

# COMPRESSION MEMBERS

Curated by **James Hope**, Dunedin Public Art Gallery 2018 Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa Curatorial Intern of Contemporary Art.  
New works by **Amy Unkovich**

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Based in Auckland, **Amy Unkovich** holds an MFA from Elam (2013) and has been exhibiting regularly since 2012. Working primarily with materials and aesthetics associated with construction and architecture, Unkovich creates sculptural objects and site specific installations for interior spaces. Her works often utilise colour, tactility and pattern.

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## TWO BUILDINGS

The Italian architect Luigi Boldini arrived in Dunedin aboard the *Wild Deer* on 20 January 1875 with his two sons Gualterio and Alfredo.<sup>1</sup> Remaining here for thirteen years and anglicising his name to Louis, he designed several significant public buildings in the city, as well as an unknown number of private commissions. Of his contributions to the built environment in Dunedin, the three noteworthy buildings still extant are the Royal Albert Hotel on George Street (1880), the Grand Hotel (1882-1883), and the Parkside Hotel, South Road (1883).<sup>2</sup> Despite the relatively brief period of his residence, he was decidedly one of Dunedin's most significant architects.

Of those still standing, the five-storeyed Grand Hotel, now known as the Southern Cross, on the prominent north corner of High and Princes Streets, is the most impressive. It was said to be 'undoubtedly the biggest venture of its kind that has hitherto been undertaken in the Colony.'<sup>3</sup> Faced in Oamaru Stone, it featured ornate carving on the façade and a concrete and iron frame for enhanced fire protection. Its continental European influences characterised it as distinct in the Exchange area of Dunedin, a city where Scottish and English architects prevailed. However, it was the now-demolished building commissioned by insurance provider, Australian Mutual Provident (A.M.P.) Society, further up Princes Street, on the south corner of Dowling Street, that should be considered as Boldini's greatest architectural accomplishment from his short career in New Zealand.

Described as 'one of the handsomest and most substantial structures in Dunedin',<sup>4</sup> the A.M.P. Building was four-storeys tall and built in an Italian Renaissance revival style. Its scale dominated its corner site, the neighbouring two-storey buildings seeming modest by comparison. The bottom two floors were of Port Chalmers 'Bluestone' (more correctly identified as a Breccia, a conglomerate of granite, syenite, felstones, porphyry and other rock fragments)<sup>5</sup>, while the upper two were faced with Oamaru Stone. On the top floor, the windows were framed by thirty-two red granite columns topped with Corinthian capitals – one of the five major orders of classical architecture. These ran across the entire length of the building's Dowling and Princes Street façades.

Despite its acclaim, before its completion the building was the subject of criticism for its supposed extravagance, held to be a waste of money entrusted to the company by its insured customers. A meeting of A.M.P. policy-holders

was held to discuss this matter among others: 'Mr Stanford quoted a letter by Mr. King, of Sydney, with respect to the Dunedin building. There was to be a costly marble colonnade and granite front, and the building was to be 10 ft higher than the Grand Hotel.—[Laughter.] Was it not perfectly ludicrous that, while the society's business was now being carried on in two rooms, they should be provided with a building 10 ft higher than the highest building in Dunedin?'<sup>6</sup> Boldini himself was present to respond to the charges of profligate spending:

*[he] denied that the ornamental work was as costly as had been represented. He had made certain suggestions with a view of improving the aspect of the building, and the directors had assented. It was only on one side that the building would be higher than the Grand Hotel, and that was owing to the formation of the ground...To speak of the extravagance of the building—well, he could not bear the term.—[Great laughter.] In Europe the public buildings were magnificent, and the people were proud of them.<sup>7</sup>*

Louis Boldini did not remain in Dunedin. On 8 March 1888, the day after the lift in the A.M.P. Building was tested, he departed for Australia.<sup>8</sup> He settled in Maldon, Victoria, a small gold-rush era town 136 kilometres from Melbourne. He designed several notable buildings in the town, and died on 12 October 1908.<sup>9</sup> He is buried in an unmarked grave in the town's cemetery. There is no known photo in existence of Boldini, although his name has been preserved in Dunedin at the café Boldini, situated in the hotel of his design, the former Grand Hotel. It is puzzling how little is known of his life, given how admired his designs were in their time. The fame that was attained by his younger brother, the highly successful Macchiaioli painter Giovanni Boldini, did not extend to the architect residing in the Antipodes. The reason for his abrupt departure for Australia remains unknown.

Once built, the A.M.P. Building was admired for its grandeur and European influences. It stood for around eighty-one years, receiving three extensive renovations of its interior. One of these, completed in 1936, involved the upgrading of the lift and installing custom-designed furniture to align with the fitout's overall design. By the late sixties it was clear that the aging building was not suitable for the requirements of modern office culture and so the decision was made to demolish it. This took longer than expected, as it was revealed that Boldini had integrated steel reinforcing within its structure. This was an innovative decision, and unusual for its time.<sup>10</sup>

Several incidents occurred during the demolition; demolished material from the building toppled the wrong way and fell through the roof of the adjoining Princes Street building housing a music studio, destroying a valuable grand piano.<sup>11</sup> The partially demolished building also caught fire, caused by embers produced from a cutting torch. This resulted in the adjacent Commercial Bank of Australia receiving a singed roof and the Para Rubber Company building on Princes Street left with water-damaged goods.<sup>12</sup>

The A.M.P. Society commissioned the Dunedin architects Mason & Wales to design the company a new building to be built on the same site. During the sixties there was a desire to modernise, and the clean lines and up-to-the-minute construction methods of the latest modernist buildings were the subject of much attention. Work started on the structure in 1969 and the new A.M.P. Building was officially opened on 9 October 1970. Five-storeys high, the exterior was constructed of pre-cast concrete panels and took twenty months to complete. Kairuru marble, quarried in Nelson, was used on the ground floor,<sup>13</sup> and it was intended that the Society's logo – embodied in the statuary group that adorned the top of the 1888 building – be recreated in fibreglass, in a modernist interpretation of the original, for the new building.<sup>14</sup> An Otago Daily Times feature published on the day of the opening mentioned the previous building had undergone extensive renovations to accommodate the A.M.P. Society's growth. The new building's interior, it said, had an atmosphere of space and light. It also asked the question, 'what happened to Boldini?' concluding that his fate 'very much remains a mystery.'<sup>15</sup> Today, A.M.P. no longer has a regional branch in Dunedin and the building is now known as 'Rodgers House'.

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One feature of the façade that was recovered from the demolished A.M.P. Building were the red granite columns, which are held in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's collection and form part of the current exhibition *Compression Members*. The other element of the exhibition is a series of concrete panels by contemporary artist Amy Unkovich, that take aesthetic cues from the original columns, as well as from the former and current buildings. The exhibition addresses an aspect of Dunedin's loss, in the late 1960s, of one of the city's most distinctive buildings. While acknowledging this aspect of

vanished history, *Compression Members* seeks to create a space where the columns' ambiguous status in the Gallery's collection becomes an opportunity to exhibit them as art objects, while acknowledging their previous life as architectural features. As building fragments, the columns are an unusual set of objects within the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's collection and their apparent incongruity prompted an investigation into how they happened to become part of it. What was revealed was the story of Boldini, of the A.M.P. Building and the building that currently stands on the former's site, as a specific instance of Dunedin's civic history; one that the Gallery itself now plays a role in.

The columns are comprised of polished red granite, most likely quarried at Peterhead near Aberdeen in Scotland.<sup>16</sup> The Corinthian capitals they sported while attached to the building were probably comprised of Oamaru Stone, along with the rest of the top floor façade. At some stage these capitals were removed. Of the thirty-two original columns, sixteen are in the Gallery's possession and a further six are in storage at Larnach Castle. It is unknown where the remaining columns are located, or if they still exist. Before the 1888 building was demolished, there was speculation about how the columns would be utilised after their removal. The Otago Daily Times reported that they would be put into storage until a use was decided for them. Mr. G. G. Henderson, the superintendent of reserves, had been in discussion with the architect of the new building and stated that they would be useful to the city, either in the Botanic Gardens or another park.<sup>17</sup>

Correspondence between the then-director of the Gallery Charlton Edgar and A.M.P. Regional Manager C. A. Holloway reveals that the Gallery requested, and were offered, the columns on the proviso that all costs of their transportation and storage were incurred by the Art Gallery Society after the 31 March 1969. The meeting minutes of the Society on Thursday 27 March 1969 records that the A.M.P. Society notified the Gallery that they had given eighteen columns to them. It is unclear what happened to the extra two columns. Further correspondence between Edgar and Holloway shows that the intention was for the columns to be integrated into an outdoor sculpture court, that was to take place with the expansion of the Gallery through the construction of two new buildings at its former location at Logan Park. Why this was not realised has not been uncovered.

The research informing the curatorial direction of *Compression Members* involved visiting and searching through several archives spread over a range of institutions. The four historic images bring this research process into the exhibition, while the formal conversation between the granite columns and Unkovich's installation reactivates Boldini's building within a contemporary art context. Unkovich uses architectural fabrication techniques to play on both the architectonic and the sculptural elements of the columns and the former as well as the current building. In a previous exhibition, *Irrational Interior*, it was suggested that Unkovich's work could have chronicled 'the whole arc of building history...from primitive huts, through to modernism via classical columns.'<sup>18</sup> Here, it is a truncated and very specific building history that is being presented, and a juxtaposition of two very different architectural styles.

Unkovich's sculptural practice considers architectural details and surfaces, with a focus on the material qualities of the built environment in which she exhibits. She has used the technique of sand casting to produce eight panels, mostly of the same dimensions as the columns, and set within these, aggregate pieces of marble and granite. These materials reference those used in the original A.M.P. Building – marble for the Carrara marble pilasters and statuary that sat atop it and granite for the granite of the columns themselves. Shades of pink are derived from the Peterhead granite of the columns. At the same time, her works reference the pre-fabricated concrete panels that adorn Mason & Wales' building. The aggregate set into Unkovich's works hint at the pebble-dash surface that can be observed on the building's exterior.

In Hal Foster's influential essay 'An Archival Impulse' he describes a turn in contemporary art towards investigating archives and mining them for material in the production of new artworks. He writes, 'In the first instance, archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text, and favor the installation format as they do so.'<sup>19</sup> *Compression Members* utilises aspects of the archive and attempts to uncover a linear history of the columns from the time they became detached from their building of origin. Unkovich's practice, takes the archival material and the columns themselves and abstracts them; creating objects that contain aspects of the built history under investigation, both absent and in view.

The gallery space becomes a container that, for a time, houses disparate pieces of information collected through the research. The gallery is therefore a speculative space where both buildings could exist simultaneously; where one building did not have to replace the other. Elements of both are interwoven with one another, to create a hybrid setting that takes both Renaissance revival classicism and mid-century modernist architecture as reference points. *Compression Members* also provides an opportunity to consider treatments of the façades of two different buildings in a gallery context. Here the building's

façade is turned inward, the outside of the building is brought indoors, creating an interior space that takes its cues from both the original and later building, 'compressed' into a single area.

The weight and materiality of the columns can be experienced directly, non-mediated and viewed from multiple positions. Presented in a gallery context, they can be appraised as art works independently, beyond their status as architectural fragments. Indeed, stripped of their capitals they could resemble the raw material of a minimalist sculpture, which raises additional considerations in their synergy with Unkovich's works. Foster asserts, in relation to art addressing the archival, that 'although the contents of this art are hardly indiscriminate, they remain indeterminant like the contents of any archive, and often they are presented in this fashion – as so many promissory notes for further elaboration or enigmatic prompts for future scenarios.'<sup>20</sup> It is hoped that this exhibition may engender the greater likelihood that more material will be uncovered that relates to this aspect of Dunedin's urban history, especially in regards to the elusive architect that, considering his contribution to the city's heritage, not nearly enough is known about.

— JAMES HOPE

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1. David Murray, 'Louis Boldini, architect', *Built in Dunedin*, 13 June 2013. Accessed 7 April 2018 from <https://builtindunedin.com/2013/06/13/louis-boldini-architect/>

2. Ibid

3. 'THE GRAND HOTEL', *Otago Witness*, Issue 1998, 6 October 1883. Accessed 17 September 2018 from Papers Past, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/OW18831006.2.51>

4. 'AUSTRALIAN MUTUAL PROVIDENT SOCIETY'. *Evening Star*, issue 7689, 13 August 1888. Accessed 17 August 2018 from Papers Past <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ESD18880813.2.21>

5. Ian Church, *What Mean These Stones: The Story of the Port Chalmers Quarries and Building Stones* (Port Chalmers Early Settlers and Historical Society in conjunction with the Port Chalmers and District Lions Club, 2001), pp. 2-3.

6. 'A.M.P. SOCIETY', *Evening Star*, Issue 7190, 19 April 1887. Accessed 18 September 2018 from Papers Past <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ESD18870419.2.21>

7. Ibid

8. Murray, op. cit.

9. Boldini had suffered from kidney troubles for more than forty years and died following complications from chronic cystitis and uraemia. 'OBITUARY', *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 14 October 1908. Accessed 28 September 2018 from <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/89418799?>

10. Murray, op. cit.

11. 'Rubble Smashes Into Music Studio', *Otago Daily Times*, 4 February 1969.

12. 'Wrecked Offices Swept By Fire', *Otago Daily Times*, 22 January 1969.

13. 'Another Fine Building In Heart Of City', *Otago Daily Times*, 9 October 1970.

14. 'A.M.P. Building Opened By Mayor', *Otago Daily Times*, 10 October 1970.

15. 'What Happened To Boldini?', *Otago Daily Times*, 9 October 1970.

16. Peter Entwistle, 'Boldini, Louis', Accession File, December 1995.

17. 'Valuable Pillars May Go To Gardens', *Otago Daily Times*, 18 January 1969.

18. Amy Weng, 'Architectural Intervention', *EyeContact*, 1 December 2014. Accessed 10 October 2018.

19. Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110, Fall 2004, pp.3-22. p.4.

20. Ibid. p.5.

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