

7 SIGNIFICANCE

7.1 Historical Significance

Dunedin has the longest history of civic government of any settlement in New Zealand and the Town Hall forms an integral part of this important historic tradition.

The fact that original plans to build were suspended during the War years and only reprised in the early 1920s also marks a significant historical moment, underlining first the spirit of sacrifice that existed during the war years (and it has been noted that Dunedin sent proportionally more personnel to the First World War than any other district in New Zealand), but also the spirit of renewal and reorganisation that existed in its aftermath.

In a similar vein, alterations made for the insertion of air raid shelters at basement level in 1942 act as a surviving reminder of a very specific historical moment, when the Second World War had begun to threaten on the home front.

The fact that the building was funded largely by proceeds derived from the New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition of 1925-26 also contributes to its historical significance. The era of the great exhibitions, begun in the late 19th century, was coming to a close by 1925 and this was one of the last of such great events, marking a specific chapter in history, in which the huge industrial developments of the era were ceasing to be a source of fascination and starting to be integrated into everyday life.

In addition, the layout and size of the auditoria and the installation of the 'Town Hall Organ' mark a particular period in the history of public entertainment.

The huge wealth of documentation that survives relating to this building adds considerably to its historic interest. Rarely is it the case that one can so easily access departmental reports, funding strategies, competition details, original drawings, photographs of the construction process, correspondence, photographs of the building on completion, records of building use etc. and the existence of all of these items and more allows the building to function as a living historical document.

7.2 Social Significance

The role of the Town Hall in the history of civic government has been noted above and this is certainly of social as well as historical significance. The building's greatest social significance however derives from its use as a venue for public entertainment. In the early twentieth century cinema was just beginning to make an appearance but music and dance halls remained a hugely important part of social life. Dances and musical events held at the Town Hall have made it a focus of social and community life in Dunedin since its construction and it retains that role in occasionally playing host to large musical events today.

The building of the Town Hall was a huge construction project, one of the largest taking place in Dunedin at that time. In the post war years this must have provided a significant source of employment to a large section of the city's population and it is likely that many people still alive today or their family members were involved in the project in one capacity or another.

7.3 Technical Significance

The reinforced concrete construction used in building the Town Hall was an advanced technical innovation for its time, and it is also interesting to note the specification of

concrete and cement throughout. The triple layer construction with brick to the interior, concrete fill and stone cladding to the exterior is also of some note. The early adoption of concrete and cement was a phenomenon unique to New Zealand and derived largely from the pioneering nature of Early Settler society.

Fibrous plaster work used throughout is also of technical significance for the depth and scope of the designs, exploiting the full potential of what was at that time a relatively new and modern material.

The Town Hall organ too is of considerable technical significance, being a rare surviving example of a symphonic organ. It is noted that "Few instruments have survived unaltered from this period of organ building" and that "The high quality of the original organ building ensure that Norma continued to play through periods when the symphonic style was highly unfashionable – a period in which many great organs were aggressively rebuilt and changed beyond recognition from the vision of their original builders."⁷

7.4 Architectural Significance

The commissioning of a design competition for this building adds considerably to its architectural significance. Great care was taken in assessing all of the entries, and highly-placed competitors were asked to re-design and resubmit.

The survival of both the competition criteria and the original architect's drawings also contribute to the building's architectural significance, and changes made to the original design between its inception and actually taking the building on-site are of particular interest.

The Town Hall is an excellent representative example of the pared-down neoclassical style assumed for much public building in the early twentieth century, forming a transitional phase between the more decorative Victorian-era designs and what would later become the Art Deco.

This is the biggest Town Hall in New Zealand and possibly even in Australasia, with a seating capacity of 3,000. At the time of its construction it was an architectural undertaking of enormous scale.

In addition, the careful attention given to crowd management and flow throughout the building at the time of its design is an integral part of its architectural significance.

7.5 Contextual Significance

The Town Hall is undeniably an imposing feature in the streetscape and it forms a particularly attractive architectural group with St. Paul's Cathedral, its retaining wall and the red brick 'Rossi' building to its west.

The building forms a particularly landmark feature when viewed from the hill suburbs, and the viewpoint remains largely unaltered from its original appearance despite recent development.

The Town Hall is somewhat unusual in having been designed as an adjunct to the existing Municipal Chambers and as such the whole block should be considered as a unit.

⁷ From *The Dunedin Town Hall Organ: "Norma"*, pamphlet produced by the Dunedin Town Hall Organ Trust for the information of visitors.