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What to Look for in a Mayor; or Classical Reception in the Coalopolis

Recent scholarship on the Classical tradition, as it applies to the *physical*, architectural construction and features of nations or, more precisely cities, has become an increasing concern within the field of Reception Studies.¹ Once the preserve of architectural historians, regularly, historically-speaking, working without particular deference to historic-cultural tenets, the legacy of antiquity on cityscapes is not only an emerging topic of endeavour among Classicists but also an important interdisciplinary adjunct to studies of demographics and the socio-economic dynamics of *place*.² It is also a means by which scholars can explore dialogues of civic identity within the confines of cityscape, or indeed within geographical microcosms or enclaves within metropoleis. While scholarship within Classics per se is concerned with monumental themes and iconic cities, there is less attention on smaller urban centres (usually the preserve of archaeologists). One may speculate that this is the legacy of the grand narrative that has historically dominated Classical Studies and

* Thank you Gionni Di Gravio (University Archivist, The University of Newcastle) for information on Morris Light and for inspiring the main title of the paper. Thank you also to my colleagues, Tessa Morrison, Terry Ryan and Nancy Cushing for expert advice and feedback. I am also grateful to Geoff Turkington (Manager, Major Venues, City of Newcastle) and Ken Walmsley (Live Performance Supervisor) for their guided tour of the Civic Theatre, and to Stuart Marlin for select photographs.

¹ For a comparatively early examination of Roman architecture within the context of Reception Studies, see David Watkin, 'Architecture,' in Richard Jenkyns (ed.), *The Legacy of Rome: A New Appraisal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 329–66. More recent discussions of some facets of ancient architecture on certain nations, with some references to cities, can be found in Craig W. Kallendorf (ed.), *The Companion to the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); see, for example, William J. Dominik, 'Africa' (especially 129–30); Volker Riedel, 'Germany and German-Speaking Europe' (especially 181–82).

² Of course there is the debt to the discipline of Human or Social Geography, which has laid a reasonable proportion of the theoretical groundwork underpinning studies such as the one undertaken here. On this topic the bibliography is extensive.

which Reception Studies has increasingly sought to destabilise through research that involves, at times, sharper attention to topics concerning the dispossessed, the implications of race and, more recently, the role of class. This paper seeks to interact with the issues outlined above in order to contribute to research on the influences of the ancient world on later cityscapes. It is also concerned with the significant movement within Classical Reception Studies to give voice to some of the non-traditional concerns of the Classicist, essentially, in this instance, the presence of an ancient world legacy in the most unlikely of locales.

One such place is Newcastle, Australia, a city far removed from the cultural and historical grandeur of the super-cities of Britain, Europe and North America if cities are to be judged by, in this instance, the markers of Classicism. Indeed, if one were to ponder the great cities of Australia, Newcastle would not come readily to mind. Re-founded or re-discovered by colonists in 1797, Newcastle's reputation has, not infrequently, rested on several unfortunate stigmata: its convict beginnings;³ its coal mines and coal miners; the smog of its industrial complexes; the Star Hotel riot (1979); and an earthquake (1989). Insightful here is the unfortunate quotation from Mark Twain who, during a speaking tour of the Antipodes in 1895, sought refuge in Newcastle owing to an agonising toothache, only to leave it with an indelible good-bye quip, describing the city as 'one long street with a graveyard at one end with no bodies in it, and a gentleman's club at the other with no gentlemen in it.'⁴ A similarly derisive tone is evoked by Harold Wells who characterises Newcastle in the early 1900s as:

[A] thriving industrial centre. A dirty city, over which clouds of coal-smoke lie low in the heavy air; in which coal-dust ... and soot ... penetrate every home, colouring the household linen. A city of one hundred and fifty thousand people, mainly dependent for their livelihoods on the

³ Lieutenant John Shortland came to Newcastle in 1797 in search of runaway convicts (noting simultaneously its coal). Subsequently, Newcastle was transformed into a penal colony (1804-1822); see John Turner, *Newcastle as a Convict Settlement: The Evidence Before J. T. Bigge in 1818-1821* (Newcastle: The Council of the City of Newcastle, 1973).

⁴ While commonly cited, there is no direct source for this quotation; see Gionni Di Gravio, 'Why Mark Twain lost a tooth in Newcastle: a mythological explanation,' in Miranda Lowry (ed.), *New Adventures of Mark Twain: Coalopolis to Metropolis* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2007), 62-72. Di Gravio refers to it as 'a mnemonic put down ... but a good one' (63). Twain does make a less subjective reference to Newcastle in his published account of his tour of the British Empire: 'Then Newcastle, a rushing town, capital of the rich coal regions' (*Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World* [1897; London: Empire Books, 2011], 177).

coal-mines ... and the gigantic steelworks.⁵

In short, one may argue that Newcastle lacks high culture or is perceived to lack high culture. What high culture is, of course, is a matter of debate. If, however, one were to use a cultural marker well known in the West and the fetish of the traditional Classicist, namely some discernible debt to Classical Greece and Rome, then one would have to rethink Newcastle's shortcomings in this respect.

The not insubstantial markers of Classicism that inscribe the urban body of Newcastle are the legacy of Alderman Morris Light. A Novocastrian by choice, not by birth, Light was born in Kovno, Western Russia, in *circa* 1859. After moving to Scotland in order to escape the increasing persecution of the Jews in his homeland, Light migrated to Australia in 1884 and moved to Newcastle in 1886. A businessman who began his mercantile trade by selling household items door-to-door from a horse-and-cart, Light became a migrant success story, rising from humble beginnings to the august position of mayor in 1924. While his time in this office was brief, indeed lasting only till 1925, it was, nevertheless, long enough to leave a Classically-inspired imprint on the city: a Town Hall in the Inter-War Academic Classical style and the Civic Theatre in the Georgian Revival manner, with more than a smattering of lush Graeco-Roman ornamentation.

Light's vision for Newcastle was initially inspired by his mini-grand tour of 1923. In a ramshackle scrapbook he collated, with later additions by his son, Bertram, his notes on this journey abroad make particular reference to the city of Durban, its town-planning and public architecture. Light was especially enamoured of Durban's Town Hall, writing:

I arrived in Durban South Africa on the 7th March, and was very glad to land ashore. Since I left Fremantle, no land was sighted crossing the Indian Ocean. Durban is a beautiful city ... it has a magnificent Town Hall, supposed to be one of the finest in the British Empire. It cost £350,000

⁵ Harold Wells, *The Earth Cries Out* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1950), vii. I would like to temper the above interpretation of Wells in light of a conversation with Nancy Cushing, who pointed out that Newcastle, being a place dominated by workers and secondary industry, was not necessarily negative. Well's opening words, describing Newcastle as a 'thriving industrial centre' were high praise of the type most sought by people in Newcastle. The lines that follow, however, cast Newcastle in a less flattering light.

to build. It is situated in the west street which is the principal street and is in the heart of the City. It has an art gallery, library, museum. The Hall where mayoral functions and concerts are held will seat 3,000 people.⁶

Light's interest in white South-African architecture and town-planning is of particular significance in relation to his vision for Newcastle: as Dominik has discussed: '[c]lassical architecture, with its qualities of monumentality and historicism emblematic of European colonial power and tradition, has influenced the design of numerous public buildings in South Africa.'⁷ In terms of Durban and its Town Hall (1910),⁸ designed by Stanley Hudson, Neo-classicism morphed into and merged with a Neo-baroque style, indicative of the more ostentatious examples of the inclination towards heaviness that characterised some Edwardian architecture. Durban's Town Hall, like the resultant one in Newcastle, was itself modelled on another, the Town Hall in Belfast. This cyclical deference to other cities, other designs and monuments is suggestive of, in this instance, the imperative behind architectural *imitatio* to reference an established artefact 'to legitimate something', be it 'political, artistic, social, or ... cultural in the broadest sense'.⁹ One may posit, therefore, that such heavy-handed implementation of Classically inspired architecture in countries such as South Africa and Australia authenticated and legitimated these colonial outposts in terms of their place within an empire. Buildings such as these helped in the partial creation of new versions of the mother country in order to forge symbolic allegiances to Britain and to mimic the alleged markers of her perceived cultural superiority. Light in this sense was no different to town-planners throughout the Empire; a man of his time, he was searching for something 'better' for his adopted city and saw that 'something' in the landscape of a fellow colonial city.¹⁰

⁶ From the Morris Light Collection, Cultural Collections, Auchmuty Library, The University of Newcastle.

⁷ See n. 1, Dominik 'Africa', 129.

⁸ Not to be confused with the first Durban Town Hall (1884) which later became the Post Office.

⁹ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁰ Light's allegiance to Empire is evident in his scrapbook, which includes an undated interview with him in *The Rhodesian Herald* entitled 'An Australian on His Own Country: Visitor from New South Wales': "'The Average Australian", he said, "is more loyal to the Empire than the average Englishman".' That Light specifically wanted to enhance the reputation of Newcastle and that this was an impetus for his overseas travel are revealed in an unsourced newspaper article on him (dated 3 May 1925): '... it speaks volumes for him when it is considered that the greater part of his travelling was devoted to enquiries that might assist his beloved Newcastle to gain recognition as a big Australian city and to help on his just-as-beloved Australia to her place among nations.' (See also n. 14 for further reference to this article). From the Morris Light Collection, Cultural Collections, Auchmuty Library,

On his return, Light campaigned for renowned architect Henry Eli White to create an ambitious Town Hall, which he intended to be part of a Civic Precinct that would incorporate a theatre and a shopping complex. So began Light's odyssey of local government in-fighting and factional obstructions as the years limped by and the plans were revised, rejected, revived, stalled and revived again. Ultimately Light's will and autocracy prevailed and the Civic Complex was officially opened in 1929. While Light did not live to see his buildings completed, his Classical tastes made manifest, in Newcastle, the Town Hall and Civic Theatre remain a testimony to his vision and may well be regarded as testimony to the qualities one should look for in a mayor.



Figure 1: Newcastle Town Hall; Date: c. 1930. Source: Newcastle and Hunter District Historical Society Archives. Courtesy of Cultural Collections, The University of Newcastle.

The Town Hall bears features typical of the twentieth century revival of Neo-classicism.¹¹ With its imposing Roman Doric columns and stately entablatures on the lower level and its two upper-storeys joined by Ionic columns, it is a building of austere *gravitas* yet, nevertheless, one somewhat out-of-kilter with the more active and energetic architectural trends of the 1920s. In addition to the entanglement of architectural periods evident in the main building with the aforementioned Grae-

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¹¹ Information based on the New South Wales Government's Environment and Heritage Report (File: H04/00091/7 [ICONS]).

co-Roman features combined with elements of the High Victorian era such as heavy windows and a sweeping driveway, Newcastle's Town Hall also has a most extraordinary tower. Like the constituent parts of the whole that comprise the 'base' of the Town Hall, the tower embraces yet another design model and thus contributes further to the eclecticism that defines the building (Fig. 1).

The architectural origins of the tower do not reflect a debt to Greece and/or Rome but, arguably, to Egypt (Fig. 2a & 2b). Here is a tower that may be regarded as belonging to the Egyptian Revivalist movement, a popular style in Europe and the United States, especially during the nineteenth century, although its origins are much earlier.¹² The style came to prominence during the 1920s as a result of the archaeological forays of men such as Howard Carter, whose excavations and discoveries made all things Egyptian particularly fashionable. Admittedly, towers had emerged from stately buildings independently of Egyptian Revivalism, yet this particular tower, rising at this particular time, seems to add a conscious 'nod' to Egypt as much as its foundations acknowledge the Classical world. It does so, stylistically-speaking, because of its resemblance to the Lighthouse of Pharos, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, particularly as envisaged by Hermann Thiersch in his 1909 monograph, *Pharos Antike Islam und Occident* (Fig. 3).¹³ This is not necessarily a fanciful suggestion when one considers not only the popularity of Egyptian Revivalism during the 1920s, evident even in houses built in Newcastle at the time, particularly with their Egyptian-inspired interiors, but in view of the geography of Newcastle—a harbour settlement like Pharos—and the possible pun on Light's name. Indeed, in references to Light in local newspapers, he is sometimes referred to as 'a light', illustrated in an article on him dated May 3, 1925: 'Mayor Morris Light: The Light that Shines Over Newcastle Council.'¹⁴

¹² The preference for Egyptian design may be dated at the very least as far back as Napoleon's conquest of Egypt and the ensuing Battle of the Nile in 1798; see *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-22).

¹³ While Thiersch may be regarded today as a slight romantic when it came to his reconstruction of the Lighthouse, his interpretation is more realistic, more academically adept when compared to earlier visionaries and their imaginings, such as Maerten van Heemskerck's curvaceous, billowing structure from *Septem Orbis Miracula* (c. 1572). For a discussion of the historical, and particularly the engineering and architectural features of the lighthouse (including comments on Thiersch), see A. S. Elnashai, et al., 'New Light on an Ancient Illumination: the Pharos of Alexandria,' *International Journal of Nonlinear Sciences and Numerical Simulation* 7.2 (2006): 137-48.

¹⁴ From Light's scrapbook; as with most of the newspaper clippings therein, the source is not included.

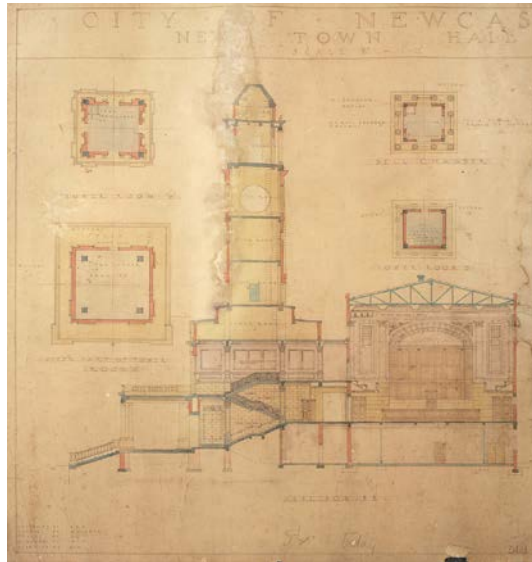


Figure 2a: Plans for Newcastle Town Hall; Scale 1/8" = 1;00"; Approx. Sheet Size: 61cm x 65.6 cm; Detail: Section B-B, Tower Room "B", Upper Part of Tower Room "A", Bell Chamber and Tower Room "D"; Date: n.d.]; Designed by Henry E. White. Courtesy of Cultural Collections, The University of Newcastle.



Figure 2b: Plans for Newcastle Town Hall; Scale 1/8" = 1'00"; Approx. Sheet Size: 76cm x 66.3 cm; Detail: Front Elevation; Date: 8.[10]. 1925; Designed by Henry E. White. Courtesy of Cultural Collections, The University of Newcastle.



Figure 3: The Lighthouse of Pharos; Designed by Hermann Thiersch; Date: 1909; Source: *Pharos Antike Islam und Occident* (Berlin: Teubner).

In addition to the Town Hall, Light regarded the Civic Theatre on Hunter Street as his greatest achievement. Also designed by White, the theatre is—in terms of scale—monumental, essentially a two-storey Georgian Revival building with Italian Renaissance elements (most prominent in its repetitive, semi-circular-headed windows).¹⁵ The interior, in Spanish Baroque style, incorporates Classical features, including a proscenium arch adorned with a frieze and recessed arches over the royal boxes containing parapets with inset statues; Apollo on one side and an elegant Graecian female, possibly a Muse or one of the Graces, on the other (Fig. 4a & 4b).

As with the reference to the Pharos Lighthouse in relation to the Town Hall, the statue of Apollo once again represents the motif of light in addition to his other traditional symbolism, rendering him an appropriate inclusion for a theatre. He stands somewhat awkwardly—no particular symmetry adorns his stance as one would usually expect—cradling his lyre in his right arm and saluting the audience with his left. This statue, as with its twin standing opposite it, provides the sense of taste and culture that was clearly a major imperative for the architect as well as the interior

¹⁵ Information based on the New South Wales Government's Environment and Heritage Report (File: S90/01087-035).



Figure 4a: Interior, Civic Theatre. Courtesy of Stuart Marlin.

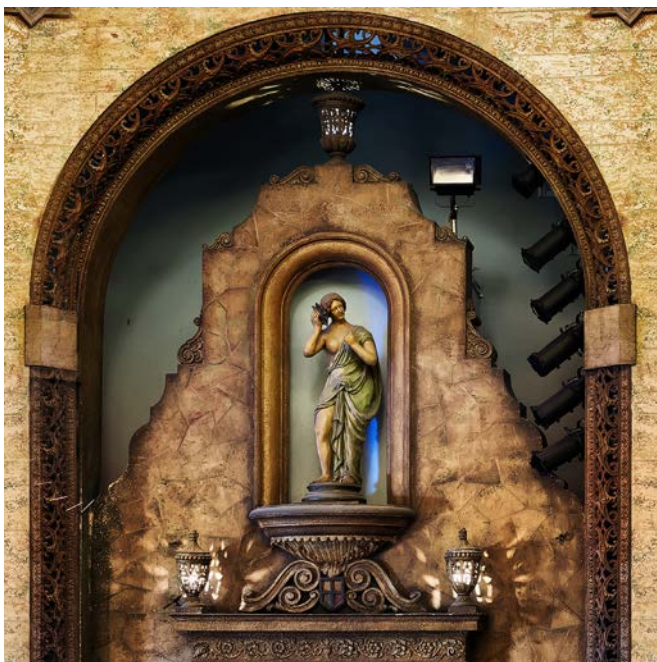


Figure 4b: Interior, Civic Theatre. Courtesy of Stuart Marlin.

designer of the Civic Theatre, J. V. Rowe (chief designer for Wunderlich from 1904 to 1925).

These statues, unexpected settlers in Light's coalopolis,¹⁶ are nevertheless most welcome in his theatre. While clearly a suitable choice, quite possibly by Rowe, they also reflect Light's fascination with Classical artefacts. This fascination, and indeed awe, is evident from his travel journal (Light travelled to England after he had visited South Africa), which contains an entry on his reaction to the British Museum:

We visited the British Museum and were astounded at the vastness of the collection. The sculptures ... were very fine. Greek, Norman, Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian ... Vases of different nations and ages. Mummies of all ages. The statues of different statesmen very wonderful. In fact it is very bewildering and impossible to describe the collection. It is absolutely the Wonder of the World.¹⁷

Of relevance here, in terms of a cultural contextualisation of Light's response to the grandeur of the British Museum, is the work of Bradley on the museum and imperialism:

[t]his institution [the British Museum] became a powerful expression of British hegemony over contemporary European claims to ownership of the classical past, as well as the currency of ancient artefacts for representing the cornucopia of the British Empire.¹⁸

The juxtaposition of Light's description of the museum and Bradley's Reception-based analysis of the institution per se may initially appear to be an excessively academic and, by default, a supercilious endeavour. Its purpose, however, is not only, as prefaced above, to contextualise Light's response within the cultural discourse of imperialism, but, in turn, to exemplify Bradley's insightfully broad-based deconstruction of the museum by reference to a narrow, personalised experiential response to its authority as a symbolic arbitrator of culture. Here is a migrant-made-

¹⁶ On the term, 'coalopolis,' see Nancy Cushing, 'Coalopolis to Steel City: Perceptions of Newcastle 1797-1859,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 22.57 (1998): 61.

¹⁷ From the Morris Light Collection, Cultural Collections, Auchmuty Library, The University of Newcastle. Other entries chronicling his time in England make specific references to Roman remains, which once again suggest a particular fascination with antiquities.

¹⁸ Mark Bradley, 'Introduction,' in Bradley (ed.), *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.

good, a local government official, a soon-to-be mayor from an outpost city within a colonial outpost experiencing the grandeur of the mother country first hand. Here is a personal testimony to Bradley's postmodern and postcolonial readings.

Light's vision was literally visionary, particularly in view of the coalopolis/steel city's reputation as a place far from the elitism of, and high culture associated with, Classicism (in any form). It must be acknowledged that White was busy designing theatres in Sydney, the Capitol Theatre and the State Theatre, at the same time he was working on Newcastle's Civic Theatre and that the results are strikingly similar.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is equally important to consider that, as Dunn *et al* emphasise in their work on the social construction of Newcastle, 'deconstructing the identity of place exposes the ideologies and the actors behind such constructions.'²⁰ It is in this sense and in this instance that the ideology of the actor is important. Light, a performer in a script of his own composition, commissioned and intensely oversaw his architect in order to ensure that the Classically-inspired grandeur he experienced in Durban was played out in Newcastle, and it is this deconstruction of his markers on the city, in this instance the Civic Theatre, that is unique (White's architectural repetition of form aside).

Light was a small player in a much bigger, indeed global arena. Nevertheless his vision for his city was on a grand scale. It has been the intention of this paper, therefore, to bring to light (pun intended) his story, articulated through a Classical lens, in

¹⁹ Perhaps the closest similarity with the Civic Theatre, however, is the St. James Theatre, Auckland, also designed by White (1928). While the replications of White's designs throughout Australia and New Zealand may suggest that Newcastle's Civic Theatre was simply another building in a line of buildings and thus represents nothing unique by way of Classically-inspired intentions, it should be noted that Light had the opportunity to source other architects and thus other designs (there was, for example, pressure to employ Newcastle architects for the project, which Light vigorously opposed). The specificity of intent behind the commissioning of certain architects who would produce certain designs is exemplified in the work of Nancy Cushing on the BHP Steel Works Administration Building in the Newcastle suburb of Mayfield. Built to an impressive standard the building is also designed along Neo-classical lines for specific reasons: 'Unlike the purely functional production buildings, the administration building was used as an opportunity to make a statement about the dignity and order BHP wished to associate with itself. By drawing upon classical architectural forms, BHP allied itself with the ideas of solidity and public service of the government buildings, libraries, churches and art galleries which also used the style, while distancing itself from the profit motive and side effects of productions'. ('Forging the Image of the Steel City: Newcastle and BHP,' unpublished paper presented to Urban History/Urban Planning Conference, ANU, Canberra, June 1995, 18).

²⁰ Kevin M. Dunn, Pauline M. M'Guirk and Hilary P. M. Winchester, 'Place Making: the Social Construction of Newcastle,' *Australian Geographical Studies* 33.2 (1995): 164.

order to stimulate further research on the part of the scholars of Reception Studies into the minutiae of its discipline, into the forgotten archives of individuals who, despite the odds, fought to claim a piece of Classicism for themselves and, in the case of Mayor Light, their community.

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