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.” 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. 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
met the woman who was to become his second
than one reason, because it was there that he
memorable day for Jack Hennessy junior for more
the Sacred Heart, Stuartholme, at Toowong. The
and the first major project was the Convent of
Hennessy were awarded many commissions,
archbishop of Brisbane in 1917, Hennessy and
in Australia, had become a close friend of
one of the great builders of the Catholic Church
The young James Duhig, who was to become
expand its sphere of activity into Queensland.
The firm of Hennessy and Hennessy began to
of the Gothic Revival.
Wardell, one of the leading Australian exponents
Cathedral, Sydney, to the design of William
senior partner. This huge undertaking was the
not completed until well after the death of the
after their partnership was formed, and was
ready to retire. Hennessy senior took his son
When Hennessy returned to Australia, his father’s
long-time business partner, Joseph Sheerin, was
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
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.³
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,’⁴ 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.⁵
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’. Ultimately, Benedict stone was not a financial success, and the works were sold in 1950.

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’, 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.

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
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 ‘and indicated that he most likely would be given the work’. 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’.

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. 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.

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
a Pyrrhic victory. As Duhig’s biographer puts it, ‘they decided for Hennessy; yet oddly, Hennessy left the court under a cloud’.14

Jack F Hennessy died of heart disease on 4 September 1955, at the age of sixty-eight.15 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.16

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.

REFERENCES


2. Obituary of Leo J. Drinan, Courier Mail, 2 March 1967, 5.
3. TP Boland, James Duhig (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1998), 229.
5. Boland, James Duhig, 280.
8. Building (Sydney), 12 December 1931, 39-49.
9. Hennessy, Hennessy & Co. to JD Story, 22 April 1937, Story Papers, UQ Archives, UQA S533, item 5.
10. Courier Mail, 20 August 1936, 16.

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.