

**"From over-sweet cake to wholemeal bread": the *Home & Building* years: New Zealand Architecture in the 1940s**

held under the auspices of the Centre for Building Performance Research, Victoria University

Date: Friday 5th December 2008

Venue: School of Architecture, Victoria University, Wellington

Convener: Christine McCarthy (christine.mccarthy@vuw.ac.nz)

In 1940 when Helen Gosset, writing for the *New Zealand Home & Building*, asked her readers to "[a]nalyze for a moment the intricate exterior design which meets one's eye from the streets of a modern city," she gave a vivid account of urban life of that decade:

A complexity of motor wheels, iron girders, tall window-dotted buildings, flashing electric signs, vivid shop windows, traffic signals, and as a back drop for all this, the bustle of modern industry. These things make up the lives of moderns. Is it any wonder that they find a certain comfort in straight lines and the absence of ornament?

In emphasising the time's comfort "in straight lines and the absence of ornament," she anticipated Vernon Brown's vivid disgust for over-sweet architectural cakes, and his desire for a wholemeal bread building. These tensions (between over-sweet cake and wholemeal bread architectures) would be evident throughout the decade, with the continuance of traditional colonial images of houses, such as Chilwell and Trevithick's Grigg Homestead, Longbeach, W.S.R. Bloomfield's L.W. Rainger House, and C.Irwin Crookes' A.K. Voyce House, contrasting with the work of modernist architects such as Vernon Brown (1905-1965) and Paul Pascoe. Brown (who taught at the Auckland School of Architecture from 1942 until 1965), and Pascoe, were perhaps the most published architects of the decade.

Conjunctions of old and new images were a point at which the decade began, with 1940 being New Zealand's Centennial year, one hundred years after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. New Zealand's Centennial produced significant architectural output, most notably Edmund Anscombe's Centennial Exhibition in Rongotai, Wellington, and numerous centenary buildings dotted around the country, including: Horace Massey's Wellington Provincial Memorial and Bathing Pavilion; Pascoe's Centennial Memorial Plunket Rooms at New Brighton, W.H. Jaine's Centennial Plunket & Rest Room at Ngaruawahia, Llew Piper's Memorial Plunket Rooms at Mt. Eden, and Edward H. Smith's Southland County Memorial Offices, Invercargill, as architecture from the smaller centres increasingly featured in *Home & Building*. The new buildings of Whangarei, in particular, were well represented, with articles published throughout the decade on A.P. Morgan's J.W. Court's Ltd store, C.B. Watkin's Whangarei House, Brown & Simpson's Coutts the Chemist, and Finch & Corne's Hawthorne Glass Co. Ltd factory.

Shaw notes, the centenary also "resulted in a belated official interest in Maori buildings. As a result a number of historically important structures were restored and some new ones built." He refers to the restorations of the Banks Peninsula Maori church, The Kaik, Onuku (1878), Tama-te-Kapua at Ohinemutu, Rotorua (1878), the building of Miller & White's concrete Centennial Memorial Church at Otakou Marae, Otago Peninsula (1940), and the Whare runanga at Waitangi (1934-1949). It was also a time of reflection and critical appraisal of New Zealand's architectural past; for example architecture and buildings featured in the National Film Unit's *Housing in New Zealand* (1946) and two issues of the Centennial series *Making New Zealand: A Pictorial Record of New Zealand's First Hundred Years* (1940), "Houses" and "Public Buildings" by Paul Pascoe, the "Houses" issue featuring Humphrey Hall's 1938 Le Corbusian-inspired house for he and his wife, on the corner of Park Lane and Lysaght Street in Timaru. Many other architect's designs for their own houses were published, including those of Vernon Brown, George B. Fritchley, Thomas F. Haughey, A.H.M. Manson, Cecil W. Wood, Richard H. Toy, Humphrey Hall (his second house in Christchurch), Paul Pascoe, W. Robin Simpson, and C. Trevithick.

The beginning of the decade also saw the continuation of World War II begun in 1939. *Home & Building*, the only New Zealand architectural periodical in 1940, strongly stating its editorial policy regarding the wartime context as follows:

It is "Home & Building's" editorial policy to review as much as possible of this [war] work, both for its architectural interest and for its effect on public morale. However, it is essentially part of the architect's mind, and of his duty, to look ahead to works of reconstruction and of peace. Therefore it is equally our policy to stimulate thought on future developments ... some of which certainly could not be undertaken at the moment ... to look ahead to the pleasant paths of peace.

The war was to last until 1945. It produced articles such as "Household Hints for Wartime," and spurred research into new technologies, most evident in the New Zealand architectural press in a debate about prefabrication, with articles and editorials such as "Will prefabrication 'Take on?'," "Prefabrication as applied to a National Housing Scheme," "Prefabrication - The Answer?," "England develops Prefabricated Unit System of School Construction," and R.G.R. Beaton's "The Shape & Shadow of Homes to Come," which asserted that:

The war has brought prefabrication to the fore. Army huts, sheds and other buildings of a military nature have absorbed thousands of standard parts prefabricated at a factory and transported sometimes hundreds of miles to be erected like sections of a Meccano set.

Published prefabricated buildings included: the R.G.S. Beatson house at Takapuna, Hemore and Cotterill's standardised maisonettes in Bealey Avenue, Christchurch, and Pascoe's winning entry in the Rehabilitation Board's Pre-fabricated Housing competition, also in Christchurch. Wartime building also included various military emplacements and support buildings; the steel and timber prefabs, which accommodated part of the Auckland architecture school up until the late 1970s, are reputed to have once accommodated a wartime hospital facility. The end of the war was also the impetus for the building of memorials, including Richard Toy's "Otahuhu College War Memorial Gates." The war engendered new interests in the world beyond New Zealand. The local architectural press reflected international architecture in articles and book reviews examining Dutch brickwork, modern Swiss architecture, architecture in Czechoslovakia, the architecture of Kashmir and Ladakh, Swedish housing, Swedish public, cultural and commercial buildings, the architecture of Norway and Denmark, and Swiss Architecture, the majority of them written by Keith L. Piper. New Zealand architects' awareness of international architecture was also present closer to home as the war fought with it the arrival of European refugees. Immigrant architects of the time included Friedrich Neumann, Ernest Gerson, Frederick Farra, Helmut Einhorn and Ernest Plischke. They were a productive influence on the development of modernism in New Zealand.

War-time restrictions on specific aspects on building, particularly the size of dwellings were reflected in numerous schemes examining how to design within a tightly prescribed building footprint, such as: E. Rupert Morton's "The Small House of To-day," Pascoe's M.M. Cunningham House, Pascoe & Hall's W. Chapman House, Vernon Brown's T.M. Hawes House, Parnell, and Clifford Sanderson's "house for four people." This discussion extended to designs which anticipated extending buildings after restrictions had been removed, producing Richard H. Toy's own house, Graham F. Fox's "house that grows with the family," and Helmore & Cotterill's "small house planned in the Regency manner and planned for future extension." It also prompted an examination of the relationship between the inside and outside of houses, with articles proposing "interiors [which] don't just stay indoors," and open planning integrated with the exterior. By the end of the decade building controls were being questioned, with a 1949 *Home & Building* editorial stating that "a legitimate case for control of house building does not now exist."

The end of the war produced a new understanding among young architects, and architectural students, that theirs was a revolutionary brave new world. In 1946 Auckland University architecture students published a manifesto and formed Group Architects (later Group Construction Company). In Wellington the Architectural Centre resulted. Both organisations involved women, reflecting the increasing prominence of women as architectural clients (E.H. Didsbury, A.D. Crawford, E. Duncan, Edith Barrett, G.H. Buchanan, Valmai Fleming, Mrs. George Sinclair), architects (Monica. F. Barham, Nancy Northcroft), architectural commentators (Helen M. Gosset, May Smith), and architectural students (Marilyn Hart and Barbara Parker). Both groups also made important contributions to New Zealand architectural discussion at the time and afterwards. The Group's manifesto, the publication of *Planning*, and the designing and building of numerous houses exploring a new modern architecture for New Zealand, were mirrored in the activity of the Architectural Centre's Demonstration House, exhibitions such as "Te Aro Replanned," and the publication of *Design Review* (1948-1954). The Centre's beginning and much of its agenda engaged with Town Planning, which post-war, had garnered renewed interest among the architectural profession. This was reflected in articles in *Home & Building* asking "What is Town Planning?," advocating to "Tell the Public about the Plans," and proposing strategies "Towards Planning in New Zealand." By the end of the decade Raymond Pow, Senior Town Planning Assistant to the A.C.C. and former student of Sir Patrick Abercrombie, published a series titled "Town Planning in New Zealand."

As with any time-period a complex array of shifts occurred in architecture, which cannot be simply

confined to a single decade. Taking the publications of the time in isolation though, a fascination with architectural photography, and new interests in wall treatment, in particular with murals, are apparent during New Zealand's 1940s. The period published the photographic work of A.J. Adams, F.G. Barker, R.G.S. Beatson, Rowland Brialey, Gordon H. Burt, C.M. Collins, Eileen Deste, Doree & Sache Ltd, Gerald E. Jones, Maja, E.A. Phillips, Sparrow Industrial Photographs, and Raymond Syme. *Home & Building* published R.G.S. Beatson's 1941 article, "An architect with his camera discovers the 60's," a photographic essay of the 1860s work of William Beatson, and A.G.W. Sparrow's articles: "Photographing Homes: How a Professional Photographer Works," and "Photographing that Interior." The close of the decade saw the event of *Home & Building's* Photographic Competition in 1948, which was won by J.G. Patterson for their photograph of the Temple of Jupiter, Baalbeck, Syria. The interest in interior walls can be seen in various articles including: May Smith's "Entertainment on your Walls," Helen Gosset's "Mirror - Mirror - on the wall ...," A.R.D. Fairburn's "Polynesian Cave Drawings," and Vernon Brown's "Pictures on your Walls," where he noted that "perhaps one may assume that the great majority buy and hang their pictures as a matter of course, just as they buy curtains." Murals were to be the prime point of discussion about walls. "More than mere walls," and "Fijian Scene/Murals in New Zealand," discussed these, while "Trocadero Dine & Dance," "Stilson's Coffee Inn," and "An Interesting Combination – Pharmacy & Book Shop," featured James Turkington's murals in J.O. Owen's Trocadero Dine and Dance, in Vernon Brown's Stilson's Coffee Inn, and Brown & Simpson's Coutts the Chemists, respectively. This fascination with the mural seemingly culminated in a "Mural Competition for Dominion Artists - "To express ideas for a better New Zealand,"" the announcement of which stating that "An architect might define the muralist as a painter who has educated himself to applied art and co-relates his design in harmony with its architectural setting."

Exactly what an architect was became a point of increasing interest, or perhaps more accurately, what the public thought an architect was, was an increasing issue of concern for architects. A *Home & Building* editorial in 1940 proclaimed that an architect is "**not** a transformer of the commonplace to the spectacular ... **not** a layer-on of art ... **not** a luxury. ... first and foremost, [the architect] is a planner," advising the public to:

Be frank with him, as you would be frank with your physician. Spill your thoughts, needs, preferences, budget limitations. Tell him what you would like to have, but leave to his knowledge and ingenuity the technical means by which the result is to be brought about.

Numerous articles addressed this relationship between architect and client, including the eight-part series "How the Architect Works," W.J. McKeon's "The Function of the Architect in the life of the Community," R.H. Fraser's speech on the Architects' responsibilities to the community, and P.M. Barclay's "The Architect and the Teacher," which asserted that:

Every citizen of this country has to spend the most impressionable years of his life in our schools, and there is laid the groundwork of his subsequent interests, the basis of his adjustment into society. There, with a careful and understanding treatment, the citizens of tomorrow could be given a rational, intelligent outlook towards architecture. And there is no time like the present.

The 1940s was hence a time of both radical change and restriction. It was the decade of the building of R.S.D. Harman's Church of the Good Shepherd, Lake Tekapo, Bernard Johns' and Meldrum's Chemical Works and Industrial Laboratories at Gracefield, R.L. Farrell's Greenlane hospital, M.K. Draffin's Northern Roller Milling Co. Ltd, Building, Emily Place, Gummer and Ford's State Fire Insurance Building, Colin C. Lamb's Ovaltine Factory, Papanui, and numerous Department of Housing Construction flats. The decade saw the deaths of several architects, including those of Edmund Anscombe (1874-1948), John Campbell (1857-1942), A.F. Clark (c1899-1948), W.A. Cumming (-c1948), William Martin Hutchison (-1949), Eric Miller (c1896-1948), J. Park (c1880-1948), Llewelyn Richards (1865-1945), W.R. Simpson (c1907-1947) and Cecil W. Wood (1878-1947). It also saw important new publications about architecture, Plischke's *Design and Living* 1947, Paul Pascoe and Humphrey Hall's article in *Landfall* "The Modern House," and the Group's single issue of *Planning* and the Architectural Centre's more enduring *Design Review*. The decade which *Home & Building* dominated the architectural press, was to become a decade of architectural discussion through both building and publication. At its end *Home & Building* had lost its lone status as sole New Zealand architectural journal, having been joined by the enthusiasm and irreverence of the Architectural Centre's newly founded *Design Review*, and a new generation of architects including: William Alington, James Beard, Charles Fearnley, S. William Toomath, Anthony Treadwell, Alan Wild, and Bill Wilson.

Papers (15-20 min) which examine aspects of this period of New Zealand architectural history are called for from academics, practitioners, heritage consultants, and postgraduate students. The symposium is one of a series of annual meetings examining specific periods of New Zealand architectural history.

**Symposium fee:** The cost of the symposium (including proceedings) will be \$60, to be collected on the day of the symposium. Additional copies of proceedings will be available on the day for a cost of \$20.

**Timetable:**

Abstracts due: Friday 22nd August 2008

Programme announced: Friday 29th August 2008

Full Papers due: Friday 14th November 2008

Registration due: Friday 21st November 2008

Conference: Friday 5th December 2008