

Max Rosenfeld: "The Home Architect"

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ABSTRACT: 1949 marks the beginning of a radical change in the relation between New Zealanders and their homes. The new government at that time began encouraging home ownership in opposition to the existing policy of renting state houses. In those days, one of the most influential architects in the country was Max Rosenfeld, a Czech immigrant who became known mainly through the Auckland magazine *The Weekly News*. Rosenfeld hadn't produced any iconic building or brought any revolutionary aesthetic style. Nevertheless his contribution to New Zealand domestic architecture was tremendous, though today he is hardly ever mentioned. This paper proposes to shed light on the work of this architect focusing on his participation in *The Weekly News* publication which started in 1949.

For almost a decade Rosenfeld became known as the "Home Architect" following the name of his magazine column. His ideas and architectural advice became very popular and his publications inspired owners and helped builders to familiarize themselves with the Modern way of living and building. Rosenfeld is mainly quoted in reference to the popularization of New Zealand plan books, a kind of publication renowned for containing projects made to fit just about any taste, budget and site. Seen with disdain by some, those books were, nevertheless, the most efficient vehicle for the dissemination of architecture into the everyday life of ordinary Kiwis. In that sense Rosenfeld can be seen as one of the essential contributors to the modern building practice we find in New Zealand, which decisively influences the way Kiwis live today.

I came across Max Rosenfeld from a rather indirect path while doing a wider research about the 1950s' Kiwi house. Though my PhD supervisor, Dr Julia Gatley, had long ago suggested that his work might be worth looking at, there was no way for me to foresee just how seminal Rosenfeld's work had directly influenced the development of New Zealand house production over three defining decades. Indeed this ignorance on my part was fully justified by the fact that Rosenfeld is a somewhat invisible figure in the history of New Zealand architecture, having never produced a single iconic building or brought about any revolutionary aesthetic style. Nevertheless his contribution to New Zealand domestic architecture was tremendous,

though today he is hardly ever mentioned. This paper proposes to shed some light on the work of this architect focusing on his earlier participation in *The Weekly News* publication, which started in 1949. It is the primary result of research that now has been directed to map out and bring to light Max Rosenfeld's contribution to this country's architecture.

A Czech by birth and upbringing, Rosenfeld came to New Zealand with his wife and daughter in 1939, sailing from Marseilles a few days after the Second World War started. He joined the Ministry of Works shortly after arriving, working for the government as an architect up until 1973, by which time he resigned to join the Auckland based firm RG

Oaks and Co. Ltd.

During the Second World War and for years onwards, Rosenfeld enthusiastically worked for the Red Cross and other non-profit boards contributing his expertise as a trained architect. He had an acute sense of the responsibility of his profession towards society and when he became a New Zealand citizen, in the early 1950s, he dedicated his work to the improvement of architecture and particularly the domestic architecture of the country which had received him with open arms. According to published comments from his friends, Rosenfeld took his citizenship very much to heart and "became a passionately loyal New Zealander, the kind

difficult to find in the country."¹

In an interview for *The Weekly News* in 1971, Rosenfeld said that the proudest day of his life was when he realised that he had blended completely into New Zealand society. He said that this became evident while travelling from Wellington to Auckland by train when, at a certain station displaying a Māori name, a stranger addressed him by asking the meaning of the Māori word, as the stranger had evidently taken Rosenfeld to be Māori. An honest mistake that made Rosenfeld blissfully happy as it proved that no boundaries any longer separated him from the country he had adopted and adored.

His appreciation for New Zealand is continuously mentioned in his publications and interviews, as is his disdain for the lack of Kiwi patriotism. Rosenfeld could not understand how New Zealanders took for granted the possibilities that the country offered, "let me tell you, you have a marvellous country here, most people do not appreciate it because they have not seen what I have seen."²

¹ MacDonald "Home queries answered weekly – and nightly" p 16.

² "Mt Albert architect deeply influences NZ home

New Zealand found by Rosenfeld

When Rosenfeld arrived, New Zealand was quite a new country with little over a century of intense settlement. With an economy based on primary products from agriculture and farming, the country had full employment and very good living standards that, despite ration restrictions from the war period, was relatively guaranteed by a worthy welfare state.

The New Zealand population at the time was around two million with a steady growth, characteristic of the baby boomer generation which followed the Second World War. This growth brought about an increase in the country's housing problems and needs. The government until 1949 had massively invested in state rental house programmes, which were quite successful considering the quality of the houses and the acceptance of the population. That year marked the beginning of a radical change in the relation between New Zealanders and their homes.

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building" p 18.

architectural staff of the Ministry of Works concentrated their efforts in public buildings such as offices for Government Departments or extensions for the University buildings in the main cities of New Zealand. Though there were some rental blocks of apartments designed by government architects, most of the housing projects were covered by private enterprises, which, until that period, were still relatively small.

The country had also a great shortage of architects, which was not uncommon in most countries during the 1950s, but in New Zealand most of the existing professionals were entirely dedicated to designing for the commercial sector. House design was mostly left to the builders, a fine and pragmatic profession which, no matter where in the world, is not known for their creative flair and search for betterment in design concepts.

Rosenfeld tried to change that by tackling the matter in a myriad of ways. He actively contributed to the Ministry of Works' regulations for house design giving directives to enhance the quality of housing projects. Whenever a chance arose he would argue with his fellow professional architects with the intention of turning their interest from

commercial buildings towards house projects. He also tried to educate builders by offering different and increasingly more efficient alternatives to traditional ways of building houses. Finally, he did his utmost to increase the Kiwi public's awareness of the importance of good house design by publishing numerous newspaper and magazine articles as well as books which became very popular in New Zealand over a three decade period.

Rosenfeld's Publications

Rosenfeld first attempt at writing for a news publication was for the Auckland-based *Weekly News* in 1949. The text, though praised by the editor, proved to be inadequate for the magazine and had to be completely re-written because of its abundant use of technical terminology. It took Rosenfeld a few months to rewrite it, but eventually he came back with a text that any layperson could understand. Soon, he got the knack of it and was able to turn out articles that the most non-technical mind could indeed appreciate.

For almost two decades Rosenfeld became known as the "Home Architect" following the name of his magazine column. His ideas and architectural advice grew to be very popular and his publications inspired home owners

and helped builders to familiarize themselves with a modern way of living and building. Rosenfeld is mainly quoted in reference to the popularization of New Zealand plan books, a kind of publication renowned for containing projects made to fit just about any taste, budget and site. Seen with disdain by some, those books were nevertheless the most efficient vehicle for the dissemination of architecture into the everyday life of ordinary Kiwis.

When asked about his dedication to publishing architectural books for the wider masses, Rosenfeld answered: "There is no better alternative to educate the public than through publications the man-in-the-street can understand. Only that way can the product of professional people be appreciated by the wide public."³

Rosenfeld was one of the most successful writers in New Zealand publishing history. By 1976, he had already published 13 editions of his book of house plans with a total of more than 100,000 copies sold.⁴

³ "Home, Units, Town Houses and Holliday Homes for \$3.30" n.p.

⁴ MacDonald "Home queries answered weekly – and nightly" p 16.

He wrote in a simple way, always with a very good sense of humour while relating complicated information making use of everyday life examples, with the intention of making it easier for anyone to understand. He believed that most of the problems in the building of houses were related to poor communication between owners and the architects or builders. Indeed he knew that for most people, it was very hard to articulate what their needs really were, and that any layperson would be in a much better position communicating with an expert if they had the right amount of knowledge to make themselves understood.

His books were sold for \$3.30 and included projects for urban houses, countryside houses and even holiday homes and alternatives for the Kiwi bach. He offered simplified versions of architectural drawings including plans, sections, elevations, perspectives and even construction and furniture details. He gathered information about all the phases of house construction, from aspects of the selection and buying of the section, and deciding what sort of house would be more adequate, to details of how to build the house; indeed little escaped Rosenfeld's scrutiny.

In addition to the projects, his books offered chapters on the principles of home design and construction including a room-by-room appraisal of living needs and how to best meet them. It also carried detailed information about constructing elements of the house such as foundations, flooring, framing and roofs. Moreover he wrote about types of finishing materials, and acoustic and thermal insulation.

The value of his books was praised by numerous reviews from professional bodies such as the NZ Institute of Engineers, international journals, and even from the Ministry of Housing.

Rosenfeld made the ideal, to have the right sort of house with the right sort of rooms that any budget could afford, seem like an attainable Kiwi goal. If readers wanted to build any of the projects included in his books, they could order the complete set of plans for which Rosenfeld only charged \$14, as opposed to the five per cent of the cost of the building that was commonly charged by a registered architect. As an excuse for charging so low, Rosenfeld pointed out that "I'm letting them go at a nominal price because I had to draw them anyway (for use in the book) and

because I want to do something for the community in order to promote building activity."⁵

To improve the participation of building professionals in community life was one of Rosenfeld's main objectives. He constantly advocated for the creation of non-profit government financed co-operatives and local bodies to join hands with home builders and advise them with architectural services or even simple consulting services to solve minor issues. That would not only improve the quality of the house design in the country but also educate people to not degrade the New Zealand environment, be it in an urban or in rural landscape.

During most of his professional life in New Zealand he divided his time between a full time job at the Ministry of Works and writing his books and articles for newspapers and magazines. Among his writing jobs, his most prolific contribution was arguably for *The Weekly News*.

Rosenfeld and *The Weekly News*

For 18 years (from 1949 to 1966), Max

Rosenfeld was a household name among readers of *The Weekly News* publication. During this period, he was the magazine's architectural correspondent publishing a weekly page and signing it as the "Home Architect." His first article was published in the 26th of October 1949 edition and it corresponded to a half page article about planning a compact family home. Shortly thereafter, with the success of his articles, he became responsible for the whole page and, in the following years, he would have to fill two full pages each week.

His articles were usually in the form of advice, always to the point, very practical and written in simple terms that any layperson could readily understand. He usually included graphic information such as sketches, plans, and construction details, which helped the most complex information to be passed on clearly.

He was one of the most popular correspondents in the magazine, receiving and answering up to 50 or 60 letters a week. That put him in touch with hundreds of home builders and gave him a close insight into what New Zealanders wanted their homes to be like - a wealth of information which

⁵ "And here's the bach" p 5.

became the basis not only for his articles, but also for his books.

No question was too simple, or too dull, to merit an answer. Some of them, the most recurring ones, were published in the "Questions and Answers" section in his page. Some were quite entertaining to read, such as the comment written by a woman in England who had by chance come across a copy of the *Weekly News* which contained Rosenfeld's advice on how to situate a house to better capture sunlight. In her letter she complained, quite up-tightly, that Rosenfeld's suggestion was completely wrong; that the house built following his articles would get only the minimal sunlight. Politely, he responded that the English south was the New Zealand north. In another occasion a reader wanted to know if Rosenfeld ever studied architecture or if he got all of his knowledge just by picking it up as he went along.

Rosenfeld's generosity in answering his readers led to interesting situations such as answering a phone call at 1am from a senior hospital surgeon asking for the plans that were published that week. Though a little annoyed to be woken in the middle of the night, but sympathizing with the surgeon's

late working hours, Rosenfeld posted him the plans on the following morning.

In his articles, Rosenfeld aimed primarily for the simplification of design and construction of the house. Though his approach can be justified on economical grounds, the relation with the principles of the Modern movements in architecture is quite noticeable.

During 1949 and 1950 for instance, his articles can be divided into four major themes: house planning; rationalization of the construction; do-it-yourself - using pre-fabricated materials; and environmental considerations. All of those themes, as indeed the articles individually, can be directly related with Modern ideas.

Good Points on House Planning

His first article was entitled "Planning the Compact Family Home. Design it for Convenience and Years of Comfort." It was written using a fluent and simple style, a plan with orientation comments and a perspective of a proposed house. The article, though occupying only half a page, settled the Modern tone of his column.

He started out with clear advice: "Plan your

house economically and concentrate on practicality, rather than ape the taste of your neighbours."⁶ He stated that the plan is the crucial element of the house, and that it is far more important than any decoration one can put in it. That the design of the house should first consider the way that each room captures the light, its proportions and the way it connects with other parts of the house. That was for him, the key problem of house design.

Then, he wrote about how each room should fulfil its purpose and that this can only be obtained if their functions are clearly stated from the very beginning. He argued not only for better communication between owners and builders, but indeed for a functional approach which resembles, in essence and in writing, basic statements from the Bauhaus school.

The plan and the perspective presented in his first article are both Modern in design and appearance. The perspective, a flat roof modular house, became a logo for his column and it is printed in every other article in the following years. The plan is clearly divided in blocks according to their function. The first

⁶ Rosenfeld "Planning the Compact Family Home" p 16.

one was composed of the social area (living and dining) and the service area (kitchen and laundry). The second block is thinner and longer and has three dormitories and a bathroom. The two blocks are connected by well-resolved circulation that allows a good flow from one block to the other and which, at the same time, preserves the privacy of the bedroom quarters.

Rosenfeld offered in this project an early version of the open-plan scheme. It suggested that the rigid walls between bedrooms should be replaced by wardrobes, in this way creating storage areas and effectively buffering sound between the rooms. The idea was quite revolutionary at the time and in the following publications it was fully developed offering plans quite similar to today's living-kitchen arrangements. He was undoubtedly the pioneer in promoting the advantages of the open-plan for the average New Zealand house, and he was indeed quite successful in this regard. In an interview for the *New Zealand Herald* in 1976, he commented on his defence of the open-plan scheme: "I tried to persuade them that there were better ways of living than by making a box divided into

cubicles."⁷

He also argued for a clear separation between private and social areas, discussing this in many articles. He emphasised the distinct qualities and characteristics of each one of these areas and the necessity for keeping them in different sides of the house. The bedroom, for instance:

is the most personal room in the house. In contrast to the living room, which belongs to all members of the family, a bedroom belongs to the individual. He, or she, should be able to retreat to it in absolute privacy.⁸

The period of occupation, diurnal for the social and nocturnal for the private, and the adequate light and heat are also pointed out to justify the separation between the two areas.

As for the kitchen and service areas, Rosenfeld pleaded for the owners to first think about their wives' needs, for it would be she who will mostly use those areas. He proposed Modern ways to design a kitchen with built-in features that could be put in place while building the house, such as auxiliary tables

⁷ MacDonald "Home queries answered weekly – and nightly" p 16.

⁸ Rosenfeld "Good Points to a Sitting Room" p 18.

and seats, serving benches between stove and dining table or corners to fulfil the function of a dining alcove.⁹ He also gave advice on practical elements such as hot water systems; which if placed wisely, could be used both for the kitchen and bathroom saving greatly on plumbing expenses, or the adoption of double sinks to enhance hygiene and help to maintain a neat and tidy kitchen. He not only described the advantages of those elements, but offered drawing suggestions of how to build them. In one of his articles, for instance, he presented different designs for built-in ironing boards.

To guarantee the hygiene of the kitchen, he proposed simple ventilation systems such as the use of glass louvres combined with fixed windows – another common element that was absolutely new at the time. He also suggested the use of new flooring materials that were moisture-resistance, grease-proof and easy to clean. All these were essential elements of physical comfort and hygiene for a Modern house.

Rationalization of the construction, the layman can help the expert

One of Rosenfeld's main ideas was to

⁹ Rosenfeld "Modern Ways to a Kitchen" p 16.

encourage people to take part in the actual construction of their homes. For that end he gave numerous tips on how to lay the foundations of a house by oneself, or on how to do the excavations and other tasks to help the builder. He used to describe the different phases of the construction in a way that was easy to follow the progress and avoid later problems.

In a very didactical way he explained important elements of the construction of a house always presenting sketches and visual information to clarify his suggestions. There were types of brick chimneys, dimensions of the concrete blocks for the foundations, types of floor joists, techniques for laying bricks or mixing cement and aggregate for concrete, roof construction alternatives, suggestions for plaster surfaces and finishing material. His instructions were so clear that it encouraged many laypeople to become building experts.

He was a pioneer in the dissemination of many construction ideas in this country that became common knowledge and practice for builders, engineers and architects, such as the adoption of concrete slabs rather than building on a raised timber floor. When he first advocated this, many people thought that

a house on a concrete slab would be colder, but Rosenfeld dispelled that misbelief. He also played an important role in convincing New Zealanders that they needed a washbasin in every lavatory both for convenience and hygiene.

In the 1950s, specifically in 1958 when he returned from a long trip, Rosenfeld started to instruct the builders about a new technique he had witnessed in America. It was the use of prefabricated lightweight trusses to roof instead of the long-established New Zealand practice of building roof frames. That freed the roof element from the interior partitions which facilitated the construction and maintenance of the house. Today it is a well established practice in this country.

Rosenfeld's name was frequently related with do-it-yourself publications, which was actually a fair acknowledgement of his work. He highly praised the New Zealand educational system for incorporating into secondary and high school education, the basic training of old professions such as carpentry. He used to say that New Zealand was a country full of skilful handymen and frequently included in his column small projects for furniture and house additions that

could be easily built by one's own hands. Those were usually the most successful articles that *The Weekly News* reprinted in extra pages on the following week.

One of the most celebrated articles, which was indeed reprinted many times, was his design for a refrigerator box for those who could not afford the appliance. It consisted of building a brick box of 2ft 6in long, 2ft deep and 5ft 6in high, saving three enamelled walls of the actual refrigerator case; only the front door would need enamelling. The motor should be placed in a handy cupboard near the kitchen, which would render its noise less noticeable. The design could not be considered a proper do-it-yourself project as it required a refrigerating engineer for the enamelled door; nevertheless it made many Kiwis busy during the weekends with the dream of having a cheap refrigerator in their home.¹⁰

Plan for Light, Warmth and Happiness

Another recurring theme in "The Home Architect" column related to environmental considerations, which included the positioning of the rooms in relation to the sunlight, and the design of houses to avoid

¹⁰ Rosenfeld "Additions a Handyman Can Do" p 14.

spoiling the landscape.

Largely through Rosenfeld's influence, home builders have become conscious of the need of siting their homes to catch the sun, rather than siting them for the purpose of presenting impressive fronts to those passing on the street. He taught how to create and use simple Sun diagrams to trace the light through day and to help design rooms with proper sunlight comfort. He called attention to the proportions of windows which would not only dictate the aesthetics of the houses, but also determined how much light would reach the room and how much heat would be lost by the glazed surfaces during winter time. These topics, though full of complex information, were nonetheless merely questions of common sense that everyone should to need consider. After all, "one does not have to be an architect to be familiar with such things any more than one has to be a poet to appreciate Shakespeare."¹¹

Rosenfeld was particularly concerned with the preservation of the country's landscape and quite worried with the Kiwi habit of building

baches wherever one fancied to do so. During the 1940s and 1950s the easy granting of building permits for erection of seaside cottages, encouraged the population to build small places all over the country. If one lodged an application with a plan and specification for a permit, the authorization to start the construction was released within less than a week.

To try to preserve the scenery and at the same time to improve the quality of the baches, Rosenfeld published special articles offering ideas for simple cottages that could be built over the weekends. The projects usually included plans for later extensions in a way that it could start as a single room and easily grow by replacing windows with doors to create extra rooms and eventually a reasonable size terrace. The projects allowed those amplifications with a minimal waste of material, even considering the enlargement of the roof. As the years passed on, Rosenfeld gathered enough projects to publish a book specifically on holiday houses and baches.

Final considerations

After 18 years at *The Weekly News* he assumed a similar page at Wellington's *Dominion* and continued promoting sound house design. For

the New Zealand public from 1950s to 1970s he was the friendly neighbourhood home architect, always ready and pleased to give advice in the name of good architecture. He thought that there was beauty in simplicity and that architectural knowledge could indeed be reached by ordinary people, always hoping to contribute to the betterment of New Zealand society.

The number of pioneering ideas and practices brought by Max Rosenfeld is still to be quantified as is the weight of his contribution to New Zealand architecture. But even with little information published in today's architectural texts, Rosenfeld can be seen as one of the essential contributors to the Modern building practice we find in New Zealand from the 1950s up to the 1970s, and someone who decisively influenced the way Kiwis live today.

When asked about his choice for New Zealand as a place to live he stated that: "When I came here from Prague in 1939, this country gave me the opportunity to make a worthwhile life for myself, my wife and daughter. No country could do more than that and I have used the opportunity to the best of my ability. I hope that with my publications

¹¹ Rosenfeld "Sunny Side Forward" p 18.

and dedication to the New Zealand public I helped New Zealanders build better homes, it is part of my repayment to them for the opportunity this country gave me."

His life and work is surely an inspiration for Kiwis and particularly foreign architects who also chose this country to live and work. His unique role in the use of Modern ideas jointly with the Kiwi way to shape the architectural landscape of the country is without a doubt one of the greatest contributions towards the modern New Zealand we know, live in and see today.

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