



# JACK F HENNESSY, ARCHITECT OF THE GREAT COURT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

JOHN EAST DISCUSSES THE WORK OF JACK F HENNESSY

The impressive heritage-listed sandstone buildings which form the nucleus of the St Lucia campus of The University of Queensland are used by thousands of staff and students every week, and photographed by many visitors to the University. Despite this, the name of the architect who designed this complex is virtually unknown today. In the 1930s he was a prominent member of his profession, and one who 'can probably lay claim to having Australia's first international practice.'<sup>1</sup> His name was Jack F Hennessy.

Hennessy's father was also called Jack F Hennessy, and he was also an architect, so the two men are sometimes confused. The father was born in England to Irish parents and trained as an architect in Leeds and London. He worked in the United States for some years before arriving in Sydney in 1880.<sup>2</sup> Four years later he went into partnership with Joseph Sheerin, an Australian-born Catholic architect, and established a flourishing practice under the name of Sheerin and Hennessy. At a time when there were still few Catholics in the professions in Australia, Sheerin and Hennessy enjoyed the

Above: University of Queensland St. Lucia perspective sketch of proposed completed scheme, Hennessy, Hennessy & Co., circa 1936, F3328, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library

patronage of the Catholic Church and of many Catholic businessmen.

In 1884 Hennessy senior married Matilda Silk, who bore him seven children, four of whom survived childhood. The second child, and the only son to reach adulthood, was John Francis junior. He was born on 8 January 1887 at Burwood, Sydney, and was probably destined for a career in architecture from an early age. He began his secondary education at the Christian Brothers' High School at Lewisham, and continued it at St Patrick's College, Goulburn. On completion of his schooling he was articled to the Sydney architectural firm of Sulman and Power.

For want of a full degree course in architecture, aspiring architects had to make do with the architectural course offered at the Sydney Technical College, which Hennessy attended. His father then sent him overseas for about five years for further study and experience. Jack Hennessy senior had worked in the United States and believed that the future of the profession was being forged in America. His son spent four years studying at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as obtaining work experience with American firms before returning to Sydney, via Europe, in 1911. While in America, Hennessy met his future wife, Dorothy Grady. They were married in 1913 and three children were born to them before the untimely death of Dorothy Hennessy in 1919.

When Hennessy returned to Australia, his father's long-time business partner, Joseph Sheerin, was ready to retire. Hennessy senior took his son into partnership in 1912 and the firm of Sheerin and Hennessy was reborn as Hennessy and Hennessy. The largest project which the father and son team would undertake began shortly after their partnership was formed, and was not completed until well after the death of the senior partner. This huge undertaking was the construction of the nave and towers of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, to the design of William Wardell, one of the leading Australian exponents of the Gothic Revival.

The firm of Hennessy and Hennessy began to expand its sphere of activity into Queensland. The young James Duhig, who was to become one of the great builders of the Catholic Church in Australia, had become a close friend of the younger Hennessy. After Duhig became archbishop of Brisbane in 1917, Hennessy and Hennessy were awarded many commissions, and the first major project was the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Stuartholme, at Toowong. The opening of Stuartholme on August 1, 1920 was a memorable day for Jack Hennessy junior for more than one reason, because it was there that he met the woman who was to become his second

wife. Stella Beirne was the youngest daughter of the wealthy Brisbane retailer, TC Beirne. For an architect wishing to expand his practice in Brisbane it was a perfect match and they were married in 1922.

Hennessy's work for the Catholic Church in Queensland included many significant buildings, such as the boarders' residence at the Range Convent, Rockhampton, the transepts and sanctuary of St Stephen's Cathedral in Brisbane, St Vincent's Hospital in Toowoomba, Nazareth House at Wynnum North, Villa Maria in Fortitude Valley, Corpus Christi Church at Nundah, St Ignatius Loyola Church at Toowong, the Mater Hospital at Mackay and the Pius XII Provincial Seminary at Banyo. In 1924 Hennessy established an office in Brisbane, and to manage it he appointed one of the staff from his Sydney office, Leo Joseph Drinan, who would make a major contribution to the firm's success in Queensland.<sup>3</sup>

Duhig dreamt of constructing a huge cathedral in Brisbane that would be one of the wonders of the Southern Hemisphere and, as his biographer records, 'he had an ally in all this, a man of vision as broad and of energy as restless as his own, a man as optimistic as he, as daring, as ready for the greatest risks,<sup>4</sup> in other words, his architect. Hennessy and Duhig settled on a plan for a massive Renaissance basilica, and the foundation stone of the Holy Name Cathedral, on a large site opposite All Hallows Convent, was laid on 16 September 1928. Work on the construction of the extensive foundations then commenced but the huge sums required were beyond Duhig's means. Although work continued intermittently for years, the only part of the structure that was ever completed was a crypt fronting Gipps Street.

Hennessy's business relationship with Duhig was becoming very complex. Hennessy had been looking for suitable stone to build the Holy Name Cathedral and had sent an engineer to the United States to investigate Benedict stone, a manufactured stone produced by mixing crushed natural stone with cement and removing minerals which caused disintegration in natural stone. Hennessy recommended the adoption of Benedict stone for the construction of the cathedral and Duhig decided to set up a factory in Brisbane for the production of the stone, using a local porphyry as the natural ingredient.<sup>5</sup>

However the cost of setting up the factory, plus the royalties to be paid to the parent company, exacerbated Duhig's already serious financial problems. In 1930 he was able to obtain a loan from the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Company (CML), using as security the Benedict Stone Works and other properties. Hennessy

was already working on a new building for CML in Brisbane, which was to be the first of a series of such buildings, and CML agreed to use Benedict stone in all of these buildings. The resultant relationship between Duhig, CML and Hennessy is one which Duhig's biographer has described as 'mutual dependence'.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Benedict stone was not a financial success, and the works were sold in 1950.<sup>7</sup>

Although Hennessy was one of the leading Australian ecclesiastical architects of his day, his practice was by no means confined to work for the Catholic Church. His marriage to the daughter of TC Beirne soon yielded some important commissions from his new father-in-law, including a cinema, flats for the accommodation of Beirne's staff, and extensions to his large department store in Fortitude Valley.

Hennessy's most important commercial client would prove to be the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Company (CML). As already noted, an intricate relationship developed between Hennessy, CML and Duhig. Hennessy began his work for the company by refurbishing and extending the Mutual Life Insurance building in Martin Place, Sydney, which CML had purchased as their new headquarters. The company then asked Hennessy to design for them a new building in Brisbane. The ten-storey building beside the General Post Office in Queen Street was opened in November 1931, and it is perhaps

the most admired of Hennessy's surviving buildings, although little of the original interior remains. It was also the first large building to be built using the locally produced Benedict stone. Contemporary media reports described the style as 'modern Romanesque',<sup>8</sup> and it is today often loosely described as art deco, but in many ways it is a uniquely Hennessy style, a commercial equivalent of his Romanesque Revival churches.<sup>9</sup>

The directors of the CML were so pleased with the Brisbane building that they commissioned Hennessy to construct a series of buildings, all in the same style, in other cities in Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, and ultimately in Britain as well, where only the Birmingham building would be completed before the Second World War put an end to the company's plans for expansion. Hennessy's work for Colonial Mutual had been noticed by other insurance companies, who were keen not to be left behind. This brought him major commissions in Sydney, Melbourne and Wellington from the Australasian Catholic Assurance Company and the Prudential Assurance Company.

In 1935, the year which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of The University of Queensland, the Queensland Government came under increasing pressure to finally begin building a new campus for the University on the land at St Lucia which had been donated for that purpose by Dr James Mayne and his sister. In September



Left: Hennessy and Duhig (centre) at the Holy Name Cathedral site, probably taken in 1928, Concrete Constructions (Queensland) Ltd. photograph collection, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland (acc: 27937).

Right: Perspective drawing of entrance to Arts School from the quadrangle, Hennessy, Hennessy & Co., circa 1936, F3328, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.



1935 the Premier, William Forgan Smith, set up a committee to advise on the transfer of the University to St Lucia. This committee deliberated from October 1935 until June 1936.

Late in June 1936, before the findings of the committee were even made public, Forgan Smith saw Hennessy 'and indicated that he most likely would be given the work'.<sup>10</sup> The formal offer was made late in July. Reaction from the local architectural profession was predictable, swift and fruitless. Nobody was prepared to publicly attack Hennessy, who was a very successful and well qualified architect, but they complained that 'there was no need for the Government to go outside the State for professional advice'; the failure to hold a competition for the project had left 'a strong feeling of dissatisfaction'.<sup>11</sup>

The reasons for Hennessy's appointment remain obscure, but it was well known in Brisbane that Archbishop Duhig had the Premier's ear. Hennessy, as we have seen, had a close business relationship with Duhig, and the archbishop may well have hoped that Hennessy would recommend the use of Benedict stone from Duhig's factory for the construction of the St Lucia buildings. The fact that Hennessy's father-in-law, TC Beirne, was warden of the University added to suspicions of favouritism. The appointment of Jack F Hennessy as architect to

the new University may or may not have been a Catholic conspiracy, but it certainly seemed that way to many people in Queensland.

Within two months Hennessy produced a plan for the new campus which, although subsequently modified and never completely realised, is still recognisably the present Great Court.<sup>12</sup> However the process of construction would prove to be long and tortuous. Financial stringency, professional jealousy, bureaucratic delay and, not least, the Second World War and its long aftermath, all combined to obstruct Hennessy in the realisation of his grand plan. Building work commenced in March 1938, but the last of the buildings to be built to the Hennessy design, the Biological Sciences (Goddard) Building, was not opened until June 1962.<sup>13</sup>

Hennessy's post-war career was a rather sad affair. He had fallen out with Archbishop Duhig in 1938 and received few further commissions from the Catholic Church. Construction of large commercial buildings came to a standstill during the war and did not resume until the 1950s, by which time Hennessy was seen as old-fashioned. His decision in 1950 to sue Archbishop Duhig for unpaid fees relating to the Holy Name Cathedral project did little to enhance his reputation. The court found in his favour and he was awarded the very significant sum of £25,720, but it was



Left: The Great Hall, This part of the Great Court was never built, Hennessy, Hennessy & Co., circa 1936, F3328, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

a Pyrrhic victory. As Duhig's biographer puts it, 'they decided for Hennessy; yet oddly, Hennessy left the court under a cloud'.<sup>14</sup>

Jack F Hennessy died of heart disease on 4 September 1955, at the age of sixty-eight.<sup>15</sup> He was soon forgotten, but many of his buildings remain. They are fine examples of some of the main currents of Australian architecture during the inter-war years and are certainly worthy of renewed study.<sup>16</sup>

JOHN EAST was employed for thirty years as a librarian at The University of Queensland. In his retirement he is working on an architectural history of the Great Court.

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  15. For a more detailed study of Hennessy's life and career see JW East, 'Australia's first international architect: a sketch of the life and career of Jack F Hennessy Junior,' (2013), <http://espace.uq.edu.au>