org/Downloads/New_Palladians_xcatalogue_reva_LLR.pdf; Hans Ibelings and Vincent van Rossem, *De nieuwe traditie: continuïteit en vernieuwing in de Nederlandse architectuur = The New Tradition: Continuity and Renewal in Dutch Architecture* (Amsterdam: SUN 2009).

9. Renata Jadresin Milic, "Contemporary Classical Architecture – Reconsidering Tradition," in Tomasz Jelenski, Stanislaw Juchnowicz and Ewelina Wozniak-Szpakiewicz, eds, *Tradition and Heritage in the Contemporary Image of the City, Vol. 1. Fundamentals* (Kraków: CUT Press, 2015), 25–32.

based on lessons from Gummer, and apply them in designs for modern needs. This project will test the premise that research and knowledge of architectural history are relevant for current design practice. The students will develop their individual projects through a comparative critical analysis of the Gummer design method with the architectural tradition from another context of their own choice (e.g., Māori, Pacific, Asian, African, etc.). They will have the opportunity to learn about the architectural history of various countries from international guest speakers – recognised experts in their respective fields teaching at various New Zealand schools of architecture. The students will also have the opportunity to collaborate with practising architects and heritage specialists. Student work produced during the second stage of the project will be exhibited at the Objectspace gallery at the end of the 2022 academic year. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication discussing the suitability of Gummer's design methods and principles for contemporary design problems, based on the students' work and experiences. The students will critically engage with the material, discussing positive and negative aspects of traditionalist design.

3. Celebration and the Community

The project will culminate in the third phase of the project, Celebration and the Community, in 2023, with the Gummer and Ford centenary exhibition at the Auckland War Memorial Museum – ironically, particularly since Reginald Ford was on the judging committee, the one major design competition that William Gummer did not win. The exhibition will introduce the significance of Gummer and Ford's architecture for New Zealand to the broader public. It will also gather eminent architectural historians who will be invited to contribute to the accompanying publication with individual chapters about Gummer and Ford and related topics, consolidating the research of the history of traditionalist architecture. Finally, the exhibition will feature a section exhibiting student works from Unitec's School of Architecture studio papers that will centre on the possibilities of the application of historical research in contemporary design. The third phase of the project will bring together the three parties targeted – students, practitioners and the community. By this time, the students will have developed a new skill set, finessed through the series of practical design exercises. The practitioners will be presented with a new approach

to designing for modern needs. The community will be invited to contemplate and share their thoughts about the architectural alternatives that the project proposes. And, finally, inspiring a deeper understanding and appreciation of New Zealand's multifaceted architectural tradition, all three parties will be welcomed to share in the celebration of the Gummer and Ford jubilee.

Conclusion

This project can be described as a unique exercise that will connect knowledge and research of architectural history with contemporary education and design practice. Testing strengths and shortcomings of the traditionalist method in design for modern needs, the project will produce a body of knowledge relevant for New Zealand and global architecture. In terms of architectural history, the project will set the foundation for systematic exploration of a voluminous yet under-researched topic, crucial for better understanding and proper (re-)evaluation of twentieth-century built heritage across the world. It will give a new purpose to architectural history, redefining it as a source of practical knowledge – not just an academic discipline estranged from the practice. In terms of education, the project will contribute to a more versatile graduate profile of students at Unitec's School of Architecture. It will expand the skill set of architectural students, preparing them to cater for a broader range of prospective clients. Consequently, the project will leave a mark on New Zealand and international architectural practice, empowering designers to competently draw from the deep pool of experiences from various architectural traditions.

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