

Spiritual dimensions

Wellington architect Hugh Tennent is making a name for himself as an expert in contemplative spaces, writes Sarah Catherall.

Architect Hugh Tennent combines his passions for architecture and spirituality by designing everything from a Buddhist monastery to a Cistercian retreat, while also refurbishing churches.

A director of the Wellington-based firm Tennent+Brown Architects, he has been practising a Buddhist style of meditation for the past 25 years, and when he's not drawing up buildings, he teaches meditation. On his census form, he labels himself a Buddhist, but he's not a card-carrying practitioner. "I'm most interested in the inquiry into life offered by meditation techniques, and how to integrate that into a modern urban context," says Tennent.

His firm is designing the multimillion-dollar sports centre in Wellington's eastern suburbs, which opens in August. But Tennent is also making a name for himself designing spiritual retreats, and the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) judge has won architecture awards for some of this work.

It's a rare talent to be able to create spaces that make their inhabitants feel calm, silent and reflective. He speaks slowly and thoughtfully about his work, proving he walks the talk. "I try to make things feel beautiful and make them uplift the human spirit. That's about proportions and how things are composed and arranged. The use of light is really important ... the use of light can create power in a space that makes one become self-reflective or self-aware."



Hugh Tennent spent time living with Cistercian monks at a rural retreat at Takapau before designing their abbey, above and right.

His interest stems back to the early 1980s, when he visited monasteries and retreat centres while travelling through Asia after graduating as an architect. Also discovering Buddhist meditation on that quest, he returned to Wellington to work as an architect in the mid-'80s and began visiting the Bodhinyanarama Buddhist monastery in Stokes Valley. Meditating and spending time with the resident monks, he offered his services when they said they needed a new monastery and more buildings.

He designed a timber meditation hall and adjoining cloister able to fit hundreds for big gatherings. A reception and kitchen areas have recently been added. "The cloister isn't very common in New Zealand, as we're a culture of pavilions and we sit in the landscape and look out," Tennent says. "The cloister



focuses the attention inward and it's a design used a lot in Europe. It's a calming space."

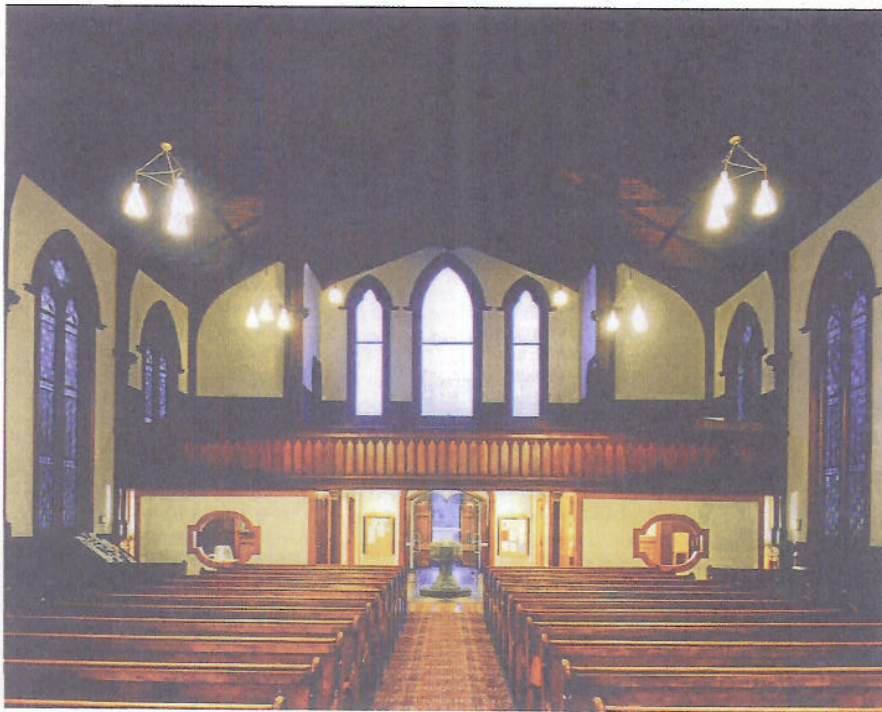
It was that project that got the religious community talking. "Priests who connected with the monks recognised I

Detail from St Peter's Church, Wellington.

was someone who could design contemplative spaces."

Tennent renovated St Peter's Church in Wellington's Willis St, designing a meditation chapel out the back, and also refurbished St Mark's Church at Wellington's Basin Reserve. He also stamped his mark on the hills above Akaroa by designing an east-facing timber temple for a local spirituality group.

More recently, after careful selection by a group of Cistercian monks living in retreat in rural Takapau, southern Hawke's Bay, Tennent was asked to design an abbey, replacing a cluster of tired



St Peter's Church in Willis St, renovated by Tennent.



The courtyard at the Bodhinyanarama Buddhist monastery in Stokes Valley, redesigned by Hugh Tennent, right.



buildings there. He lived there with the monks, getting to know their needs before he came up with the final design. In doing so, he was influenced by the old Cistercian abbeys in southern France, built in the 12th and 13th centuries, some of which he has visited.

"You go into [the Silvacane Abbey] and you breathe differently and your mind slows down and you become more aware of your place in the universe," he says.

"Creating a 'quietude' is important. Le Corbusier was influenced by Le Thoronet Abbey in France in particular. The old abbeys are so silent

and quiet and full of warmth, and that's the mood I was trying to create [at the Korua abbey in Takapau]."

Being built in stages, a set of buildings will be connected by cloisters and courtyards, using materials and building methods "that tread gently on the land".

The first, a guesthouse, won an NZIA local award. The courtyards are designed to provide "varying experiences of seclusion, outlook, procession and pause".

As Tennent says: "It is uncommon, in this busy world, for people to choose a life dedicated to prayer and

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HUGH TENNENT

reflection, rarer still to build for this way of life."

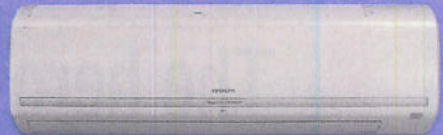
After the guesthouse was built, the monks wrote on their website: "It is one of simplicity, space and serenity, providing comfort and privacy to those seeking a spiritual refuge from the cares of the outside world for short periods of time."

Tennent also designs houses and tries to include a calming space where the owners are able to go to reflect.

He's renovating his own home and hopes to include a meditation room. "We're a bit short of space, though, so it will probably double as a guest bedroom," he says, laughing.

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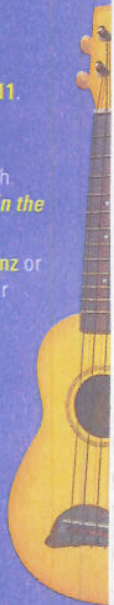


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