

Auckland University Old Arts Building

A ‘Maori Gothic’, ‘un-British’ pile

Poet ARD Fairburn suggested that Roy Lippincott and Edward Billson’s design would scare old ladies in the park. The Education Board’s architect, who liked boring single-storey primary schools with more corridor than character, called it ‘un-British and out of harmony with our national character’. Minister of Education CJ Parr wondered if it would look better without the tower. Others ridiculed it as ‘Maori Gothic’ or a wedding cake.

Fortunately the university bureaucracy stood its ground and stuck with this Gothic-inspired amalgam of mediaeval and modern designs. Enjoy the New Zealand details — the stone flax-seed pods, the ponga fronds, the kaka and kea — and see whether you agree with historian Keith Sinclair that ‘it is one of the few examples of visually successful architectural siting in the city’. Like naughty Victorian seaside postcards in a museum, the once-controversial Old Arts Centre, now better known as the Clock Tower, basks in a respectability confirmed by its presence on the dust jacket of the university’s official history.

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Further reading: Keith Sinclair, *A History of the University of Auckland 1883–1983*, Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1983.

Note: The building has a link through Walter Burley Griffen to Frank Lloyd Wright. Lippencott was Griffen’s brother-in-law.

