

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT FOR SCHEDULED HERITAGE BUILDING:

ARCHWAY LECTURE THEATRES



[ARCHWAY LECTURE THEATRES | McCoy Wixon Architects](#)

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Temporary 2GP Scheduled Heritage Building Reference No:	BX080
Address:	290 Leith Street, Dunedin
Located within a Heritage Precinct:	No
HNZPT List Reference & Description:	N/A
Heritage Covenant:	No
Building Use at Time of Record	Lecture theatres/Education
Condition of Property:	Not known to be at risk because of condition

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT

Historic/Social	Meets criteria
Spiritual/Cultural	Does not meet criteria
Design	Meets criteria
Technological/Scientific	Does not meet criteria

RECOMMENDATION:

The building meets one or more of the significance criteria from Policy 2.4.2.1.b and is recommended for inclusion in Appendix A1.1 of the 2GP.

RECOMMENDED PROTECTION

[Tick]	Features	Details
✓	Building envelope	Entire external building envelope including internal corridor.
	External/ancillary elements	
✓	Internal elements and/or rooms	Internal corridor. Other internal spaces not considered as part of this desktop assessment. Owner may nominate interior elements for protection
	Excluded elements	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Archway Lecture Theatre building, constructed c1974, has heritage significance as part of the historic University of Otago Campus. Designed by notable Dunedin architect Ted McCoy, the Brutalist design is recognisable for its cruciform layout, tiered lecture theatres, and bold use of materials. The building has maintained a high degree of architectural integrity; its design significance demonstrated by New Zealand Institute of Architects Enduring Architecture Award it received in 2020. The Archway Lecture Theatres also demonstrates historic and social significance as a site of learning for thousands of students and recalls the expansion of the University in the 1960s and 1970s.

When considered alongside other buildings on the district plan heritage schedule, the Archway Lecture Theatre is without comparison. This building is both unique and special to Dunedin, it also contributes to a nationwide body of Brutalist architecture. The Archway Lecture Theatres meet the threshold to be included on the district plan heritage schedule.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Architectural Period	Modern (1975-2000)
Style	Modern/Brutalist
Era/Date of Construction	1974
Architect/Designer/Builder	McCoy and Wixon Architects
Historic Use & Cultural Associations	University of Otago lecture theatres
Primary Construction Materials	Pre-cast concrete, steel
Notable Architectural Characteristics	Textured concrete, undercroft spaces, looped access corridor, murals and numbers, spiral stairs.

Previous site development

Before the Archway Lecture Theatres were built, this site at the corner of Leith and Union Streets was laid out as tennis courts.



The campus area in 1947 – approximate location of Archway Lecture Theatres indicated by red circle.

(https://files.interpret.co.nz/Retrolens/Imagery/SN223/Crown_223_511_38/High.jpg)

Design and construction

The Archway Lecture Theatres were built in the early 1970s, a time when the University of Otago's campus was growing. Heritage New Zealand's list entry for the nearby and contemporary Hocken Building summarises the developments at the time:

The significance of the [Hocken] building also rests on its setting within the development of the University of Otago campus which, in turn, was part of a major expansion of New Zealand universities beginning in the 1960s. The future shape of the New Zealand University system was outlined in the Hughes Parry Report. The Hughes Parry Committee saw the university in a broader social context than previously and it 'caught educational institutions and industry unprepared, both in their philosophy and in their facilities'. The Report prefigured the relocation and rebuilding of Canterbury University and the expansion of the campuses at Auckland, Wellington and Palmerston North. This period of expanded access to university education marks a significant historical shift in New Zealand's cultural history. Tertiary education was subsidised by the taxpayer and students with bursaries were

able to pay fees and receive a small living allowance from the state. The Hocken Building reflected the importance of the Arts in the New Zealand University system.¹

Historian Ali Clarke writes:

'In 1972 construction began on this new teaching complex, designed to help cope with the rapidly growing student population, which had doubled in the previous decade. The arts faculty grew from 761 students in 1962 to 1712 students in 1972 and the theatres were intended primarily for them, although they were also available to other faculties and became a popular venue for public lectures. Two of the rooms could seat 120 people, one catered for 180, and the largest could accommodate 260. The new building featured the latest in technology, with air conditioning and wiring for television.

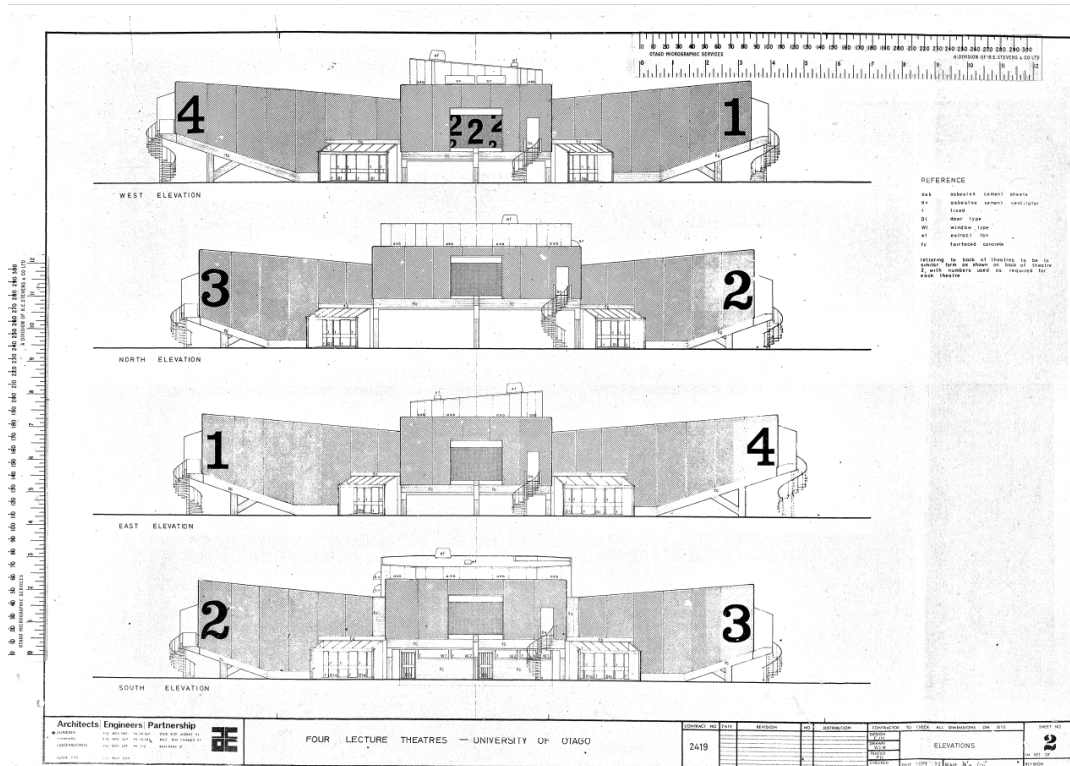
The building was squeezed onto a small site on the corner of Union and Leith streets, previously laid out as a netball court. Architect Ted McCoy's ultra-modern design presented a stark contrast with the stone Home Science Building (now known as the Consumer and Applied Sciences Building) right next to it and the old Archway Building opposite, from which the new building took its pragmatic name. The Home Science Building – designed by Edmund Anscombe and opened in 1920 – was then in line for demolition, which explains why the Archway Lecture Theatres design paid little regard to the position of the older building. But some people realised the heritage value of the old home science complex; it was reprieved from demolition, listed as an historic place in 1988 and extensively refitted in the 1990s [strengthened 2023].

One feature of the new building was the graphic designs painted on the exterior of the boxes projecting from the back of each lecture theatre. These have faded somewhat over the years, but seemed particularly bright and striking when they first appeared in 1974. Ted McCoy explained to the Otago Daily Times that he aimed to introduce "a bit of colour" onto the campus. "There has been criticism that many university buildings are grey and forbidding. We have tried to liven this one up with strong primary colours and graphics – to inject a little playfulness in the building." The designs had no particular meaning, stated McCoy: people could "interpret them in any way they liked".'

The striking geometric shape of the building itself is not obvious to passersby or to anybody inside. I found the design of the building bewildering until I saw an aerial photograph of the campus, which revealed its cruciform shape, placed diagonally on the site (it features on the left side of the aerial photograph in this earlier blog post). McCoy selected this design to make the most of the tight site and provide an open courtyard at each of the four entrances. It has now been confusing students for forty years. In 2013 Loulou Callister-Baker wrote an entertaining article for Critic about some of the architecture around the University of Otago. The Archway Lecture Theatres received special mention

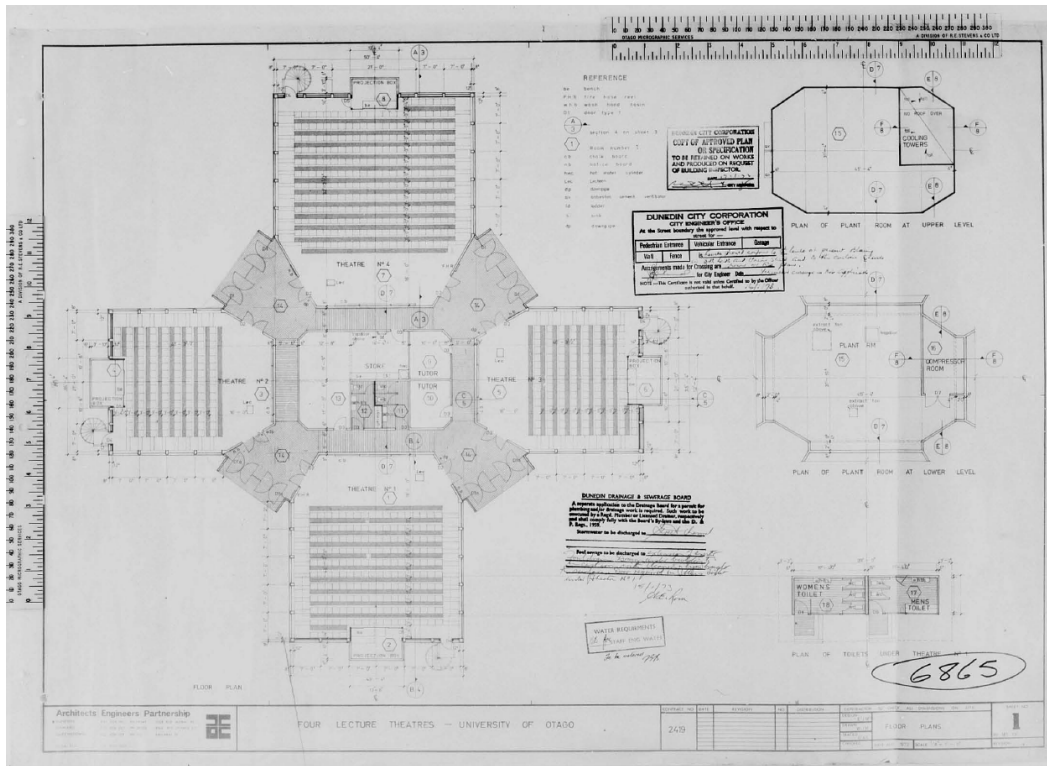
¹ [https://www.heritage.org.nz/list-details/7809/Hocken%20Building%20\(Former\)#details](https://www.heritage.org.nz/list-details/7809/Hocken%20Building%20(Former)#details) accessed 16 October 2023.

for their “barely comprehensible” design. She wonders if the architects “were specifically employed to stimulate critical thinking” and thinks the “four arrow²



Elevations (DCC Plans)

² Ali Clarke, February 2014, [Lost in lecture theatres | University of Otago 1869-2019 \(wordpress.com\)](http://lost.in.lecture.theatres | University of Otago 1869-2019 (wordpress.com)) accessed 4 October 2023.



Floor Plans (DCC Files)

In *A Southern Architecture* McCoy writes that Archway was designed for a very tight site, 'so the diagonal plan was developed to provide an open courtyard at each entry.' The walls, McCoy writes, 'were pre-cast concrete slabs poured against metal roofing sheets to give the patterned profile.' This profile was later used for the Hocken Building.³ Architecturally, Archway speaks the Brutalist language of its near McCoy-designed neighbours, University College (1969) and the Hocken (1979, now Richardson) Building.

Architectural historian Christine McCarthy writes that McCoy's use of concrete was a textural as well as spatial 'articulator' – where decoration was 'both intentional and obliged to articulate the material, functional, constructional, structural and spatial qualities of architecture.'⁴ Of the Archway Lecture Theatres McCarthy argues that they are '[l]ess acknowledged – but, to my mind, as accomplished as McCoy's award-winning Hocken Arts Building... the Archway Theatres are usually considered to be a prelude to the more obviously majestic Hocken, in part because of their shared textural cladding in diagonally-rigged fair-faced concrete.' They arrived 'an alien' foregrounding Edmund Anscombe's Home Science Building (1920) and his proximate School of Mines (1908) and Archway Building (1914).

³ Ted McCoy, *A Southern Architecture: The Work of Ted McCoy*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2007, p. 125.

⁴ McCarthy, 'Campus Concrete,' *AHA: Architectural History Aotearoa* (2016) vol 13, p. 47.

McCarthy writes: 'Its *in-situ* formworked landscape anchors this constrained site within the orthographic context, providing a geometric logic of the diagonal texture of its precast concrete panel cladding....' 'Paint, cast *in-situ* members, and recurring rhythms within the design of the building (such as the raked undercroft), create the texturing of the building. Painted super-graphic numerals, anticipated in the precast mould, explicitly identify the internal arrangement of lecture theatres. The mural which lines circulation spaces inside is pulled out onto the building's exterior at the lecture theatre projection boxes, graphically locating the building and the university within their wider geographic context, through its abstract depiction of the wider campus geography (bisected by the River Leith).'

John McCoy, Ted's son, summarises the importance of the surfaces: 'Pattern and colour is injected as contrast to this geometric purity. Projecting projection rooms, large coloured numerals, patterned precast panels and abundant murals provide the necessary variety. It is the variety of surface treatments that gives the complex vitality.' 'The exterior expression of the interior and the building's location though is not simply confined to surface texture articulated in precast concrete and paint – it is 'the formal legibility of space and function' that gives Archway its Brutalist identity. McCarthy calls this 'crass "bloody-mindedness"' (a core Brutalist quality) as explaining the 'seemingly inconsiderate intrusion of the Archway Theatres building on its site.'⁵ The 'in-your-face-ness' of the 'well-articulated concrete surface, and the explicit and unambiguous transparency of function spatially read on the building's exterior.'

For all the architectural intentions and ideas, users have had a less clear relationship with the Archway Theatres. Alison Clarke commented on her blog post that 'This blog post has started off a few online conversations about how confusing the building is. Many people report they have no idea which door they are going to emerge from when they leave the building, or that the building seems to have moved around when they come out – something I've experienced myself. It comes from the M.C. Escher School of Architecture, suggests one friend (thanks Pete!), while another thinks it is like a spaceship out of Doctor Who. Lecturers find it just as confusing as students. Apparently the building was once used to test robotic navigation algorithms ...'⁶

Notable people/Themes

Ted McCoy

Edward John McCoy (known as Ted, 1925-2018) was born and raised in Dunedin and studied architecture at the University of Auckland, graduating in 1949. Nola and Ted McCoy had a family of thirteen children, four of whom became architects.

In 1957 McCoy was awarded two medals by the NZIA, a bronze for the Nees house and a gold medal for Aquinas Hall at the University of Otago. This was reportedly the first time that two medals had been won by the same architect in the same year. McCoy also designed the family's holiday house at Wanaka (1971). His later partnership with Peter Wixon was continued by the two partners' sons.

⁵ McCarthy, p. 48.

⁶ [Lost in lecture theatres | University of Otago 1869-2019 \(wordpress.com\)](#) accessed 16 October 2023

Over his career, McCoy received eight National Awards of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, 20 Otago regional NZIA awards, and in 2002, the Gold Medal of the NZIA recognising his lifetime achievement in architecture. He was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2004 for services to architecture and heritage.⁷ McCoy was a strong supporter of heritage, being a chair of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Regional Committee and a member of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Board in 1990. He was active in the New Zealand Institute of Architects both locally and nationally.

In *Exquisite Apart: 100 Years of Architecture in New Zealand* Tony Van Raat, writing on modern architecture in the South Island, places McCoy alongside Miles Warren, Peter Beavan, and Paul Pascoe as the major architects in the 1950s and 1960s – creating a ‘distinctive body of work that draws upon a highly-developed consciousness of history and context.’ Van Raat writes that McCoy ‘gained a national reputation with a number of projects including a series of very fine houses’ – including his own residence, the Blackman residence, and the Nees residence as exemplars.⁸ In 2007 McCoy published *A Southern Architecture – the Work of EJ McCoy* (Otago University Press).

Brutalism

The Archway Lecture Theatres have architectural and historical significance as a New Zealand expression of the 1960s-1980s international Brutalist architectural movement. Brutalism was a style that emphasized material, textures and construction producing ‘highly expressive forms.’ Brutalism was dominated by the use of ‘beton brut’ (raw concrete) patterned by shuttering. Also important were scale, and an emphasis on mass characterised by large concrete shapes, textured surfaces, and expressions of structure and unusual shapes.⁹

The raked undercroft form had British and American antecedents, with New Zealand predecessors being Bill Toomath’s Wellington Teachers Training College lecture theatre (1966-69, Category 1 historic place) and Chris Brooke-White’s ‘voluptuous’ CIT F Block (1969-72).¹⁰ McCarthy writes that these projects ‘demonstrate the capacity for surface and its textures to operate in a sophisticated and substantive architectural manner conveying aspects of political, material production, architectural history, spatial planning and construction. Brutalism demands the exterior surface of a building to be a device of legibility, its size and physical nature intrinsic to all other aspects of building. Without this role a building fails to be Brutalist, because unremitting and fearless legibility, rather than any specific aesthetic of material quality, determines Brutalism.’ These buildings concoct, McCarthy writes a ‘kind of colonial Brutalism’ – a weaker version of the strident international movement.¹¹

⁷ Ted McCoy, *A Southern Architecture: The Work of Ted McCoy*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2007.

⁸ Charles Walker, (ed), *Exquisite Apart: 100 Years of Architecture in New Zealand*, Balasoglou Books, Auckland, 2005, pp.60-61, p.54.

⁹ <https://www.architecture.com/explore-architecture/brutalism> accessed 16 October 2023.

¹⁰ McCarthy, p. 49.; <https://www.heritage.org.nz/list-details/9797/Listing>

¹¹ McCarthy, p. 54.

James Stevens Curl writes Brutalism is an ideology that is wilfully disruptive and anti-tradition, and aggressively anti-establishment. It has a contempt even for the past, is a rejection of the world as it existed and has a desire to destroy it. It revels in attitudes of anti-craftsmanship and overt lack of respect for traditional forms of architecture that have, in the opinion of many architects and critics, led to a catastrophic deterioration of the built environment.¹²

Later history and development

Like the Hocken (now Richardson) Building, the Archway Lecture Theatres polarise opinion. Loulou Callister-Baker, a *Critic* correspondent, wrote in 2013:

'The Archway Lecture Theatres have to be one of the most polarising buildings on campus. At least twice a week back in second-year law, this circle of identical-looking lecture rooms would spew a confused, non-law student into our lecture theatre. In another class, it was reported that a student spontaneously threw up in one of the theatres and ran out. The bizarreness of Archway was embodied in a surreal, David Lynch-esque incident when the theatre's emergency phone rung. After our lecturer questioned us as to whether he should answer it, he did so, and then proceeded to ask us whether anyone in the theatre was quietly dying. Nobody, including the dead person, had any idea what was going on.'

*McCoy & Wixon designed archway as well [as the Richardson Building], in 1974. Either the firm's architecture doesn't age well, or they were specifically employed to stimulate critical thinking. Although the building looks like a concrete spaceship discarded from the set of Star Trek, it was actually modelled on Louis Kahn's Tenthon Bathhouse. Unfortunately, the intended central courtyard was discarded in favour of a poorly coordinated toilet block. The terror continues to the outside of Archway, which features a cluster of outdoor spiral staircases, jail-like toilets continuing the prison theme of the Richardson and four 1970s graphics painted on the building's external walls. The four arrow graphics are waiting for a Da Vinci code assessment and I am certain the theatres have a central control where a squat alien resides, living out its days smoking cigarettes and wallowing in the repetitive grief of Property Law.'*¹³

In 2020 the Archway Lecture Theatres were given an 'Enduring Architecture' award by the Southern Institute of Architects. The 2020 NZIA citation reads:

'This four-lecture theatre project by Gold Medallist architect Ted McCoy has endured for nearly half a century and still stands out as architecture that is different and special. The form's uniqueness and its sense of presence on the campus derive from the simple but effective four-point cruciform layout of the theatres. The external expression of the tiered lecture theatres is such that the building seems to

¹² James Stevens Curl, *Making Dystopia. The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*, Oxford, 2018, cited by New Heritage, Submission S251, University of Otago, PC1.

¹³ [Getting Around the Orthodoxy | Features | Critic Te Ārohi](#) accessed 16 October 2023.

*hover over the ground. Fluted concrete panels and external spiral stairs speak to a moment in our architectural history, but the building remains an accomplished work of significant merit.'*¹⁴

ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

HISTORIC/SOCIAL

The building demonstrates heritage values within this criterion. The Archway Lecture Theatres have historical significance for their association of the redevelopment of the University of Otago campus in the 1970s to reflect the growing student numbers. The theatres have historical significance as a major building constructed within a period of economic and social change in New Zealand. The significance of the building also rests on its setting within the development of the University of Otago campus which, in turn, was part of a major expansion of New Zealand universities beginning in the 1960s. The Archway Lecture Theatres have social significance as a site for the education of many thousands of Otago University students.

SPIRITUAL/CULTURAL

The building does not demonstrate heritage values within this criterion.

DESIGN

The building demonstrates heritage values within this criterion. The Archway Lecture Theatres have architectural and aesthetic significance as a Ted McCoy design embodying principles of the Brutalist movement through the expression of mass, form, and materials. The building was recognised for its architectural merit in 2020 with an NZIA enduring architecture citation that reads:

'This four-lecture theatre project by Gold Medallist architect Ted McCoy has endured for nearly half a century and still stands out as architecture that is different and special. The form's uniqueness and its sense of presence on the campus derive from the simple but effective four-point cruciform layout of the theatres. The external expression of the tiered lecture theatres is such that the building seems to hover over the ground. Fluted concrete panels and external spiral stairs speak to a moment in our architectural history, but the building remains an accomplished work of significant merit.'

TECHNOLOGICAL/SCIENTIFIC

The building does not demonstrate heritage values within this criterion.

REFERENCES

Alison Clarke, [Lost in lecture theatres | University of Otago 1869-2019 \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.wordpress.com/lost-in-lecture-theatres-university-of-otago-1869-2019/) accessed 16 October 2023

¹⁴ [University of Otago Archway Lecture Theatres \(1974\) \(nzia.co.nz\)](https://nzia.co.nz/university-of-otago-archway-lecture-theatres-1974/) accessed 9 January 2023

[Getting Around the Orthodoxy | Features | Critic Te Ārohi](#) accessed 16 October 2023.

Christine McCarthy, 'Campus Concrete,' *AHA: Architectural History Aotearoa* (2016) vol 13, 46-56

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[University of Otago Archway Lecture Theatres \(1974\) \(nzia.co.nz\)](#)

Charles Walker, (ed), *Exquisite Apart: 100 Years of Architecture in New Zealand*, Balasoglou Books, Auckland, 2005

Date Initial Assessment Completed	17 October 2023	Author	HB
Date Assessment Completed	12 December 2023	Reviewer	MM
Date Confirmed Complete	31 July 2024		
Date Revised (R1)	4 April 2025Additional information and revisions after notification of Plan Change 1		

APPENDIX

Photographs from the NZIA website <https://www.nzia.co.nz/awards/national/award-detail/9223>



