

# Auckland Architecture

## A Walking Guide

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

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# INTRODUCTION

The land now occupied by central Auckland has been inhabited since at least the fourteenth century, when Māori tribes settled the fertile isthmus they called Tāmaki, a place so naturally favoured it was also called Tāmaki-makau-rau ('Tāmaki desired by many' or, more suggestively, 'Tāmaki of a hundred lovers'). Tāmaki seems to have been a flourishing, and sometimes fought over, region by the middle of the seventeenth century, well before the English sea captain and cartographer James Cook navigated his way to New Zealand, and 200 years before the establishment of the town of Auckland.

Auckland's official foundation may be ascribed to governor William Hobson, who in 1841, the year after he had signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi with Māori chiefs, chose to make the place the capital of the colony of New Zealand, a status it lost in 1865. Hobson named the new capital for his patron Lord Auckland, a not very successful Governor-General of India. (Lord Auckland's career was blighted by one of the great British imperial disasters — the retreat from Kabul in the First Afghan War.)

Immigrant ships quickly began to arrive in Auckland and a rough and ready settlement coalesced around Commercial Bay, near the docks, before spreading up to the surrounding ridges — Parnell to the east, Ponsonby to the west, and Karangahape Road to the south. This catchment, which incorporates the modern Auckland CBD and parts of its central-city suburbia, is the focus of this book. The area, despite Auckland's often careless and even wilfully destructive approach to its built heritage, contains more than 150 years' worth of architectural history. From the street, you can read the story of Auckland's progress, its filling in and its going up, and the architectural evolution that accompanied the city's economic development.

The buildings of a city, whether civic or commercial, residential or religious, express the values, ambitions and capabilities of



the people who, at a particular moment in time, commissioned their design and construction. Architecture is a good guide to the zeitgeist. Central Auckland is a pattern book of the styles that have commanded architectural allegiance over a century and half: the various Revivalisms — Classical, Gothic and Baroque — that were fashionable in Victorian and Edwardian Britain and exported to Britain's empire; the turn-of-the-century Chicago School that is synonymous with confident American capitalism; inter-war Modernism in its Stripped Classical and Art Deco guises; post-war International Modernism, the house style of the modern corporation; and contemporary expressive form-making, enabled by computer-aided design and composite material technology.

A city's buildings are also a testament to architectural ability. From the early years of Auckland's settlement, impressive buildings have been designed by talented architects. In the nineteenth century, most of these architects were immigrants, men — the architectural profession has been, until relatively recently, heavily gendered — who often came from modest backgrounds in England, Scotland or Ireland. In their social circumstances, the pupillage nature of their training and their command of the practical details of construction, Auckland's early architects were not so far removed from the master masons who had shaped European cities for a thousand years.

As architecture became more professional, and the city grew, architectural practices started to proliferate. Many enjoyed a heyday and then declined or morphed into new firms. The fortunate few are remembered in their surviving buildings. As well as providing a guide to Auckland's notable buildings, this book acknowledges the architects who designed them.

Some names — the self-made Mahoneys, for example, long-time Government Architect John Campbell and Beaux-Arts exponent William Henry Gummer — recur in this book, which is organised into five walks (with public transport close at hand) around the city and its waterfront, and takes in significant streets such as Queen Street, Karangahape Road and Ponsonby Road, important

civic buildings such as Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, and popular urban spaces such as the Domain and Wynyard Quarter. Some of the buildings are monumental, some are modest, and all have a story to tell: a city is the sum of its disparate parts.

And a city is never finished. Auckland has grown substantially since the turn of this century, and the signs of this growth are evident all over the CBD, and in some of the photographs in this guide. (The orange cone diverting traffic from construction sites has become the unofficial symbol of the city.) But Auckland is also getting better at thinking about not just individual buildings — the old ones it has and the new ones it is getting — but about how they go together to make a city: one that is efficiently workable and, perhaps with this guide in hand, pleurably walkable.

# A NOTE ABOUT ACCESS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

This book is intended as a footpath guide to the architecture of central Auckland, but many of the featured buildings may be experienced closer up, at least in part, for free, or perhaps for the price of a cup of coffee.

## **Route 1: Britomart and waterfront**

The Chief Post Office is now Britomart Station, the busiest railway station in Auckland. At their street levels, the Hotel Britomart has a restaurant and the Northern Steamship Company Building has a pub. Commercial Bay has three levels of shops, cafés and restaurants, and its internal lanes are public thoroughfares. An arcade in the Ferry Building leads to the wharves serving Auckland's passenger ferries. You don't have to be a guest to visit the café, restaurant or bar in the Park Hyatt Hotel. North Wharf is a hospitality strip, and there are several cafés and food outlets at the street level of the Wynyard Central East 2 apartment complex.

## **Route 2: East side**

An internal public laneway passes through the Imperial Buildings, connecting Queen Street and Fort Lane. The Jean Batten Place Departmental Building has a café on the ground floor. Pioneer Women's and Ellen Melville Hall may be appreciated from the adjacent and recently revamped Freyberg Place. An internal public laneway connects the High Street and Queen Street entrances to Canterbury Arcade. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki is open every day except Christmas Day. Both McLaurin Chapel and Old Government House can be viewed close-up from the grounds of the University of Auckland, which are open to the public. St Andrew's Church is open for worship on Sundays. The Fale Pasifika can be circumnavigated on foot. The Supreme Court Building now houses the High Court — members

of the public usually have access to the court's proceedings. You have to be a member of the Northern Club to enjoy its interior architecture, but booking a table at an upmarket restaurant will get you into The Grand/The International just down the road. The IYA Building houses the University of Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery; exhibitions are open to the public.

### **Route 3: West side**

West Plaza has a café on the ground level. The doors of the Cathedral of St Patrick and St Joseph are open every day. The Sky Tower offers a bird's eye view of Auckland (and bungy jumps). The Smith & Cughey Building houses a department store and a venerable café with a sedate clientele. The Civic Theatre is a music and theatre venue, as is the Town Hall.

### **Route 4: Karangahape Road to Parnell**

St Kevin's Arcade has several cafés and a diverting range of small stores. Over the road, Iron Bank offers a public connection from Karangahape Road to Cross Street at its rear. Grafton Bridge is closed to cars during the week, but is always open to pedestrians. The Domain Gates and Statues are no barrier to access to the Domain, which is always open to public use. The Wintergardens are always open, and the Temperate and Tropical Houses are open every day; there's a café nearby. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira is open every day except Christmas Day. Holy Trinity Cathedral is open year-round from Monday to Saturday, except for some public holidays, and of course welcomes worshippers on Sundays.

### **Route 5: Karangahape Road to Ponsonby**

The Naval and Family Hotel is a strip club. Artspace is a contemporary public art gallery, open most days. Newton Police Station and Barracks is now the premises of community arts organisation Studio One Toi Tū, which sometimes holds public exhibitions. The Vinegar Lane development has several cafés. Objectspace public arts and crafts gallery is open every day, as are Sacred Heart and All Saints churches. Ponsonby Post Office has had a recent history as a hospitality venue.

The Leys Institute, which housed a branch library, has been closed as it poses an earthquake risk; its future is uncertain. Jacob's Ladder Footbridge Te To Bridge is always open.

Many of the buildings in this guide are listed as Historic Places (Category 1 or 2). These appellations are applied by Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, the government agency that identifies New Zealand places that have historical or heritage significance. Category 1 historic places are of special or outstanding historical or cultural significance; Category 2 historic places are of historical or cultural significance or value. 'Historic places' tend to be of pre-Second World War vintage, although more Modern-era buildings are now being listed. A building's heritage status, as the recent histories of New Zealand towns and cities demonstrate, does not necessarily ensure its protection.

# ROUTE 1: BRITOMART AND WATERFRONT

Auckland started out as a port, and the area around the docks was for decades the liveliest part of town. For much of the twentieth century, though, the city's waterfront was out of bounds to the public. That's changed now, and the centre of gravity of the CBD has shifted back to the waterside. This route takes in two urban revival precincts: Britomart and Wynyard Quarter.



# Chief Post Office/ Britomart Station

**12 Queen Street**

**John Campbell, 1912**

**Historic Place Category 2**

John Campbell (1857–1942) was ideally placed to implement his personal preference for Edwardian Baroque architecture as a national style. The Scot — according to architectural historian Peter Richardson, a quiet and unassuming man accompanied at work by his fox terrier — was in charge of the design of New Zealand government buildings for more than 30 years, nearly half of them (1909–22) spent as the country's first Government Architect. (Tasmanian-born William Clayton was appointed as Colonial Architect in 1869 but was not replaced when he died in office in 1877). In New Zealand's nation-building phase post and telegraph offices were a remote country's portals to the world, and their significance was signalled in their architecture. Built of Ōamaru stone on a base of Coromandel granite, the Chief Post Office (CPO) features a panoply of Baroque elements: arches and cartouches, half columns with Ionic capitals, a pediment, a parapet and cupolas at either end of the building. In the 1980s, the New Zealand Post Office was dismembered, its three functions — mail delivery, telecommunications and banking — being separated into different corporate entities. By the early 1990s the spacious Auckland CPO was surplus to government requirements. What to do with a big heritage building on a prime city site? This problem was not unique to Auckland. In Sydney around the same time, for example, the very grand Italian Renaissance-style General Post Office (GPO) on Martin Place, designed by New South Wales Colonial Architect James Barnet (1827–1904), was also left bereft of its original purpose when the Australian postal department quit the building. The Sydney GPO, controversially, was sold to foreign interests, and now houses shops and hotel rooms. In Auckland, the CPO was purchased by the city council, and in the early 2000s



was converted by Mario Madayag, Jasmax and Salmond Reed Architects into Britomart Railway Station, the downtown terminus of Auckland's suburban rail network. The conversion of the CPO into Britomart Station corrected an Auckland planning blunder. In the early twentieth century there was a train station at the foot of Queen Street, but this was demolished – its already small site was squeezed by the new CPO – and replaced, an inconvenient two kilometres away from Queen Street, by the Beaux-Arts Auckland Railway Station (1930) designed by William Henry Gummer (1884–1966). The main entrance of Britomart Station faces a new civic square – Te Komititanga (to mix or merge) – paved in the pattern of a whāriki or welcome mat. Designed by Jasmax and local manu whenua, Te Komititanga (2021) sits above the train tunnels heading westwards from the station.









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# Australis House and A. H. Nathan Warehouse

**37 Galway Street / Takutai Square**

**Mitchell & Watt (Australis House); Arthur Pollard Wilson  
(A. H. Nathan Warehouse); both 1904**

Historic Place Category 1 – Australis House

Historic Place Category 2 – A. H. Nathan Warehouse

Australis House (formerly the Entrican Building) and the A. H. Nathan Warehouse and Condiments Factory were built on reclaimed land near Auckland's shipping wharves as premises for prosperous colonial importing companies. In the 1990s, a public campaign saved the buildings, and their Victorian and Edwardian neighbours, from ill-considered redevelopment. Restored as one project in 2016 by architects Peddlethorp, the two buildings are now an integral element of the Britomart heritage precinct. Both buildings face two ways: south to Customs Street, and north (shown here) to the new Takutai Square. Architect Arthur Pollard Wilson (1851–1937) topped the Customs Street façade of the A. H. Nathan Warehouse Factory with Romanesque arches; the north side of the building has a plainer neo-Classical façade. Australis House, designed by the practice of John Mitchell (c1859–1947) and Robert Watt (1860–1907), features Baroque detailing on the south face; elegant sgraffito (plaster tracery) has been applied by Peddlethorp to the originally unadorned north façade.



# Excelsior Building, Stanbeth House and Buckland Building

## 22–30 Customs Street East

**Edmund Bell (Excelsior), 1897; Joseph Becroft (?) (Stanbeth), 1885; Edward Mahoney & Sons (Buckland), 1885**  
Historic Place Category 2

Sited on reclaimed land near Auckland's wharves, the three Victorian buildings in this block were designed as warehouses on either side of a decade-long depression. Starting at the east end (30 Customs Street East): the Buckland Building was designed for merchant John Buchanan, soon to be ruined in the late-1880s economic slump, by the architectural firm Edward Mahoney & Sons, which was led by founder Edward Mahoney (c1824–1895) and his son Thomas (1854–1923). Pilasters rising from a rusticated base form nine arcaded bays of windows with different frame treatments on each floor; a frieze of medallions runs beneath a cornice and parapet. Rising to the building's taxonomic challenge, Heritage New Zealand defines the design as 'eclectic Romanesque/Italianate in Victorian Commercial Palazzo style'. Ditto neighbouring Stanbeth House (26–28 Customs Street East), built for merchant John Coupland — another depression casualty — by Joseph Becroft who also, according to a contemporary *New Zealand Herald* report, 'drew the plans'. Perhaps; whoever designed the building gave it a symmetrical façade centred on a pair of pilasters which meet a cornice and parapet. The third building in the block is the Excelsior Building (22 Customs Street East), designed by prominent architect, city councillor, Baptist deacon — and likelier author of Stanbeth House — Edmund Bell (1841–1917). More pilasters, this time with Corinthian capitals, enliven the brick façade of a building which is an amputated version of its original self — it was cut in half in the 1930s to allow the widening of Commerce Street. The Commerce Street façade has been covered by a permanent work — *Maunga* — by leading New Zealand artist Shane Cotton.