

Athfield Architects

by Julia Gatley

Review by Marshall Cook



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The precious history of architecture in New Zealand is rarely explored as comprehensively as in architectural historian Julia Gatley's book on Athfield Architects. It is both a catalogue of design projects and a portal to the authors of the works. But essentially, it is about the prime protagonist Ian Athfield. Although broken down into four progressive parts from “formative student” and “early practice” to “boom times” and “public works”, it really is about Athfield the architect and then Athfield the assemblage.

His architectural beginnings are clear, blunt and seemingly counter-cultural. Illustrations of his student work that expose the raw nerve ends of a devoted designer are signed off as I. Charles Athfield or simply Ath. His early unbuilt works that remain as designs on paper carry the full illusion of reality. Influences of the Christchurch masters Beaven and Warren appear, disappear and re-appear but within a unique palette of materials used in original ways. Sometimes stressed to their limits the buildings under construction form the inverse case to ruins. The ad hoc nature of the construction process, the light and shadows of framing, the laying of scaffolding, the smell of newly-sawn wood, and that incomplete state of construction which gives hope and anticipation is the apparent driving force behind Athfield in the early years. It is an architecture that stands against or at the very least in contrast to a cultural trend to continually re-invent its history. Early encounters with adaptive re-use of heritage buildings explored both the financial and social values of the existing fabric of the city: “heritage starts with a good idea

tomorrow". As comfortable as Athfield is with the new and the old he was equally at home with pubs, churches and the odd brothel.

"My thinking has always been comprehensive and inclusive not focused and exclusive."

The most significant work, a regrettably unbuilt housing project in the Philippines in 1975, was a turning point for architecture. International interest in the design principles and the technical advances made it a benchmark for social housing in developing countries.

Other competition-winning entries such as School of the Future, also unbuilt, were equally significant designs that would have changed the learning environment of the 1990s. Also illustrated are a few unbuilt buildings that would have challenged the contemporary city. It was also the period when Athfield was an active partner in a number of development projects.

It is in the final section of the book that the work of Athfield Architects displays the firm's depth of design skills. Given the volume of work passing through the practice it would be easy to adapt standards to suit work load. It would appear that the opposite happened. As the office has evolved so have the skills of the design managers. As much as it is obvious that Wellington is Athfield's city, the firm has a strong design-led foothold in Auckland and Christchurch. It also produced the brilliant war memorial in London's Hyde Park.

There are a number of projects produced in collaboration with other practices that are clearly acknowledged and brief introductions to future projects show the possibilities and hopes of the staff. Although presented as a democratic working family there have been financial hard times when the cards had to be shuffled. In all work it is easy to experience the sense of ownership and the aspirations of the designers. But the ringmaster is always present, especially in public spaces where he does not dictate how to use them but provides the tools to enable the possibilities of encounter.