

1929

Civic Theatre, Auckland

New Zealand's greatest atmospheric cinema

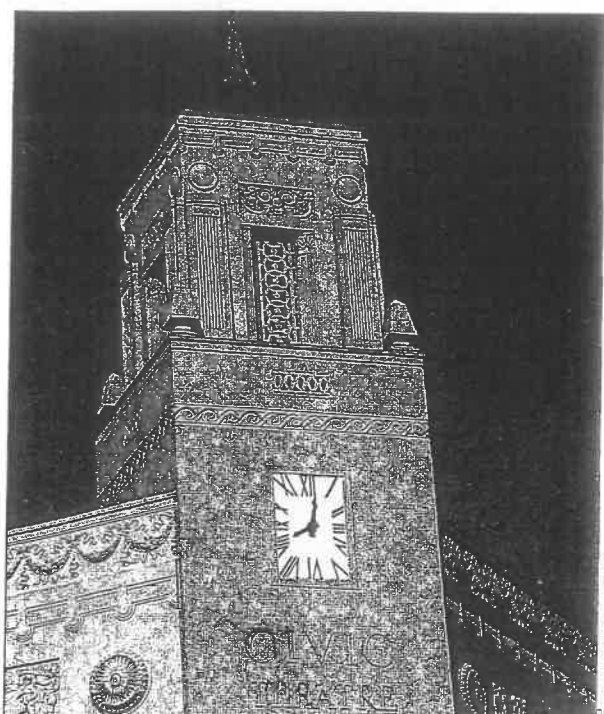
The Civic occupies colonial Auckland's old marketplace, replaced by shops in 1918, which in turn came down a mere seven years later, victims of the council's latest grandiose plans for a civic centre. And there things rested, for the site lay empty after ratepayers struck down the council's scheme. In 1929, however, the chastened council leased it to Thomas O'Brien Theatres Ltd, which ran up a massive new picture palace in nine short months to a design by Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson. It cost £200,000 and could seat 3500, the jewel in a phenomenon that saw New Zealand cinema admissions soar from 550,000 in 1917 to 30 million in 1939.

The builders cut many corners but nevertheless constructed an impressive example of the new 'atmospheric theatres', the opulently decorated picture palaces that enjoyed a brief heyday from the late 1920s. New Zealand built three, Dunedin's Saint James, Christchurch's Regent and the Civic, with its Moorish and Hindu arches, pierced screens, minarets and balconies, all overarched by a twinkling 'sky'. Fittingly for a city known as the 'Queen City', the Civic's interior is a high-camp riot, a Pierre et Gilles photograph come to life. In 1987 the Historic Places Trust saved the building, which reverted to council control eight years later. Early in 2000 it emerged from a major council-funded facelift, our last proper atmospheric theatre (the Regent's interior was burnt out in 1979 and Dunedin's fell before 'adaptive reuse' in 1997).

Location: 267 Queen Street, Auckland

NZHPT: I

The decorative friezes only hint at the exuberant interior of the Civic. Its huge size reflected the popularity of cinema-going between the wars.



Gavin McLean 2001



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Auckland War Memorial Museum

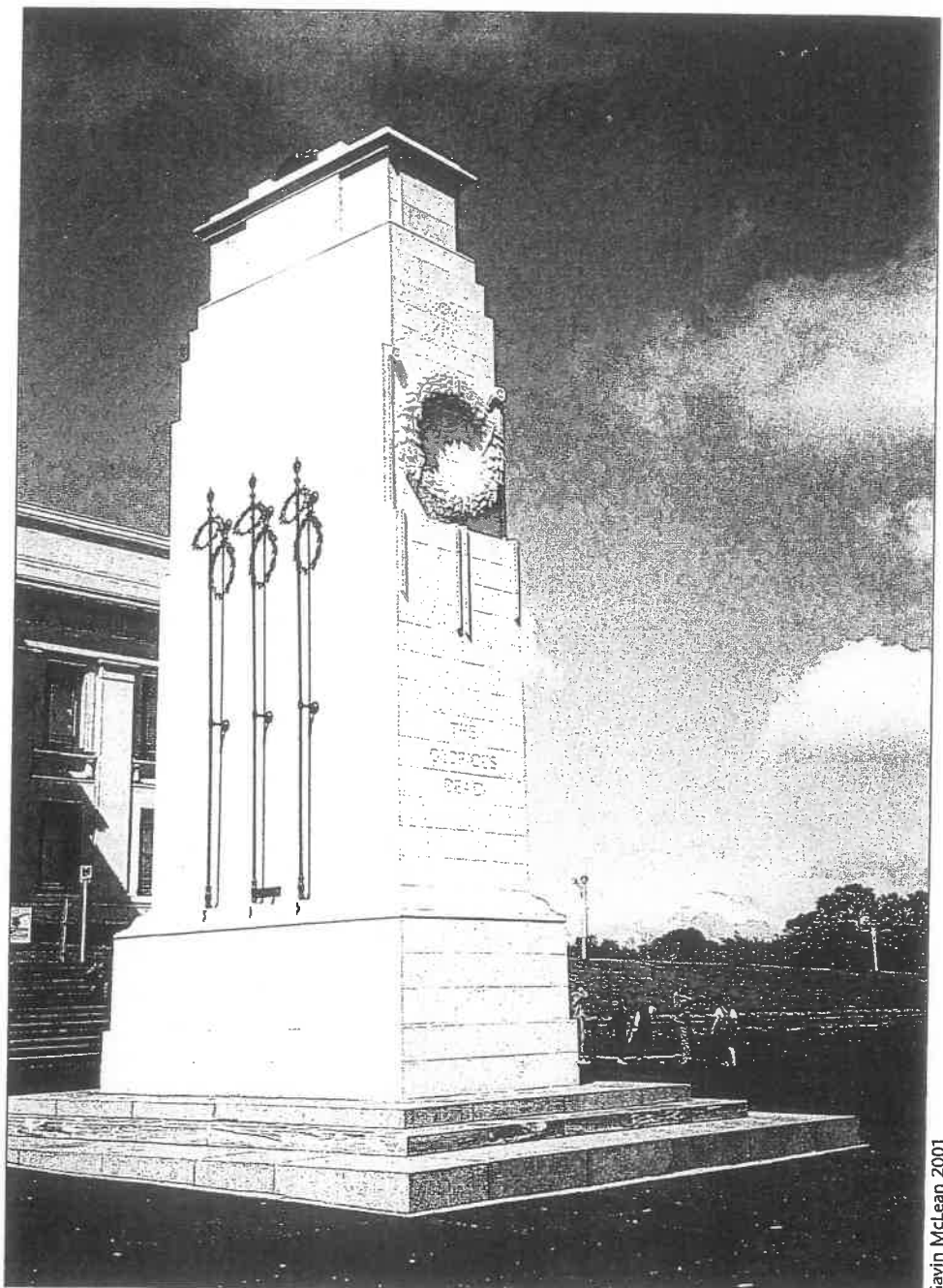
A Parthenon on a hill of bitter memories

Location: Auckland Domain

NZHPT: I

Between the wars Governors-General and other dignitaries unveiled hundreds of memorials to the dead of what everyone hoped had been the 'war to end all wars'. It could be a touchy subject. Although people wanted to honour the fallen, they often disagreed about how and where to do it. Political fashions changed, too. Most World War II memorials are 'utilitarian', libraries, halls and community centres, but World War I sites are predominantly 'inspirational', obelisks, cenotaphs and statues.

Right: Anzac Day rituals became part of New Zealand life between the wars. This replica of the Whitehall cenotaph dominates the forecourt in front of the museum where each year 'we will remember them'.



Opposite page: A storehouse of stories, the museum wears its symbolism on its walls. As you walk up those flights of stairs you are reminded of the approach to a Greek temple, with its Doric pillars and words from Pericles. Look closely, though, and you will find as much Antipodes as Athens. The bronze leaves are kawakawa not laurel and Maori decorations adorn friezes and doors. Even the Old World battle names inscribed on the Portland stone exterior have been etched in blood into New Zealanders' memories.

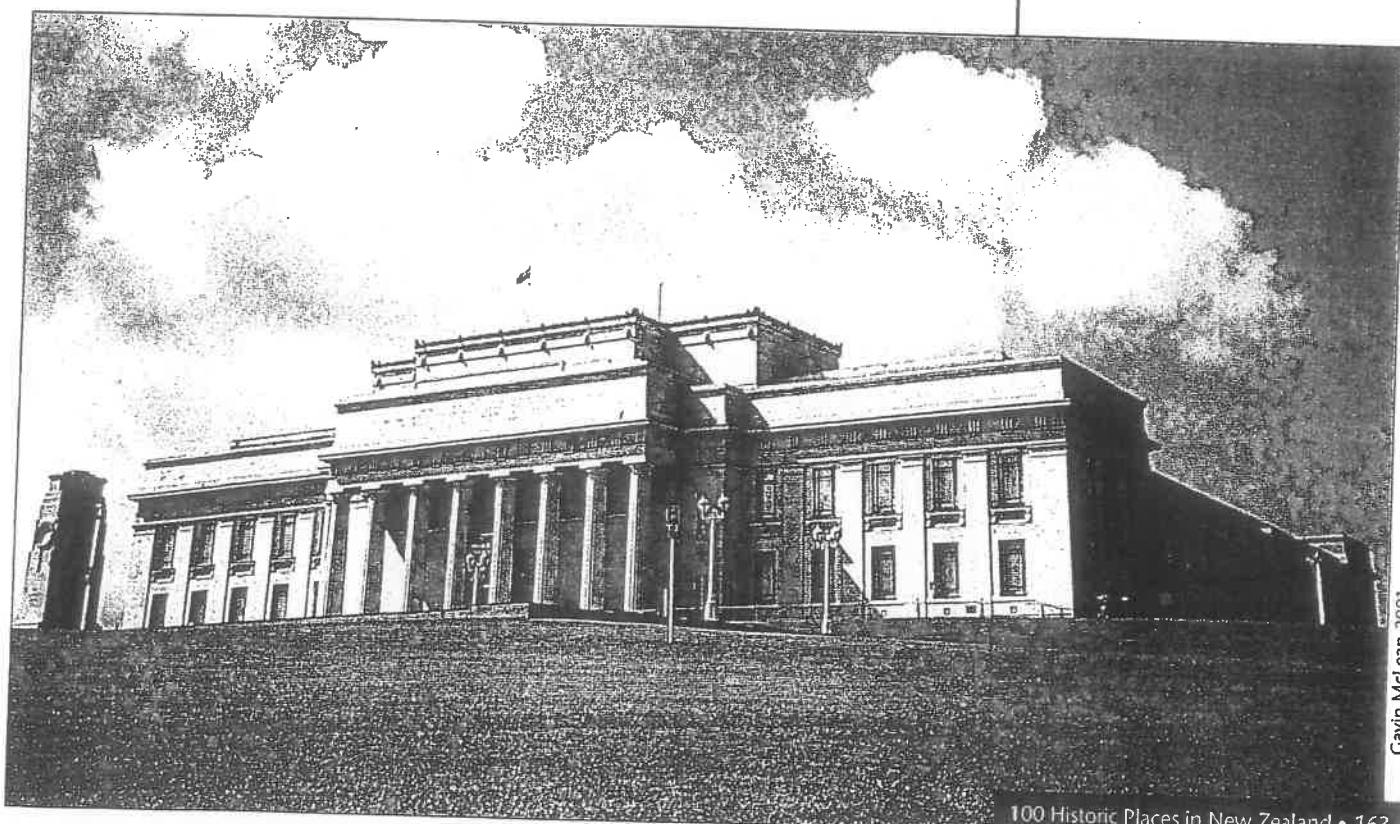
Auckland's war memorial typified the complexities. The Auckland Institute had been planning a new museum on the Auckland Domain, for which it had got £25,000 from the government. But when Wellington's *Dominion* complained, Auckland mayor JH Gunson tried to deflect criticism by making the museum a war memorial. He silenced the southerners but offended those veterans who felt that only a straight memorial would honour their comrades. From his position on the citizens' committee, museum curator TE Cheeseman counterattacked quietly and persuaded his colleagues to stick with the museum. In October 1922 local firm Grierson, Draffin and Aimer won the design contest with a Greek Revival design that was almost de rigueur for memorials. Yet despite this 'almost pedantic Classicism', Peter Shaw has called the monument, erected with Parthenon-like presence atop Te Wherowhero's Pukekawa ('hill of sorrows'), 'a fervently nationalistic building'. In front the diggers got their Court of Honour and stone cenotaph, a replica of Luytens's Whitehall one, sketched on the cheap by Draffin from newsreel footage.

Governor-General Sir Charles Fergusson opened the cenotaph on 29 November 1929 in a speech larded with classical references. Next day he returned to open the building. During the 1930s Governors-General Bledisloe and Galway presided over enormous Anzac Day dawn parades at the Court of Honour. The parades continue to this day while tourist buses have the hill the rest of the year. The Museum of New Zealand has replaced the Auckland Museum as the most-visited museum in the country but during the 1990s 'Auckland's Parthenon' underwent a major redevelopment. In 2002 it was poised to begin a second, in which the interior courtyard between the main building rear extension, completed in 1960, will be filled in to provide additional gallery spaces.

Further reading: Grant Neill, 'Auckland's War Memorial Museum', *Historic Places in New Zealand*, 39, 1992, pp. 16–19; Jock Phillips and Chris Maclean, *The Sorrow and the Pride*, GP Books, Wellington, 1990.



The South African War niche is one of the museum's smaller ones.



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1933

National Tobacco Company Building, Napier

Napier's remarkable recovery

Location: Bridge Street,
Ahuriri, Napier

NZHPT: I

Not everyone suffered during the Great Depression. Gerhard Husheer's National Tobacco Company, founded in 1922, was making a profit of £35,000 a year during the 30s, so it had money to rebuild in style after the Napier earthquake. This quake, one of the more calamitous natural disasters of the 20th century, struck on 3 February 1931 with the force of 100 million tonnes of TNT. It killed 256 people and seriously injured over 400. Much of what it failed to flatten burned down in the fires that broke out.

Husheer turned to Louis Hay. He was one of the reconstruction architects who transformed the face of central Napier with the economical, quickly built and new art-deco style. Not that there was anything cheap about this building. The tobacco tycoon sent Hay's first set of plans back with a demand for something fancier. And here it is, an oddly successful blend with art nouveau tendrils tipped with roses adorning an art-deco sunburst. Never mind: the arch in the square is pure Louis Sullivan art deco.

Art deco is now widely appreciated and the fag factory is the poster boy for the 'Newest City on the Earth'. It was not always so. Until a visiting International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) delegation sparked interest in the city's streetscapes, Napier politicians and businesses had shown little interest in preservation. Long known as the Rothmans Building, it has recently been repainted in more authentic colours and been renamed the National Tobacco Company Building. It is open to the public on weekdays. Enjoy the wooden doors, carved by Ruth Nelson of Havelock North, and the elaborate dome.

Further reading: Robert McGregor, *The Art Deco City*, Art Deco Trust, Napier, 1998; Matthew Wright, *Quake*, Reed Books, Auckland, 2001.

The National Tobacco Company Building, with its exuberant façade and lush interior, symbolised Napier's rapid recovery from the catastrophic 1931 earthquake. Since the 1980s the city has developed an international reputation as an art deco mecca.



Art Deco trust courtesy of Robert McGregor