

John Stacpoole's opening address for 'Past Present: the Visionary Architecture of Gummer and Ford' at the Gus Fisher Gallery on July 14 2006

... This exhibition celebrates a remarkable architectural partnership and two remarkable men.

William Gummer and Reginald Ford were two very different men but they complemented each other – Gummer the designer and Ford an administrator blessed with great depth of knowledge and a cultivated eye. Both men were notable for their courtesy.

Gummer had his first training in New Zealand in the busy Auckland practice of W.H. Holman whose father had been the second Superintendent of Works in the Colonial Government. He went to England in 1908, worked in the London offices of Leonard Stokes and Edwin Lutyens – later Sir Edwin and the most distinguished architect of his generation – and studied at the Royal Academy Schools. He traveled in Europe and spent time at the British School at Rome. In 1912 he crossed to America where he worked with Daniel Burnham who had been consultant architect for the building of Selfridges's department store in London. But Burnham was chiefly notable for large scale commercial buildings in Chicago and planning developments there and in other cities, Washington, San Francisco and Detroit. While away Gummer was admitted as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Ford's entry to architecture took a very different path. He was English and he joined the Navy at an early age. In 1901, aged 21, he volunteered for Scott's Antarctic expedition and on his return to England he traveled with Scott on a lecture tour of Australia under the direction of J.C. Williamson.

He came to Christchurch in 1906 and entered business as a land agent. A natural ability for drawing lead him to architecture and he set up practice in Wanganui, eventually in partnership with Robert Talboys, uncle of Deputy Prime Minister Brian Talboys.

He made his mark at the Wellington Town Planning conference of 1919 and rather extraordinarily became president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1921. This early recognition of his abilities is a measure of the respect in which he was already held.

Ford's early work in Wanganui was almost entirely domestic, though some commercial buildings were designed during the partnership with Talboys. Gummer's early work – he had spent four years away – was done as the Auckland arm of the Wellington practice of Hoggard and Prouse. It included the forward-looking steel-framed New Zealand Insurance building in Queen Street, the elegant YWCA building, the Winter Garden coolhouse in the Domain, and the very impressive Bryant and Mays factory in Wellington, as well as some notable houses in Auckland and Hawkes Bay.

The two men formed their partnership in 1923, Gummer having pulled out of the Hoggard and Prouse partnership a year or two earlier, and two years later they won their first Institute of Architects gold medal. This exhibition has been subtitled 'The Visionary Architecture of Gummer and Ford'. I think one must define the term 'visionary'.

In 1962 Auckland was treated to an exhibition of Visionary Architecture put together by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It consisted almost entirely of dream architecture – a mile-high skyscraper, a city under the sea and so on – dreams unlikely then and still unlikely to be realized.

Gummer and Ford's work was more practical but it was still on occasion visionary, largely, I think, because they saw their work in a context of like structures. The Dilworth building, for instance, was seen as one half of a gateway to Queen Street. Gummer's winning design for a civic centre for

Auckland, never put into effect, would have imposed an order on that part of the city which it has failed to achieve since. In Wellington the setting visualized for their National Museum and Art Gallery was never completed. In Auckland, again, their Railway Station, with its superb concourse, has been sadly belittled.

But if public buildings have sometimes suffered, there is much domestic work to admire and none more so than the Hawkes Bay houses designed by Gummer on his own – Tauroa and Craggy Range – and those done in partnership – Arden and Te Mata. The strongly Lutyens-influenced plans of Tauroa and Craggy Range particularly repay study.

The Gummer and Ford practice was unquestionably the premier New Zealand practice in its heyday of the 1920s and '30s. It ended with the retirement of both men in 1961. Gummer died in 1967 and Ford, though the older man, in 1972. I would like to finish these remarks by reading two short passages, both from obituaries of Gummer:

The first is by Reginald Ford. He wrote:

It remains only to be said that from its inception the firm of Gummer and Ford was a true partnership, and if Gummer were with me he would wish me to acknowledge the aid given to the firm by many loyal assistants and, later, by younger partners, both in the architectural and engineering sides, who as the years passed took an increasing share of the work, the cares, and the responsibilities of the practice. It may, too, not be inappropriate to mention that of the assistants who have passed through the office through the years, many have become successful in both private and public practice.

The second passage is by W.B. McKeon, like both Gummer and Ford, a president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects:

[Gummer] was an inspired and prodigious worker, and would sometimes work a full 24 hours to achieve a deadline, more particularly in architectural competitions in which he was masterly in his conceptions and presentations. In carrying out the hack work on these occasions I was usually reduced to pulp long before the maestro showed signs of tiring.

This is a timely exhibition and we must thank those who have put it together and those who have lent material. I am honoured to have been asked to open it and I do so now, remembering both men with the greatest respect.

*[transcript of speech notes posted on the Architecture Archive website with the generous permission of John Stacpoole]*