

"everything tastes better with cream" NZ architecture in the 1950s: a one day symposium 2015

Date: Friday 4th December 2015

Venue: School of Architecture/Te Wāhanga Waihanga

[please note due to building work, the symposium may be held on the Kelburn campus at VUW, more details closer to the date].

Victoria University/Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui, Wellington

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Philippa Mein Smith's reference to the official marketing advice that "everything tastes better with cream," reflected a 1950s' abundance: eggs and produce, full employment (for men), and the baby boom, which "boosted the market for children's toys and obliged fathers to build sandpits to encourage creative toddler play." In professional architecture, a confident modernism of curtain walling, air conditioning and prefabrication might have looked, on the surface, to have been counter to a cream-laden Pavlovian mentality, but there appears to be no shyness regarding construction innovation and technological advancement.

This was an outward looking decade accompanied with increasing levels of informality. World War II had finished and wartime restrictions concluded with the end of petrol and butter rationing in 1950. The end of war also meant a relaxing of building controls, matched with a construction boom, and the building of war memorials, such as the Newman, Smith and Greenhough's 1956 competition-winning design for the Wanganui War Memorial Hall. This was "a radical break" for NZ public hall architecture, and opened in 1960. Similar post-war boldness saw "the tall office block and ... a scaling seldom encountered before." Plischke and Firth's first curtain wall for New Zealand, Massey House (1952), towered "cleanly and majestically above its drear[y] neighbours," in "a polite and elegant manner." Its neighbours soon changed with the arrival next door of Structon Group's Manchester Unity (1959), faced with an elongated pink ceramic, honey-combed pattern. Technologically the Plischke and Firth highrise was soon to be surpassed by Stephenson and Turners' Shell House (1957), which made comprehensive use of prefabrication, was fully air-conditioned, and also known for its "use of quality materials and spacious entrance foyer." It was followed in Auckland by Thorpe, Cutter, Pickmere and Douglas' AMP Tower (1958) which elegantly paces down the hill to the Victoria and Queen Streets corner.

But war was never too far away during the decade. The Korean War began in 1950, with NZ's involvement as part of the UN operations lasting until 1954, and later, in 1956, NZ supported the British invasion of Egypt and had troops participating in the guerilla warfare on the Malayan Peninsula. Smith observes that "the fear of communism drove New Zealand into the Cold War," and the outbreak of war in Korea made the communist threat feel near. Nuclear testing also formed the backdrop to military politics, with the British testing bombs in Australia and Kiribati, and America using the Marshall Islands until 1958. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed reflecting New Zealander resentment "with nuclear bombs in what they regarded as their backyard," but simultaneously the need nuclear power stations was endorsed by officials during the power shortages experienced post-war. The diplomatic complexities of the competition to supply the "free world" arose between American and England meant that New Zealand built electricity infrastructure along the Waikato river and proposed the Cook Strait cable instead.

International treaties signed by New Zealand included the ANZUS Treaty signed in San Francisco, in 1951, and the Antarctica Treaty in 1959. The ANZUS Treaty was the reward for Australasian support of America in the Korean War and is remarkable as "the first security alliance that New Zealand (or Australia) entered into without Britain." We also joined SEATO in 1954, which aimed to prevent further spread of Communism. The same year New Zealand took up a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The earlier Colombo Plan (agreed to among Commonwealth Foreign Ministers at Colombo, Ceylon in January 1950) was a non-military, economic assistance plan to prevent Communism due to instability in underdeveloped countries. Colombo Plan scholarships funded study in Australia and New Zealand for students from newly developed countries, and included students of architecture.

These relations were contextualised by the Cold War and an increasing awareness of the need for full American support for defence security. The Antarctica Treaty followed the establishment of Scott Base in January 1957, and Edmund Hillary's expedition from the base to the South Pole the following

year. The 1950s was also the decade when the "Realm of New Zealand" was established, following the Queen's proclamation in 1953. This new entity appears to be in part a consequence of our belated adoption of the Statute of Westminster Act in 1947 (needed with the introduction of the bill to abolish the legislative council (our upper house) which passed in 1950), but was also likely related to the Queen's visit to New Zealand in 1953-54 (the first official visit by a head of state) following her coronation, and Hillary's climbing of Mount Everest with Tenzing Norgay. The legislative council chamber still physically exists, its red interior contrasting the debating chamber's green, consistent with Westminster tradition.

The 1951 founding of the Maori Women's Welfare League by Miraka Szaszy (the first Māori women university graduate) aimed to support Māori with a focus on health, housing and education, and to target overcrowding in substandard housing. The establishment of the League co-incident with both the struggles of the 151 day-long Waterfront dispute, and the initial acceleration of Māori urbanisation, linked to the perception of young Māori as a "reserve of industrial labour" who should be transferred from "uneconomic" areas to cities and towns." The waterfront dispute disrupted exports "at a time of record prices for primary products, especially high wool prices." The waterfront dispute illustrated the degree to which the government would use power to quash the workers with "drastic emergency regulations" later given more permanent status. The workers locked out of the wharves occupied urban spaces in strike meetings and protest marches. Mabel Howard (Labour Member of Parliament) also identified the impact of the dispute on strikers' wives and their children, who were "separated from other pupils during playtime [at Clifton Terrace primary school] in case they illegally shared their lunches."

The rarity of seeing Māori in civic centres, such as 1950 Christchurch, has been noted by Smith, who also states that "[i]n Auckland, tribal settlements became engulfed by suburban sprawl. Pakeha policy-makers viewed traditional pa as a blot on the landscape. "Modern" Maori had to become urban, and suburban." In addition to increased Maori urban migration, the English, and Dutch were also migrating to NZ cities following the reintroduction of assisted migration in 1947, and in 1952 Chinese gained the right to be naturalised.

Simultaneously, suburbia was idealised with detached houses, "a clipped front lawn and a more relaxed backyard where children could play, a rotary clothesline, vegetable patch, flowers for mum and a shed for dad, came to denote a national way of life supposedly accessible to all New Zealanders." Homeownership increased, and was supported by government policy through the selling of state houses to their tenants, and state loans being made available to further assist homeownership. The contribution of architects to houses during this period is well documented, with significant buildings such as Plisckhe's Sutch House (1953-56), Kulka's Strauss House (1959), and Porsolt's Goodman House (1956) being built. This was also the decade when the built work of the Group, in its various manifestations, emerged: the First and Second houses (1950), followed by, for example, Hackshaw's Thom House (1953) and Wilson's Malitte House (1954).

The Maori Affairs Act (1953) and the Maori Trust Boards Act (1955) were passed to increase the productivity of Māori land, and in 1956 compulsory enrolment was required of Māori voters. The changing cultural context was reflected on in Bruce Mason's play: *The Pohutukawa Tree*, first performed in 1957, and Colin McCahon's word paintings and abstract landscapes. New architecture supported such cultural events, and new organisations were founded, such as the New Zealand Ballet in 1953. The Lower Hutt Library (Structon Group, 1952) was (like Newman, Smith and Greenhough's Wanganui Hall), a war memorial, and included a lecture theatre, while adding to Lower Hutt's reputation as a modernist enclave. Another Lower Hutt Structon building, St James' church (1951) added to this architectural reputation, when on completion, in 1953, the building apparently "created "so much interest that difficulty is being experienced controlling the numbers wanting to see through it. People are even driving from Wellington specially to visit the church."" Other innovative church designs of the decade included Doc Toy's "modern but not eccentric" All Saints (Ponsonby 1956), and John Scott's Futuna chapel (1958), which Hodgson described as "an essay in the use of acute triangles." Both buildings drew from Māori architectural traditions, particularly the whareniui, with Futuna becoming "a fingerpost of design ... [and] developed an almost cult status."

The establishment of the Maori Women's Welfare League was not the only moment of publicly recognised female leadership. Hilda Ross was the only woman in the National government, an MP until her death in 1959 and the Minister of Social Security, Welfare of Women and Children and Child

Welfare. The protests organised by Nelson women (led by Ruth Page), opposing the removal of the Nelson railway line, resulted in a 10-day sit-in on the railway line at Kiwi in September 1955, and nine women arrested. One of the women, Sonja Davies, would later become a prominent union leader and politician. New Zealand's first family planning clinic also opened ("above a mechanic's garage in Remuera, Auckland, in November 1953") with a second clinic in Christchurch in 1956, a year following New Zealand's associate membership of the International Planning Parenthood Federation in 1955.

Large industrial developments were built or proposed, including forestry, agricultural and power-generation projects. These resulted in the construction of buildings, but also new towns, and transport infrastructure as well as new landscapes. In 1953 the Kinleith pulp and paper plant was commissioned to process *pinus radiata* from Kaingaroa forest, and by the late 1950s Fletchers' Tasman Pulp and Paper plant at Kawerau was in production. Mount Maunganui wharf (the future Port of Tauranga) was developed for forestry, with the first log shipment to Japan in 1957. Chemical research resulted in new fertilisers which converted the North Island pumicelands into grasslands and viable farming. In 1956, Consolidated Zinc Proprietary Limited expressed interest in smelting aluminium using Manapouri hydro power, and in 1959, the Kapuni natural gas field was discovered in Taranaki, and the Wairakei geothermal station (the second in the world), was commissioned. The same year, the Auckland harbour bridge was opened, providing an important transport connection for Auckland which, in 1953, had also been the first New Zealand city to introduce parking meters.

The year that Auckland saw parking meters, it was also introduced to the Bledisloe Building, designed by Gordon Wilson using a slab technique. "[N]arrow vertical fins between the floor slabs ...indicate[d] the interior modular planning ... [and] a composition of calm and orderly repetition." Gordon Wilson had been appointed Government Architect in 1952, and under his watch large modernist buildings were built by the government, including: Otago University's Dental School (1954), and Bowen State Building (1955). Other large modernist buildings designed by the private sector included King, Cook and Dawson's economically styled Hutt Valley Electric Power Board building (1952) - described as "one of the many softened Bauhaus-styled buildings in Lower Hutt" - and its parallel and lusciously curved Piper's AEPB Building (1951) in Auckland. Pascoe's Tecton-influenced Christchurch International Airport also dates from this time (1955-60)

Producer board headquarters, such as Plischke and Firth's Massey House and Johns and Whitwell's Wool House (1955) in Featherston Street, were also built. Wool House is now Old Wool House, and largely credited to Bill Toomath, and its design was a result of Toomath's determination not to replicate the monotony of B-grade highrises that he had seen in America. Hodgson refers to the arrangement of windows as "flush-set or shallow bays," such detailing indicating "that more than a little thought had gone into the job."

This decade, during which NZ's population passed the grand total of 2 million, witnessed the highs of nationalism. In addition to the visit of the new Queen, and Hillary's success at Mt Everest, Auckland hosted the British Empire Games at Eden Park in February 1950, and the 1911 Coat of Arms (complete with the NZ flag), was amended in 1956. But perhaps more influential, but just as indicative of NZ's cultural values at the time, was the renaming of the humble Chinese gooseberry, "Kiwifruit," in 1959.

Papers (15-20 min) presenting **new** research which examines **any aspect 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. Papers can be submitted in Te Reo Māori and/or English, but the conference will be in English. **It is intended that papers comprising the proceedings will be made available through the VUW institutional repository within a year of the conference.**

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: 5pm, Thursday 17th September 2015
Programme announced: Thursday 17th September 2015
Full Papers due: Monday 10th November 2015
Registration due: Friday 27th November 2015
Conference: Friday 4th December 2015

References

- "The 1950s: 1953 - key events" *NZ History* <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/the-1950s/1953>
- "Contraception and sterilisation: Family Planning" *Te Ara* <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/contraception-and-sterilisation/page-6>
- "History" *Port of Tauranga* (2006) <http://www.port-tauranga.co.nz/Community/History/>
- Hodgson, Terence *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* (Wellington: Grantham House, 1990)
- Jackson, Keith and Alan McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* (Auckland: Longman, 1996)
- McGuinness, Wendy and Miriam White *Nation Dates: Significant events that have shaped the nation of New Zealand* (Wellington: McGuinness Institute, 2012)
- "Māori-Pākehā relations: Māori urban migration" *Te Ara* <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/maori-pakeha-relations/page-5>
- "Page, Ruth Allan" *Te Ara* <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p5/page-ruth-allan>
- Shaw, Peter *New Zealand Architecture: from Polynesian Beginnings to 1990* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991) p. 148.
- Smith, Philippa Mein, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- "Strikes and labour disputes" *Te Ara* <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/strikes-and-labour-disputes/page-7>
- Szczeoanski "Protest at Kiwi station" *The Prow* <http://www.theprow.org.nz/yourstory/Protest-at-Kiwi-Station-1955/#.VfFYBpdEzW4>