CHRISTCHURCH ARCHITECTURE

A WALKING GUIDE

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To the architects and builders of Christchurch,
then and now.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a guide to a century and a half of Christchurch architecture, presenting outstanding examples of the various styles that have been in vogue, and introducing the significant architects who have practised in the city. It focuses on the centre of the city — the area bounded by the 'Four Avenues': Bealey, Fitzgerald, Moorhouse and Deans — and the important architectural site that is the Ilam campus of the University of Canterbury. This is where the city's most significant buildings can be seen and, in many cases, visited.

Of New Zealand's four main cities, Christchurch is the most conscious of its architectural history. This civic awareness made the loss of much — but by no means all — of Christchurch's architectural legacy in and after the earthquakes of 2010–2011 even more poignant, and the debates about reconstruction even more pointed. This is a city that cares about its buildings.

The history of Christchurch architecture is a coherent and legible narrative, or at least it was, before the earthquakes. It dovetails with the wider story of the city's gestation and development; from the start, Christchurch's architecture has been a key component of the city's Anglocentric brand. Christchurch began as an intentional city: it was founded in the 1850s by people with a vision for an ideal settlement and a plan for its realisation. That plan really was a plan — a grid imposed on a stretch of flat land (and on other people who had long used that land, of which more later). Christchurch was conceived as an Anglican colony, a transplanted cross-section of English society, and the settlers wasted no time in replicating the institutions of established Victorian order and in constructing the buildings to house them.

The regnant architectural style of the settlement moment was Gothic Revival, which was closely associated with

Anglicanism in mid-nineteenth-century England. Gothic Revival was the original style of the Christchurch settlement and dominated the religious, governmental and institutional architecture of the city until the end of the nineteenth century. The style's leading local exponent was Benjamin Mountfort, a figure who towers over the first 40 years of Christchurch architecture. (Ten of the buildings in this guide were totally or partially designed by Mountfort.) Christchurch architecture has had two outstanding eras, periods in which the city's two greatest architects were producing their best work and, at the time, the best buildings in the country. Mountfort's Gothic Revival heyday, from the mid-1860s to the mid-1880s, was the first period of Christchurch architectural pre-eminence; the second was the years from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, when Miles — later Sir Miles — Warren was engaged in his Brutalist phase.

Mountfort had able contemporaries, if not peers, architects such as ecclesiastical specialist William Speechly, a short-term migrant, and William Barnet Armson, Christchurch's prototypical successful architect-businessman. Warren, too, had talented contemporaries, none more important than his long-time practice partner, Maurice Mahoney. From the 1950s through the 1970s, Christchurch had a strong Modernist architectural scene, populated by architects such as — to cite just those whose work features in this book — Paul Pascoe, Humphrey Hall, Keith Mackenzie, Holger Henning-Hansen, and the architects who worked in anonymity for the Ministry of Works. ('Full many a gem of purest ray serene / The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear' — Thomas Gray might have been thinking of ministry architects when he wrote his Elegy.) And then there was Peter Beaven. Like planets in a small solar system, he and Warren spun around on orbits that sometimes came into volatile proximity. Perhaps a chivalric analogy is more appropriate: especially in the twilight of their careers, Warren and Beaven often jousted over Christchurch heritage and urban issues, one entering the lists set up as a knight of the realm, the other as an indomitable Don Quixote.

A ribbon of design talent runs through the history of Christchurch architecture, connecting the eras of Mountfort and Warren. In the 80 years from late-career Mountfort to early-career Warren the city's most notable architects were Samuel Hurst Seager and Cecil Wood, although John Collins and Richard Harman had long careers in the decades before the Second World War, and the England and Luttrell brothers were also prominent in the early twentieth century. Between High Gothic Revivalism and Brutalist Modernism, Christchurch architects sampled the regularly replenished smorgasbord of styles on offer in the Anglophone world. The city was treated to buildings in the Italianate, Collegiate Gothic, 'Tudorbethan', Queen Anne Revival and neo-Georgian styles, before Art Deco and Spanish Mission made their appearance. Continuity amidst this change was provided by a tradition of masonry construction and a genealogical design consciousness. Even as central Christchurch became a city of Modernist concrete, its architects alluded to its days of neo-Gothic stone, adding pointy bits to Brutalist buildings.

Some of the most important buildings from the 1860s to the 1970s have been carefully restored after the 2010–2011 earthquakes — the Great Hall at the Christchurch Arts Centre, for example, and the Dining Hall at Christ's College and the Christchurch Town Hall. Other historic buildings have gone forever, most notably the Italian Rennaissance-style Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament (Francis William Petre, 1905), with its dome that evoked the Duomo (in Florence, that is). Peter Beaven liked to cite George Bernard Shaw's praise of Christchurch's cathedral, taking mischievous delight in mimicking the locals' penny-dropping awareness that their distinguished visitor was referring not to the Anglican cathedral in the centre of the city but to the Catholic one down by the gasworks.

History, even aside from seismic events, has not been kind to Christchurch buildings designed between the end of Modernism and the eve of the earthquakes. Post-modern

architecture was always a bit of a freak show, everywhere, but Christchurch got off relatively lightly. Instead, the city's architectural problem, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, was the increasingly moribund condition of the inner city. With a few exceptions, if you wanted to see good new architecture in Christchurch, in the millennium-ending decades, you headed to the suburbs to look at houses.

Things have improved in central Christchurch since the difficult years immediately following the 2010–2011 earthquakes. There are still many gaps in city streetscapes and a profusion of empty lots, and a rash of ubiquitous tilt-slab concrete and glass buildings has provided critics with an itch to scratch, but the government investment in 'anchor' projects and the local determination to save significant heritage buildings are reviving the central city. The quality of many of these buildings, both new and conserved, not just in a design sense but also in terms of environmental and social performance, is a cause for civic optimism.

It is not a coincidence that the raising of architectural consciousness in Christchurch is contemporaneous with the increasing prominence in the city's economic life of the local iwi, Ngāi Tahu. The city of Christchurch was established in a place that was a place — Ōtautahi was its name — and the wealth of Canterbury Province stemmed from the 1848 alienation, via a payment of £2000, of 20 million acres of Ngāi Tahu land. No Māori iwi has been more successful than Ngāi Tahu in using the Waitangi Treaty settlement process to develop the economic resources necessary to influence not just the politics but also the shaping of a city. As some of the projects in this guide indicate, Ngāi Tahu are regaining their naming rights to Ōtautahi-Christchurch, and design influence is starting to follow.

On the subject of inclusivity, there is another point to make. Readers of this guide will not fail to notice that it is a chronicle of the works of white males, not all of them dead.

Architecture in Christchurch, as in most places, has been, until very recently, a gendered profession. Without being glib, it is to be hoped that the events that have shaken up Christchurch might have the positive effect of sufficiently disturbing the structures of the architectural profession to make room for women in the architectural story of the city.

ROUTE 1: PARK SIDE

The planned foundation of Christchurch bequeathed two great legacies to the city: in the natural environment, Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens; in the built environment, Gothic Revival architecture. This route along the west side of the CBD, and into the eastern edge of Hagley Park, includes two of the strongest architectural compositions in the city: the buildings around the Christ's College quadrangle, and the former Canterbury University buildings that now constitute the Arts Centre. The route ends near one of the four squares incorporated in the original city plan, this one named for the sixteenth-century English Protestant martyr Bishop Thomas Cranmer.

Hagley Community College Main Building

510 Hagley Avenue

George Penlington, 1924
Historic Place Category 2

The main building at Hagley Community College (formerly West Christchurch School) suggests the architecture of English private schools. Its style is neo-Georgian, with a Queen Anne inflection: sedate and symmetrical, built of brick with masonry quoins at the edges, a pediment and flagpole in the middle, and Ionic columns framing the main entrance. So far, so traditional, but looks can deceive. Despite the appearance of its main building, Hagley Community College sits at the progressive end of the New Zealand state education system — 'no one wears a uniform and everyone's on a first name basis,' the school's website declares. And, when you look more closely, the building itself is, modestly, heterodox. The proportions are disciplined but also a little out of order — the main façade is really one big framed window. When new, West Christchurch School was a breath of fresh air, a modern learning environment of its time. George Penlington (1865–1932), chief architect of the Canterbury Education Board — for most of the twentieth century public education was run by regional boards — designed the building to meet New Zealand's first school building code, which addressed post-First World War concerns about national health and hygiene by mandating standards for natural light and ventilation.

Hagley Oval Pavilion

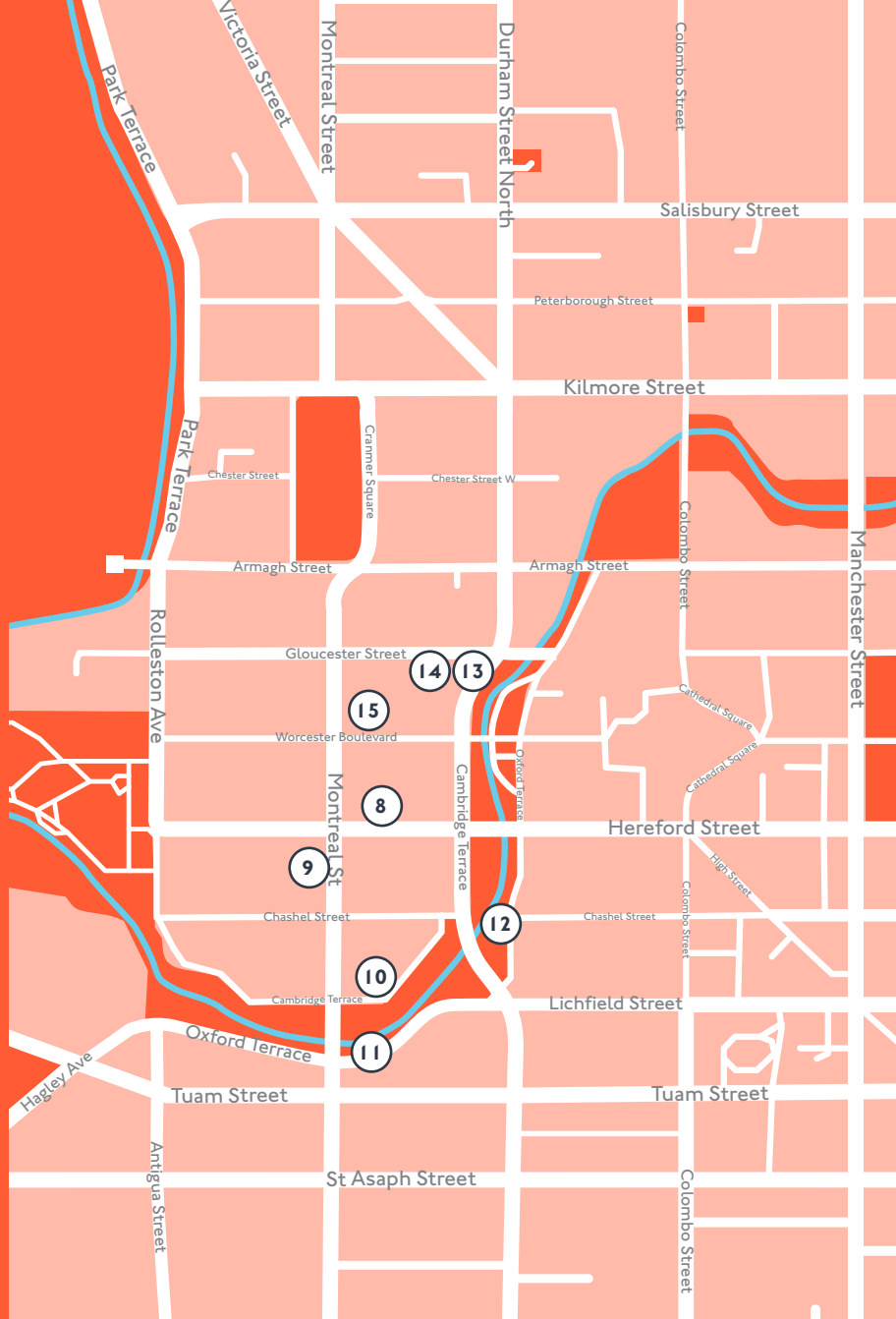
South Hagley Park, 57 Riccarton Avenue

Athfield Architects, 2014

For a century, from the bewhiskered decades of the late 1800s to the more socially heterogeneous late twentieth century, (men's) cricket dominated the summer half of New Zealand's sporting calendar. Rugby, of course, got winter pretty much all to itself. This season-based sporting duopoly allowed for ground-sharing arrangements in the country's cities and towns. In Christchurch, where cricket has always been particularly strong — the first club was formed just six months after the arrival of the 'First Four Ships' in December 1850 — the sport, at its inter-provincial and international levels, co-existed with rugby at Lancaster Park, until rugby pushed its season into late summer in the 1990s. In response to rugby's manspreading, and the decline in cricket crowds, cricket administrators decided to shift to a new 'boutique' venue in Hagley Park. The proposal was controversial because Hagley Park, according to its 1855 foundation ordinance, was 'to be reserved forever as a public park'. Establishment cricket got its way, via the Environment Court, and the result is a very pleasant venue that can accommodate 12,000 spectators on the oval's grassy raised banks and in the pavilion designed by Trevor Watt of Athfield Architects. The signature gesture is the pavilion's tensioned fabric roof, a series of tent forms with a familial relationship to the Mound Stand (Michael Hopkins & Partners, 1987) at Lord's Cricket Ground in London.

ROUTE 2: WEST BANK

This city pocket bordered on three sides by the Avon River–Ōtākaro includes two very different memorial sites, one commemorating those who fell in the First World War, and the other those who died in the earthquake of 22 February 2011. Also in this part of the city are the two Christchurch public art galleries, designed 40 years apart, and two significant examples of local concrete Modernism: the early 1980s brute that has been converted to house Council offices, and the engaging 1960s building which Miles Warren, the leading Christchurch architect of his generation, designed as his practice office and town house.



Te Hononga Christchurch Civic Building

53 Hereford Street

Government Architect's Office, 1981;
Athfield Architects, 2010

Te Hononga Christchurch Civic Building impressively represents several phenomena of both architectural and social significance. It is a case study in sustainability and — literally — a monument to the role of the state as architect and builder in New Zealand and to the historic importance of the post office in the socio-economic life of the country. The building was designed as a mail sorting facility by the Architectural Division (headed by the Government Architect) of the Ministry of Works and Development (MoW). It started its project life in 1965 but MoW jobs had a long lead time and the building was not completed until 1981. The grunty industrial building expressed the MoW's Brutalist tendencies of the 1960s and '70s and a concomitant partiality for reinforced concrete as a construction medium. (In an era of import restrictions, concrete offered the advantage of high local content.) The post office's enfeeblement after the economic deregulation of the late 1980s eventually robbed the building of its purpose, and in the first decade of this century it was converted by Athfield Architects into the headquarters of Christchurch City Council. The energy embodied in the building's construction has not been wasted, nor has the structure been much changed. Concrete façade panels were replaced with glass to admit light into the building's seven 5.8-metre-high floors, and a ground-level walkway now connects the business entrance on Hereford Street with the public entrance on Gloucester Street.

West Avon Flats

279 Montreal Street

Wilfred Melville Lawry, 1936
Historic Place Category 2

Art Deco? You cannot be serious! Rarely has there been such an instance of a design style serving itself up so heedlessly to the judgement of the future. Captivated by surface and smitten with glamour, Art Deco was fashionable for a couple of decades — a frivolous filling sandwiched between two world wars. Its architectural crime, in the eyes of later critics, was to be modern without being Modernist, to be too gratuitous in its ornamentalism. (Art Deco architects might have argued they were just putting the fun into function.) But that is exactly why the style had its moment, and why, even today, in a popularity contest between, say, great New York skyscrapers, the Chrysler Building (William Van Alen, 1930), with its gleaming sunburst spire, would win hands down over the austerely elegant Seagram Building (Mies van der Rohe, 1958). Art Deco spread around the world, reaching into New Zealand suburbia and more impressively into downtown Napier after the 1931 earthquake. The West Avon Flats were designed in the relatively restrained Moderne variant of the genre by Wilfred Melville Lawry (1894–1980), a Deco specialist, and First World War veteran and Methodist church organist. Lawry's design, downscaled from six storeys and 36 flats to two storeys and eight flats, was realised, reassuringly, at a time of heightened seismic consciousness, in reinforced concrete.