

**OF TWO BUILDINGS AND THE SPACE BETWEEN:
A COMPANION TEXT FOR THE PROJECTS: ANYWHERE, HOW TO GET FROM HERE
TO THERE & A CORRIDOR FROM THERE TO NOWHERE**

Reuben Moss

Anywhere was an open public art project which took place in September 2007. I gave tours around the outside of the Post Office Building in Dunedin and told participants about the history of the façade. I also broadcast a radio documentary called "a brief history of the post office women's league" directly outside the building. The broadcast which I produced myself was in the generic style of a national radio show from the era in question. *How to Get from Here to There* dealt with the National Mortgage and Agency Building. Using the lure of incomplete sentences, I led people from gallery spaces to an open car park on the ground floor of the building with typed directions listed line by line. At the NMA Building I had installed, in the same manner, another incomplete sentence and directions back. The sentences were written onto scrap cardboard with a marker, and they loosely referred to the 1848 anti-establishment rebellion in France. The work has been installed three times this year in three different gallery locations, two in Dunedin and one in Hamilton, with different sentences used each time. *A Corridor from There to Nowhere* is still a work in progress. When completed, the corridor, in a 1930s style, will lead into a room in which I will build a cardboard train with help from the public. The train will then travel at an undisclosed date from the exchange through town along Princes and George Streets. This essay is a companion text for these projects. Whilst still allowing for open-ended work, it aims to add a particular content to the corridor through narrowing the context of the work historically and providing a platform for further discussion on public space in the city.

Dunedin in 1930 was a city affected by the first influences of the modern. In the central business district on Water Street, two buildings, or at that stage sites, would declare the times. The Chief Post Office was completed in 1936, the National Mortgage and Agency building finished in 1938. Both buildings were completed in the years after the economic crisis culminating in the 1929 stock market crash. The Chief Post Office was envisioned for a particular strategic purpose; it was to be the logistical centre for the Post Office and a central hub for all state agencies in Dunedin. The NMA building was head office for the National Mortgage & Agency Company, overseeing all of the company's national and international affairs, as well as being a store for agricultural supplies. These two buildings sit now, in opposition to one another, but it is wrong to say they always had. They now stand emptied and decaying in the former heart of the city with between them the sites of two city blocks long since leveled. To see them now is like viewing the site of a once epic battle. That is to say; for these two buildings at least, it is a battle which was fought and won long ago. However, what happened to these two buildings was not a battle between literal sites, nor between two substantial powers. These buildings are more the sites where, over an entire life time, one series of events gave way to another. They mark the transition of a certain type of aesthetic, social and political modernity in Dunedin.

The Chief Post Office was designed by government architect John T Mair and it was built in the years after the great American art deco skyscrapers culminating in 1931 with the 101 floor Empire State Building. Mair had studied architecture in the United States in the early part of the century and had continued to travel there after his appointment in 1922 to the position of government architect. Measuring less than a tenth of the height of the Empire State Building, the Chief Post Office was never intended to rival New York. It was, however, the largest and most modern building in Dunedin. Built entirely by and entirely for state agencies, it was and still remains, a monument to the beginnings of the modern state in New Zealand.

The year before the Chief Post Office was opened was the year of the historic 1936 Labour Budget. This document opened the gate for the development of public assets and agricultural subsidies which would underlay the economic

and social structure of New Zealand for the next fifty years. The Chief Post Office was the first large art deco building in Dunedin. Even though the building appears well embellished compared to today's standards, its relatively plain art deco style was considered by one local councilor¹, not to be grand enough to represent the Crown. Nonetheless, this was the new face of the state in 1936. The grand columns and plaster work had become a mere embellishment onto the greater structure and was confined to the front of the building. Columns – which had once been the symbolic load bearers of empire – no longer held the weight of anything at all. This was a building designed as much for functionality as for grandiose representation on its façade.

JT Mair's designs incorporated most modern facilities; there were elevators in each corner of the building, public on the Princes Street frontage and staff at the rear. The entire building was equipped with a telephone exchange as well as housing the machinery for the telephone and telegraph network of Dunedin. A new window system was designed specifically for the project and all furniture in the building was brand new in accordance with the overall style. Mair had a very specific idea of how things were to look; he personally designed all of the detailed bronze paneling adorning the windows. Initially Mair intended the eight foot bronze gates which guard each of the four corners, to be glazed. Unfortunately the bronze proved too weak and the glass broke in tests.

Underlying Mair's plans was a desire – fueled perhaps in part by what he had seen in Manhattan and in part by a social backlash against the depression – to construct a building emblematic of a new era, a modern building. This was by no means the ideological Modernism of the Bauhaus, Constructivism or Le Corbusier; it was rather the restrained functional Modernism which in reality existed in New Zealand in the 1930s. What is most amazing then is that seventy years later the building as the physical and symbolic home of this typically New Zealand Modernism sits in near ruin. It was, over time, to be replaced by a new ideology of freedom and superseded by new technologies of functionality.

The Chief Post Office building was built across Water Street from the Exchange Building. At the time of the opening of the post office this was the social and economic centre of the city. The Post Office became an integral part of the functioning of the urban community in Dunedin. Archived film footage of parades from the 1930s and 40s illustrates the central position, both geographically, and socially, which the Post Office held. The architecturally unique, particularly Manhattanist feature of the veranda acted as a natural stage for viewing community events and parades, and in turn for being viewed. The veranda opened through the bronze entrance way into the large atrium labeled as public space on the plans. This in its time would have been a spectacular space, covered in marble and native timbers and lit from above by the light well. The public foyer was the central public space for the entire Post Office. The arrangement of this space in comparison to contemporary post shops demonstrates clearly the changes that would occur over the next 50 years.



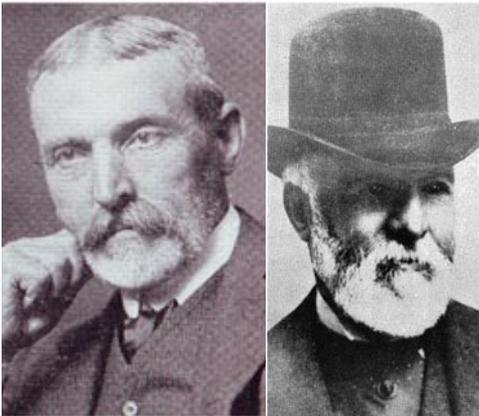
Figure 1: The Chief Post Office in 1937
(image in the public domain).



Figure 2: The Chief Post Office under construction in 1934
(image in the public domain).



Figure 3: Graffiti on the Post Office: "Blind kings led by tired hands", 2007 (photograph by the author).



Figures 4 & 5: John Macfarlane Ritchie, George Gray Russell (images from the Hocken Library, NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. London Head Office Records 1877-1975 AG-133).

the Chief Post Office now represents; the myth of its own modernist, functioning system. This system was in reality always on the verge of malfunction as its very processes of function doomed it to stagnation and inevitable demise in the face of neo-liberalism. The story of the Post Office's repair, modification and eventual decay mirrors the life of the political thinking which first led to its construction. When the Chief Post Office was finally re-clad in 1987, fifty years after first opening, it was in its final years as it was soon to become two separate state-owned enterprises: New Zealand Post and Telecom. It was the end of an era, and it is marked – in a twist of history – by the worst economic event to strike since the 1929 crash which it had begun with.

A few hundred metres along Water Street, beyond two empty parking lots, the National Mortgage & Agency Company Building sits. Aligned by the street grid mandated by town planners nearly two hundred years prior, it faces the Chief Post Office exactly. The building on the corner of Water and Vogel Streets was the third central office

In the façade of the building today, and in the records of the archives, the building's monumental appearance is revealed. The building in reality was in constant disrepair, and faults and malfunctions appeared within its first year. From the first winter welds on the copper roof gave out causing leaking. In 1947 the internalised gutter piping began to leak through the wall on the seventh floor of the northwest corner. The specially designed windows were defective from the start; if they were not fastened properly they could be blown open causing glass to fall to the street below; this happened at least a dozen times. Each time the incident was recorded by a memorandum from the Chief Post Master to all departments, reminding staff to properly secure windows. These memos would in turn be initialed by all department staff and returned to the Post Master before being filed.

The greatest failure of Mair's design was the cladding; still visible from the Princes Street frontage. The original cladding was Putaruru stone. Unfortunately this material could not withstand Dunedin's cold wind and rain; the first cracks appeared on the building's southern face in 1957. The process of repair, culminating eventually with the re-cladding of the building, would take thirty years. The process of exchange between the building superintendant and the Chief Post Master, the department of works and the government architect is recorded in triplicate. This archive demonstrates the great achievement and in some ways the great failure of state organisation prior to 1986. The massive record (series 7) includes over ten thousand pages in total, in multiple colours and under changing letterheads. Every quote, receipt, drawing and remark is kept there. The purpose of this system was centralisation; all decisions ultimately rested with the heads of the varying government departments concerned. It demonstrated to the public the power of government in the most hierarchical way possible. Government could easily affect its departments and this control was always shadowed by a complex, functioning system of recorded exchanges. The saga of the Putaruru stone is the clearest example of what

of the company, all of which were located on Water Street, one of them being the now empty parking lot. The National Mortgage & Agency Company was formed in London in 1864 by two business partners, George Gray Russell and John Macfarlane Ritchie. Initially the Company acted as a brokerage between the Australia and New Zealand Land Company and farmers, but it subsequently became involved in all areas of the farming industry. The NMA records suggest the first shipment of mutton to England in 1882 was, at least in part, financed by the NMA or at least by its board members. The NMA were shareholders in the Longburn Meatworks and held the mortgages for tens of thousands of acres throughout the South Island. In 1974 the NMA Company merged with Wright Stephenson to become Challenge Wrightson, who merged with Fletcher Holdings Ltd. in 1981 to become Fletcher Challenge.

The NMA Building is fairly humble in comparison with the Chief Post Office: they share few features and in fact each typifies quite unique aspects of art deco design. But that it is still an art deco building is a strong connection. It means there must have been a point of decision – as with Mair's building, to move on from what had been the standard style for most of a century to something else. When the building was first occupied by the NMA in 1929 it had a Neo-Baroque façade and roof. This building was by far the most elaborate building to be headquarters for the company, yet within the decade it was completely refaced. When the current building is compared to the original, the magnitude of the change is clear. The contrast in style with the earlier Neo-Baroque and Victorian buildings must certainly have been a point of discussion. This aesthetic change suggests that another change had taken place. This involved an ideological change, not purely political but also in a social and conceptual sense which pointed to a future quite different to that imagined by the company ten years before. But was this the same future as envisioned by Mair's Post Office? Aesthetically the many small differences between the two buildings are overcome by their shared level of difference with the style of the rest of the city. The political, ideological structures which underlie them are varying and complex. While the NMA Company hearkened back to an age of pre-Keynesian economics the NMA Building was definitely rooted in a new post-mercantile, post-depression era. Each building in its own right is an exemplar of the two particularly modern structures of post-depression New Zealand, namely the *capital* enterprise of farming and the *state* operation of public service. This by no means suggests that these two buildings and their inhabitants were, at this stage at least, adversaries. At this point in particular the relationship was only just being established and the specific types of operations which occurred in these buildings or more precisely, the way in which they operated, was relatively new. When the NMA began trading in 1864 it was through a charter instigated directly by the Crown. The NMA was in effect a private enterprise acting as agents for the Crown, fulfilling a particular public necessity: the distribution of farming land. The modified mercantile system under which the NMA traded prior to the 1929 stock market crash meant a low level of public regulation of the economy, and this in turn meant there was little government protection for New Zealand's economy during the Depression.



Figure 6: The original façade of the NMA Building, which was built for the Union Steam Ship Co. in 1929 (image from the Hocken Library, NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. London Head Office Records 1877-1975 AG-133).



Figure 7: The NMA Building decorated for the Queen's visit in 1954 (image from the Hocken Library, NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. Records c.1861-1960 UN-028 Box 43).



Figure 8: Lord Glenconner and several secretaries during his visit for the centenary in 1964 (image from the Hocken Library, NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. Records c.1861-1960 UN-028 Box 41).



Figure 9: The NMA Building lit up at night for the centenary in 1964 (image from Hocken Library, NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. Records c.1861-1960 UN-028 Box 43).

dairy produce and meat during the years of the First World War constituted an exceptional demand which New Zealand was only too glad to meet. The rendering of this important service was all the more remarkable when we remember how many New Zealanders left the country to join the armed forces and how great a contribution New Zealand made, in relation to her wealth and population, towards the prosecution of the war."² The records of the events during the centenary provide the clearest insight into the social relationship between the NMA, its employees and Dunedin as a community. Along with Glenconner's speech, then mayor of Dunedin Russell Sidey referred to the long relationship between the city and the company and the central position agricultural business still had in Dunedin. This was a relationship and a community based on shared morality and a shared vision of the position of industry in New Zealand and the Commonwealth.

The future which saw the NMA Building re-plastered then, was superficially little different to the Post Office's.

By 1936 the effects of the Depression had hurt New Zealand particularly badly; the 1936 Labour Budget was a direct re-action to New Zealand's lack of internal regulation and a means to protect New Zealand industry from international effects. While it is true that the development of New Zealand's socialised assets was not purely the result of the first Labour government, by 1936 the NMA Company was operating in an economy newly regulated by state controls and this point, then, becomes crucial in understanding the shared history of the two buildings discussed in this essay.

The records of the NMA create the image of a company which could only have existed when and where it did. The various employees and managers fill the roles one could imagine for them in a film of the era. For Queen and country, this was a British Empire company, and a staunchly loyal one; a company that could not appear more different than the modern corporation it would become. In reality the NMA was still a multinational company operating on the same basis of investor profit as any company today. What appears distinct in retrospect is the approach to locality, the involvement and interest in the communities, rural and urban. This distinction may in fact have been more rhetoric than reality, but nonetheless it is such a distinction in the written, archived records. The NMA Company was historically a Dunedin company and on the occasion of the company's centenary in 1964, it donated 75,000 pounds to the University of Otago's fund for a new hall of residence. This community concern may not seem unusual as it is part of the marketing exercise of any modern corporation, but its spirit was unique to that era. Duty and great need are repeated motifs in recorded speeches. This was the particular sort of morality which developed along with the great cause of the commonwealth, a charitable nature that had gone hand-in-hand with colonisation and Empire. During the centenary celebrations in 1964 the then chairman of the board, Lord Glenconner, who was based in Britain, referred to the company's gallant efforts in the First World War: "The need to supply Britain with

The Chief Post Office and the NMA Building both relied on Dunedin as an urban centre of community and of commerce. The relationship between them can perhaps best be described as mutual, one of shared moral loyalty to the Crown and to community; an ideology of community rooted in an image of New Zealand as a farming nation born out of the mixed memory of dutiful allegiance to Britain through a World War and a Depression. Among the NMA Company members there was probably a measure of private ill will towards the new era of market regulation which the Post Office signified. In the written record, however, no such conflict is found. Loyalty to the Crown was an absolute for this kind of morality. In any official, archived records these two buildings and their inhabitants were allies for the greater good of New Zealand, looking towards a future based on primary production.

It is the somewhat bitter irony of this story that the future which both the NMA and the Post Office had envisioned was so very different. Even as early as 1964 the NMA had changed substantially, and in the fifteen years prior to this date the board had overseen the purchase of nine companies. The old rhetoric of commonwealth and community was, for the younger generation at least, beginning to be replaced by a new spirit which could be described as the beginnings of global economics. Director James Ritchie (the grandson of founder John Ritchie) said in the closing remarks of his speech for the centenary: "There is a little bit of nationalism creeping into New Zealand. I hope it will not grow into ultra-nationalism. We in New Zealand need overseas help and know-how, all New Zealand does, though we all agree companies ought to be New Zealand companies. I am confident that in 10-15 years this company will be opening branches in South East Asia. I have always been told good trade makes good friends. And good friends make peace and prosperity for all of us."³ Ten years later the company would no longer exist, merging with Wrights Stephenson Ltd. in 1974 and entering a new modern age as the Challenge Corporation. The archive of the NMA closes at this point; the building was never used as an office for Challenge, and the last sign of the company is a 1960s plastic logo still found on the rear of the building. It is impossible to say whether the rhetorical community spirit which underlay the NMA Company went with it. But it is hard to imagine notions of community loyalty and morality playing any real part in the operations of a modern corporation today.

By 1987 the NMA Company was completely subsumed into the Fletcher Challenge Corporation



Figure 10: James Macfarlane Ritchie (image from the Hocken Library NMA Company of New Zealand Ltd. Records c.1861-1960 UN-028 Box 41).



Figure 11: The rear entrance to the NMA Building, 2008 (photograph by the author).

and the building was empty. The Chief Post Office had begun the process of neo-liberal reform which would ultimately rationalise it away. A new political and economic era had begun and both these buildings now remain as artifacts from its precursor. The future for these two buildings is uncertain; numerous plans have been unveiled over the years for the redevelopment of the Post Office but none have come to fruition. The foundations of the Post Office are unfortunately in danger and the copper roof which always leaked has for the past ten years allowed water to seep in. This has slowly undermined the integrity of the concrete foundation and will eventually weaken it beyond repair. The NMA Building, apart from occasional residential tenants, has remained vacant for more than a decade and is in all likelihood facing the same fate as that of the Post Office. Whether these buildings should be preserved or restored was never a question intended to be answered in this essay. Rather, I hoped to present a brief history of these buildings through a glimpse of the political, economic and social history they shared. Their story is unique to Dunedin and they speak of the rise and fall of an era. This essay on their story is a companion text for my participatory projects through which I explore public space in Dunedin. Whilst still allowing for open-ended work, it aims to add a particular content to the train I am currently making for the project entitled *A Corridor from There to Nowhere* through narrowing the context of the work historically and providing a platform for further discussion on public space in the city. The train for *A Corridor from There to Nowhere* will travel along Princes and George Streets in Dunedin, inviting participants to consider the relationships between buildings, companies, moralities of an earlier era and those between their contemporary counterparts in our era of late-capitalism.

Acknowledgement: Photographs held in the Hocken Library (collection UN-28, boxes 41 & 43) are the property of the Fletcher Trust Archive.

Reuben Moss is a fourth-year student completing a BFA in Sculpture at Otago Polytechnic School of Art. He is primarily interested in participatory or relational modes of art which engage directly with the political through issues of urbanism and public space under the conditions of late-capitalism.

- 1 New Zealand Historic Places Trust Report on the Dunedin Chief Post Office building.
- 2 Lord Glenconner's speech to the company, 1964, Fletcher Trust Archive, Hocken Library.
- 3 James Ritchie's speech to the company, 1964, Fletcher Trust Archive, Hocken Library.