

Making a Place: Mangakino 1946-62

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ABSTRACT: In between Whakamaru (1949-56) and Maraetai (1946-53) dams, on the Waikato River, sits Mangakino. Planned and built from c1948 to 1951, by the Town Planning section of the Ministry of Works, the civic centre was to provide housing and services for the work force on the Maraetai scheme. The architectural design of these dams has previously been discussed as the work of émigré architect, Fredrick Neumann/Newman (Leach), and the town, as that of Ernst Plischke (Lloyd-Jenkins, Sarnitz).

In 1949 the plan for Mangakino was published, alongside the plan for Upper Hutt, in the February-March edition of the *Design Review*. As two "rapidly growing towns," Upper Hutt and Mangakino are briefly reviewed in the context of two essays ("Who wants community centres?" and "Community Centres" by HCD Somerset), an outline of the curriculum of the new School of Architecture and Town Planning, run by the Architectural Centre, and notification of the 1948 Town Planning Amendment Act. As published in the *Design Review*, the plan of Mangakino includes a church in the south west, with the sporting facilities to the north and Rangatira Drive flanking a shopping strip on the east. The church sits in a field of grass, isolated and apparently serene. In the drawing published in the monograph *Ernst Plischke*, however, this building has been cropped off.

Focusing on the case of Mangakino, this essay will review the discourse of town planning for secular and religious communities in the late 1940s. This era, framed by the end of World War II and the deepening of the Cold War, is seen as the context for industrial action, a changing sense of nationalism, and small town New Zealand as the site of civil dispute.

In between Whakamaru (1949-56) and Maraetai (1946-53) dams, on the Waikato River, sits Mangakino. Planned and built from c1946 to 1951, by the Town Planning section of the Ministry of Works; Mangakino was another step in the hugely ambitious Waikato Hydro Power Scheme. As a civic centre, the town was to provide housing and services for the work force at Maraetai, though this life was extended through the construction of several other dams, finally dissolving as a Works town in 1961-62. The social and architectural history of these dams, and their service towns, has previously been discussed in a variety of venues. This essay will attempt to bring some of the more meticulous social

history into context of the architectural history through an examination of the February-March 1949 issue of the *Design Review*.

In this issue the plan for Mangakino was published, alongside a plan for Upper Hutt, as two "rapidly growing towns." Upper Hutt and Mangakino were briefly reviewed alongside two essays (an editorial "Who wants community centres?" and "Community Centres" by HCD Somerset), an outline of the curriculum of the new School of Architecture and Town Planning, run by the Architectural Centre, and notification of the 1948 Town Planning Amendment Act. When comparing the two essays on town-planning and the two

centres of Mangakino and Upper Hutt, great emphasis is placed on balancing educational facilities (discussed as "high-brow") with sporting facilities. The editorial essay "Who Wants Community Centres?" critiques the "sudden eagerness" for government subsidised War Memorial-cum-Community Centres. What is this thing, a "community spirit?," the essay asks, and why does it need a specialist building? History has demonstrated, the essay goes on to argue, that community "found its forms of congregation regardless of the lack of solid buildings. After all, the Christian faith and many others gained their vital strength in catacombs."¹ For the purposes

¹ "Who wants Community Centers?" p 3.

of provocation, the editorial throws the value of architecture into doubt, demonstrating that a "COMMUNITY CENTRE" needs to be more than "a precious little temple in the centre of a somewhat inaccessible ring of tulip beds" with a carved name plate. Rather the architecture needs to have an "honest appearance" and be "situated close to shops ... cinema...[and] the pub."²

The disjunction of power, hinted at in the editorial, a constant *problem* for architecture, is that which arises between those who make decisions in the construction of the built environment, and the populace that will come to occupy it. In the decades around the completion of the Waikato Hydro Power Scheme (1960-80) this issue would become central to the theoretical and philosophical discourse of the discipline. From Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, to Jane Jacobs and Robin Evans, the large scale building programmes of social housing and infrastructure were opened-up to the critique of "power." The company town of Mangakino was no exception however, what history has shown is that the paternalism of the Ministry of Works was engaged by the town's

occupants at several levels. In retrospect, it may be argued that this (at times combative) engagement was fundamental to the incredible success of the town, even for its short existence.

In the 1920s, prior to the onset of World War II, it had been recognised that New Zealand's industrialised future would rely on the generation electricity by hydropower. The Waikato River, which falls about 320 metres between Lake Taupō and Cambridge, was identified, and surveyed, for the useful location of as many as ten dams. The first of these, begun in 1929, was Arapuni. The second was Karāpiro dam (which, on completion flooded over the 1919 private dam of Horahora) was begun in 1936. With the onset of the war, construction was delayed due to shortages of materials and labour. It was during this period that the New Zealand government initiated emergency labour laws, which could forcibly enlist men to work on the dam construction site. With the end of the war, this measure ended also, and by the time Karāpiro was finally completed and Maraetai was ready to begin, finding workers was becoming increasingly difficult.

Much of the driving force behind the MoW

Waikato Hydro construction programme was Robert Semple, Minister to the MoW in the Labour government (1935-49). As Len Richardson describes him during these years:

there was frequently more display than doctrine in Semple's politics, his energy and desire to get things done ... Under his stewardship, the Public Works Department threw off the notion of relief work and resumed its original function as the development arm of the state.³

In the mid-1940s Semple saw the answer to a staff shortage in "Mangakino": a "semi-permanent" settlement and the "best public works camp in the world."⁴ The scale of the wider dam project and the increased interest in town planning at the time meant that Mangakino would be planned with paved streets (but un-paved footpaths), street lighting and a civic centre, before any buildings, or occupants, arrived on site. Plischke's design on "Pouakani Block" leased by the government from Ngāti Kahungunu locates the town on a concave bend in a future dam lake. In his drawings a light transparency frees the Modernist buildings to float across lawns, which give little indication of the arid pumice landscape upon which the design was

³ Richardson "Semple, Robert 1873 - 1955" n.p.

⁴ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* p 13.

² "Who wants Community Centers?" p 3.

to take place. In perspective images, the landscape is benignly arcadian. As August Sarnitz comments on Plischke's town planning style, he followed the English garden city model inherited from Ebenezer Howard. In this model, the idealism of the Mangakino project lay not only in its green site, but in the single authority of the client: the Ministry of Works. According to Howard's thinking, such a town, where all land was centrally controlled, made the deleterious effect of property speculation negligible.⁵ It also permitted (or demanded) a rapid laying down of the town, such that there would be no time for prevarication, no room to doubt the precision of the original design plan.

Hasman's account of the state of the landscape at Mangakino is very unlike this Arcadian terrain.⁶ She tells of how the earth, exposed to create roads and building sites, was terribly arid. The volcanic pumice created huge amounts of dust, which when wet, became sticky and slippery. Some early arrivals to Mangakino described it as being sent to Siberia; a possible double entendre referring to both the landscape and the political climate.

⁵ Kostoff *A History of Architecture Settings and Rituals* p 629.

⁶ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* pp 15-16.

Not only was the pumice earth a nuisance, it also hid a greater risk: *tomo* (underground cavities eroded into the soft pumice by water) which would collapsed at any time. One account tells of a man whose car disappeared inside his garage overnight, to be discovered sunken into a *tomo* beneath the garage floor. And to make Mangakino feel even more "wild-west" feral horses from the Central Plateau were regular marauders of the main street.

The workers on the Maraetai dam arrived to populate Mangakino on mass as 2,000 labourers, from the completed Karāpiro dam, some 50 kilometers to the north. This population base arrived with several social organisations already in place, including the Waikato Hydro Welfare Association (WHWA), a policeman, the YMCA, and membership to the New Zealand Workers Union (NZWU). With the workers came their accommodation; on the backs of army surplus lorries 300 small houses were hauled south. This all happened in the narrow lee-time between the completion of the bridge across the Mangakino stream in July 1946, and the flooding of the Karāpiro dormitory site (to be submerged under the dam waters) in May the following year. Leaving Karāpiro at 4am,

using two lorries (one to pull and the other to act as a break on the steep hills) a cottage would be dragged across the country, to be installed on piles in Mangakino that night. This dramatic, if not reckless, process was remembered by some as the greatest achievement⁷ on the Waikato Hydro project.

Though following Plischke's layout, the town was not built as he had envisaged. Rather less monumental structures accommodated the civic and commercial services that had been defined as necessary for the well housing of the workers. But it is Plischke's mix of "crescents, horseshoes, curves and straight" streets that appears to capture the imagination of reporters on Mangakino. This format can be seen in numerous other MoW planned towns of this era including Tūrangi and Tokoroa. The civic and commercial centre by 1952, according to plan, would include a gymnasium, social hall, cinema, billiards room, 19 shop units, a maternity hospital, library, school, post office, tennis courts and rugby fields. Semple's "best public works camp in the world" was highly successful, leading to a transformation of the workforce from one of predominantly transitory single

⁷ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* p 14.

men, where there was an 80% turnover of the workforce, to a more settled population of married men, where turnover was reduced to 25-30%.⁸ The population swelled to over 5,000 and the high proportion of young married couples resulted in Mangakino having the highest birth rate in the country.

The town had no civic authority; the occupants were all tenants of their employer, the Ministry of Works. There were no rates to be paid or councillors to be elected. The WHWA fulfilled some of this role as a community control body, but in the early days of the settlement another body, the Householders Association was established with the specific task of voicing the workers needs at Mangakino. Set-up in 1947, and dissolved in 1951, the Householders Association was successful in petitioning the MoW for appointment of a second police officer, improving the bus service and getting trees planted. They were however unsuccessful in gaining the bakery that had been included in Plischke's town plan. The lack of a pub was also lamented, as the country around Mangakino was listed as a dry area. This however led to a large quantity

of home brewing.

Many of the cultural and sporting facilities built at Mangakino had been defined by the WHWA at Karāpiro, where the social amenities were limited to movies hosted by the YMCA. Drinking and gambling had become the norm for the itinerant population, so when the possibility arose of providing an alternative social and sporting life the WHWA mobilised. In negotiation with the MoW, the "Welfare" became an incorporated society, taking over the running of the civic buildings, co-ordinating the social and sporting groups, establishing and greatly expanding the library and running the cinema, the profits from which kept the WHWA afloat.

Despite this apparent harmony the late 1940s through the 1950s were a tense time for negotiations between the "staff" and the "workers," and this tension was played out in the town not only geographically, but also by definition of houses. The single men lived in dormitories, pushed away to the west, behind the civic centre. Married "workers," or construction staff, and their families, were provided with cottages (mostly the "Old 530"; a three room cottage with a floor area of 53m²) free of rent. Engineering "staff" were offered

larger houses (up to 100m²) and with greater amenities for an incremental rental fee. Though no resources I have found explains where exactly these larger houses were located, and many buildings were removed from the site after 1962, one photograph hints at more substantial dwellings in Totara and Konini Terraces and Moana Crescent, on the east side of town, facing the newly created lake, on the far right. This photograph also shows the lake level to be much higher than current maps (closer to 200m above sea level), which would have created a shallow bay area bending in toward this eastern area of the town.

The entwined lives of the workers and the MoW made living precarious, and sometimes appeared to lack the social escape valve of a democratically elected council. In the establishment of the WHWA, for example, the MoW stipulated that the senior project engineer had the right of veto over any executive committee decisions. Though all parties were proud that this veto had never been used, its necessity indicated the overarching paternalism of "Uncle MoW." A second inflammatory event, in 1948, was the transfer to Auckland of Mr Clapham, the then secretary of the Mangakino branch on the

⁸ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* p 22.

NZU. The engineers had accused Clapham of being a disruptive element, citing his open membership to the New Zealand Communist Party, as evidence of his extreme views. The construction staff stopped work in protest, against which Semple riled declaring the "dispute [Len Richardson writes], as a trial of strength between communism and the government."⁹ The workers however succeeding in eventually having Clapham returned to Mangakino for a dispute hearing, in which the MoW claim and Clapham stood down as secretary. The new secretary was appointed immediately: Mr D Ross, also a NZCC member, was however this time protected from the MoW redeployment by being employed fulltime by the Union. The third, and effectively final industrial action occurred in February 1951, when the NZU members went out on strike in support of the Watersiders. Again the MoW accused the Union of being in the control of a minority of extremist Communists. While Semple, as minister till 1949 had "denounced communist union officials and those he saw as fellow travellers as "wreckers," and clashed openly with them," the policy of the new Prime Minister, Sidney Holland, was far more

vigorous. The workers at Mangakino remained on strike for over a month, during which time workers supported each other growing vegetables and going pig hunting. The Watersiders remained locked-out until July.¹⁰

While these three events, in the sum of things seem minor, the tension must have been high and the resentments bitter. Adding a foreword to Hasman's book in 1967, the then Commissioner of Works, JT Gilkison couldn't help but comment that he *reserved the right to differ with some of the opinions and statements expressed in the book*. Hasman's book was delayed for publication for 10 years on the grounds that the book, J Gardenier suggests, "stressed ... how explosive life could be in a new hydro town" and that this would cause disturbances in the new town of Tūrangi. An unattributed appendix to the text states:

Relations deteriorated from 1946 to 1952 ... From then on they improved as individual members of the militant minority left the job.¹¹

... suggesting that the fear of "communistic" disturbances. In her conclusion to *Mangakino*

in Perspective Cynthia Hasman predicted, quite correctly with hindsight, that the ructions in the early days of Mangakino, were the learning ground to the later town development at Tūrangi: a permanent settlement 60 kilometres to the south. Here the WHWA became the Tongariro Welfare Association; an association that ran alongside, rather than instead of, a local council. The MoW liaised with the local county and private land owners, rather than building a complete Works town, such that the employer was no longer also the landlord and the civil authority. Gardenier, writing in 1977, is however nostalgic for the vibrancy of the original WHWA and Mangakino. He questions how the newer Tongariro Welfare Association will survive without support facilities, such as a cinema, provided by the employer, which could raise the funds to carry out other activities.

The loss of such an institution would be a loss to the community and particularly to democracy. Democracy expressed as "of the people, for the people, by the people" often misses "by the people" ... If you want to see an

⁹ Richardson "Semple, Robert 1873 - 1955" n.p.

¹⁰ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* pp 42-51.

¹¹ Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* p 71.

example of such a community and of such a group, come and see Mangakino.¹²

¹² Hasman *Mangakino in Perspective* p 70.

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