

The Question of Auckland's Civic Building

BY JULIA GATLEY

This article examines recent and current controversy over the Civic Administration Building (1954–1966) in Auckland, New Zealand. Unoccupied since the end of 2014, the building's future is uncertain. Its heritage value is widely recognized by heritage professionals and commentators. Yet Auckland Council, the building's owner and former occupier, does not recognize its significance and has not scheduled it as a heritage building on its district plan. To the contrary, it has floated the possibility of demolishing it. This article considers the building's history, significance and possible futures.

Over the past two years, New Zealand has seen several well-known modern buildings under threat of demolition: Auckland's Civic Administration Building (1954–1966) and Symonds Street Flats (1941–1947); Wellington's Gordon Wilson Flats (1955–1959); the Lower Hutt Town Hall (1951–1957); and the Christchurch Town Hall (1966–1972). All were purpose-built by either central or local governments.

The Christchurch and Lower Hutt city councils have both taken heed of public opinion in working towards retaining their town halls. Housing New Zealand Corporation has sought the advice of conservation architects Salmond Reed on the repair of the Symonds Street Flats, and last year sold the Gordon Wilson Flats to Victoria University of Wellington. Interested parties await news of the university's intentions for the former public housing complex.

But Auckland Council is reluctant to accept that the Civic Building is of heritage value, or that it is worth keeping and adapting for reuse. The building is empty, pending decision-making processes. At stake here is not only the future of this one significant building, but also the establishment of precedent: how can a local authority expect private owners to use and maintain their modern heritage buildings if it does not do so itself?

History

The Civic Building is a nineteen-storey glass-clad office tower, built to house the Auckland City Council and its staff. It was designed from 1954 by the council's chief architect, Tibor Donner, and his team, and was completed in 1966¹. The council occupied the building from that time until 2014, when it vacated it department by department. Its shift to new premises followed local authority

amalgamations: the Auckland City Council, Auckland Regional Council and six other local authorities united under the banner of Auckland Council, a so-called "super city" with a population in the vicinity of 1.5 million people.

Tibor Donner (1907–1993), the Auckland City Council's chief architect from 1948 to 1967, designed the building. Hungarian-born, he grew up in Romania and moved to New Zealand at age 21. He studied architecture at Auckland University College and worked in private practice (1932–1938) and in the Public Works Department / Ministry of Works (1938–1948). He then joined the council, where he built a strong reputation with key works including the Civic Building, the Parnell Baths (1951–1957) and the Ellen Melville and Pioneer Women's Hall (1958–1962)².

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, central government and council architects produced four designs for a civic centre to be built on Auckland's main commercial boulevard, Queen Street. A tower for council staff only appeared in the fourth of these designs. It became known as Scheme 4, and its tower, a bold gesture signifying ambition and progress, became the building now known as the Civic (figures 2 and 3)³. In developing the design, Donner and structural engineer Vern Coleman enjoyed a research tour of North America and Europe. In California, they met with engineer John A. Blume, who suggested the steel framing system which was ultimately used⁴.

The building is tall and slim, orientated north-south with a footprint measuring 132 × 52 feet (40.2 × 15.8 m). The floor plans are open, with lifts, stairs and toilets located at the north end and a fire stair at the south end. The long east and west façades are divided into six bays. Glass curtain walls have aluminum frames and sunshades. The narrow north and south façades are heavier. Here,

concrete panels were originally clad with mosaic tiles. The north-east corner is differentiated by its glazing details and projecting balconies, in part serving to disguise toilet windows (figure 1)⁵.

The steel-framed structural system is an important part of the building's significance. On Blume's advice, it introduced column-beam moment connectors, with the columns and the principal beams fastened together using high tensile bolts rather than being welded with diagonal braces. This meant that shear walls were not needed for bracing⁶. Construction was also faster than usual because the steel members were prefabricated. Between the main beams, smaller secondary beams help to support the floors, which comprise metal trays topped by a thin layer of concrete.

There have been incremental changes to the building fabric over time. Access to a rooftop viewing platform was closed in the mid-1970s for safety reasons. The main entry was relocated in the mid-to-late 1980s and additional weather protection was added around the new entry. A bridge to the neighboring building, a performance venue, was added in 1989. There have been ongoing issues with asbestos, which had originally been sprayed onto many of the building elements for fire-proofing and insulation. It was later found to be a health hazard and asbestos linings were removed in 1989. In the early 2000s, mosaic tiles were removed from the building's north end as some were starting to fall off⁷.

Heritage

The Civic Building has been well documented, particularly by Dr Robin Skinner, now Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Design at Victoria University of Wellington. Skinner completed his undergraduate thesis on Tibor Donner in 1994, with a chapter on the Civic. He delivered a conference paper on the building in the Australian city of Perth in 2000. He also wrote the short entry on it for the *docomomo* New Zealand "Top 20", published in Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke's 2000 book, *The Modern Movement in Architecture: Selections from the docomomo Registers*, and the slightly longer entry for the 2008 book, *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904–1984*, which identifies and documents 180 of New Zealand's best and most important extant modern buildings⁸.

Skinner's detailed work informs several more recent heritage assessments, including

the **docomomo** fiche that was completed and approved in 2014, and the Heritage New Zealand (former New Zealand Historic Places Trust) listing proposal submitted by **docomomo** New Zealand in 2014 and currently under assessment.

But the Auckland Council does not recognize the Civic's significance and has not scheduled it as a heritage building on its district plan — the only type of heritage listing that would afford any protection over the building, and one that would impinge upon the ease with which the council can demolish it. The council has, though, commissioned a series of reports on it, from the multi-disciplinary firm GHD in 2012 and from conservation architects Salmond Reed in 2012 and Archifact in 2014.

The first of these reports followed the council's purchase of another building to accommodate its city-based staff and public announcements that it was considering demolishing the Civic, with the cost of demolition estimated at \$10 million NZD, compared with \$93 million to repair and refurbish it⁹. Its main reasons for proposing demolition seem to have been that the building would be surplus to its requirements and is not well liked: council staff and members of the general public find it ugly. Council does not, therefore, consider the cost of repair to be warranted.

Under pressure to provide evidence to support these estimates for demolition compared with repair, the council commissioned GHD to prepare a report on the condition of the building and options for the future. This report acknowledged that vacating the building would provide an unprecedented opportunity to remove all remaining asbestos. It also raised the issue of the curtain walling, commenting that it was “old and deteriorated”, having moved, leaked and corroded over time, and with the glazing sealants also having “aged and dried”¹⁰. It suggested that rebuilding the façade with a combination of existing and new materials would be possible, with the new components custom-made to match the existing. It nonetheless took the view that “no amount of refurbishment work is going to make the Civic Building a premier office building”¹¹.

Concurrently, the council commissioned Salmond Reed Architects to complete a heritage assessment of the building. Salmond Reed concluded that it “has exceptional overall national, regional and local significance” and recommended that it should be scheduled as a Category A heritage place on the council's district plan¹². They highlighted its importance in design and engineering, as a symbol of local authority aspirations in the post-World War 2 period, as an example of International Style architecture in New

Zealand and an example of Tibor Donner's work in adapting international models to a geographically isolated country.

The council then commissioned Archifact to peer review both earlier reports. Archifact refuted GHD's claim that “no amount of refurbishment work [would] make the Civic Building a premier office building”; agreed that the building's empty state provided an ideal time to remove the remaining asbestos; and emphasized that it would be acceptable from a heritage conservation viewpoint to rebuild the façade using a combination of existing materials and new materials to match¹³.

In its second peer review, Archifact agreed with Salmond Reed's conclusion that the heritage value of the building is such that it warrants being scheduled as a Category A heritage place on the Auckland Council district plan. Indeed, Archifact went one step further than Salmond Reed by suggesting that the building is “exceptional” in several respects, and of international significance in terms of its technological value¹⁴.

Archifact's work was not limited to peer review: council also took the unusual step of commissioning this firm to prepare another heritage assessment; a second full heritage assessment of the one building. This second assessment reiterates the findings from the peer review reports and presents in more detail Archifact's own conclusions that the building is exceptional and of international significance¹⁵. The Archifact report also presents the restoration of New York's Lever House as an instructive precedent: by the 1980s, the steel sub-frame supporting its glass curtain walling had corroded and rusted; and in the 1990s, the sub-frame was replaced using concealed aluminum glazing channels. The glazing too was replaced¹⁶.

There is a range of valuable precedents that could be cited in addition to Lever House: Gropius' Bauhaus Building at Dessau; Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall at IIT; Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York; and Louis Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven¹⁷. All of these important modern buildings have had major conservation/restoration work done on them since the mid-1990s. All had problems with their glazing systems, such as corrosion, moisture and dirt, and in all cases the conservation work included both the repair of existing building materials and the replacement of those elements which were beyond repair, including replacement glazing. In none of these cases has the significance of the building been compromised by the work; to the contrary, all continue to be held in esteem and now also have extended longevity and improved environmental performance.

Possible Futures

In June 2014, Auckland Council made the GHD, Salmond Reed and Archifact reports public¹⁸. In full knowledge of the two independent assessments of the building's heritage significance, it then developed three possible options for the redevelopment of the site. One of the three allows for the repair, refurbishment and reuse of the Civic Building for mixed arts and commercial use; the other two involve its demolition and replacement — one with high-rise development for mixed arts and commercial use and the second comprising low-rise facilities solely for arts use¹⁹.

Council circulated these options as a call for expressions of interest from developers to join a public-private partnership to work on the site, and illustrated them with conceptual designs by Stephenson & Turner. The 24-page call for expressions of interest made no mention of the building's heritage value; to the contrary, it commented that “RFA [Regional Facilities Auckland] could work with any of the three concepts”²⁰.

To summarize, then, a **docomomo** fiche²¹, a Heritage New Zealand listing proposal and two independent heritage assessments — both by reputable firms of conservation architects — all agree on the high significance of the Civic Building, yet still Auckland Council cannot mention the words “heritage value” in its call for expressions of interest to redevelop the place. Council is just as open to demolition as it is to adaptive reuse; in fact, it appears to be twice as open to demolition, given that two of the three illustrated options for its future depict this possibility over and above retention and reuse.

The uncertain future of the Civic Building shows New Zealand to be slow in recognizing the heritage value of its significant modern buildings. It is clear, too, that if the country is to retain the best and most important of its modern buildings long term, then public bodies must lead by example, identifying the exemplars and demonstrating that such buildings are worth spending money on, including adaptation for reuse in favor of demolition and replacement. ■

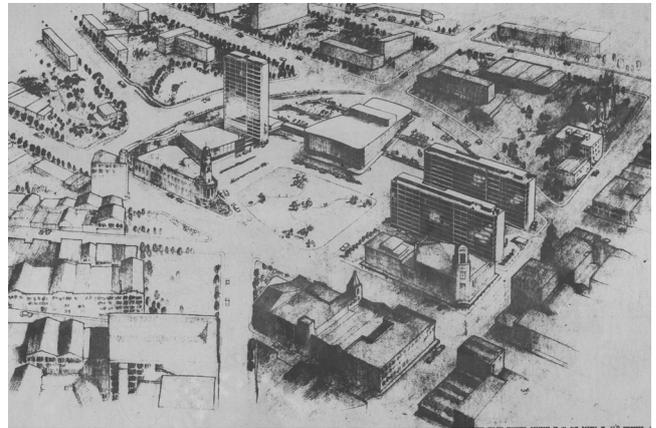
Notes

- 1 “Auckland City Council Administration Building”, *Home and Building*, Vol. 29, No. 6, November 1966, pp. 60–63.
- 2 For detailed information on Donner and his buildings, see Robin Skinner, *T. K. Donner: The Architect*, BArch thesis, The University of Auckland, 1994. Briefer but more widely available are Paul Jenkin, “Donner House”; Antony and Jane Matthews, “Parnell Baths”; Antony Matthews, “Ellen Melville Pioneer Women's Hall”; and Robin Skinner, “Auckland City Administration Building (now known as the Civic Building)”, in Julia Gatley (ed.), *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904–1984*, Auckland, Auckland

01 Tibor K. Donner, The Civic Building, Auckland, 1954–1966. View from the north-east. © Simon Devitt, 2008.



02 A model of the developed design of the principal tower, 1956. The low-rise facilities at its base were not realized. © Auckland City Council photographer, Architecture Archive, The University of Auckland Library, Auckland.



03 Tibor K. Donner, "Revised Civic Centre Scheme: Scheme No. 4", prepared by Donner's office for the Auckland City Council, November 1951. © Donner Papers (DO1), Architecture Archive, The University of Auckland Library, Auckland.

- University Press, 2008), p. 47, 78, 117, 149.
- 3 Robin Skinner, "T. K. Donner", p. 50–52.
 - 4 *Idem*, p. 55–59.
 - 5 A full description of the building is included in S. W. Mitchinson, "Auckland City Council Administration Building", *New Zealand Institute of Architects Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 20 March 1968, p. 80–86.
 - 6 Robin Skinner, *idem*, p. 58.
 - 7 The changes are documented more fully in the **docomomo** Fiche on the Civic Building, approved in 2014.
 - 8 See Robin Skinner, *idem*; Robin Skinner, "Disarticulated High Rise: The Auckland City Administration Building", *Habitus 2000: A Sense of Place, Perth, 5–9 September 2000*, Perth, 2000; "New Zealand", in Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (eds), *The Modern Movement in Architecture: Selections from the docomomo Registers*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2000, p. 191; and Robin Skinner, "Auckland City Administration Building".
 - 9 Bernard Orsman, "Council's Wrecking Ball Hangs Over Civic Building", *New Zealand Herald*, 20 July 2012; and Bernard Orsman, "Som to Rid City of Sick, Rusting Civic Building", *New Zealand Herald*, 5 November 2012, p. A10.
 - 10 GHD, "Auckland Council Property Ltd., Civic

- Building: Background Information", Report prepared for Auckland Council Property Ltd., December 2012, p. 6.
- 11 *Idem*, p. 9.
 - 12 Salmond Reed Architects, "Auckland Council, Civic Administration Building: Heritage Assessment", Report prepared for Auckland Council, December 2012, p. 20.
 - 13 Archifact, "Auckland Council, Civic Administration Building, GHD Limited Assessments: Peer Review for Auckland Council", Report prepared for Auckland Council, April 2014, p. 6.
 - 14 Archifact, "Auckland Council, Civic Administration Building, Salmond Reed Architects Limited Assessment: Peer Review for Auckland Council", Report prepared for Auckland Council, April 2014, p. 5.
 - 15 Archifact, "Civic Administration Building, 1 Greys Avenue, Central Auckland: Heritage Assessment for Auckland Council", Report prepared for Auckland Council, April 2014, particularly, 44–50.
 - 16 *Ibidem*, p. 63–64.
 - 17 These four projects are among those documented in the special issue "Reinvigorating 20th Century Masterpieces", *a+u*, No. 474, March 2010.
 - 18 For links to these reports, see Chris Barton, "The

- Civic Building: Modernist Folly; Architectural Treasure", *Metro*, 10 June 2014, available at: <http://www.metroag.co.nz/city-life/urban-design/the-civic-building-auckland-architectural-treasure/>
- 19 Regional Facilities Auckland: An Auckland Council Organisation, "Civic Administration Building: Three Concepts for a Thriving Arts and Cultural Precinct in Aotea Quarter", circulated 18 November 2014.
 - 20 *Idem*, p. 3.
 - 21 Lauren Speer and Julia Gatley, "Civic Building (also known as the Auckland City Administration Building)", **docomomo** Full Documentation Fiche, Approved by **docomomo** New Zealand on 25 April 2014. [http://www.docomomo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Civic_Bldg_Auckland1.pdf].

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