

## ITINERARY n.4



## JAMES HACKSHAW'S PUBLIC BUILDINGS

On reading through Peter Shaw's history of New Zealand architecture recently, I was struck by how few Kiwi architects have managed to produce more than one or two important buildings. Only a small number of local architects have been able to contribute significant designs throughout their careers. The majority, especially in the middle part of century, seemed to flower only briefly before disappearing from Shaw's pages.

James Hackshaw's career began with a burst of energy and invention, producing a series of buildings that profoundly influenced the development of Kiwi architecture. Hackshaw was a key player in the Group's groundbreaking projects, which sought to sweep away the suburban conventions that straight-jacketed post-war life. During and after the Group's slow dissolution, he began producing seminal solo works: the Thom House (1954), one of New Zealand's few courtyard houses, the influential Talbot House (1960) in Meadowbank, and the Japanese-inspired house for the potter Len Castle (1960). These houses refined and extended the Group vision of an unpretentious indigenous architecture.

Hackshaw soon began producing public buildings, many of them for the Catholic Church, which closely followed the principles that informed his house designs. Restrictions on both domestic and church life were being eased, and Hackshaw's loose, informal spaces were ideal for fostering a sense of community and closeness in congregation and family alike. Similarly, the Group's rational, efficient structures could fulfil the need for low-cost new churches in rapidly expanding suburban areas, where the clarity of Hackshaw's spaces, stripped of imported decoration and religious paraphernalia, perfectly accommodated the work of rising Kiwi artists, particularly Colin McCahon and Paul Dibble.

A key Modernist value is consistency. Modernism, especially in the guise of the International Style, was a vision in which architects should not only create their buildings from a consistent set of ideas and elements, but that buildings ought to be the same in every part of the world; it sought congruence across building details, an architect's oeuvre, and the whole planet. Hackshaw stayed remarkably true to the rational, functional, and woody models the Group developed; his buildings varied little over his career, his later work being almost unchanged from his then radical early designs. While he tempered some of the ruthlessly rational planning and raw materiality, elements of the Group approach persisted in his work, particularly in his use of timber post-and-beam construction. This was especially marked in his school projects, where he spent much of his later career working through masterplans he had developed years earlier.

By the end of the 1960s, Modernist ideals were firmly established in NZ; the Group's once radical ideas had been absorbed into the mainstream and Hackshaw's works lost their polemical power. Once the material and labour shortages which defined post-war architecture had passed, the Group's frugal houses seemed less desirable as places to live. Further, the Group's woody tectonic and determinedly domestic aesthetic – almost every building Hackshaw did looked like a house – made it hard to move up to larger scale work. Hackshaw's visibility declined; *Home & Building* magazine, for instance, published his work in four different issues in 1960 and frequently through the 1960s, but only three times since then. In the NZ scene, the lead passed to younger figures – cottage-making "new colonialists".

In the 1980s, the rise of postmodernism moderated the desire for consistency, liberating architects to move relatively freely between styles and ideas. It was, in a certain sense, a return to the stylistic eclecticism that had reigned until the 1930s. Hackshaw's vision had perfectly captured a moment in New Zealand's architectural and cultural development, but having found his target wasn't willing or able to keep pace with it. He continued to make excellent, sometimes brilliant buildings, but for a culture that was no longer terribly interested in them. AB

## Biography:

James Hackshaw was born in 1923 in Mananui, near Taumaranui, and was raised in Auckland. He trained at the Auckland School of Architecture in the immediate post-war period alongside Bill Wilson and the other students who formed the Group. Hackshaw was a member of the Group Construction Company, and helped build the three groundbreaking houses on the North Shore. By 1953, only Hackshaw, Wilson, and Ivan Juriss remained in the Group Architects partnership, but each member produced seminal designs including Hackshaw's early masterwork, the Thom House of 1954.

Hackshaw established a solo practice in 1958; works such as his 1959 house for potter Len Castle cemented his reputation as a domestic architect. Hackshaw was a second cousin of Reginald Delargey - who became Catholic Bishop of Auckland and later a Cardinal - who supplied his early commissions for public buildings. Hackshaw battled poor health, and his temperamental personality and distaste for committees as clients also took a toll on his practice. In his later years, Hackshaw worked from his own home in St. Heliers, and was felled by cancer in 1999. In 2001, the Architectural Group were awarded the NZIA Gold Medal.

- ① 1961  
St Michaels School Classrooms  
6 Beatrice Road, Remuera
- ② 1962-72  
De La Salle College  
81 Grey Avenue, Mangere
- ③ 1962-71  
McAuley High School  
26 High St, Otahuhu
- ④ 1964  
House of Studies for Sisters of the Mission  
78 Upland Road, Remuera



Image: Berry Mckey Industrial Photography

Tucked onto a small site behind Tole & Massey's 1930 St. Michael's Church, this project was a single-storey classroom block for a primary school. Hackshaw received the commission – his first for a public building – while Reginald Delargey, was parish priest. (Delargey went on to become Catholic Bishop of Auckland, and remained a key supporter of Hackshaw). The building included many of the elements that were typify his later designs for public buildings – a hipped roof supported on exposed wooden structure; low walls to reduce costs; clerestory windows to bring light into the centre of the building. In 2004, the building was demolished and replaced by a two-storey classroom block.

Hackshaw designed a series of buildings for this large site. The first, dating from 1962, was a compact two-storey classroom block. In a cost-cutting pattern Hackshaw would often reuse, the building avoids internal circulation spaces - the upstairs classrooms are accessed from two covered but external staircases. An administration and library building (1972) is tucked into the trees and overlooking a stream, and with science and classroom block (1972), Hackshaw followed the pattern established in the earlier McAuley, arranging clerestory-lit classrooms around an intimate cloister.

In 1962, Hackshaw put together a masterplan for a long, narrow site slotted between a reserve and the adjacent church and convent. Designed to be built in three stages, the complex is composed as an integrated series of buildings arranged around an elongated cloister. The enclosed courtyard is broken at its mid-point by stairs which accommodate the complex to the gently sloping site. Taking account of both the school's low budgets and Auckland's mild climate, Hackshaw use of continuous covered ways eliminated unnecessary internal circulation spaces. Hackshaw's parsimonious design cost only three-quarters that of comparable schools. Hackshaw added a fourth stage – a two-storey block – in 1971. See *Home & Building* March 1968.

The centrepiece of this complex, built as a convent, was a high-ceilinged private chapel. Contrasting with geometrically complex churches fashionable at the time, the high white walls, parquet floor and wooden ceiling defined an austere, simple space. The sanctuary was adorned with a tabernacle and candlesticks by Paul Dibble, and the clerestory windows around each side of the chapel were projected by Colin McCahon – the project (which included a painted Stations of the Cross) was McCahon's largest public commission and reignited an interest in biblical symbolism that fuelled his work for years to come. The complex later became a language school for foreign students. The building has since been converted into a private residence, the McCahon windows removed, and the chapel converted into a swimming pool.

- ⑤ 1965  
St Cuthberts Church  
45 Anzac Road, Browns Bay
- ⑥ 1965  
Church of the Immaculate Conception Presbytery  
66 Main Highway, Ellerslie
- ⑦ 1966  
Otago Convent Chapel & Offices  
18 Otago Road, Otago
- ⑧ 1971  
Baradene College Teaching Block  
237 Victoria Avenue, Remuera



A Presbyterian church, this was one of his few non-Catholic religious commissions. With a hipped roof that reduces the building's height and therefore its cost, this domestic-scaled, ground-hugging church is the lowest building on a street of commercial buildings and blocks of flats. Externally, it has all the Hackshaw hallmarks – painted concrete block, exposed rafters, corrugated fibrolite roofing with unlined soffits, and a clerestory inserted into the roof. On the intimate interior, diagonal struts extend upwards from two dark stained timber columns to support the roof. The stained glass clerestory was designed by Pat Hanley, and the sanctuary furniture is by Hackshaw. The administration addition is not by Hackshaw. See *Architecture NZ* May/June 1993.

This building provided offices, private studies and accommodation for the parish priest and curate, as well as housing for their housekeeper. Combining brick, vertical board-and-batten, and a tiled roof, the building is for Hackshaw unusually conformist. Here's Hackshaw's quaintly anachronistic explanation: "The character of such a building is quite important. As a representative of all men the priest must be conservative and we felt that conservative everyday materials should be used, to give the building a sympathy with the people the priest serves." In 1967 Hackshaw also made alterations to the 1904 church building. This project was essentially a refurbishment of the sanctuary, including new Hackshaw-designed furniture. See *Home & Building* Sept. 1967.

Sitting back from the road in the grounds of St. John the Evangelist Church, this consists of a series of connected buildings arranged around a grassy square. Originally built to house a small group of nuns, the project was built to a very low budget – the materials are unpainted concrete block, timber framed roof. The building is now occupied by the Catholic Treaty Resource Centre.

For a private school in one of the wealthiest parts of the city, the building's use of cheap materials (unpainted concrete block, weatherboards, exposed soffits) and cost-cutting planning moves (external staircases connect second storey spaces directly to the ground) is highly conspicuous. Further, the low-cost materials, domestic scale and picturesque informality of Hackshaw's building seem a deliberate confrontation to the ordered, symmetrical, vertically-oriented composition of the immediately adjacent main building (1911). A stained glass corner window designed by Colin McCahon has been removed and placed in the nearby auditorium and chapel complex produced by Warren & Mahoney in 2002.

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1972

Sacred Heart College  
Classrooms  
250 West Tamaki Rd, Glen Innes



Running parallel to West Tamaki Road, this project boldly added a second floor to a block of existing classrooms. Wedged between a two-storey classroom block and the school hall, and overlooking a large, grassy courtyard, the elevated row of classrooms are supported by an exposed, steel skeleton. The building includes Hackshaw's characteristic clerestory windows, and the external stairs allow access to classrooms without the need for circulation space. While on the site, be sure to take a look at the series of highly contextual classroom blocks completed by Architectus in 2003.

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1973 – 1978

Liston College  
Cnr Edward & Rathgar Rd,  
Henderson



Hackshaw produced a series of buildings for the site, including a classroom block and toilets (designed in 1973) and a gymnasium (1974-5). Constructed in Rough red brick and fibrolite, these blocks closely follow the models Hackshaw developed in the 1960s. The school's most remarkable building is the chapel, completed in 1978. The building is based on a simple cruciform plan, and is essentially a lean-to shed in the Group tradition. The impact of the generous space created above the altar is enhanced by coloured glass windows. The large crucifix on the exterior was produced by Paul Dibble.

11

1976

St Francis Catholic Church  
8 Finchley Road, Browns Bay



Located on a large site on suburban slope, the building conveys a sense of spaciousness amid tightly packed suburban houses. Approached from below, the building is of concrete block, painted cream outside and left unfinished on the interior. The wide, uncluttered interior rises up towards the altar, where high-level clerestory windows bring in light to focus the space on the altar. The two rather understated circular windows in the transept are by Colin McCahon, the copper tabernacle and candlesticks in the sanctuary are by Paul Dibble (for whom Hackshaw later designed a house in the vicinity). See *Architecture NZ* May/June '93.

12

1977

St Ignatius Church  
12 Kotiri Street, St Heliers



Here Hackshaw takes the understated urban presence of St. Cuthberts in Browns Bay almost to the point of camouflage. This low-slung brick-and-tile building is almost indistinguishable from the neighbouring suburban houses; the small cross on the roof and the coloured window glass give the only architectural clues that it is a church. Within, a post-and-beam structure of stained timber recalls the work of the Group. Hackshaw designed the furniture, and the richly coloured glass panels of the windows are the work of Colin McCahon. The adjacent parish office was added after Hackshaw's death. See *Architecture NZ* May/June '93.

13

1983

Hato Petera College Library  
103 College Road, Northcote



This Catholic school's history extends back to the 1920s, when it was established with the goal of educating Maori youth. Housing a library and audiovisual room, this building lacks the elements that Hackshaw's habitually employed, and is one of his least successful works. The structure is composed of large laminated beams jointed with steel plates. Like many of the school's other buildings, this relatively youthful structure has not been well maintained.



### Other addresses:

McKillop Girls College (1965-76)  
Kahu Street, Rotorua  
This school was masterplanned by Hackshaw, and its most noteworthy elements is the chapel designed in 1976. The school was amalgamated with the adjacent boy's school in 1987, and is now co-ed John Paul College.

St. Patrick's Church (1969)  
59 Queen Street, Te Puke  
Another Hackshaw-McCahon-Dibble collaboration, the McCahon's window designs incorporate images of the hill of Calvary.

Pompallier College (1971-78)  
Te Mai, Whangarei

The College was founded in 1971, starting as a private Catholic Boys' Boarding School, becoming co-ed in 1977, and a state integrated school in 1981. The school was comprehensively designed by Hackshaw.

St. Patrick's Church (1978)  
Campbell Street, Whitianga

St Marys Catholic Church (1986)  
Cnr East & Wellington Sts,  
Papakura  
Hackshaw added a new entry to an existing church building.

### Sources:

The photographs are by Andrew Barrie. Thanks to Frederika Hackshaw and to Maria Eriksen at the Auckland Architecture Archive at University of Auckland for their invaluable help. While there is a growing body of literature on the Group in its various incarnations, Hackshaw's solo work has been only sparsely published, particularly beyond the 1960s. Douglas Lloyd Jenkins includes an extensive discussion of Hackshaw's early houses in *At Home* (Auckland: Godwit, 2004). A number of Hackshaw's earlier houses were published in *Home & Building* during the 1960's and 70s, and more recently Jonathan Gibb published an article on Hackshaw's 1948 Reid House in *Architecture NZ* Nov/Dec 2005. Hackshaw's public buildings are not well published. The best source is Cathy Sheehan's article on Hackshaw's churches in *Architecture NZ* May/June 1993. Peter Shaw briefly describes some of the churches in *New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991). A number of books record the details of the involvement of various artists in Hackshaw's projects: Gordon H. Brown's *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Auckland: Reed, 2nd ed. 1993), Marja Bloem & Martin Brown's *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith* (Nelson: Craig Potton: 2002), and Jeannette Cook's *Paul Dibble* (Auckland: Bateman, 2001).