

interview / JULIA GATLEY

In conversation with Ian Athfield and Sir Miles Warren

INTERSTICES 22

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In 2012, Julia Gatley conversed with Ian Athfield (1940–2015; in 2015, Sir Ath) and Sir Miles Warren (1929–2022) for the launch of her book *Athfield Architects* (Auckland University Press), in conjunction with the opening of the associated exhibition at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi. A video of the conversation is available in four parts on YouTube.¹ In the wake of Sir Miles' death in 2022, *Interstices* is publishing a transcript of the conversation in honour of the memory of both Sir Ath and Sir Miles, indisputably two of the greats of New Zealand architecture.



Fig. 1 City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi (2012). Julia Gatley, Sir Miles Warren, and Ian Athfield in conversation in the Adam Auditorium. [Video still]

Julia Gatley: It's a huge pleasure to welcome everyone here today. I'm going to start by introducing these two well-known gentlemen to you, run through a series of questions, and then invite questions from the floor. So yes, it is my great pleasure to introduce Sir Miles Warren and Ian Athfield to you.

Sir Miles, of course, founding partner of Warren and Mahoney in 1958, well known to us all through projects such as the Christchurch Town Hall, the Michael Fowler Centre, the New Zealand Chancery in Washington, and the High Commission in New Delhi. Sir Miles was the first New Zealander to be knighted for services to architecture, in 1985. He received the Order of New Zealand in 1995, and the NZIA Gold Medal in 2000. In 2003 he was named an Icon of the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. The Icon Awards were established that year, and are limited to a living circle of 20.

Ian Athfield, founding partner of Athfield Architects in 1968, and again well known to all of us through Wellington landmarks, including much of the context for the building we are in today—Civic Square, the Wellington Public Library, much of the Wellington Waterfront—and plenty of other local landmarks and buildings nationwide. Ath received, in 1996, a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit; in 2000, an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from Victoria University; in 2004, the NZIA Gold Medal; in 2008, he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects; in 2009, he was appointed to the Board of Trustees of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust; and in 2010, appointed Architectural Ambassador to earthquake-damaged Christchurch.

A very warm welcome to you both.

Fig. 2 Sir Miles Warren, Philip Guan, and Ian Athfield at *Athfield Architects: People and Place* (City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 22 June–7 October 2012). They are pictured with Guan's model of Wellington's Civic Square, in which Warren and Mahoney's Michael Fowler Centre can also be seen. [Photograph by Jianying Wang, courtesy of Philip Guan]



Sir Miles Warren: Perhaps we should leave now! [Laughter]

JG: There are several reasons why I wanted to invite Sir Miles to be part of this exhibition opening and book launch weekend. One of them is to recognise and thank him for his generosity in establishing the Warren Architects' Education Charitable Trust and, through it, supporting book and exhibition projects, including the current ones. But beyond this there is a certain synchronicity between his and Ath's careers and I thought it would be interesting to tease some of this out today. Both grew up in Christchurch. Ath worked in Warren and Mahoney's office for a summer in the early sixties. Both established firms that grew to take on important public and institutional projects, and today have offices in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. The Christchurch office of Athfield Architects operated out of the former Warren and Mahoney premises at 65 Cambridge Terrace [before the Canterbury earthquakes], and will do again in the future, when the building is repaired. In 2009, when the substantial exhibition, *Miles: A Life in Architecture*, opened in Christchurch, Sir Miles invited Ath to be the opening speaker. And this event, then, provides the opportunity to reciprocate.

In terms of a series of questions in chronological order, my starting point is the 1950s, when Miles began his practice and entered partnership with Maurice Mahoney, and Ath was at high school and developing an enthusiasm for architecture. Miles, if you could set the scene for us by describing Christchurch's architecture scene in the late 1950s.

MW: Well, you mention I was a partner with Maurice Mahoney, and we were, but for one year we were in partnership with Gordon Lucas. And Gordon Lucas told me that he had no work for a year, and finally a client came through the door, and he wanted a garage. Lucas designed the garage, but the price came in too high. So, that was the sort of level things were at. But we had an extraordinary break. My grandfather was chairman of directors of three large companies—Pyne Gould Guinness, Ballantynes, and Whitcoulls [Whitcombe and Tombs]—and Gordon Lucas was their architect. He was not an architect at all really, but a builder, but he identified himself with his clients. We got a telephone call from Bertie Whitcombe of Whitcoulls. "Is that you, Warren?" "Yes, Sir, Miles Warren speaking." "New building, Miles Warren. E, F, G, H, new building." I said, "Thank you, Sir." It was hasty. I went and spoke to Gordon Lucas, I said, "What on Earth is he talking about?" He produced a drawing of 5 acres of Whitcoulls printing works, and those were the four corners of the new building, an enormous new building. In those days, engineers weren't around, we architects simply built buildings.

Gordon Lucas said, “We better go and see the management.” Off we went. Lucas did a surprising thing. To the Whitcoulls senior staff, he said, “We,” he didn’t say “you,” “we,” as he identified himself with his clients, “we could move that factory there and move that storage area there, and then you don’t need to build this building.” They said, “My God you’re right, Lucas.” We walked out and he said, “Don’t worry, it’ll come again in another year’s time. We’ve got too much work to do now.” So, we started off with some very posh people, major buildings, right from the word go. Maurice and I were building Ballantynes, which ran for five chains, with no clerk of works, no quantities, just the architects, and a rather limp engineer, versus the toughest contractor in town. All of this is to say that we were launched very early into the whole building process. And houses came drifting along. But I’m talking far too long here.

Ian Athfield: I can interrupt here, because I was probably about 12 at the time Miles was talking about, his infancy in his practice, and my dad actually worked at Whitcombe and Tombs. He was not then the foreman of the box department, which he became later on. We couldn’t afford an architect, nor could we afford a builder, so my brother and I built the garage for Mum and Dad, and excavated it, and I went past it the other day, and it stood up during the earthquakes [applause]. And I had a grandfather, on my mother’s side of the family, who was a cobbler and a blacksmith, and he had a small practice in Riccarton Road. And just before my mother died, her brother told her the story about Uncle Charlie. Grandfather Fred had taken the horse and cart out to the front of the house. Charlie was a baby, and he put the baby into the back of the dray, and the horse took off while Grandfather Fred went back into the house and the boys chased this cart right down to Riccarton Road from Hamilton Avenue, and finally deposited the baby outside his cobbler’s shop. And on the other side of my family was a grandmother who was called the Leg Lady of Christchurch and she used to do surgery on gangrene legs and war injuries. She had surgeries in Ashburton, Timaru, Oamaru, and Dunedin. Totally illegal. One thing that she hated was buildings. And sport. One day she told my father that she had bought the North Beach Tennis Club. And we went down in the Austin Big 7 with my brother and father. We had to demolish the tennis pavilion, put the nets inside, and set fire to it. And so that’s my family introduction to architecture [laughter].

JG: But then at some stage you developed more of an enthusiasm for architecture, and becoming an architect. So, was your early interest in Christchurch particularly in the work of Warren and Mahoney, Peter Beaven, those who became known as Christchurch School, or did it extend to Christchurch’s historic architecture more generally?

Ath: It was pretty much about the Christchurch School, and it was very, very difficult to get work when I was 18, and I was very, very lucky. There was a firm called Griffiths and Moffat who were sort of poor cousins of Warren and Mahoney, but still worked in the same school. Through Mr Griffiths’ son, I got a job with Griffiths and Moffat. And one of the interesting things was that Mr Griffiths was a councillor, and the first jobs I had to do was take his council propaganda around the neighbourhood. His son assured me that he could drive his father’s car, and I walked out and the car was missing, and then this kid came back and said, “Look, we’ve damaged Dad’s car, but I’ve got a friend who’s a panel beater.” So we went around to this panel-beating friend, and we knocked the dents out of the car that afternoon and that’s how my job started. George Griffiths didn’t actually know

we had damaged his car. But as soon as I started work in the place, George let me drive his car around. He was very proud of it. We were doing a job at Duncan and Davies, which Warren and Mahoney did a job for later on, and Mr Griffiths was standing outside waving me in, and I pulled in, in front of a car with those large bumper bars of the Model A, and it caught under Mr Griffiths' car and ripped it from one end to the other. He excused me for that. And the third accident, I was driving along Armagh Street and there was a person in a 1936 Ford Coupe backing back to me very quickly. I put my hand on the horn and the horn dropped off [laughter], so I walked into the office, and I said, "Mr Griffiths, this is all that's left of your car."

But it was really interesting because there was quite a social group of young students, because we actually did our preliminary work for our Architecture Diploma all in Christchurch. We went to the School of Art and the Technical School for technical drawing, we did Testimonies of Study up at the old atelier [Christchurch Atelier], and so we got to know each other very well. And some of my impressionable peers were working in Peter Beaven's office, and after work at Griffiths and Moffat, we would go in there and Peter would supply us with many drinks. I remember this amazing day. Peter had a friend called John Drew, and John Drew worked as a reporter for the *Listener*. And someone was saying, "Here's John, coming down the road," because we were up very high above it, and a woman opened her car door, and John on his bicycle went straight into her door and fell on the road. And then straight after that, Peter was travelling up in the lift to, I think it was the Canterbury Building Society building, and the manager of the Building Society travelled up with him, and Peter came into the office and said, "I thought something was wrong." We said, "What happened, Peter?" He said, "The manager travelled up beyond the first floor where the Building Society exists, and he said, 'I've got a strange problem, Peter. One of the women in our department went into the women's toilet this morning at seven thirty and found a naked man in the cleaner's sink.'" And it was John Drew, who had been given the position under the receptionist's desk to sleep. But it was these sorts of scenes that prevailed. Not terribly much done in architecture. But plenty done in good fun.

JG: And what about in the Warren and Mahoney office in the summer of 1961–62, when you employed young Ath—what are both of your recollections of that time?

MW: Were you in the Pynes office era?

Ath: We were in Manchester Street, the building there.

MW: Well at Christmas Eve, we all retired to the local pub, which was a really rough, tough pub. And Ath was going through his Edwardian phase.

Ath: Emulating other architects.

MW: With an Earl Grey topper hat. We arrive in this pub and imagine the astonishment of the rough crowd that was there. It was the most uproar-ish and amusing, laughing, hour I ever spent. The top hat came off and started shooting around the room. It was filled with booze and then dropped [over people's heads]. Ath, as you can imagine, was the whole centre of the party. It was a brilliant performance. I've never laughed so much in my life.

Ath: The people in there included Don Donnithorne, George Lucking, Don Cowey, a whole lot of people of that sort of age, doing similar work, in many ways.

Very jovial times.

JG: This coincided with the construction of 65 Cambridge Terrace?

Ath: Just before that. I came into the office, and one of the things that happened as soon as I got to the office on the second day, everyone looked at their watch. I looked up and the clock said nine o'clock. And everyone said, "We start at half past eight." And then Miles saw my poor quality of lettering, and so gave me lettering practice every morning for half an hour. And then finally, when I'd done a reasonable drawing, he got someone else to letter up the drawing. He was a pretty tough teacher at that time. And then, 65 Cambridge Terrace. I remember going to a party, Miles, for the demolition of the house there. And it was a most joyous occasion because we took the bath out of the house, and we put Miles in it and floated him down the river [laughter]. Hopefully never to be seen again!

MW: I can't imagine that sort of party happening today. A policeman arrived, and I had just emerged from the river. The policeman enquired what was happening, and I said very respectfully, "Officer." He said, "Is it starting or stopping?" I said, "Sir, it is continuing." Somebody threw a window, through another window, landing right in front of him, and the policeman just walked away [laughter].

An interesting, sober fact. 65 Cambridge Terrace cost 8,000 pounds, which I didn't actually have at that time. That year, I earned 10,000 pounds. We had no idea how well off we were. Until we were paying 66 per cent in tax. But the major buildings that we were whacking up. There was no argument about fees. Fees were never discussed. For 30 years, it would be vulgar, impolite, to argue about fees. They used to pay 6.5 percent. We didn't pay out money to quantity surveyors and all the peripheral lot—it was just architects, and the client. It was a great way to begin. In a funny way, we had the good luck to come from the top down, Ath came from the bottom up, and we met in the middle.

Ath: I remember meeting in your apartment in Dorset Street one night, and you introduced me to gin and tonics. I had never had gin and tonics before, and I had to ride on my bicycle all the way home. I didn't do a very good pathway on the way home, I fell off once. But Miles was splendid in black-and-white leotards at that time [laughter].

MW: We were very proud of the buses—tourist buses came past the flats in Dorset Street, with everybody coming to see the ugliest building in town, you know, and we would wave and cheer.

JG: That's probably a good note on which to jump to this article, "Style in New Zealand Architecture," which Miles wrote in 1978, and it was published in *New Zealand Architect*. It was a personal history of New Zealand architecture, and well known for the description of your own work as Group-come-Brutalism. I would like to read a few excerpts about what Miles had to say about Ath.

MW: Before you start that, just about our buildings being Group-come-Brutalism. It's been contended that the Dental School was Group-like. It wasn't. It was pure, you could transfer that to England. It was an English thing. We only built one Group-like house. Be warned. If an architect gives you one of his clients, don't accept it. This poor unfortunate woman, a woman in her seventies, probably, her husband, a doctor, charming man. I can remember the last scene, looking at the drains, and the drainlayer, the unfortunately named Mr Shatford

[indecipherable]. It was a total disaster. But the fees got me to England [laughter].

Ath: Thanks, Miles, for reminding me, you gave me one of your clients once [laughter]. She was extremely difficult. I won't tell her name. She built a house in Masterton. And we had a lot of difficulty, because her daughter said, "You don't understand old women." And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "You know the toilet door can be seen from the front door if both doors are open, and people can see her knees, on the toilet, so please move the toilet across." And I went to the builder and said, "The [woman], she wants to move the toilet," so we moved it 300 to the right, and she then complained that she bumped her elbow on the wash-hand basin. So we moved it back into a new position and finally she was happy with it. I think the sum for it was 800 dollars, and when you divide 800 dollars by three, someone has 34 cents on it and the other two have 33 cents. And the builder took the 33 cents, we took the 33 cents, and she complained that her third was costing 1 cent more than ours. So, Miles, that's the client you gave me [laughter].

JG: OK, so now we'll turn to what Miles had to say about Ath and Roger Walker in 1978: "I have tried to devise an appropriate name other than the derogatory Noddysism but so far no luck. I will just call it A and W." "The Athfield-Walker style is the direct opposite of everything the Group and the architects of the fifties and early sixties held dear." "The broad calm horizontal expanse of the Group is replaced by an intricately modelled collection of spaces with a vertical emphasis." "The structural elements tend to be used as decorative devices, not as a finely calculated minimum members"; "The ... collection of gables and half gables and slices thereof are juxtaposed together to produce complex sculptural shapes, sometimes looking like a wilful uncontrolled collision"; "Form no longer develops from function. No functional requirements can justify the complex exotic roof forms." "A and W work has all the trappings of an architectural style. It commits the worst sin of the fifties—it wears what Bill Wilson would have called an evocative fancy dress." "It was started by able rebellious young architects more than a decade ago thumbing their noses at the university, the establishment and the last flutter of the puritanical fifties and early sixties—it has elements of an extended university prank."

Miles, I love this article, and I am interested to know, how you feel reflecting upon something you wrote back in the 1970s.

MW: It's quite simple: architects should not write about architecture [laughter]. It was often pure jealousy actually. No, I mean, we were brought up in a very puritanical world, where form had to follow function, etc., etc. And this extraordinary burst of creativity was a bewilderment to conservative Christchurch. We had the beginnings of it, with Peter, and modest attempts on our part. The effects of the Group continued in Auckland. It didn't survive in Christchurch. The [roof] fall of the shed sitting on the Canterbury Plains went down like a lead balloon. Buildings in Wellington got those hills with that splendid view and so on. Christchurch was a world behind hedges, a world of houses looking into gardens. The exuberance of Ath would never have flowered in Christchurch. It was a response, an extraordinary response, to ...

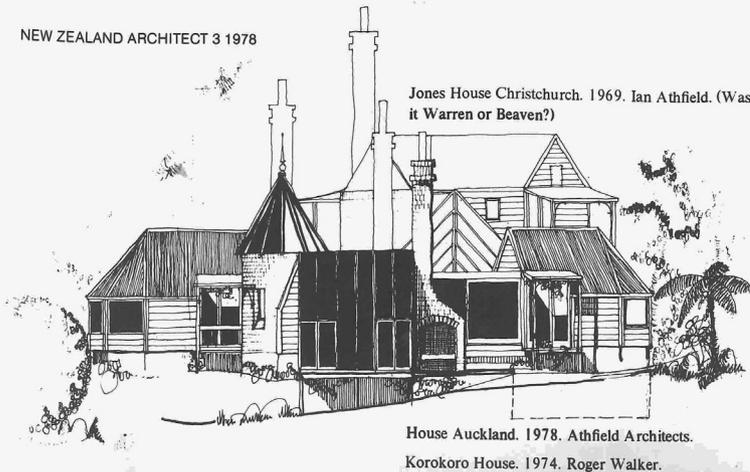
Ath: To the Wellington hillsides.

MW: And that extraordinary book, *Architecture without Architects*. Did that have an influence?

overleaf

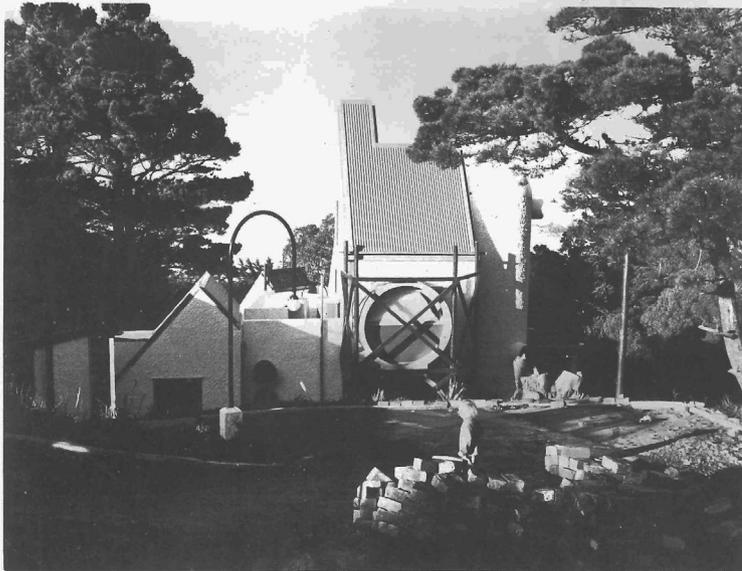
Fig. 3 A and W's work "has elements of an extended university prank." [Journal article: Miles Warren, "Style in New Zealand Architecture," *New Zealand Architect*, no. 3 (1978): 12]

NEW ZEALAND ARCHITECT 3 1978



House Auckland. 1978. Athfield Architects.

Korokoro House. 1974. Roger Walker.



various forms derived from early colonial architecture — verandah detailing, finials, barge boards; the colours — any strident colour splashed diagonally and clashing as outrageously with its neighbour as possible; diagonal shapes in plan and elevation; skylights galore.

Nothing must look like itself, especially doors. As an Australian critic aptly said, "If entry is found first time around, go back to gaol, collect £200."

Why has this extreme architectural style (some might call it an odd-ball aberration) blossomed and flowered so vigorously in New Zealand?

As far as I know, no other country has carried such small buildings to such frenetic shapes and embellishment. One can list overseas sources of most of the elements — op art and architecture for the circles; complex geometric shapes from the western states; southern Europe and "Architecture without Architects" for the continuous plastered surfaces over wall and roof in defiance of structure, materials and weather, and to our own colonial past for historical elements and so on. This is of course not said in criticism. The parent sources and influence of all good work can be dissected.

However, visiting architects from the States and Australia, many experienced and able critics, are astounded by the A & W work and always end up using the word "Disneyland".

As I see it, these are the reasons for the rapid acceptance and spread of the style.

It was started by able rebellious young architects more than a decade ago thumbing their noses at the university, the establishment and the last flutter of the puritanical fifties and early sixties — it has elements of an extended university prank.

It arrived on the scene when young architects in an affluent confident society could immediately on graduating do their own thing, start their own practice. This happens rarely in other places and the way things are going will not happen again here for a while. And probably for the first time in New Zealand there were relatively young people with the money and confidence to have a go.

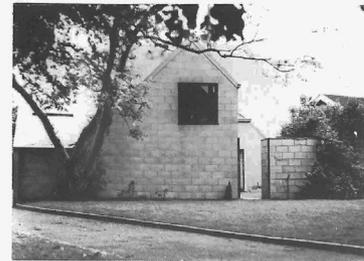
So the older practising architects had no chance to beat the hell out of them, to knock out the enthusiasm and creative energy nor to impart the proper restraints of good craftsmanship.

Young architects starting in a fully fledged A & W style competing for clients' attention could only develop more extreme forms.

The A & W style coincided with New Zealand's belated but now intense interest in the past. Colonial architecture, especially wooden gothic, has become the darling of public and architects alike.

It is surprising how late and sudden was this change in taste.

For three years starting in 1969 the Christchurch Club, the home of the conservative establishment, debated whether it should pull down its large Victorian wooden club house and rebuild. In all the debate with five architects and many professionals in its membership, no one suggested that the building be preserved for its architectural or historic value. An illustration of the proposed new multi-storey building in the press produced no public comment defending the present club house. In the end, for economic reasons, it was decided to alter and refurbish the wooden building. It must have been one of the earliest and still one of the largest



restorations in the country. We pulled down thousands of square feet of rotting black offices and rebuilt large portions leaving only the street facades and two or three rooms much as they were.

Our work received undue acclaim. As we saw it, all we had done was to peel the banana. It was all sitting there waiting to be revealed, and with my good classical training it was no problem to run coarse timber moulds and maintain the hearty Victorian character. The wheel has turned full circle and the Club is now on the list of buildings that must be preserved.

The Club fought the City Council before the Town Planning Appeal Board and was instrumental in having the Amenity Regulations of the Council thrown out as not being within the terms of the Act. We had fun at the hearing explaining that the Council appeared to be trying to preserve some genuine Warren and Mahoney. The Club was worth preserving because it is a good, well made, well designed structure used for exactly the same purpose now as when it was built.

From ignoring the past we have gone to the other extreme. Anything that is old and preferably of stone is therefore good, beautiful and worth preserving.

The Christchurch City Council aided and abetted by Christchurch architects now talks of preserving the clumsy piece of neo-Haliante-gone-wrong of the Post Office in the Square. It wasn't even on the first lists of interesting buildings made only ten years ago. Now we are saying, in effect, that today's architects could do no better — God help us.

I fear that architects have been equally uncritical of early New Zealand work. They are prepared to borrow the bits and pieces, the obvious details rather than to understand the substance. A few glazing bars, a criss-cross verandah rail and a dormer and you have a colonial house.

The small scale forms of the A & W style have their obvious historical overtones and the client public happily accepted the package. A bit of applied gew gaw, old doors, crude stained glass, any old junk from the breakers' yard could be incorporated.

To what extremities Middleton's finials have led!

What the Australians called "out-backery" started earlier there. Old Victorian pictures, gloomy cracked oils of dubious value were resurrected and flogged off for huge prices. Old houses were discovered and a seemingly endless array of sketches sold.

It is argued in England that the chief reason for our present interest in the past is television. It is said that it has opened vast numbers of people to visual culture in much the same way that, 500 years before, the invention of printing opened to people a literary culture, and in the nineteenth century the gramophone to music. The first need of people in this intoxicating situation is to discover their historical roots. To quote from the "Review": "For this the Modern Movement's monocular aesthetic, its tiny repertoire of acceptable forms and its disdain for the past, is most unsuitable."

Well, where to from here? It is easy enough to be critical and to take snide pot-shots, as anyone who has to make things and stand by them knows. The intensity of the criticism is often the measure of the work. The better the work the more vigorous the reaction.

I do not see how the A & W style can proceed much further. There is a limit to the number of parts into which a small building can be dismembered and the ways it can be reassembled. The style has all the hallmarks of decadent extremism. The initial shock tactics have become a bore and even the wit wears thin.

There is also a limit to the design and detailing input a small building can stand. Some designs must cost their authors dearly in detailing time, others have indulged in

Ath: That had some influence, but I think one of the things that frustrated probably many architects at that stage was that architects were very precious. They were very articulate in a way, but they hid themselves in bushes up in Auckland. You could never find an architect's house unless you knew them. You could hunt for ages and they wouldn't even put something on the letterbox to let you know where they were. The last thing was a name, and most of the time they even left the number off so you couldn't even find them. But the thoughts were that architecture should be universal, and to be seen, you took prominent positions, you challenged everything around, and you built houses for the poor, and they finished up by having to build houses for themselves. It seemed to be an important phase, with kids and other people starting to notice things which were different. That difference. That's when I started my house. We were thinking about similar things. We were thinking about how imposing the regulations were. We challenged things like ceiling heights, we challenged the sizes of walls, we challenged setbacks from neighbours, neighbouring boundaries. We did a lot of things to challenge the rules at that stage. We challenged the colour palette, that was happening overseas, with Victorian houses at that time. And we wanted to challenge people who had rejected the history of our grandparents. In many ways we brought the symbols of our grandparents back into the housing of the sixties and seventies. And by using those, we attracted young people. I remember one time standing on the bus stop and the old guy next to me said, "You're very interesting, kids sort of like you a bit. It's mainly because our kids like to think they respect their grandparents over their parents, so they never build the houses which their parents built." So in some ways, it was a lot of questioning, and that questioning developed between Roger Walker and me, for a short time in competition, and then we worked together, against the authorities. We did get a few things changed, which was really important. We got the minimum ceiling heights reduced. And when we built our house, I know that one time the building inspector came in and he said, "Look, you're going to have to increase the ceiling height by 600 millimetres." And I said, "We can't do that, it's already built." And then we averaged it out between the living room and the dining room, and he accepted that [laughter]. Many building inspectors don't know too much about averages.

JG: [To Ath] With that sort of writing, did it register with you, do you read it, do you ...

Ath: No, I don't read terribly much, which is quite helpful. If you read too much about yourself, about what other people are saying, you can become cynical about how things are going. You can become bitter. That's the worst thing, architects who become bitter after they read things, and so, you know, the worst thing is to become bitter.

MW: Ath was a marvellous person when it came to creativity. We were just steadily building. About the same time we started College House / Christchurch College, at the University ...

Ath: I was in the office when you started College House and also the Crematorium [Harewood Memorial Crematorium and Chapel], which is an absolutely beautiful building, well done.

MW: College House is still standing [post-earthquakes]. I think the chapel probably is. The basic approach there was that form would be generated by function,



Fig. 4 Athfield Architects (1980–81). Buck House, Te Mata, Hawke's Bay. [Photograph by Euan Sargisson Photography, www.sargissonphotography.co.nz, courtesy of Athfield Architects Ltd]

which sounds very prescriptive, but it wasn't. Warren and Mahoney were best when we had a unique function to build for, and we were worst when it was so much floor space [gesturing vertically], in office buildings.

Ath: It is fair to say it was in stable economic times, wasn't it, and one of the things that we sort of lost in the early seventies when that space was starting to move, very, very quickly, and the developer came onto the scene and they would employ anybody to get the building up as quickly as they possibly could.

MW: I remember the bursar at Christ's College ringing me up, saying, "Hello Miles, or Warren (or actually I was Warren Minor), would you like to work for the College?" "Oh, yes, Sir. What's the project?" "Oh, it's a lavatory block, a seven holer, no doors on the bogs. Well, it's a start, lad; it's a start" [laughter]. And we worked for them for the next 40 years.

JG: At some point, or perhaps it was incremental, your interpretation and opinion of Ath's work changed considerably, and you became a firm ally and a supporter of Ath and of Athfield Architects, in Christchurch in particular. Was it with a particular project or point in time when this happened, or if it was just incremental?

MW: I suppose it was the Buck House [Hawke's Bay, 1980–81], that was just astonishing. That I'm sure is in everybody's mind, that a magnificent work, the vineyards running up to it and those white forms and so on. What can you say? Genius at work.

JG: In the 1980s, Warren and Mahoney and Athfield Architects both produced buildings that are now described as postmodern, with oversized classical elements, symmetry, and sometimes the use of metaphors. I'm interested to know how both of you feel about the eighties work now, whether you see it as part of a continuum from earlier work, or whether you see a juncture.

MW: It's funny, we had the same client, Graeme Bringans.

Ath: We did. The [apartment] building in Oriental Bay.

MW: And Citibank, in Auckland.

Ath: I think the clients were also starting to be influenced by architectural magazines. Up to then, many people we worked with weren't influenced at all, except by your particular work, you know. And offices, as they increased in size, you know, it's not Miles and I who continue to push the pencil, it's a case of joint minds. As those offices develop and overseas influences come, you're always affected by them. But today, I suggest, they are so diverse that fashion determined by age and time is probably not so important, because there are so many ways of doing things, there are so many techniques for putting things together, and there are so many materials available. It's really trying to get a certain amount of restraint when you are actually working with some of these clients who want to actually use every material in the world or are influenced by something you actually have no respect for. So, it's much different producing buildings now than historically.

MW: I remember, Graeme Bringans, I think he must have built ten office buildings with us, he'd ring up and say, "I'm coming down, I'll be at your office at ten past eight. I will give you instructions for a fourteen-storey office building in Wellington. I have to depart at nine thirty. Would you produce the sketch plans in two weeks?" "Um, yes." "And the working drawings in six weeks?" "Yes." All you could do was regurgitate multiplications of what you had done before. It was a mad, stupid world. If only we had had more time. That's all you could do was repeat and make multiplications. A run-up standard office block was the least interesting brief you could get.

Ath: And the best money.

JG: Miles, in 1994 you reached the age of 65 and that was the agreed retirement age at Warren and Mahoney.

MW: Yes.

JG: It seems topical given recent focus on retirement age. Was it too early? Was 40 years of practice enough?

MW: Well, I continued designing buildings thereafter. I had the great pleasure of still continuing to work for Christ's College. I did a building a year. It was a great pleasure to get back onto the drawing board and not having to do things, all the carry on. So I could puddle along and enjoy myself.

JG: So were they done in your name or still through the Warren and Mahoney office?

MW: No, just under my name. I was really practising without the trophies [laughter].



Fig. 5 Photographer not known. Sir Miles and Ath at *Four Decades of Architecture: Warren and Mahoney Retrospective* (Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 14 May–19 June 1994). [Photograph, Athfield Architects Ltd]

JG: I'm interested that you marked 1994 with an exhibition on four decades of architectural practice.

MW: There was a particular reason for the exhibition. I had been for ten years a trustee of the Arts Foundation. The Arts Foundation made five awards of 30,000 dollars a year to artists, each year. So 50 awards had been made to artists, and not one to an architect. Architecture is the mother of the arts. You can take all the paintings out of, [to City Gallery staff] I'm sorry [laughter], and you probably would never know, for a year, probably [laughter]. But you can't take the whole built environment. That is what architecture is about. It is the mother of the arts. And they'd made no award to architecture. Not one in 50. We'd given awards to ... [gesturing]. So we had the exhibition at the Christchurch Art Gallery. It was really to say, look, architecture is an art. And we had a wonderful turn out, in numbers. As this one will. Look around the walls of the gallery out there. Those working drawings themselves are works of art. That's one of the pleasures of the old drawing system. When the architect or the draughtsman or staff made a drawing, it was his or hers. You could identify each drawing, you could just glance at it and know who had done it. They were works of craft and art, and that's well displayed in the exhibition here.

Ath: The only design drawings in architecture are the working drawings. It's the way that you put things together. It's not those beautiful perspectives that you use in the first place. For us, it's the way that you put things together. And I've been really lucky, because I'm a small part of a fairly large firm that has let me retire gently, mainly because they might be frightened. But years ago, when I worked at Structon Group, I became a partner in 1965, and my first task was, I thought my first task was, to introduce a retirement policy for the rest of the partners, which didn't go down terribly well. I was subsequently dismissed from the practice, on the fifteenth of July 1968. That was on my birthday. So I went out and gained quite a few of their clients in the afternoon. The bailiff came around at half past five at night, and the practice [Athfield Architects] started like that. I've been lucky over the last seven years. I have been slowly reducing my amount of

work, which the office has accepted, and the helm and the tiller are in the hands of others. And I'm really happy to be a small part of that organisation. And probably will never actually start drawing by myself, because I don't need to. I just need to finish some of those questions I have asked for the last 40 years and provide some answers. Especially to my family [laughter].

MW: Just going back. I first worked as a student in Cecil Wood's office, and the first thing I did was to practise lettering. I used to draw parallel lines, evenly spaced, and then you could grade up to your letter Ts, and Cs had to go just above the line and then down. Wood looked over my drawing and said, "It's very immature, Miles." I had no idea what he was talking about. We were drilled in draughtsmanship, and we found if one got stuck with a design, that it wasn't getting anywhere, we simply had to set to on the drawing board, and keep drawing and looking, and we would manage.

Ath: Very similar to when I started working for you, Miles, and I drew the first wall on the drawing and Miles came over and said, "What's that wall, is it a block wall?" I said, "No, it's a timber-framed wall." He said—and this was at one-eighth scale—"It's 6 inches thick, and framing boards are 4 inches thick. Draw it again, lad."

MW: The discipline of looking.

JG: Ath, you also marked the four decades of Athfield Architects with a big party at the Embassy Theatre. Tell us about that one.

Ath: It was a film that was made, which was really important. Geoff Cawthorn and Richard Riddiford made a film about the practice of Athfield Architects, and living on the hill and working on the hill, and demonstrating that it is a practice of a whole lot of people working together, which I've had some influence in. But there are some very, very good people there. So I feel good about leaving. Great party. It's always good to have a party. I wouldn't mind another really good one like that before I die. And even a better one after I die, which would be important to have.

JG: The film is running in the reading room upstairs, during the exhibition.

Ath: Very good.

MW: And there is a much lesser film on Warren and Mahoney. Finally, it goes into the chapel at Christchurch College. We were there quite a lot, I thought. And he turned to me and said, "Do you believe in God?" I said, "No." Here I was in the chapel that I designed saying I didn't believe in God. He would use it in the film, of course.

Ath: That's always the question they ask you in the end. I've been asked that a number of times. And it makes it quite difficult, especially when you're asked by the Bishop of Christchurch. You know you're on a loser when you say "No," but in the end, you have to be honest.

JG: Miles was awarded the NZIA's Gold Medal in 2000, and Ath in 2004. Miles, you recalled that on the occasion of your Gold Medal, you said that if you could start your career all over again, you would choose to do it "as an apprentice in Ian Athfield's office." I am intrigued by this comment and wonder if you can elaborate?

MW: Well, it would have been a wonderful experience, wouldn't it? I mean, how much more exciting and creative that would have been, compared with the dour, confined, sober process that we went through.

Ath: We went through some dour experiences too. Yesterday we went through a really dour experience when we had to get a building consent for the object out in the Square [a 3/4 scale model of the Athfield House lookout tower]. Fortunately I didn't have to do it. My son, Zac, did it. There was a change in mood. You could see him smiling for short periods of time and then down on the lip. This has been going on for two months to get a building consent, because there was a debate between whether it was a sculpture or a building, or a non-complying object. Right up to yesterday we really didn't know. We had a truck going round this block four or five times with the remnants of the tower on it, waiting to get into Civic Square, and finally we got the building consent, five minutes before we took it into the Square. People can be very glum in those situations, when the wall comes up in front of you, and you find you're in a bit of a muddle. I'm sure it happens in all offices. It's not all about joking, but it's a balance between the things which can make you laugh and the things which can make you cry, which is important. As long as the laughter isn't too great, and the tears aren't too great, it's a good place to be.

JG: I think the tower is already creating lots of joy out there in the Square, which is fantastic.

Ath: Yeah it's full of kids at present, but you wait until they see how many teenagers you can get inside it, and that may be a problem. As soon as we put the sails up in Civic Square, we had a copulating couple on top of one, and they were going to take them down. This is a sort of invitation to do something slightly different. If it's a place to get into, then people will get into it differently than [envisaged].

MW: It could only happen in Wellington.

Ath: It happens in Christchurch, but behind fences!

JG: It is impossible to avoid the subject of Christchurch, both with the devastation of the earthquake and the great loss to New Zealand architecture with Peter Beaven's recent death. My interest here is to draw a comparison between Athfield Architects' project for the Canterbury Museum, which ran 1999 to 2006, and Warren and Mahoney's 2009 project to build a new Conservatorium of Music for Canterbury University within the Arts Centre complex. Both of you came up against Peter Beaven and the Civic Trust with those projects, with their interpretation of them as being projects having too great a level of intervention with the heritage fabric and the heritage value of the place. Neither of the projects has been built. Is there a future for either of these projects, or if they are dormant?²

MW: Could I explain why they are both dormant, or at least one of them. The judge was nicknamed Whacko Jacko. We had appeared twice before, on occasions. One of the debates was the classification of houses in four city blocks, whether they were nineteenth century or 1930s or postmodern or what category they fell into. But seeing as the judge seemed a bit confused, I said "Sir, could I draw on the blackboard to explain what I am talking about?" He said, "No, this is a court of law. You may draw on a piece of paper for the court." So I drew a gable and a hip, and handed that to him. "Oh, I see, now I know what you mean." He didn't know the difference. He had no architectural vocabulary at all. And he

was the judge for the Museum. The opponents of the design waffled away talking absolute nonsense, but neither the judge nor his two sidekicks came up with ... They simply didn't know what was being talked about. So Peter's evidence sailed across the process.

Ath: The Museum had 10 per cent [Benjamin Woolfield] Mountfort, who was a very, very important historical architect in Christchurch. And the rest of the building was very, very questionable. There were two interesting aspects of the building. They had the largest white whale in the southern hemisphere, and the previous room for the whale had been put on the mezzanine of a new addition, and the architects had incorrectly measured the whale, so they had to put an extra mezzanine on the room for its tail. The gallery only opened for about a month before people became disinterested because you were so close to the walls to see the whale that you couldn't see what size it was. When I was a kid, this whale used to be in the courtyard outside the building, with the whare and the large waka they had. Unfortunately this whole area had been built in, in the sixties, extremely poorly, it looked like a concrete building by the worst architect, Mr Bucknell. They spelt it with an "F". The whole thing became incredibly complicated. We put this whale in a position where it was seen at the entry, it was completely outside the Mountfort area. And the most contentious area was the whare whakairo, which we put between the McDougall Art Gallery and a portion of the Museum, as a linking structure. The whare was bought from Ngāti Porou in 1880. It was only the interior of the whare. We decided that it could have an exterior, and it should sit between the McDougall and the main building at a high level where it could get the eastern sun and look out towards the Southern Alps. When we got to the hearing, this woman who was the patron or the head of Save Our Botanical Gardens, said "We don't want a Māori building which can be seen from the Botanical Gardens. This is a very English garden. We cannot be seeing a Māori building." We explained that it was a blue collar amongst two white collars and that made it even worse. And then she said, "It could go on the Christ's College side of the building." And a person from Christ's College said, "But we are not that happy with it on this side of the building." So the part of the building was moved around all the time at the hearing, and we got shafted through every bit of that exercise. But I am sure we are going to get some traction. Someone has to get some traction in Christchurch. We have to mix old with new. We have got the cathedral, which if the engineers and the bishop have their way, could be demolished to nothing. And one of the most important things in Christchurch now is memory, and the spiritual place, and all the memory is being wiped from Christchurch at this stage. Every site where there is a building pulled down, all the bits are taken away and chucked in the dump, and then it is bulldozed, cleaned up, gravel put on it, a bit of lime, and a few pot plants dotted beside it. It is just the most unfortunate thing. We have to provide answers to the building huggers who have traditionally looked after these heritage buildings, one by one, intact. We have had some real problems with the people who hug buildings. People have died in them. We do have to build new buildings to support old buildings, we have to leave remnants of old buildings there. We have to build new in relationship to old, we have to respect things from the past. It's a different way of looking at it. And that's one of the reasons why I'm at the Historic Places Trust, as no one else would put their hand up, but I'm determined to make sure that we look at new in relationship to old and respect both of them at the same time. History starts with a good idea tomorrow, not something that's really poor and

Fig. 6 Ian Stantiall for Athfield Architects (2004). Design for the revitalisation of the Canterbury Museum [Digital drawing, courtesy of Athfield Architects, Stantiall Studios, and the Canterbury Museum]



NOTES

1. "Julia Gatley interviews Ian Athfield and Miles Warren at City Gallery Wellington, 23 June 2012," YouTube, Part 1, www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2GlyDuQDpE;

Part 2, www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3Rkjm_9CVo;

Part 3, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPa-lu8hTHw; and

Part 4, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S77xCfSywbw.

2. The redevelopment of the Canterbury Museum to a revised design by Athfield Architects was granted resource consent in 2021. Works commenced on site in 2023 and the building is expected to reopen in 2028.

gets entrenched in history 50 years after it was built. It is really important. And, look at the Arts Centre. The Arts Centre is a beautiful collection of buildings. But the income from the Arts Centre after the earthquake was three million dollars gross per year. They are going to spend 250 million dollars on those buildings, and you need 25 million dollars a year in rental. So if you don't get those high rentals into that area, then those buildings are going to have to be subsidised by someone. And there needs to be great modern buildings in relationship. There need to be cloisters, which actually worked from the street, inwards. The Dux de Lux is a pretty shabby building on the corner, with its service dock right on the corner. It should go. I told them, but you're not very popular when you say, "Get rid of that bloody Dux de Lux." Miles' produced a great five-storey building [the Conservatorium of Music] with long colonnades, and views from the street into the complex. It is really important to actually understand what has to happen.

MW: Our whole concept was very simple. Instead of a cold, southerly facing car yard, you could transform it into a third quadrangle, the same size as the other two, with a new building along the street. It's as simple as that. But the days descended into ... a terrible waste of effort and energy, the time pressures.

Ath: We spent seven years on the Museum. Costs were about seven million, which is really unfortunate.

JG: I had said I was going to open up to the floor, but the Gallery have given me very strict rules about drawing this discussion to a close at exactly this time, so I am going to follow their strict instructions. Thank you both so very much for your time today, and your conversation. It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

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