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Counterculture Themes in the Growth and Development of Athfield Architects

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Ian Athfield is one of New Zealand's best, and best known, architects. Born in 1940, his career gathered momentum in the mid-1960s and today he remains active in the firm he founded in 1968, Athfield Architects, which numbers about 50 staff with offices in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Athfield's early work was consistent with the counterculture of the day in various ways. In a previous publication, Athfield Architects (Auckland University Press 2012), I have discussed this with reference to its layering of historical references; its reaction against conformity and the establishment; its egalitarianism and emphasis on democratic processes; its rejection of consumerism; its initiatives to utilise renewable sources of energy; and its concern for collectives.

This paper uses recent literature on American countercultures to further reflect upon the conditions of hippiedom and the establishment. It considers the extent to which Athfield was, or was not, a hippie, and then pursues counterculture themes in the growth and development of Athfield Architects.

The paper finds continuity between the early days and now, in the firm's non-conformist Wellington premises, particular office structure and recurrent initiatives to foster community. It concludes that the Athfield House and Office in the Wellington suburb of Khandallah, from which the biggest of the firm's three offices operates, is a strong point of difference for the firm, both literally and in terms of the history and attitudes it represents.



RIBA Journal editor Peter Murray once quipped that Ian Athfield, long-haired, bearded and shirtless in the 1970s, looked “as though he had just stepped out of the pages of *Whole Earth Catalogue*.”¹ In contrast, in the 2000s, Athfield was elected president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA), received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University and was appointed Architectural Ambassador to earthquake-damaged Christchurch. Interestingly, though, the elder statesman of New Zealand architecture still describes himself as an “alternative . . . rather than a mainstream practitioner.”²

1. Peter Murray, “Architecture in the Antipodes,” *RIBA Journal* 91, no. 2 (February 1984), 26.

2. Athfield quoted in Ann Clifford, “Leading from the Top,” *Cross Section: NZIA News* (August 2005), 8.

This paper explores the conditions of hippiedom and the establishment within the work and practices of Ian Athfield and the firm he formed in 1968, Athfield Architects. It considers his non-conformism—and his conformism—and outlines his path to success. Given his early challenges to authority, should we be surprised by the establishment’s subsequent embrace of him? And in what ways might he and Athfield Architects still be considered alternative today?

When discussing the early work, the focus is on Ian Athfield as an individual because in the 1960s and 1970s, he drove the small firm and its outputs. When discussing the later work, the paper gives greater attention to the firm, Athfield Architects, recognising that it is now much more than one person, with close to 50 staff spread across offices in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and with Ian Athfield being just one of six directors, trying to edge his way towards semi-retirement, yet hindered from doing so by heavy demand for his name, his ideas and his public voice.

The paper finds continuity between then and now, in the firm’s non-conformist Wellington premises, particular office structure and recurrent initiatives to foster community. It concludes that the Athfield House and Office in the Wellington suburb of Khandallah, from which the biggest of the firm’s three offices operates, is a strong point of difference for the firm, both literally and in terms of the history and attitudes it represents.

Early Athfield Architects: The Hippie Element

From the mid-1960s, Wellington architects Ian Athfield and Roger Walker gave New Zealand architecture what Russell Walden has described as a “healthy and personalized kick in

3. Russell Walden, "The Rise of the Personal in New Zealand Architecture: Complexity and Contradiction in Athfield, Walker and Others," *New Zealand Architect* 4 (1981), 30.

4. Gerald Melling, "The Terrible Twins: Athfield and Walker in (and out of) the 1970s," in Charles Walker (ed.), *Exquisite Apart: 100 Years of Architecture in New Zealand* (Auckland: Balasoglou Books, 2005), 69.

5. Ian Athfield quoted in "Unconventional Building and the Building Regulations: An Interview with Wellington Architect Ian Athfield," in Dennis List and Alistair Taylor (eds), *The Second New Zealand Whole Earth Catalogue* (Martinborough: Alistair Taylor, 1975), 290.

6. Julia Gatley, *Athfield Architects* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2012), 42-47.

7. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 86.

8. "Unconventional Building and the Building Regulations," 289-90.

the pants."³ They shocked the profession with their rejection of accepted norms of appearance, dress and behaviour and their vibrant buildings, which soon attracted nicknames like "Disneyland" and "Noddy" houses. These were immediately distinctive. Gone was the open planning of post-war modern homes, replaced by multiple small spaces, each given architectural expression across numerous floor levels with complex roofs combining hips, gables, pyramids and drainpipe skylights, all contributing to an overall sense of verticality. Where they led, others followed—clones and copyists, as the late Gerald Melling described them in his evocative essay, "The Terrible Twins: Athfield and Walker in (and out of) the 1970s."⁴

In *Athfield Architects*, I interpret the early Athfield work as being consistent with the counterculture of the day. I analyse it thematically, discussing its layering of historical references (from Mediterranean vernaculars to colonial cottages); its reaction against conformity and the establishment (in 1975, Athfield commented, "Our firm hasn't built one building yet which complies with all the by-laws"⁵); its egalitarianism and emphasis on democratic processes (particularly self-building); its rejection of consumerism (with the recycling of materials and redundant old buildings and initiatives to utilise renewable sources of energy), and its concern for collectives and communities.⁶ In addition, Athfield and his wife Clare experimented with communal living, buying land at Awaroa Inlet, at the north end of the South Island, with three other couples (all friends and Athfield clients) and building a holiday house "for an alternative lifestyle."⁷

Indicative of his reputation by the mid-1970s, Athfield was interviewed by *The Second New Zealand Whole Earth Catalogue*, one of three local editions of the alternative community newspaper published in the United States from 1968. Amid stories on contraception, composting, recycling and do-it-yourself building, the interview was titled "Unconventional Building and the Building Regulations," and the questions addressed these two topics. Unconventional buildings included a communal house for twelve people and another community house called the Big House. Athfield advised readers on how they could get local authority approval to realise such facilities. Perhaps surprisingly, given the topic at hand, he introduced the importance of privacy, including in communal living situations.⁸ He also outlined some of his own experiences in breaking building regulations. He was, though, measured in encouraging others to follow suit, recognising that,



“It’s better to have laws and break them than to have no laws at all”, and emphasising that it was important for anyone choosing to break laws to know and understand exactly why they were breaking them and to “firmly believe in your reasons for doing it.”⁹

9. “Unconventional Building and the Building Regulations,” 289-90. This is in contrast to countercultural critique, “which throws the very existence of rules into question.” Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture became Consumer Culture* (Chichester: Capstone, 2005), 72.

The interview was consistent with Athfield’s broader reaction against what he considered to be restrictive regulations relating to zoning, allowable uses and the control of heights and set-backs. At a time when residential zoning did not allow commercial uses, he chose to use his own house in Amritsar Street, in the Wellington suburb of Khandallah, as the Athfield Architects office. He also made additions to the building without first obtaining the necessary permits. He antagonised his already disgruntled neighbours by both encroaching on their boundary and flaunting his commercial activities, adding signage to suggest that part of the place was operating as the Onslow Alms, Vaudeville and Lunches. With the latter initiative, he succeeded in drawing media attention to the issue of town planning, while also being fined in the process. Concurrently, he encouraged clients and other architects to challenge regulations. For example, with the Sampson House in Maungaraki (1970-73), he called an upper level space a gazebo because such summerhouses and porches did not have to conform to the same requirements as rooms conventionally found inside a house.¹⁰ At the Simperingham House in Epsom, Auckland (1978-79), the local authority initially declined a permit because the tower housing the header tank exceeded the height limit. Athfield redesigned it with a hinge, so when open it would sit below the height limit and when closed it would remain in the location originally proposed. The permit was granted. The reporting of such incidents¹¹ confirmed Athfield’s reputation as free thinking and willing to take on the authorities.

10. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 76.

11. See *Auckland Star*, June 20, 1978, A1; and *Home and Building* 1 (1981), 57-61.

Complicating Assumptions

While all of this suggests that Athfield was overtly anti-establishment, he was not extreme by hippie standards. Born in 1940, he was several years older than the main wave of hippies, who were baby-boomers with 1950s childhoods. He studied architecture and married in the early 1960s, while they were still in school. He consistently describes his own background as working class, meaning he was never one of those “middle class kids” who could afford to reject the desired norms of “the system.”¹² such as

12. Writing of American hippies, Iris Kelzt makes the observation that: “The hippie-phenomenon was created for the most part by middle class kids who became disillusioned with the American dream. The kids from ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to be less crazed. It’s hard to reject what you’ve never had. They were fighting to get into the system.” Iris Kelzt, *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, an excerpt in F. A. Swingrover (ed.), *The Counterculture Reader*, (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 60.

13. For information on Athfield's life and experiences prior to the formation of Athfield Architects, see Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 3.

14. Clare Athfield in Geoffrey Cawthorn (dir.), *Architect of Dreams: Ian Athfield* (Messenger Films, 2008).

15. Nicola Barnes, "Ian Athfield: Changing the Character of Wellington's Landscape," *Evening Post Weekend Magazine*, July 4, 1987, 1.

16. For a summary of Athfield Architects' break into commercial work, see Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 119-20.

17. See Stewart Silk, "Profile of the Competition Winner," *Architectural Record* 159 (May 1976), 42-43; "The Winning Designs," *Architectural Record* 159 (May 1976), 112-23; "Prélude au Congrès de Vancouver: Habitat 76," *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 185 (May-June 1976), 82-96; Ian Hogan, "Habitat," *RIBA Journal* 83, no. 8 (August 1976), 317-18; Ian Hogan, "Self-help/Tondo, Manila," *Architectural Design* 46 (October 1976), 594-95; "1. Preis: Ian Athfield, Athfield Architects, Wellington, New Zealand," *Baumeister* (10 October 1976), 856-88; Michael Y. Seelig, *The Architecture of Self-help Communities: The First International Competition for the Urban Environment of Developing Countries* (New York: Architectural Record Books, 1978), 37-47; and David Gosling and Barry Maitland, *Concepts of Urban Design* (London: Academy Edition; New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), 85-86.

employment and home ownership. To the contrary, after graduation he accepted a job in a large Wellington firm, Structon Group Architects, with an agreement that he would be made a partner two years later, in 1965, when he was only 25.¹³ This demonstrates ambition and a desire to work with the system, rather than to reject it. Property ownership was also important to him and Clare from the outset: they chose it shortly after their 1963 move to Wellington, in preference to overseas travel.¹⁴ This was in contrast to the hippies who promoted communal property ownership and chose an itinerant existence. As mentioned above, the Athfields then also pursued the ownership of land at Awaroa.

Fired from Structon Group in 1968 for suggesting that the firm should introduce a retirement policy,¹⁵ Athfield immediately established his own practice and transferred his ambitions to it. He was not content designing houses—the building type with which he developed his early reputation—but instead, in an effort to make the firm profit-making, he actively pursued opportunities to break into commercial work. This included collaborating with bigger, more established firms, notably King & Dawson, to build up a track record of designing and realising larger and more complex buildings. He also became a shareholder in a development company, City and Provincial Properties Ltd, which specialised in refurbishing and adaptively reusing redundant old buildings including shops and hotels.¹⁶

Concurrently, Athfield's design talent was increasingly recognised through awards, starting with Auckland Architecture Association Monier Awards (for unbuilt architecture) for the Imrie House in 1968 and Drewitt Housing and the White Star Hotel, both in 1972; NZIA Bronze and Silver Medals for the Athfield House in 1970 and 1971 respectively; an NZIA Merit Award for the McIntyre House in 1973; a Tourist Design Awards Commendation for the Wakatipu Trading Post in 1975; and international success in 1976 when the firm beat almost 500 other entrants to win the United Nations-sponsored competition for the design of low-cost housing for squatters in Manila.

The latter was very high profile, reported in major journals around the world and exhibited at the UN Habitat Conference in Vancouver that year.¹⁷ The New Zealand National Film Unit documented Athfield's success, the film being even more watchable today because it was directed and narrated by the young Sam Neill. In it, Athfield emphasised his desire to make money out of building highrises: "If you get one of them up then you can make



quite a bit of jam . . . cos it's the same all the way up, you can get more fees."¹⁸ And following the international win, such commissions began to arrive. Mainzeal Design and Build was an important commercial client in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from the five-storey Crown House (1977-81) to the seven-storey Colenso House (1980-84) and beyond. Other commercial clients followed, and the office grew from four or five staff to fourteen or fifteen to cope with the increased demand for their work. An increasing number of local and national architecture awards were complemented by other recognitions, with Athfield being an invited respondent to keynote speaker Charles Moore at the 1981 NZIA conference and then, at Stanley Tigerman's invitation, being one of four New Zealand architects to participate in an invited lecture tour to the United States in 1986.¹⁹ Athfield Architects incorporated as a limited liability company in 1986, by which time Athfield had been joined by three other directors: draughtsmen Ian Dickson and Graeme Boucher, and accountant Bernadette Robb, who had started as the office typist and then completed her accounting degree part-time.

Athfield, then, was not as "crazed"²⁰ as his more hard-core hippie counterparts. He actively pursued opportunities to advance himself and his firm. When asked in a 1986 interview how radical he had been, he replied: "I don't think I am that radical . . . I have a reasonable amount of imagination, and I think that's a natural gift, so really I have never had any fixed ideas about how one should conduct their life I suppose, that's about it."²¹

Mature Work and the Accolades

Since the late 1980s, Athfield Architects have completed numerous nationally significant public and institutional projects, from Wellington's Civic Square and Public Library (1987-91) to campus buildings (for schools, polytechnics and universities), galleries and museums, cultural and community centres, medium- and high-density housing, local authority offices and urban design projects. Recent jobs include the conservation of Government House (2006-11) and a new high-rise for the Government Communications and Securities Bureau (2005-11), both in Wellington.

The completion of such major projects implies responsibility and respectability—even conformity—as do the accolades that Athfield

18. Athfield in Sam Neill (dir.), *Architect Athfield* (Auckland: New Zealand National Film Unit, 1977; New Zealand Television Archive, 1997).

19. See "New Zealand in America: Lectures 'Up From Down Under,' Re-Presented by Athfield, Thompson, Walker, Blair," *New Zealand Architect*, no. 1 (1987), 13-29; and Jill Malcolm, "Up From Down Under: Four New Zealand Architects in Perspective," *Home and Building* (June 1986), 50-51.

20. This is the word used by Kelzt in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, 60.

21. Ian Athfield in "Ian Athfield: Interviewed by Peter Kerr and David Greig," unreferenced newspaper article from 1986. Copy in Scrap File for 1986, Athfield Architects Ltd Library, Wellington.

22. "Dr Who?", *Cross Section: NZIA News* (June 2000).

23. "Power List," *New Zealand Listener* (25 November 2006), 32.

24. "Awards 2008/2009," *Cross Section: NZIA News* (June 2008), 6.

25. See Designers Institute of New Zealand, "New Zealand's Best: Black Pin Winners," www.bestawards.co.nz/black-pin/ (accessed April 11 2013).

26. Pers. comm. Ian Athfield to Julia Gatley, May 2012.

27. Heath and Potter, *The Rebel Sell*, 5.

earned in the same period. These include public recognitions (a New Zealand Commemorative Medal for services to the country and Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit); academic recognitions (he is a Distinguished Alumnus of the University of Auckland and has an Honorary Doctorate of Literature from Victoria University of Wellington);²² and professional recognitions (he is a past president of the NZIA and a recipient of its Gold Medal). In 2006, the *New Zealand Listener* identified him as one of the "50 most influential New Zealanders,"²³ and he was appointed New Zealand's first Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) architect; in 2008, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognised him as an Honorary Fellow;²⁴ in 2010, the NZIA appointed him Architectural Ambassador to earthquake-damaged Christchurch; and in 2012, the Designers Institute of New Zealand awarded him its Black Pin, its highest award for service to design.²⁵

Athfield is undeniably one of the elder statesmen of New Zealand architecture. It is a long way from the ingenuity of the early work to prestigious projects like Government House and the Government Communications and Security Bureau Building. No-one is more surprised by this level of success than Athfield himself. "We never imagined that we'd end up doing this kind of work," he freely admits.²⁶ Such commissions have been earned through hard work, astonishing buildings and Athfield's public persona, friendships and connections: he is a people person. He is seen as a leader of the firm but also, more widely, a leader of the profession. Others appreciate his design ability and admire his lateral thinking as well as his willingness to speak his mind, nearly always with wit, humour, personal—sometimes intimate—anecdotes, and entertaining side-swipes at individuals who disagree with him: of late, traffic engineers and "the heritage huggers."

Recent literature on American hippiedom suggests that there is nothing unusual about hippies going on to have successful careers. For example, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, in their 2005 book, *The Rebel Sell*, argue that the 1960s hippies were so successful that they became the yuppies of the 1980s. To become successful was not to "sell out," for the reason that the 1960s counterculture "was, from its very inception, intensely entrepreneurial."²⁷ Love beads, Birkenstocks and VW Beetles were some of its symbols. They were also commodities from which huge profits were made, only to be rejected by the next wave of counterculture (punks), who bought a new array of symbols/commodities



by which to declare their difference from those who had gone before them. Successive countercultures have all stimulated the economy.

Similarly, David Brooks, in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), suggests that with the increasing wealth of the hippies over time, the former binaries such as square and hip, classic and romantic, and technological and humanistic, ultimately merged to produce Bobos—the Bohemian bourgeoisie—the former rebels gone educated, successful and powerful, particularly in the creative industries.²⁸

28. David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How they Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Athfield's trajectory from hippie rebel to elder statesman is consistent with these patterns of career development, even if the use of the words "yuppies" and "bourgeoisie" respectively to describe the phenomenon would make him cringe. He shares affinity with early clients who have also enjoyed successful careers, giving rise to repeat commissions. For example, the Cardiffs and the Frasers are among those who commissioned radical Athfield houses in the 1960s and 70s, and mature, more spacious—more expensive—second Athfield houses in the 1990s or 2000s. John and Wendy Buck fall into this category too, but differ in that Athfield designed their second house as early as 1980 and their subsequent commissions have been for winery buildings rather than houses.

Alternative Practice in the 2000s?

Even though Athfield Architects now have establishment clients, Athfield still, as noted in the introduction to this paper, considers himself to be an "alternative . . . rather than a mainstream practitioner."²⁹ He has continued to flip the bird at authority, and still delights in critiquing local authority planning systems and other kinds of bureaucracy. He admits to having done much of the building work at the Athfield House and Office in Wellington without first obtaining local authority consent. He uses a recent experience of trying to obtain a consent to build a laundry at Awaroa to demonstrate bureaucracy-gone-mad. He continues to mock norms of dress. The only suit many people have ever seen him in, pulled out for many a formal occasion, is a 1970s throwback that is in obvious contrast to the designer labels favoured by so many architects and people in power. Similarly, when it comes to cars, there is no Saab or Audi in the Athfield garage, but rather a tiny Smart car, with Athfield using his vehicle to promote the

29. Athfield quoted in Clifford, "Leading from the Top," 8.

30. In *The Rebel Sell*, Heath and Potter talk at length about consumerism, including competitive consumption, particularly in the areas of shoes—and by association, clothing—and cars. See Heath and Potter, *The Rebel Sell*, 4, 5, 117, 120, 127-31.

31. Lee Stickells, “Other Australian Architecture: Excavating Alternative Practices of the 1960s and 1970s,” in *Fabulation: Proceedings of the 29th Annual SAHANZ Conference*, ed. Stuart King, Anu Chatterjee and Stephen Loo (Launceston: SAHANZ, 2012), 1052-69.

need for reduced energy consumption.³⁰ And the house at Awaroa is still off the grid, utilising a wetback, photovoltaic panels, gas tanks and a generator.

Rather than concentrating on Athfield the individual, however, this section shifts the focus beyond him to consider the ways in which the attitudes and practices of early Athfield Architects might still be embedded in the firm’s culture, priorities and modus operandi, remembering that it now numbers close to 50 people, with a main office in Wellington and smaller offices in Christchurch and Auckland. The section is mindful of the categories by which I analysed the late 1960s and 1970s work in *Athfield Architects* and of Lee Stickells’ emphasis, in his 2012 paper, “Other Australian Architecture,” on environmental sustainability, social responsibility, community engagement and collaborative practice.³¹

Some of the earlier themes are no longer relevant, such as the layering of historical references, which was of its time and was mainstreamed by postmodern architecture’s embrace of pastiche. With large scale projects for public and institutional clients, non-compliance with regulations is not possible: it would likely have serious legal consequences. Self-building is not an option either, except in the smallest domestic and community projects. Even the issue of energy efficiency and environmentally sustainable design—apparent in the work of Athfield Architects since the 1970s—is increasingly an expected norm for any architecture practice rather than a signifier of difference from the mainstream. That said, Athfield Architects retain an interest in alternative technologies. In 2012, for example, they volunteered to participate in a composting toilet trial. The system was installed at the Athfield Architects office in Amritsar Street and Nick Mouat, one of the associates, is monitoring and reporting on its use.

This last point is consistent with the main findings of this paper: that the ways in which Athfield Architects remain counterculture today are focused on their Amritsar Street premises rather than on their design approaches or outputs, or their handling of regulatory processes.

Athfield designed Amritsar Street as his and Clare’s home from 1965. It doubled as the Athfield Architects office from its formation in 1968. Now known as the Athfield House and Office, it remains both family home and the biggest of the three Athfield Architects offices. The building grew as the office grew, now



combining numerous small wings and pavilions, linked by staircases, rooftop terraces and courtyards, all intended to open up possibilities for unplanned social encounters. The format forces building users to go outside at regular intervals and thus to engage with the elements, made more intense by the extremes of the Wellington weather. Wind and rain can also be experienced on the daily 300-step climb up from the car-park (onsite parking at the top of the hill is limited) and on the bush-lined cycle-way (a shower is provided in the office).

Athfield identifies this as probably his most important building, because it best demonstrates his challenge to suburbia.³² He firmly believes that suburbia has to change to both increase individual privacy and enhance the sense of neighbourhood and community for all. Enhancing community requires architects to look beyond individual buildings to address context, settlement patterns and the spaces between neighbouring buildings.³³ He would like to see the Athfield House and Office twice the size and three or four times as complex, to demonstrate this challenge more overtly.

These premises are a key point of difference for the firm. The building is a highly visible and well-known landmark, one that captures the public imagination and stimulates speculation. Is it a commune? Or is it some weird cult? Taxi drivers are guilty of spreading such myths, even though there are plenty of equally evocative truths: much of the complex has been built without permits; the lookout tower bears the holes of bullets fired by an anguished neighbour; Athfield almost killed himself on the site while building, falling one floor and landing on a reinforcing bar; and there are now some 25 people living there and 40 working there. The place is a public representation of long-standing battles against neighbours and a local authority, yet ironically it is one which that same authority now recognises for its heritage value.³⁴

Beyond their unique office environment, Athfield Architects have developed an office structure that is unusual in New Zealand architecture. The firm's prospectus explains that the structure "aims to reinforce our fundamental beliefs in the value of community, collaboration and teamwork."³⁵ The structure comprises directors, associates and shareholders. The positions of associate and shareholder are both by invitation. An offer of shares usually comes after an employee has been with the firm for twelve months, and includes the payment of dividends. Thus the structure is premised on democracy and a personal investment in the firm for all.

32. Ian Athfield interviewed by Tony van Raat in "Gold Medalist: Ian Athfield; Interview by Tony van Raat," *Architecture New Zealand* 3 (May 2004), 82.

33. Ian Athfield interviewed in "20 Years of Architecture NZ: 5 Portraits," *Architecture New Zealand* 6 (November 2007), 52.

34. "Athfield's Organic House Gets WCC Recognition," *Evening Post*, August 28, 1995, 3. See also Athfield interviewed by Joseph Romanos, "Ian Athfield: The Rebel Architect," *Wellingtonian*, June 25, 2009, 12.

35. Athfield Architects Ltd Company Profile, 2011.

Under this structure, John Hardwick-Smith joined Athfield and Ian Dickson as the third director in 2000 (replacing Graeme Boucher and Bernadette Robb, whose departure had necessitated the restructuring), followed by Jeremy Perrott in 2003, and Zac Athfield and Trevor Watt in 2008. The directors form teams or workgroups to work on individual projects or groups of projects. Each workgroup has flexible membership depending upon the overall office workload at any one point in time. In the Wellington office, each of the workgroups has dedicated space within Amritsar Street's semi-detached pavilions. Thus the office structure and the spatial environment complement each other.

The extent of their public, institutional and commercial work enables Athfield Architects to undertake some considerably smaller projects for low-income community groups such as Bats Theatre, knowing that profit is unlikely. Like a community group, the office is also viewed as a collective. Various mechanisms are in place to ensure social interaction and a sense of community within it. There is regular commuting between Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, while in the Wellington office, with its multiple workgroups diffused throughout the Amritsar Street complex, individual staff rotate through the groups and get together regularly for coffee breaks, shared lunches and Friday night drinks and barbecues. A dog or two accompany their owners to work, contributing to a relaxed atmosphere. Beyond Amritsar Street, an Athfield Architects soccer team plays in a local league. Occasional trips to Awaroa further encourage interaction and the sense of community. Key dates are celebrated in style, such as the firm's 40th anniversary in 2008 and Athfield's 70th birthday in 2010. And in 2013, two Athfield Architects teams are raising money for Oxfam by undertaking sponsored walks.

In addition to collaboration within and between their three offices, Athfield Architects also collaborate regularly with other firms and individuals. Following Athfield's leading roles in multi-disciplinary teams for Wellington's Civic Centre and the Wellington Waterfront in the 1980s and 1990, this continues in specific collaborations, as with Vial & Bellerby on educational jobs in Christchurch;³⁶ Architectus and Ellerbe Beckett on Jade Stadium, also in Christchurch;³⁷ Architectus again on civic buildings in West Auckland;³⁸ and Wraight & Associates on various urban park and landscape projects.³⁹ Such collaborations are no longer premised on building up a track record but are now enjoyed for their own sake, to raise the design bar through discussion and

36. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 191, 196, 224, 238.

37. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 251.

38. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 263-64.

39. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 193, 246-47, 260-61, 288-89.



the cross-fertilisation of ideas. It extends to collaborations with graphic designers – in recent years Catherine Griffiths – and artists, including Simon Morris at the New Dowse in Lower Hutt and the Otago University School of Medicine in Wellington, and Paul Dibble on the New Zealand War Memorial in London.⁴⁰

40. Gatley, *Athfield Architects*, 193, 258, 274 and 277.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated counterculture themes in the work and public persona of Ian Athfield and the operations of Athfield Architects. It has shown that while Athfield's early work was consistent with the counterculture in various ways, he was not a "crazed" hippie. He saw the value in accepting and working with the system rather than rejecting it. Athfield today remains a "both-and" sort of person: both non-conformist, even something of a larrikin, and also an elder statesman of New Zealand architecture.

The paper shows that beyond Ian Athfield's beliefs and public persona, the ways in which Athfield Architects remain counterculture—or non-conformist—include the built environment of their Wellington premises, their particular office structure and recurrent initiatives to foster community.

Key among these is the Athfield House and Office in Khandallah, from which the firm has operated since its formation in 1968. The building exemplifies many of Athfield's ideas, from challenging suburbia and building regulations, to fostering community and accommodating growth and development over time. It is the stuff of urban myth, generating speculation among those who know the building but not the firm. The sense of community within the office is amplified by the building's difference from those around it, and promoted by the introduction of a shareholder structure. Smallish workgroups are housed in the building's smallish wings and pavilions, one complementing the other. The walk up 300 steps and the continual going outside to collect pages from the printer, or get coffee, or even use the toilet are part of the daily experience. It is the conclusion of this paper that even after Athfield's retirement, the firm will maintain a counterculture edge for as long as it operates from the Athfield House and Office.