THE CONCRETE HOUSES OF JAMES THOMAS DOUCE

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SUMMARY

Architect James Thomas Douce practiced in Cambridge between 1910 and 1945. During his career he created a number of iconic concrete houses in and around the growing settlement. His most prolific period was in the period 1914 to 1928 when he was commissioned by a number of well-known Cambridge residents.

This paper will examine the significant architectural commissions of James Thomas Douce in Cambridge and surrounding districts. Attention will be drawn to the historic and architectural characteristics of his key concrete buildings. The New Zealand bungalow, melding aspects of contemporary American design with elements of the English bungalow, was the favoured domestic housing style during this period and the style favoured by Douce. The paper will discuss the relationships between Douce’s houses, the urban environment, those being built by other architects and the wider significance of the work.

In terms of built heritage and historical significance Douce has given the streetscape of Cambridge a series of noteworthy concrete bungalows and two major commercial structures also built in concrete in the Cambridge central business district. The first of these prominent bungalows will be 100 years old in 2014. These concrete houses display Douce’s prowess and his architecture remains a prominent feature in the Cambridge urban landscape.

INTRODUCTION

In 1907 James Thomas Douce at the age of twenty five left England to live and work in Sydney, Australia.¹ There is no clear evidence but Douce almost certainly studied architecture while working in Sydney. In 1910 Douce left Australia to live in New Zealand. On his arrival in Cambridge Douce worked for George Dickinson & Company; a Funeral Directing and Cabinetmaking.

¹ Douce arrived in Freemantle on his journey to Sydney on 15 August 1907, Report of Passengers List No.12., Freemantle Shipping Records, The National Archives of Australia and Australian Shipping Records archived at the Freemantle Genealogy Society, Freemantle.
Douce started his own architectural practice and advertised his skills as an architect in the local newspaper under the heading ‘Modern Homes and Bungalows a Specialty’ in October 1911.\(^2\) His first recorded commission was in November 1911 when he designed two cottages on land behind the funeral business in Alpha Street, Cambridge.\(^3\)

**THE BUILDING INDUSTRY IN THE 1920s**

In the first two decades of the twentieth century the architecture and streetscape of Cambridge were being transformed. Cambridge had started with an early form of town planning; the advantage it had over many other New Zealand towns was that it was surveyed by the British Military using the grid as a template. The inclusion of town ‘green belts’ completed the overall structure of separating the urban from the rural and the overall development and transition from a militia outpost to the creation of a colonial settlement and the establishment of the town’s infrastructure.\(^4\) When Douce designed his first concrete house in 1914, the housing of Cambridge was quite underdeveloped. There was only a smattering of mainly wooden dwellings including a small number of cottages, villas and farm buildings in and around the town.\(^5\)

In the early stages, the Cambridge Borough Council (CBC) had no strategic vision for future growth; speculators were buying vacant land and there was little thought for how the borough might be planned. However, the one acre grid subdivision as laid out by the British Military meant that this structure remained clear as further subdivision of the lots took place. As the 1920s progressed the CBC allowed further the one acre sections to be subdivided to quarter acre lots in order to encourage housing development.\(^6\)

The use of concrete as a building material in New Zealand was becoming established by the 1920s. During this period there was a shortage of building materials and local councils lobbied government to have the import duty removed from Portland cement. There was at that time a cement shortage and the supply of cement from the South Island was governed by territorial agreements. With supply to the North Island halted temporarily, building operations in the Dominion were almost brought to a standstill.\(^7\)

At this time the Board of Trade controlled the supply of building materials and those seeking a building permit had to gain their approval. Eventually the BOT gave powers to local councils and the town clerk was given the power to grant a building permit and materials. Due to the shortage of materials many people had to put their plans on hold, however, it was reported in the Waikato that ‘one enterprising individual has secured cement and materials to erect four new houses in the borough and will shortly proceed with work’. At this time Douce was the only architect designing domestic concrete houses in Cambridge and he was the only architect who had four concrete houses being built. For Douce to complete the construction of these houses it appears he would have had access to a constant supply of cement. There is no clear evidence from whom he gained access to the building materials

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\(^2\) ‘Advertisement’ The Waikato Independent, 5 October 1911, p.2.

\(^3\) ‘Advertisement’ The Waikato Independent, 21 November 1911, p.6.

\(^4\) Byrnes stated that contours of the land were not considered by the British Military when planning the subdivision of Militia settlements and towns in New Zealand. Giselle Byrnes, Boundary Markers: land surveying and colonisation of New Zealand (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp.51-57.

\(^5\) Cambridge Borough Council Minutes, 9 September 1919, p.102. and Cambridge Borough Council Building Permit Register archived at the Cambridge Museum.

\(^6\) Cambridge Borough Council Minutes, 14 March 1922, p.95., and the grid for all its flaws gave the Cambridge streetscape definition; visually all the streets have symmetry and order. Brynes, pp.51-57.

\(^7\) ‘Cement Shortage’ The Waikato Independent, 13 March 1920, p.6.
when it was in such short supply. New Zealand experienced a mini recession in 1921-1922; by June 1922 the Portland Cement Company reduced the price of cement. Douce continued to use cement as a construction material throughout his career.8

DOUCE’S CONCRETE HOUSES IN CAMBRIDGE

A key objective of the study was to establish the historical context and the architectural merit of 15 American styled concrete bungalows designed by Douce and built in Cambridge between 1914 and 1928 (approximately 80 buildings in and around Cambridge can be attributed to Douce). The other important issue was their relationship within the urban and the rural streetscape. The study of each the houses provided the basis of the research; all were formatted to be consistent throughout and provided a thematic approach to the study. Individual studies contained pertinent information about; the architect, the builder, historical data on the land and who commissioned the construction of each dwelling. The historical investigation provided some background on the Militia subdivision of Cambridge East by the British Military. The certificates of title showed historical links between the times of militia settlement to the time of the construction of the dwellings. Examination of the tendering process and council records allowed assessment of the architectural and the construction merit. Further to this, an historical examination enabled scrutiny of the construction materials, design of the exterior and the interior and similarities between each of the bungalows.

This primary research took in examination of a diverse set of historical records, however Douce’s business and personal records were not sourced. General patterns of Cambridge’s development were pieced together using evidence from the Cambridge Museum. This includes many building tender records drawn from the local newspapers, CBC building permit records, biographies and family histories. The CBC Committee Minute records also gave insight into community issues and into the towns infrastructure and works programs. All of these resources helped to facilitate and confirm who commissioned Douce to design their houses.9

Reference to other primary sources revealed further historical data. These documents were examined to ascertain: the history of the land and ownership, Cambridge as a town in the 1920s, the developing streetscape, the architectural merit and fabric of the buildings, and the construction materials used. Certificates of title revealed the history of the land and aided the determination of the date of construction. Online survey map resources offered an opportunity to discover additional information when a survey was undertaken by an owner; this information was referenced on the certificate of titles. Each house was also subject to an on-site examination to assess the exterior and the interior design values and its architectural merit in a wider context. It was through all these sources that a picture emerged of Douce’s architectural practice and the buildings he designed. The main sources for establishing the design elements were through a thorough onsite examination and assessment of each property and an interview with the current home owners. All avenues of research developed a depiction of Douce’s professional career.10

9 Cambridge Museum Archives.
10 The Waikato Independent’s 1910-1945 archived at the Cambridge Museum and Cambridge Borough Council Minutes 1914 to 1929 archived at the Waipa District Council and Interviews with
During the 1920s Douce’s architecture began to make a mark on the urban and rural landscape of Cambridge. During this period the American bungalow was the favoured domestic housing style in New Zealand and Douce followed this style. He was one of the most important architects to practice his profession in Cambridge between 1910 and 1945. It was a period in his career where he received his most notable commissions from a number of well-known Cambridge identities.

**Figure 1: The Alexander Watt House ‘Blaigowie’**

The 15 dwellings were selected on the following basis:

a. all were constructed in concrete,
b. each building was substantial in its footprint and in the height,
c. prominence in the urban and in the rural landscapes,
d. similar design elements, and
e. the design characteristics of each dwelling.

The research also sought to establish the extent to which Douce developed a distinctive style and to evaluate the prominence of his work in the district.

Douce’s style of bungalow architecture was a reinterpretation of the American Craftsman style for New Zealand conditions using concrete as the principal material for external and internal walls. The plans for these dwellings were not standardised and each one was designed individually for their owner between 1914 and 1928. The houses were well-proportioned and designed on a rectangular or a square footprint; this was a common feature in Douce’s houses and linked the work clearly to the contemporary bungalows being built in the United States. Other design features also linked the houses to Modern design philosophies.

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Douce’s architectural style reflects his knowledge of American and English domestic architecture. Douce had worked as a carpenter in England and inferences can be drawn that he was predisposed to the English Cottage style early in his career. Some of his houses reference the influence of the English Arts and Crafts movement. However, the majority are reminiscent of American influences and in particular the craftsman bungalow. His architecture displays simplicity and solidness, and his style could be coined as ‘pick and mix’ as his houses reflect both elements of American bungalows and English designs.

The 1920s were a decade of individualism and this was reflected in the design of Douce’s concrete houses. He was at the forefront of these ideals; he designed bungalows to cater to individual client’s taste. Examination of individual case studies illustrates that he drew inspiration from American and English bungalow philosophies, principles and designs. However, Douce successfully meshed together the best of both to create a set of Craftsman bungalows that are distinctive to Cambridge.¹³

The 15 dwellings are in their own right individual, but there are many similarities that mark them as the work of one architect. Four of these houses (two urban and two rural) adhered to the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement (a common feature found in the architecture of the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright); they were designed to be low-slung and to nestle into the landscape.¹⁴ They were designed for Sam Lewis, Dr. Stapley, Alexander and Gilbert Watt. Ten dwellings are imposing structures and are almost square in design and follow the style of the American craftsman bungalows. The remaining dwelling is a combination of both types. They make important architectural contributions to the visual landscape of Cambridge and the presence of these large imposing homes amongst a relatively small number of moderate dwellings was a significant enhancement for the district.

Douce’s concrete bungalows were constructed with a rough textured stucco finish, sturdy columns, high pitched roof lines, and the extensive use of porches, which are distinctive in character. Although each dwelling is a different manifestation they all have distinct stylistic features that are recognisable as Douce’s work. They stand out as substantial, bold concrete homes in an otherwise typical urban setting.

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Concrete construction brought changes to the way domestic housing was constructed. Early CBC building permits did not always record enough information to determine if concrete structures were reinforced. The Lewis House (1914) was the first house recorded to be constructed in reinforced concrete so it was assumed that the remainder of Douce’s bungalows would have been built in the same manner. The CBC documentation indicated that concrete walls were four inches thick with reinforcing iron rods of ¼ inch. Cambridge builder William White who often advertised in conjunction with Douce reported that he could build all classes of buildings in concrete, brick and wood and all concrete construction was undertaken by ‘machinery’. It is not clear what this meant but obvious markings infer that all exterior walls were poured in situ. The walls were then finished with rough-textured stucco. In all cases interior walls were a combination of either solid concrete or battens with lath-plaster applied between the spaces.\textsuperscript{15}

The exterior and interior design and finishes vary with each dwelling but some features are common to each house. They were all finished with a heavy rough textured stucco cement plaster, tall chimneys, exposed rafter ends and gable brackets. Other common exterior features are casement windows, concrete window sills, and porch columns in either wood or concrete. Facade porches come in varying forms. Two run the length of the house, 10 occupy a corner section of the dwelling and three are an extension of the roofline. Porch columns and capitals also vary in design from the solid and chunky to a simple wooden pier. However, porches are a major element in all.

The interiors were all designed with well-proportioned rooms and a layout for ease of movement within the house. The majority had fancy plastered cornice or ceiling roses. All have batten and board ceilings and Douce has used the space under the roofline for wardrobes and storage.

The arrangement of rooms varied from house to house but all had similar facilities. Kitchens, separate dining areas, lounges, bathrooms and multiple bedrooms were common throughout. Some incorporated additional spaces such as billiard rooms (6) and offices (9) and several had maid’s rooms. In the majority of cases a separate building was located at the rear of the house for the laundry.

It is evident that the current owners of these homes cherish their dwellings. Even though they were designed from 1914 to 1929 the interior layout works well for families today as the rooms are a useful size and the houses are well proportioned for ease of living. It has become popular to own and live in a ‘Douce’ home, and they are regularly marketed as Cambridge landmarks. In terms of built heritage and historical significance Douce has given the streetscape of Cambridge a series of noteworthy concrete bungalows. Thirteen of these 15 prominent houses are extant and the first of them will be 100 years old in 2014. Douce, in his quest for a personal style, used a combination of American architectural designs and philosophies of the craftsman bungalows and also incorporated elements of English influence and design.

**CONCLUSION**

Thomas Douce embraced concrete as a building material at a time when it was considered by many architects more suitable for commercial architecture rather than in a domestic situation. His first concrete dwelling was built in 1914 and he continued to use this material for most of his major works. At the time there were several factors that slowed housing
construction. A shortage of labour and materials, a slowing New Zealand economy, and eventual depression resulted in a decline in the housing market. However, despite these shortages Douce continued to receive commissions for his work.

The American influence on design cannot be understated; American styles, popular culture and technological innovations had become part of bungalow design and these heavily influenced Douce. The bungalow became the modern style of choice.

This was a period of individualism and this was reflected in the design of Douce’s 15 concrete houses. He was at the forefront of these ideals; he designed bungalows to cater to individual client’s taste. Examination of individual cases illustrated that he drew inspiration from American and English bungalow philosophies, principles and designs. However, Douce successfully meshed together the best of both to create a set of ‘Concrete Craftsman Bungalows’ that are distinctive to Cambridge.

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