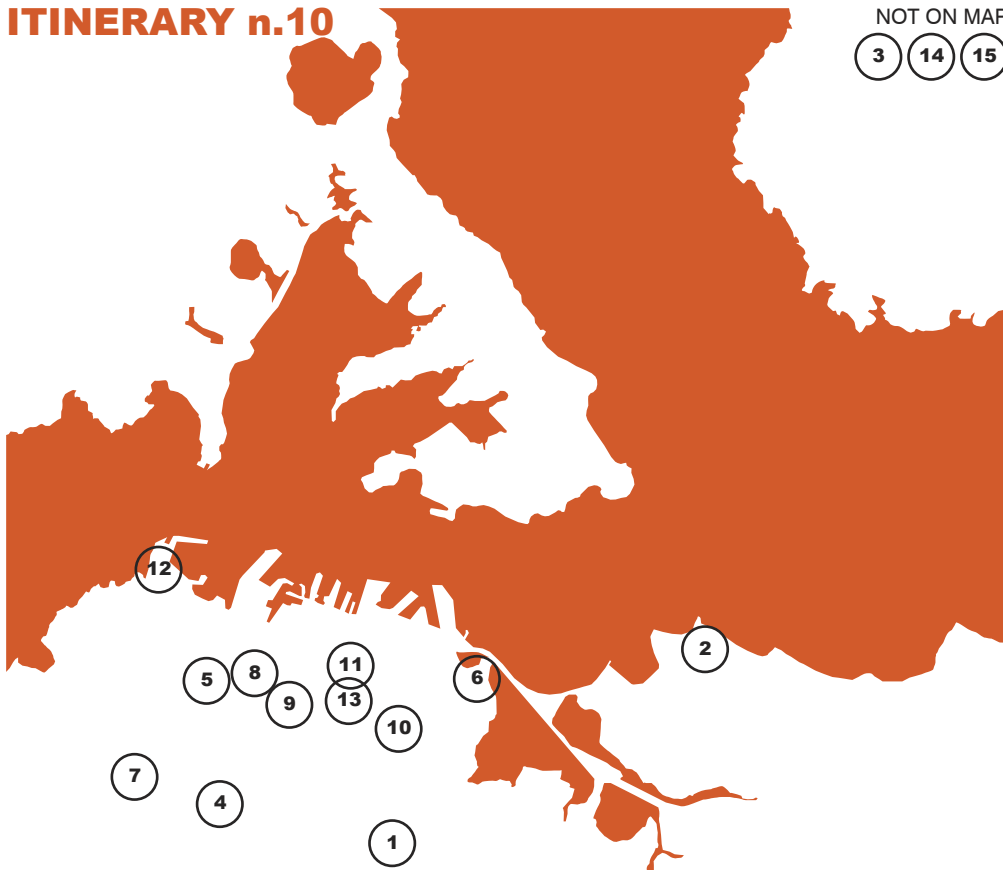


## ITINERARY n.10



NOT ON MAP  
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Photo: Firth Photography

With the pending demolition of the old Auckland City Council Workshops on Nelson Street, Auckland is about to lose another of Donner's NZIA Silver Medal-winning landmarks. We present this itinerary, penned by Victoria University of Wellington's Robin Skinner in recognition of Donner's contribution to the city.

## Tibor Donner 1: Public Buildings

When T. K. Donner applied for the position of Chief Architect to the Auckland City Council (ACC) in 1945, he was adjudged outstanding. He was one of the leading architecture students of his cohort, had won the Savage Memorial competition and had a compilation of references that would be impressive after a lifetime's work, let alone a dozen years. During WWII, he had speedily designed an efficient hospital at Avondale that had recently been converted into the country's most modern secondary school. He was already seen as an architect of great ability.

Over the next twenty years, he fulfilled that promise establishing, arguably, the leading office in the country. For many architecture graduates, there was no place that they would rather have worked. The Chief Architect's projects were inevitably modern and innovative, which befitted New Zealand's most cosmopolitan city. The drive and unprecedented growth that saw the Auckland harbour bridged also motivated the most ambitious civic centre planning in the country. While Donner's fourth civic centre scheme was not completed as originally envisaged, the current development of the City Administration Building, the Aotea Centre, Aotea Square and the underground car park largely conform to his scheme from the early 1950s.

It is not surprising that his work was so impressive. As a student in Sibiu, Romania, he showed great determination to be an architect. His anglophile father convinced him that New Zealand offered the possibility of architectural education. (This was an option that was denied him in a country that then discriminated against Hungarians). In New Zealand, his positions with the Public Works Department (PWD) and the ACC were not without controversy. As a foreigner with a German surname and showing little enthusiasm for WWII, he was not assigned defence work. His appointment in the ACC was also beset with controversy. Initially the NZIA overtly objected that the advertised salary was too low and that the appointee would report to the City Engineer. (No doubt established practitioners were also concerned that previously lucrative projects would be executed in-house.) Donner, with characteristic independence of mind, defied their direction not to apply for the position.

His time as Chief Architect to the ACC had its frustrations. Many projects were stalled by political and funding pressures; however, Donner's priority remained the architectural project. He kept an active interest in developments abroad, and he undertook many design projects personally. In addition, he discreetly maintained a lively private practice in his out-of-work hours. He was enthusiastic for new technology, and had a sharp aesthetic sense and a strong concern for quality of finish. He aimed to create state-of-the-art buildings, and his 1956 fact finding tour of North America, Mexico and Europe was undertaken to ensure that Auckland would have a civic centre worthy of the city's aspiration.

Despite his mission to create an up-to-date urban environment, Donner was no arch modernist. At times, his work included flights of fancy more aligned to the exuberance of some South American moderns, and it is here that his projects become most intriguing. The curved canopy entrance to the Administration Building; its balconies that mask the toilet windows; and the much-celebrated indulgence of Ellen Melville Hall continue to provoke enthusiastic discussion. Auckland is sprinkled with his life's work, which attests his vision and concern for quality design and construction. It is to his credit that over forty years later his legacy is championed and that his work still stimulates interest and rewarding debate. *Robin Skinner*

## Biography:

Tibor Karl (Karoly) Donner was born in 1907 in the town of Szabadka in the Austro-Hungarian state (now Subotica, Serbia). Fleeing post-WWI persecution in Romania, the family immigrated to New Zealand in 1927 where Tibor began studies at Auckland University College. He was a prize-winning student (Brick Manufacturers' Prize 1930, 1931; BArch 1933). After working for several leading Auckland firms, he practiced on his own in the mid-1930s. Through 1937-45, he took employment with the PWD working on Post Office projects and the design of Avondale Military Hospital. Through 1946-67, he held the position of Chief Architect of the Auckland City Council. In the next two decades, he built up the most advanced practice in the city (NZIA Silver Medal 1956, Gold Medal 1957). Upon retirement, his outstanding achievement was the then recently completed City Administration Building. He later undertook projects for the Kindergarten Association. Throughout his working life, including his years at the PWD and ACC, he undertook a series of impressive private commissions. He died in Auckland in 1993.

1

1937

Newmarket Post Office  
180 Broadway, Newmarket



Donner's refurbishment of the Newmarket Post Office is typical of the many schemes for the NZPO that he produced at the PWD under the direction of the Auckland District Architect, Eric Price. In this fifth scheme for refurbishment, Donner remodeled an earlier Edwardian building, giving it a stripped classical façade and notably extending the ground floor to the rear to create a roof garden opening from the postmaster's upstairs flat. The ground floor windows were new, while the rhythm of the upstairs fenestration was clearly from the earlier age. His moderne detailing was subdued. Donner's work for the Post Office in the early 1940s drew more overtly from American sources. The building was demolished in 1999.

2

1941

Savage Memorial  
Hapimana St., Bastion Point



Following the death of the Prime Minister, M.J. Savage, Donner and Antony Bartlett won a nationwide competition for his memorial. They had been students together at university and Donner's exceptional presentation skills are clearly evident in their submission. Their design included an 18m-high stone pylon with a statue of a worker facing inland as well as reflecting pools, hedges and flower beds. This design was modified so that a fluted concrete column surmounted by a stainless steel brazier replaced the pylon and statue. Sculptor Richard Gross and architect Horace Massey were consulted on the final design, which was built by Fletchers.

3

1943

Avondale Military Hospital  
(Avondale College)  
47 Victor Street, Avondale



With the expectation that the war in the Pacific would progress further south, this scheme for a military hospital was hastily produced following a US Navy request. Donner designed a facility that could be converted for use as a secondary school after the war. Permanent, well-lit, wooden structures with brick veneer were interspersed with temporary structures. Urgency removed red tape, with Donner taking responsibility for the design and job supervision. Following contemporary school design in the USA, it was unlike any other school in NZ before or since. As things progressed, the expected casualties did not eventuate. When the school was opened in 1945 it was described as the "best school group in New Zealand". The school has been largely rebuilt following a disastrous fire in 1990. See 'From American hospital to school,' *Building Progress*, Mar 1945.

4

1947

Khyber Pump Station  
4 Mt. Eden Road, Grafton

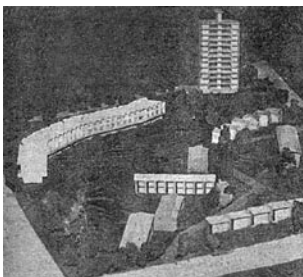


Donner's first substantial design for the ACC was this reinforced concrete pump station designed to draw water from the Hunua main supply to the Mt. Eden reservoir. Completed early in 1948, the building's incised v-cut painted plaster finish exhibits the architect's characteristic precise and deliberate detailing. These concerns are further revealed in the tapering exterior hoods (now sawn off), sills, doorways, windows, stairways, glazed internal screens, handrails and built-in ply furniture. With this utilitarian structure, Donner was free to develop a functional modern solution that may not have been acceptable in other civic locations. It remains his most purely unaffected modernist work.

5

1951

ACC Housing Development  
Freemans Bay



Although Donner does not appear to have been heavily involved with their design, as chief architect he was ultimately responsible for the council flats of the 1950s and 1960s. He oversaw the projects, engaging with other parts of council and the politicians. In the office, much of the work was undertaken by Cam McClean and Sandy Mill. His office produced further designs including: flats in Hope St (1953); Anglesea St (1954); Phillips St (1960-62); pensioner flats in Parnell (1953); Avon St, Parnell (1957); Exminster St (1961-62); Elstree Ave (1963); Surrey Cres (1963); Madelaine Ave (1964); Highbury St (1964-67); Wood and Ryle St (1966). In some later schemes, the ACC adopted the MoW "star flat" design.

6

1951-54

Parnell Baths  
Judges Bay Road, Judges Bay



Working to achieve maximum pool area while maintaining 24 hour access across the site from the sea to Parnell, the final design utilized a 2.1m wide cantilevered concourse that funneled swimmers through the changing rooms to the pool area. This elegant solution owes much to the AA trained architect, Ralph Wilkinson, who was then working in Donner's office. Ewen Waincott was site architect. In 1957, James Turkington's mural designs were installed using a technique of embedding coloured glass in plaster panels that Donner developed after his 1956 visit to Mexico City. Marianne Riley argues that the mural was in part stimulated by Matisse's *The Swimming Pool* (1952) which Donner may have seen that year. The complex won an NZIA Gold Medal in 1957. See *Home & Building* June 1950.

7

1953-57

Vehicle Testing Station  
285 Great North Rd., Grey Lynn



This functional design was largely the work of George Kenny in Donner's office. Two contiguous buildings were designed to process light and heavy vehicles in a streamlined, linear process. Great care was exercised to reduce disruption to main road traffic and to the urban setting. The steel-framed design won the NZIA Silver Medal in 1956, at which time Donner publicly acknowledged Kenny's significant contribution. Now demolished. See *Home & Building* April 1957.

9

1954-60

Administration Building  
Greys Avenue, City



After WWII several civic schemes were developed, and the fourth scheme (1951) included a sketch perspective of this elegant building. Design commenced in 1954 with subsequent work remaining true to the initial proposal. In 1956 Donner and ACC engineer, Vern Coleman, undertook a research tour abroad. They attended the first World Conference on Earthquake Engineering and met with the Californian structural consultant, John A. Blume. He advised using a steel frame with bolted moment connectors rather than welded diagonal braces. This steel frame and the development of technologies locally - such as aluminium extrusions, neoprene window seals and ceramic acoustic tiles - were novel and extended the range of architectural technologies in New Zealand in the 1960s (the building was completed in 1966).

Photo: ACC Photographer

8

c1957-65

ACC Workshops  
Cnr Nelson & Wellesley Sts,  
City

Drawing from the work of Albert Kahn, this functional design was also the work of George Kenny. (Kenny won an NZIA Bronze Award for his own house in 1960.)

10

1958

Auckland Centennial Memorial  
Domain Drive, Grafton



While it is by no means Donner's most significant work, the design of the pond, paving and the plinth for sculptor W.H. Wright's statue group is clearly a project that the architect enjoyed, undertaking the design himself. Working closely with Scarborough Brothers (the landscape contracting firm and frequent Donner collaborator), the architect enjoyed the materiality of the stone and the freedom for biomorphic exuberance that the garden setting allowed. Despite the excess of the crazy paving, the composition maintains the dignity appropriate to the triumvirate of the Watson bequest.

11

1959-61

Pioneer Women's & Ellen  
Melville Memorial Hall  
Freyberg Place, City



Initiated to honour a former city councillor, this was very much Donner's project. He designed the raised hall (projecting like the podium of the Lever building) to provide a large meeting hall without compromising circulation in the then open space below. The design is materially rich and has many champions. Its cradling, quartz-encrusted reinforced concrete frames may owe something to Mies' Crown Hall that Donner had visited in 1956; it seems unlikely, however, that the project would have appealed to modernist purists. The hall with its undulating slatted ceiling (a homage to Aalto's Viipuri Library) is one of the most impressive modernist interiors in the city.

12

1960-61

Point Erin Baths  
94 Shelly Beach Rd, Herne Bay



Men's changing rooms

This open air complex includes an irregularly shaped main pool with transition to a shallow end, a diving pool, a toddlers pool and a play area. It was designed by a team of architects headed by Ewen Wainscott, with significant input from Barry Robertson. It replaced the old Shelly Beach Baths which were removed to make way for the approach to the harbour bridge. Unlike an earlier unbuilt scheme for public baths at Coyle Park in Point Chevalier, this scheme made it off the drawing board and was completed in 1962.

13

1961-64

Parking Building  
Cnr Victoria and High Sts, City



While travelling through North America in 1956 Donner and ACC engineer, Vern Coleman, paid special attention to parking buildings. The original design for this building was amended after objections were raised that the entry ramp encroached upon Albert Park. It was designed by Bill Bartlett. Donner's office also designed parking buildings for Britomart (des. Ben Mason, 1952), Day St., Newton (1959), Albert St. (des. Bill Gillespie, 1962), and planned underground parking for the Civic Centre scheme. See *Home & Building* March 1965.



Town Hall furniture, 1949

14

1966

Glen Innes Public Library  
100 Line Road, Glen Innes



Several schemes for this library were designed through 1950-64 by R.A.E. Gibson, Donner and J.M. McKay. Each scheme shows a progressive reduction in number of floors and area. The final design with its regular nine square grid generator is discernible in the earlier schemes, as is the final raised square ceiling section which provides clerestory lighting to the library's centre. Louvres and tinted glass improved thermal performance on the north and eastern faces. The design was technologically innovative with a structure of steel, precast panels and exposed reinforced concrete. The roof of metal strips was coated with sound absorbent material to improve acoustic performance.

15

1970

Green Bay Kindergarten  
10 La Rosa Street, Green Bay



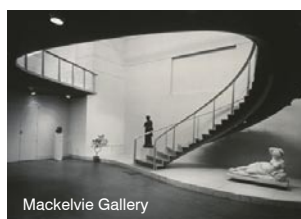
In retirement, Donner designed this project for the Kindergarten Association. His modest design utilized a simple ridged structure with hipped rafters, a centrally placed clerestory, open plan rooms and a verandah. The entrance incorporated a clinker brick feature wall. Projects were community initiated, and architects were approached personally. Donner's work must have received favourable response as he subsequently designed several other kindergartens throughout the Auckland metropolitan area including: Broadlands Kindergarten, 50 Sunnynook Rd, Sunnynook (1970), College Road Kindergarten, Northcote (1970), Mascot Ave Kindergarten, Mangere (1970), Flat Bush Kindergarten, Bairds Rd, Otara (c.1970), and a Kindergarten conversion on Seaview Rd, Mt Albert (c.1970).

## Other Addresses:

**Women's Public Toilets (1952)**  
Cnr K' Rd & Symonds St, City  
This elegant building stands just beyond the Jewish cemetery, adjacent to John Goldwater's slightly later funeral building. Donner also designed toilets for Victoria Ave, Remuera (1950-2), Heard Park, Parnell (1952) and Ponsonby (1952).



Other minor Donner works include the Town Hall furniture (1949), the M.J. Savage memorial drinking fountain in Ponsonby (1952), the Treaty of Waitangi drinking fountain in Karaka Bay (1953), the remodelling of Mackelvie Gallery (1952-3), the Auckland Town Hall's mansard roof (1951), and the Town Hall's acoustic reflector (1958).



Mackelvie Gallery

## Sources:

The photographs are by Andrew Barrie and Julia Gatley. The heritage images are courtesy of Maria Ericksen, Auckland Architecture Archive at the University of Auckland. Many thanks to Margaret Liley (née Donner) and Wendy Garvey at the Auckland University Architecture Library. References: D. Daley (ed.) *New Zealand Home and Building; souvenir edition the Newstalk 1ZB 1950s show, 1992*; Errol Haarhoff, *Architecture of Central Auckland, 2003*; Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, *40 legends of New Zealand design, 2006*; Ron Parker 'TK Donner' (obit.) *Architecture NZ* May/June 1993; Peter Shaw, *New Zealand architecture, 1991*; Robin Skinner, 'Disarticulated High Rise: the Auckland City Administration Building,' in *Habitus 2000: a sense of place, Perth, 5-9 September 2000, 2000*; Robin Skinner, 'T. K. Donner: architect' BArch Diss, Uni Auckland, 1994. On the Savage Memorial, see: Peter Shaw, 'Savage Memorial,' *Metro*, May 1994. On the Khyber Pump station, see: E. Lee-Johnson (ed.) *Arts in New Zealand Yearbook No 6, 1950, 1950*. On Matisse's influence on the Parnell Baths mural, see: Marianne Riley, 'Fatata te miti: by the sea' BArch Diss, Uni Auckland, 1994.