



Bill Alington: Civic & Institutional Buildings Biography

Until relatively recently, the work of William (Bill) Alington has been largely overlooked within New Zealand's architectural canon. While his gentle modesty makes this omission easier, his absence from the list of Auckland School of Architecture graduates of the 1940s appears to be a contributing factor. In local architectural history formation, the immediate postwar years have attained special significance – many of this first generation of postwar graduates from Auckland (especially those who were in any way associated with the Group Architects), have gone into the canon as key architects and architectural thinkers. Two years studying Engineering at Victoria University, and a further year as a draughting cadet in the Architectural Division of the Ministry of Works (MoW), meant that Alington did not begin his architectural degree until 1951. The handful of years that separated his university graduation from that of his immediate predecessors are significant.

Nevertheless, Alington's employment at the MoW immediately thrust him into the avant-garde of NZ architecture. Under Gordon Wilson and inspired by others at the MoW, including Jim Beard, Alington learnt to question the basic assumptions of 'architecture' in light of a progressive Modernist programme that focused on social and technical issues.

His commitment to the study of architecture at an academic and theoretical level is illustrated throughout his career. As a final year BArch student in 1955, he took the bold decision to submit a written sub-thesis instead of the required final year design project ("Thesis on the Theory of Architectural Design: based upon a study of certain buildings in Rawene, Russell and Waipu"). His subsequent postgraduate study at the University of Illinois, and his long-standing teaching in both architectural design and history at VUW, is evidence of a continued engagement with the development of architectural thinking.

The fifteen years spent at the MoW (which includes both his studies at Auckland University and overseas experience on a Fulbright Scholarship) and subsequent work for Gabites & Beard resulted in many institutional projects within Alington's oeuvre. This fulfils Alington's social mission, but also removes a large portion of his oeuvre from the gaze of an architectural history that tends to favour the domestic.

It is perhaps partly for this reason that, of his built works, the Alington House has received the greatest recognition. It is held up as an exemplar of Modernist design, receiving a National NZIA-Resene Enduring Architecture Award (2007) and Category I listing by the NZ Historic Places Trust. It has also been listed by DocomomoNZ as one of nineteen places that best represent NZ Modernist architecture.

The period spanned by Alington's career saw great changes to architecture in NZ. Even so, the buildings that make up his oeuvre, whether residential, institutional or congregational (Alington has also been involved with a significant number of church projects), are characterised by a remarkably consistent formal expression, arising from strongly held convictions. His iterative exploration, in terms of functional and programmatic considerations, and articulation of a personal architectural theory, is best evidenced in the series of civic and governmental administration buildings and projects - beginning with the Wellington Meteorological Office in 1962. It continues throughout his career in private practice in projects that include the award winning civic centres for Upper Hutt (1972) and Waipa (1977). Other iterations were developed as exploratory schemes for the Levin Civic Centre and the NZ Chancery in New Delhi. *Michael Dudding*

Born in Lower Hutt in 1929, William (Bill) Alington began his career as a cadet in the Ministry of Works in 1949, before studying at Auckland University. In 1956 Alington travelled to London (working for Robert Matthew and Johnson-Marshall on NZ House), and the US, and toured Europe's mediaeval cathedrals and key Modernist buildings including Corbusier's Ronchamp and Unite d'Habitation. From 1957 he studied towards a Masters degree at the University of Illinois. While there Alington visited works by Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, and met and discussed his philosophy with the latter. Returning to NZ Alington resumed work at the MoW, before moving to private practice with Gabites & Beard in 1965 – staying with various permutations of the Gabites-led firm until 1983 when he set up Alington Group Architects. He played a key role in setting up NZ's second School of Architecture in Wellington in 1974, and has made an ongoing teaching contribution .

1

1962-6

Wellington Meteorological Office
30 Salamanca Road, Kelburn



Evident in Alington's major MoW project, the Met Office, is a concern for structural articulation, and disciplined control of rhythm and proportion – reflecting his admiration for the work of Mies van der Rohe. In terms of Alington's oeuvre, this is the first of a series of similarly scaled administration buildings that exhibit a clear evolutionary development of construction technique and expression. The unusual silhouette was determined by functional requirement for a larger top floorplate to house forecasting equipment. The structure is a reinforced concrete shear wall core, with reinforced concrete beams and columns. The striking pre-cast concrete fins (now removed) were designed to control sunlight and wind. See *NZIA Jnl* March 1965 and April 1968.

2

1964

Stokes Valley Methodist Church
9 Hawthorn Cr., Stokes Valley



Carried out in Alington's own time as a private job, the small church is an intimately scaled exploration of space, proportion, structure, and light. The church is unusual in having a clearly articulated internal post and beam 'perimeter arcade', which, acting as a horizontal beam, supports the relatively steep timber-lined pyramidal roof. The rendered concrete block walls open to glazed corners. The controlled admittance of natural light is completed with the flood of light from the glazed roof apex. The pews (now removed) were arranged at right angles, creating a strong diagonal axis to the pulpit.

3

1966

DCA/MOT Bulk Store
38 Tacy Street, Kilbirnie



Alington's first job upon joining Gabites and Beard in private practice was a large storehouse for the Department of Civil Aviation. It received an NZIA Branch Award in 1975. The structure consists of an *in-situ* fair-faced reinforced concrete structural frame, with tilt-slab infill panels. These prefabricated panels are positioned slightly apart from each other, with the resulting gap glazed to admit natural light into the interior. The rhythm created by these, and the structural elements articulated on the exterior, help to enliven the large expanses of exterior wall surfaces. Aluminium rather than steel was used to clad the roof due to the site being adjacent to Wellington's Evans Bay coastline.

4

1972

Upper Hutt City Council Admin.
Building & Council Chamber
838 Fergusson Dr., Upper Hutt



The focal point of the UHCC, the Administration Building and Council Chamber, is the first of the four successive Alington-designed projects that make up the original campus. Structurally, the building consists of an in-situ reinforced concrete frame supporting pre-cast floor slabs. In this it follows the Met Office, but with a much clearer structural expression arrived at through employing free-standing columns. Originally conceived with a flat roof, the hipped form was developed to temporarily shelter mechanical plant until the final floor was added (although the building was eventually built without this transitional stage). The raised ridge accommodates the ventilation flues. Subsequently retained, the roof in various articulations, serves as a unifying formal and material element throughout the complex. The Centre received an NZIA Silver Medal in 1972. See *NZIA Jnl* no. 6 1969 and *Home & Bldg* Oct. 1972.

5

1972

Upper Hutt City Council
Civic Hall
836 Fergusson Dr., Upper Hutt



The second stage of the Upper Hutt Civic Centre, the Civic Hall (and ancillary buildings), although of a different scale and typology than the Administration Building, remain consistent within the overall campus. Visual coherency is achieved by the use of a consistent 3ft-1in module throughout; the detailing (especially the fair-faced concrete structural frame); and the material palette of unpainted concrete and the brown steel profile of the Brownbuilt '12' roofing. The roof form itself is also a further development of the ridged-hipped form of the Administration Building. In 2003 the ancillary buildings were demolished to make way for the Expressions Arts and Entertainment Centre, the blank sides of which show little respect to the quality of detailing and visual integrity of the original campus. See *NZIA Jnl* Nov. 1972 and *Home & Building* No. 5 1971.

6

1972

Helen Lowry Halls of Residence
19 Blakey Avenue, Karori



The difficult nature of the Karori site meant that the residential blocks could not be of the standard configurations that Alington used at Massey University in the early 1970s. There he had developed a robust and low-maintenance courtyard-based halls of residence typology, which became the precursor for the Helen Lowry project. The Lowry Halls also departed from the Massey model by having more communal spaces (e.g. dining and lounge areas), and by employing cavity wall construction rather than the more straightforward concrete block construction used at Massey. In both the Lowry and Massey Halls projects, Alington employs a semi-gabled roof form, which becomes something of a signature form for much of his post-UHCC work. Both projects received NZIA Branch Awards in 1972 and 1974 respectively.

7

1975

Wesley Geriatric Hospital
249 Rata St, Naenae
Lower Hutt



Built for the Methodist Church on the grounds of their King & Dawson designed Wesleyhaven retirement home, the nursing hospital is a series of pavilions that house individual wards and a main service/reception block. The pavilions are arranged around three sides of a lawn quadrangle, and are linked by enclosed glazed walkways. The buildings are brick-veneered concrete block construction on a concrete slab foundation. They feature bay windows, with bronze-anodised aluminium window joinery. Roofs are the semi-gabled roof type as used in the previous Massey and Lowry Halls.

8

1976

Upper Hutt Mobile Library Bldg
& Upper Hutt City Library
844 Fergusson Dr, Upper Hutt



The Mobile Library Building and adjoining City Library are two separate projects – the final two stages of the Upper Hutt Civic Centre. Like the Civic Hall's ancillary buildings, these are domestic-scaled, with unpainted concrete block walls and timber-framed roofs of similar steel-clad form. A series of small enclosed garden courts provide a calming buffer from Fergusson Drive, and also indicate the important role that the carefully designed landscaping scheme plays as a unifying feature for the Civic Centre. The courtyards (and entry portico) also contribute to a more 'human' scale than is evident elsewhere throughout the campus, an experience that is enriched by the tactile refinement of the material finishes.

9

1976

Johnsonville Uniting Church
18 Dr Taylor Tce, Johnsonville



Alington's exploration into the nature of a Christian worshipping community at Johnsonville resulted in a community centre built around communal gathering rather than the conventional notions of church worship. The result is a series of small-scaled pavilions (including a gathering hall, crèche, and sitting area), linked by an enclosed walkway (similar to the Wesley Geriatric Hospital). The buildings are a development of the smaller Upper Hutt Civic Centre buildings (particularly the Library), in both the use of concrete block construction (with steel perimeter poles) and in the use of built elements to create private courtyard spaces around the buildings. The roofs at Johnsonville however, are the now familiar semi-gabled roof form.

10

1977

Williams (Karori Scout) Hall
158 Campbell Street, Karori



Built on an extremely limited budget, the Scout hall was designed with robustness in mind. It uses the semi-gabled roof form, although here the changes in the roof pitch also demarcate interior planning. The hipped roof 'skirt' covers the kitchen and toilets on the entry elevation, while the remaining three sides cover small 'dens' and a recessed open storage 'shed'. The gabled roof covers the volume of the hall proper, which is top-lit by a series of skylights. A large open fireplace was included to allow the scouts to gather around. The building is constructed of simple concrete block and timber framing, with cedar board-and-batten cladding on the gable ends.

11

1977

NZ Anglican Chinese Mission
30 Glenmore Street, Northland



The Chinese Anglican Mission includes a hall (pictured), a small chapel, and a vestry house. The main hall cantilevers over the block that supports it, in a similar manner to the Met. Office, Upper Hutt Civic Administration Building, and the later Wellington High School buildings. The roof was given the Chinese aesthetic sought by the client with the simple addition of upturned ridges at each corner – the semi-gabled roof used by Alington during the 70s and 80s being formally consistent with the irimoya roof form of Japanese and Chinese temples. The centre was designed to be built in incremental stages, as finances permitted, with much of the work self-built by the clients.

12

1982

Wellington High School
249 Taranaki St., Mount Cook



The Wellington High School campus consists of a series of freestanding buildings. Designed to be robust and low-maintenance, they are a further development of the architectural vocabulary of the Upper Hutt and later Waipa Civic Centres – employing a similar free-standing fair-faced reinforced concrete structural frame. However, at the High School the structural members are more substantial to accommodate the flat slab floor construction, which allowed completely open floorplates. This feature facilitated the innovative educational methodology that was being pioneered by then Principal Turoa Royal. Demountable interiors and the location of vertical circulation separate from the main buildings also contributes to the flexible nature of each floor.

13

1989

Victoria University of Wellington
School Of Music
Gate 7, Kelburn Pde, Kelburn



The domestic scale and quality (as required by the client), of the collection of buildings that make up the School of Music belies the complex nature of the spaces inside. This complexity includes both the construction technology (each room is literally a building within, but acoustically separated from, the overall building envelope), and the spatial play (particularly in the main reception area). The whole complex is designed around an open cloister-like quadrangle, with a covered arcade on two sides that links the buildings together. The familiar semi-gabled roof is used on all buildings except the main Adam Concert Room, which was effectively sliced off to appease neighbours concerned that it would impact upon their city/harbour view.

14

1992

Karori Baptist Church
161-163 Karori Road, Karori



As at the Uniting Church in Johnsonville, Alington departed from conventional church architecture for the Karori Baptist Church – in favour of a flexible space that facilitates communal gathering in a variety of ways. Here, even bay windows were devised in order to articulate a series of smaller gathering 'places' within the overall 'meeting house'. Alington collaborated with structural engineer Andrew Charleson for the design of the laminated timber tilted-truss system. Each truss is fixed to the concrete block walls with a specially designed steel knuckle. Alington recalls the use of CAD as an important aspect of achieving the level of accuracy required to realise the design of the roof structure.

Other Addresses:

Other Alington designed civic and institutional buildings further afield include Massey University Halls of Residence and Sports Centre in Palmerston North (1970), and the Fire Station, County Town Office, and Library in Shannon. Others worth visiting include:

Gisborne District Court
Customhouse St., Gisborne

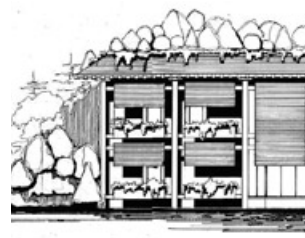
Waikanae Library (1981)
Mahara Place, Waikanae

This building is now the Mahara Gallery.

Waikanae Fire Station
353 Te Moana Rd, Waikanae

Waipa County Council Offices
101 Bank Street, Te Awamutu
This building received a NZIA National Award in 1977.

Rangiora Borough Council Offices
215 High Street, Rangiora
Rangiora Borough Council became part of Waimakariri District Council in the 1980s.



NZ Chancery New Delhi (umbrella) 1984-88

Sources:

Image 1: Duncan Winder, Images 2,5,7-8,11,13: W H Alington. Images 12,14: Michael Dudding. All drawings by W H Alington. All images except 12 & 14 are from the collection of W H Alington (now housed at the Alexander Turnbull Library). Information for this Itinerary is largely drawn from the *W H Alington Oral History Project*, Wellington: Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library, 2004. Other sources include: Dudding, Michael. "A Useful Exercise: The context, content, and practical application of W H Alington's 'Thesis on the Theory of Architectural Design'" March thesis, Wellington: VUW, 2005; Kernohan, David. *Wellington's New Buildings*. Wellington: VUP, 1989; Shaw, Peter. *A History of New Zealand Architecture*, Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1997; Stacpoole, John, and Beaven, Peter. *Architecture: 1820-1970*, Wellington: A W & A H Reed, 1972; "Upper Hutt City Council Building" *NZIA Journal*, 39, 5 (1972): 160-3; "Upper Hutt City Council" Upper Hutt City Proclamation, Upper Hutt: UHCC, 1966; "Upper Hutt Civic Hall" *NZIA Journal*, 39, 5 (1972): 164-6; Walden, Russell. "ALINGTON, (William) (Hildebrand)" in Muriel Emanuel (ed.), *Contemporary Architects*, London: Macmillan, 1980: 27-8.