A Final Formality: Three Modernist Pavilion Houses of the early 1960s

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ABSTRACT: The Beard, Alington, and Mackay houses represent the endpoint of a direction in New Zealand domestic architecture that was both internationalist *and* based within the realities of local house building in the mid-twentieth century. Imi Porsolt, while reviewing Stephanie Bonny and Marilyn Reynolds' book *Living with 50 Architects* in 1980, specifically points to the Alington house as the final formalisation of this purist trend. Porsolt's review provides an historical subtext to *Living with 50 Architects* that opposes the "altogether austere style" of the pavilion with the vernacularism of what is best described as the "elegant shed" tradition of New Zealand house design. More elegant than the elegant shed, these pavilions reveal something of a "blind spot" in New Zealand's architectural history – aside from the inclusion of the Beard and Alington houses in *Living with 50 Architects*, they have not appeared in any of the canon-forming historical surveys such as Mitchell and Chaplin's *The Elegant Shed* or Shaw's *A History of New Zealand Architecture.* The Mackay house also has not featured until its recent appearance in Lloyd Jenkins' *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design.* This paper uses Porsolt's view as a useful starting point from which to consider the relationship that exists between the Beard, Alington, and Mackay houses, and their place in the development of New Zealand's domestic architecture during the 1960s.

John Scott's Futuna Chapel may not have been sufficiently austere for Peter Middleton in 1964, but austerity was a quality that Imi Porsolt was able to find in the pavilion houses of the early 1960s.[1] Looking back from 1980, Porsolt was able to identify "an altogether austere style" in the pages of Bonny and Reynolds' book *Living with 50 Architects: a New Zealand Perspective*. Reviewing their book for the *Better Business* magazine in 1980, Porsolt reveals the historic perspective that emerges from the collection of architects' homes of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s surveyed by Bonny and Reynolds. Specifically, he identifies in the first sections of the book an austere "purist trend" that was characterised by the use of a repetitive grid, flat roofs, and by the "Spartan spirit" of the post-war period. This "purist trend," writes Porsolt, found its final formalisation in Bill Alington's house.[2]

Bonny and Reynolds, believing that architects' own homes "reflect more clearly the underlying cultural and social values of their time," canvassed a range of houses designed by architects for themselves.[3] Apart from a brief description of the changes in New Zealand society that took place in the period surveyed – the "considerable population movement" and consequent suburbanisation of New Zealand cities; the rising costs of renting or buying living accommodation, and the consequent shrinking size of the nuclear family and the size of its dwelling – they give little indication of exactly how these values are manifest in built form. They prefer to let the descriptions and images of the selected houses speak for themselves. In a light-handed way, their book presents a picture of the changing nature of New Zealand's domestic architecture over the quarter of the century that it surveys.

Opening with Donnithorne's house of 1952 and ending in the mid-70s, *Living with 50 Architects* documents 52 houses from Wanaka to Wellsford. The Alington house was built in the middle of this period, in 1962. As is often the case when the owner provides much of the labour, the house was not finally completed until two years later in 1964 – the same year that Athfield began construction of his own house in Khandallah, and the beginning of what Porsolt describes as "the

[1] Middleton "Correspondence [Letters to the Editor]" p 354.

[2] Porsolt "When Architects Design for Themselves" p 31.

[3] Bonny and Reynolds *Living with 50 Architects* p 6.

dawn of the Noddy era."[4] This paper addresses the Alington house, and two other Wellington pavilions, in light of this historical shift, which, occurring in the early 1960s, gave rise to Porsolt's view of the Alington house as the final formalisation of "an altogether austere style."[5]

It is almost mandatory in writing about post-war New Zealand housing that the Architectural Group make an appearance, and this paper too, cannot escape this element of *de rigueur*. Indeed Marilyn Reynolds, co-author of *Living with 50 Architects*, was an actual signatory (as Marilyn Hart) to the *Manifesto of the Architectural Group* in 1946. More pertinent to this paper, however, is the actual nature of the manifesto itself. As Justine Clark has pointed out, in many ways it is a "standard Modernist tract – insisting on the need for systematic planning and calls for an engagement between architecture and new techniques of fabrication based on standardisation and the machine."[6] This assessment does not deny the call for "a New Zealand architecture" that is more usually associated with the Group, but does provide an accurate, and perhaps overdue, reminder of the exact nature of their manifesto. If further proof is needed of its actual aims, it is available in the following phrase drawn from its final paragraphs: "Architecture is the planning of our whole physical environment."[7] Further evidence is seen in the title and focus of the Group's published journal: *planning* (1946). "Efficient planning," according to the manifesto:

> […] can affect for us great economies, not only of money, but of our natural resources and of our own time and energies. Only planning can check the widespread squandering of the wealth of our land that is so common a feature today.[8]

Their call is a call for a rationalisation of architecture, "where production is for use." A "vital architecture" would spring from this integration of "social and political effort," *and* "the expression of the culture of our society."[9] This is an important distinction to make as it defines the two branches of influence that grew from the work and writings of the Group. On the one hand there is the well-documented search for a local vernacular, which became manifest in a series of informally planned timber houses that made much use of visibly spare structural detailing, and an openness to the outdoors. This style is well illustrated within the pages of *Living with 50 Architects*, but is perhaps best represented by Bruce Rotherham's iconic house of 1951.

The second trend is an attempt to achieve the efficiency of planning and resources demanded by a modernizing postwar New Zealand – a social imperative that downplayed the self-conscious vernacularism. Alington's house is an outcome of this second path. He describes the project that he saw himself taking part in as one of "getting Modern architecture off the ground" in this country. It was inspired by the example set by the Group in their writings and built work.[10] The rationale was social; advancing the modernisation of society by providing an appropriate built environment for modern living, and ensuring that it was available to the fabled "Everyman" at a moderate cost. He recalls that:

> … there was a great sense of needing to rationalise what we were doing, and not until you had cleared away all

[4] Porsolt "When Architects Design for Themselves" p 32.
[5] Porsolt "When Architects Design for Themselves" p 31.
[6] Clark "The Elusive Canon of New Zealand Architecture" p v.
[7] The Architectural Group "The Group Manifesto" p 101.
[8] The Architectural Group "The Group Manifesto" p 101.
[9] The Architectural Group "The Group Manifesto" p 101.
[10] Alington "W. H. Alington Oral History Project" 1.02 1:55:52.

the dross as it were, are you in a position then to move forward.[11]

The Alington house manifests this rationalisation architecturally in its post and beam structure, and in the functional planning that is the result of a carefully considered domestic programme – it is a modest house in both size and finish. Bonny and Reynolds make a similar point, arguing that the rationalisation of both structure and plan led in the early 1960s to a focus on post and beam construction and open-plan living.[12] In this, Alington took his lead from James Beard's own house. Beard was cadet supervisor at the Ministry of Works architectural office when Alington began his training there in 1949. A close bond developed between the two, with Beard becoming something of a mentor to Alington. The Beard house, which Alington readily admits is the precursor to his own house, was designed in 1955 – the year that Alington graduated from the School of Architecture. It is, as the June 1959 edition of *Home & Building* states, a family house of simple post and beam construction.[13] It was built to a square plan, originally raised on columns and bracing walls to meet the upper terrace of its steeply sloping section.[14] The plan itself reveals an almost Miesian treatment of space, where internal walls are mere partitions, and space flows from one area to the next. The non-load-bearing role of these partitions is emphasised by their semi-height, and in the location of the major partition that defines the living and sleeping areas; placed independently of the structural frames. The areas of more formal domestic ritual – the bathroom and the kitchen – are the only spaces to be defined by the structural module – the remaining spaces exist in spite of this module, instead conforming to a more subtle arrangement, having its basis in the square.

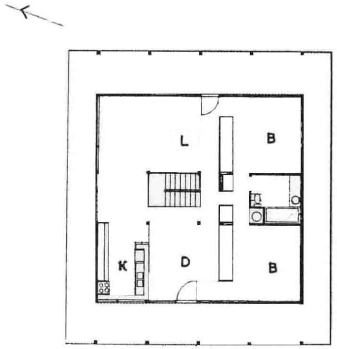
Despite the superficial similarities with the Beard house, the Alington house (built on land purchased from Beard) exhibits an altogether different treatment of space. Like the Beard house it is of post and beam construction, and has a similar outward appearance; they both feature a simple stained timber board-and-batten cladding juxtaposed with carefully proportioned timber-framed glazing, and both are set against a backdrop of native bush. They also share an obvious formal similarity in the pure rectangular prism beneath a generously overhanging flat roof, seemingly tied down by slender timber columns. The principal exterior difference is generated by the different plans – both of which are a function of the structural module of each building. They share the same major-minor-major rhythm through the house, but the Alington house has an alternating 3-1 rhythm across the plan in place of the regularity of Beard's 1-1 rhythm. The 3-1 arrangement, in conjunction with the 3-2-3 north/south rhythm of the Alington house provides the conditions for Alington to employ the golden-section as an underlying order to his plan. The result is a sophisticated symmetrical arrangement of overlapping golden-mean-proportioned rectangles.

An arrangement of bedroom-bathroom-bedroom, similar to that of the Beard house, is employed at the Alington house – although with the inclusion of doors and full-height walls to provide privacy between public and private areas. The most significant difference

[11] Alington "W. H. Alington Oral History Project" 1.02 1:57:44.
[12] Bonny and Reynolds *Living with 50 Architects* p 9.
[13] "Family House" p 38.
[14] By 1949 this lower floor had been "filled-in" to accommodate the growing family. "Family House" p 41. Parts of the verandah were glazed to create additional interior space, and further verandah railings had appeared by the time of its appearance in Bonny and Reynolds' *Living with 50 Architects* [p 32-33].

between the houses, however, is the relationship between the structure and the spatial arrangement. Despite the openness of the central living areas of the Alington house, the volumes of the spaces are defined by the structural grid – even in the absence of walls, such as with the kitchen unit or the implied passage-ways. This integration of structural and spatial systems provides a formal rigour to the Alington house plan that is not evident at the Beard house.

A third Wellington pavilion, the Mackay house designed by William Toomath, employs many of the devices found in the Beard and Alington houses. Awarded an NZIA Bronze Medal in 1962, it also has a bush-setting, prismatic flat-roofed form (minus the overhang), and vertical board-and-batten cladding. Present also is the free-standing post and beam structure and the semi-height non-structural walls of the interior. Like the Alington house, which has a semi-height brick wall as a spatial divider between the living areas, the Mackay house encloses its lounge with two such walls. Where Toomath paints his white, Alington allows the brick to retain its phenomenological warmth, combining it with the fireplace and kitchen to reinforce the "memory" of the familial hearth. The Mackay



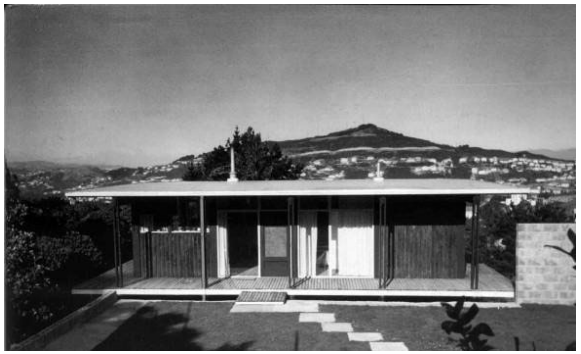


Figure 1: Plan, Beard house; Exterior view, Beard house [AC Collection, ATL, PAColl 811-09-03]

house was designed for a professional couple who were without children. The absence of the need to provide domestic privacy for the occupants of the house meant that Toomath had greater freedom for spatial experimentation. He made use of this

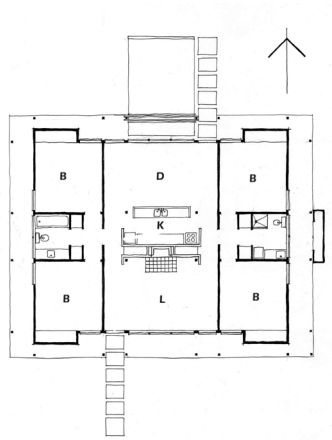
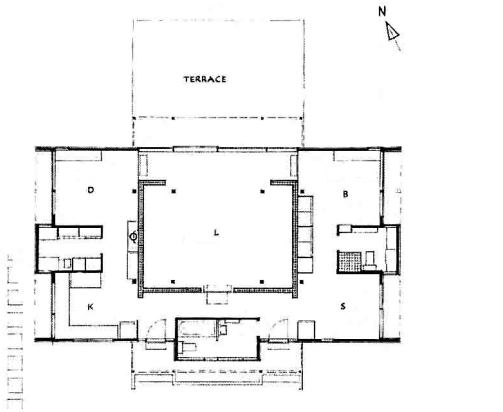


Figure 2: Plan, Alington house; Exterior view of the Alington house [WHAAR 004.09.02.003].

opportunity to design a compact house that gave the impression of spaciousness by "planning the interior as a single continuous space, divided by only a few solid elements."[15]

[15] "Awarded N.Z.I.A. Bronze" p 41.



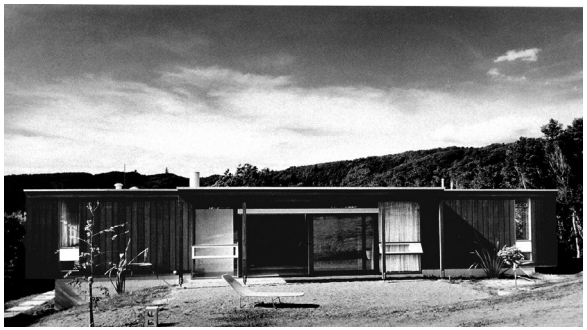


Figure 3: Plan, Mackay house; Exterior View, Mackay house [Toomath "Into the Post-War World" p 51]. [n.b. the drawings of the above plans In Figures 1-3 are not to the same scale]

Nevertheless, the commonalities between the Mackay and Alington houses extend to the alternating structural rhythm (although the beams run across the Mackay house), the formal symmetry, and centrality of the living spaces. The northern elevation of both houses reveals both the similarities between the two plans, as well as the significant generating role of the actual plan itself. Unlike the Alington house however, the spatial arrangement of the Mackay house is defined by its circulatory layout. This opportunity arises out of the separation of the spatial and structural systems that is more akin to the Beard house than the Alington house. It does however, mean that the repose that is achieved through a consistent integration of these systems is not as evident at the Mackay house.

The three houses show different approaches to what is essentially the same formal typology: the Modernist pavilion that has its roots in the work of Mies van der Rohe.[16] Mies' Farnsworth house of 1950 is effectively a rationalised abstraction of the house, where even interior walls are deemed superfluous. Beard, Alington, and Toomath, each supplement this rationalisation with a well-studied programme for living that allows "Miesian abstraction" to function as "family home," or in the case of the Mackay house, as the home of a social professional couple.

These disciplined pavilions offered an alternative to the self-conscious vernacularism that quickly developed into form-rich faux-colonialism during the 1970s, and a subsequent self-referential historicism. The exposed timberwork and natural surfaces of the Beard, Alington, and Mackay houses are the result of an explicit Modernist moralism rather than attempted vernacular expression. Alington is very clear that he did not consider the possibility of a conscious indigenous New Zealand architectural expression when designing his house, sharing the view with Vernon Brown that building methods, materials, contemporary taste and the passage of time will reveal the nature of a vernacular architecture.[17]

[16] This definition traces the term pavilion from its designation of the exhibition buildings of the 1920-30s (as opposed to the recreational/sports pavilion or pavilion-tent) to the Modernist pavilion as a formal type. It assumes the Barcelona Pavilion (1929) and the House for the Berlin Building Exposition (1931) by Mies van de Rohe as the "cross-over" links, thus defining the formal typological characteristics of pure prismatic form and overhanging flat roof, and the "flowing" spatiality of the interior that also extends to the exterior of the building. This suggests that the lightweight minimal structure of the Modernist pavilion is a result of the particular Miesian aesthetic rather than an attempt to imitate the lightweight demountable nature of the pavilion-tent.

[17] Alington "W H Alington Oral History Project" 7.04 1:20:32.

This does however, emphasise the significance of the Group across the spectrum of domestic architectural styles in the 1960s. Beard, Alington, and Toomath (who was a member of the Group during the 1940s, and a signatory to the manifesto) employed a less selective reading of the Group's ideas, valuing the aspects of "standard Modernist" ideology in the absence of a Modernist orthodoxy that was wholly relevant to mid-twentieth century New Zealand. Their's was an aim that sought to create architecture that was internationalist in ideology and expression, but also appropriate to the conditions and building capabilities of this country. It should be noted that the Wellington Architectural Centre was a key part of all three architects' background experience. An adherence to a purer Modernist rhetoric was fostered at the Centre, in part by the presence of the European émigrés such as Plischke and Newman who were influential members. The same can be said of the Ministry of Works under Gordon Wilson in the 1950s, where both Beard and Alington were employed. A second point of interest is that all three architects expanded their New Zealand qualifications with postgraduate degrees in American universities – Beard and Toomath at Harvard (where Toomath studied under Walter Gropius), and Alington at Illinois (allowing him the opportunity to meet with Mies van der Rohe). This further reveals their internationalist stance, as well as raises questions regarding the "anti-intellectualism" that is associated with the postwar generation of New Zealand architects.

However, as Porsolt points out in his review of *Living with 50 Architects*, "styles overlap."[18] The line between the New Zealand Modernist pavilions illustrated here and the "elegant shed" that attained to a particular idea of New Zealandness, is at times slim. Houses by Don Donnithorne, Derek Wilson (Toomath's partner in practice), Ian Reynolds (husband of Marilyn Reynolds), and James Hackshaw (Reynolds and Hackshaw were both members of the Group during the 1940s) are as much shed as pavilion, demonstrating that the two typologies are not mutually exclusive. The three Wellington pavilions however, display a high degree of resolution in terms of both architectural refinement and functional planning that left little room for further typological development. Indeed from the mid-60s Beard, Alington and Toomath's time was to be taken up with larger scale work; Toomath with the Wellington Teacher's College, and Alington with the Wellington Meteorological Office for the Ministry of Works, before joining Beard and Al Gabites in private practice and working on various civic projects, notably including the Upper Hutt Civic Centre. By the time that Alington in particular returned to the problem of the small individual dwelling, technology and fashion had moved on. Load-bearing concrete block walls had become a more rational alternative to post and beam construction, and the austerity, simplicity and restraint that resulted from the disciplined purity of expression had been replaced by – as Porsolt would have it – the architecture of the "Noddy era."

The Alington house, which was for Porsolt the final formalisation of a purist trend, could in fact be considered as the final development of the Modernist pavilion house in New Zealand – in many ways the final formality of a strictly Modernist domestic architecture in this country.

[18] Porsolt "When Architects Design for Themselves" p 31.

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