

"Pleasing homogeneity," "Dull times," and "animated cocktails": New Zealand Architecture in the 1930s

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Like some other Branches, Wellington had suffered from a certain apathy and lack of enthusiasm among members, due in some measure to the dull times.¹

New Zealand in the 1930s began in mid-depression. Substantial rises in unemployment were recorded early in the decade, and an unemployment tax was introduced in 1930 to pay for unemployment relief. 1930 was also the same year that the beginnings of commercial aviation in New Zealand occurred. The first trans-Tasman airmail service dates from 1934, with TEAL (Tasman Empire Airways Ltd - now known as Air New Zealand) being established in 1939. This increasing significance of aviation in New Zealand during the decade was reflected in Hean's 1935 article "Airports" in the *Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*.² In 1931 relief camps were set up for the unemployed, and unemployed riots occurred in Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin. In June 1932 the *NZIAJ* noted that "[t]he almost complete cessation of building has had its

inevitable result on employment of those connected with building - most of them are out of work, some are casually employed, and only a very few have any regular employment,"³ while the following issue remarked that "[i]n the troublous times which have come upon us during the past fourteen years since the Armistice, not least among economic difficulties has been the high cost of building."⁴ This context led to building subsidies and the Allied Building Industries Movement. By 1936 the normal working week was reduced from 44 hours to 40 hours.

In 1931 the infamous Hawkes Bay earthquake caused significant damage to Napier, Hastings, and the surrounding area killing 256 people, and attracting many architects from outside the area to work. The *NZIAJ* noted in April of that year that "all the Institute's members, both in Napier and Hastings, had come through the recent disaster unhurt,"⁵ but by June that:

[a]rising from the question of the earthquake damage in Hawke's Bay, several members brought up the matter of the action of certain architects who had been reported to be canvassing for business in the district while the local members were fully engaged assisting in relief work.⁶

Discussion about earthquakes and buildings had already begun in reaction to the 1929 Murchison earthquake (which, like Napier, measured 7.8 on the Richter scale, and caused extensive damage). 17 people had been killed in contrast to Napier's toll of 256, largely because of the remoteness of the area, and the Napier earthquake ensured this earlier discussion continued throughout the decade. Napier rebuilt was celebrated and described by Lord Bledisloe, the then Governor General, as architecturally attractive due to "the widened streets, the tasteful colours and the pleasing homogeneity of the buildings themselves."⁷

1931 was also the year Elizabeth Reid McCombs became New Zealand's first elected

¹ "Minutes of the Twentyninth Annual Meeting of the Council" pp 9-10.

² Hean "Airports" pp 63-65.

³ "A Subsidy for Building" p 25.

⁴ "The Economics of Building" p 59.

⁵ "Minutes of Twenty-Fifth Annual meeting of the Council" p 8.

⁶ "Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual General Meeting" p 26.

⁷ "The Reconstruction of Napier" p 122.

woman Member of Parliament. In the architecture men also dominated the profession, the mention of Miss MA McIntyre of Atkins and Mitchell winning the 1931 Ten/Test Small House Competition (the entry "noticeable for the excellent planning") was significant as one of the few indications that women were involved in the profession as architects. McIntyre's competition win was only one of several for architects as the 1930s was a decade of competitions, possibly due in part to the lack of employment and the expense of building commissions. These included RIBA Competitions, NZIA Student Competitions, numerous housing competitions as well as those for specific projects: the National Art Gallery, Dominion Museum and Campanile (Gummer and Ford, Auckland, 1930), Canterbury Hall Co. Ltd (WH Trengrove, 1931), the Christchurch Art Gallery (EW Armstrong, Rangoon, 1931), Dilworth School for Boys at Wiri (HE White, Sydney, 1931), the Geddes Basin (Onehunga (1934), the New Hastings Clock Tower (SG Chaplin, c1937), the combined Memorial Hall and Bathing Pavilion, Petone (HL Massey), the Christchurch Subsidiary Hospital (Gummer and Ford and Partners, Auckland, 1939), the cover of the NZIA brochure "Building in Zealand" (Ralph A Pickmere,

Auckland, 1934) and the "Aitkens Prize: Essay Competition. The Wellington Library Competition was surprisingly won in 1935 by two firms: Gummer and Ford (Auckland) for their interior design, and Messenger, Taylor and Wolfe (New Plymouth) for their exterior design, and, in November 1934, the Auckland Institute and Museum and the Library and Art Gallery Committee of the Auckland City, held an Exhibition and Competition of Decorative Art designs, "based on motifs taken from New Zealand Flora and Fauna."⁸ As well as mention of winners, conditions and unsatisfactory conditions of competition were discussed with several competitions, including a competition for a Mother's rest at Wairoa, Hawke's Bay (1935) being banned for members of the NZIA.⁹ Such competitions clearly became contentious. Discussion about the "banned" competition for the Napier Municipal Theatre including a note of appreciation to "our President (Mr. Gummer) [who] assisted in placing the whole matter on a satisfactory footing."¹⁰ International successes included Roy Lippincott's second place in the competition for Sydney's new

⁸ "Decorative Art" p 39.

⁹ "District Branches Notes [Hawke's Bay-Gisborne]" p 19.

¹⁰ "District Branches Notes [Hawke's Bay-Gisborne]" p 46.

Law Courts, and ex-pat RH Uren, who, after studying in Wellington with CT Natusch & Sons, and then later at the Auckland University College, moved to England, receiving the RIBA Bronze Medal and Diploma in 1935 for the design of the Town Hall, at Hornsey.¹¹

A key moment for New Zealand housing in the decade was the election of the first Labour Government in 1935 (the year the first domestic refrigerator was manufactured in Auckland). Savage and his Labour government introduced significant social reforms, and a programme of state housing. In 1936 the Department of Housing was established to build rental state houses, and the first state housing was occupied in 1937 (the same year that free milk in schools was introduced). 1936 was significant for other reasons too. Free education was made available to all people up to 19 years old, the National Party was formed, and the first issues of what was to become *New Zealand Home and Building* were produced. The first issue (October-December 1936) was published

¹¹ "Presentation of the R.I.B.A. Bronze Medal and Diploma, to Mr. R.H. Uren (A), A.R.I.B.A." pp 81-83; also see *Journal of New Zealand Institute of Architects* (February 1937) XV (6):90-91.

"under the auspices of the Auckland branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects" and called *Building Today*. The July-September 1937 issue (titled *Home and Building Today*), announced that the title of the November issue would be altered to *Home and Building*. This co-incided with the temporary cessation of the *NZIAJ*, which did not restart again until the 1950s. *Home and Building* was a graphically more vibrant journal. It included more photography and discussion of specific buildings, and was more popularly oriented. The Auckland Committee of the NZIA's involvement with editing an architectural page in *Home Pictorial* (Hon. Editor HL Massey) was likely the genesis of this.

1936 was also the year that informal links between Rātana and the Labour Party began. Like women, Māori were not prominently represented in the architectural profession, and only small and oblique references to Māoridom appear in the professional journals. In Robert Finch's New County Council Chambers, Whangārei it was reported that: "Unnecessary ornament has been eliminated and in a few features incorporated, careful consideration has been given to typical forms

of Maori carving."¹² Robert McGregor has noted references to Māori motifs in several of the art deco buildings erected in the rebuilding of Napier,¹³ and buildings such as Stanley W Fearn's Country House "Rototawa" (Featherston, c1938), were given Māori names.

The identity and definition of the architect was a prominent point of speculation generating numerous articles in the *NZIAJ* including: "The Architect and Civilisation,"¹⁴ "The Duties and Responsibilities of the Architect,"¹⁵ "The Architect's Function,"¹⁶ "What is the Destiny of the Architect?,"¹⁷ "The Sins of the Architect,"¹⁸ and "The Architect's Part in Modern Life."¹⁹ MH Baille Scott's musings on the subject asserted that: "if you think of the architect as a kind of animated cocktail, composed in definite propositions of artist, engineer and business man, I think you

will find it is the artist who puts the kick in the cocktail ... the architect is essentially a kind of "mixed drink".²⁰ Similarly modernism, and the moderne were a point of interest, spawning articles such as: "Modern Tendencies in Architectural Design,"²¹ "The Urge of the Modern,"²² and "The Study of History: its place in relation to modern architecture."²³ Technological advances and fascinations are evident in ongoing discussions of concrete, "The Future of Brickwork in New Zealand,"²⁴ and "Steel Doors and partitions as applied to modern buildings."²⁵ Announcements were made of "perspex" and diakon" as innovative new transparent plastics,²⁶ of the "Standardisation of Timber sections,"²⁷ "Telephone Wiring,"²⁸ and the "all-electric home."²⁹ The decade

¹² "New County Council Chambers at Whangārei" p 17.

¹³ McGregor "'Indigneous art deco' in New Zealand" pp 4-8.

¹⁴ "The Architect and Civilisation" pp 150-151.

¹⁵ "The Duties and Responsibilities of the Architect" pp 110-113.

¹⁶ "The Architect's Function" pp 54-55.

¹⁷ "What is the Destiny of the Architect?" pp 49-50.

¹⁸ "The Sins of the Architect: As Seen from Outside" pp 129-131.

¹⁹ "The Architect's Part in Modern Life" pp 29-30.

²⁰ Scott "Thoughts about Building" pp 69-70.

²¹ Knight "Modern Tendencies in Architectural Design" pp 86ff.

²² Greenish "The Urge of the Modern" pp 77-81.

²³ "The Study of History" pp 63-65.

²⁴ "The Future of Brickwork in New Zealand" pp 81-82.

²⁵ Burn "Steel Doors and partitions as applied to modern buildings" pp 27-30.

²⁶ "New Transparent Plastics" pp 46-47.

²⁷ "Standardisation of Timber sections" pp 30-31.

²⁸ "Telephone Wiring" pp 83-84.

²⁹ Keith "The All-Electric Home" pp 48-49; Keith "The All-Electric Home - II" pp 65-66.

concluded with Chiwell and Trevethick's Arthur Eady Building, cnr Vulcan Lane and Queen St, Auckland (c1939) as the largest external use of structural glass "yet made in New Zealand." Meanwhile several architects (including Oscar Jorgensen,³⁰ Herbert Anderson Jones,³¹ JE Duffell of Whanganui³²) were either suspended or expelled from the Institute.

Architects who died during the decade included: William Chatfield,³³ TH Battle,³⁴ Francis Gooder,³⁵ George Penlington,³⁶ Charles Lawrence,³⁷ Robert Edwards,³⁸ John Collins,³⁹ Samuel Hurst Seager,⁴⁰ John MacLachlan,⁴¹ David Kean,⁴² Charles Boland,⁴³

Thomas Royds,⁴⁴ John Swan,⁴⁵ and John Warren.⁴⁶ Key buildings of the decade included: Wellington Railway Station (Gray Young, Morton and Young, c1937), Australian Mutual Provident Society, Napier (JA Louis Hay), Cintra Flats, Auckland (HL Massey, 1937), Auckland Railway Station (Gummer, Ford & Wilson, 1930), Wellesley Club, Wellington (Gray Young, Morton and Young, c1932), St David's Memorial Church, Cave, South Canterbury (Herbert W Hall, c1934), Hampton Court Flats, Auckland (SS Alleman, c1931) Hotel Waterloo, Wellington (CH Mitchell (Mitchell & Mitchell)), New Headquarters for the St John Ambulance Association in Dunedin (Miller and White, c1938), Morrison and Gilberd Ltd, Wellington (Bernard W Johns), New Public Library, Whangarei (HL Massey, c1938), Blythe's Tearooms Napier (Natusch and Sons), Berkeley, Mission Bay, Auckland (Llew S. Piper), and Vernon Brown's own house on Arney Road (c1937). St Vincent's Home of Compassion, Auckland (Gerald E Jones, c1939), Fletcher House, Wadestown (John S Swan, c1939).

Other prominent architects were: Crichton, McKay & Houghton, Bernard W Johns, Albert N Goldwater, Vernon Brown, Helmore and Cotterill, Roy Alstan Lippincott

The decade had moved from the nationalism and monumentalism of Gummer and Ford's competition entry for the National Art Gallery, Dominion Museum and Campanile (1930), and the same firm's Auckland Railway Station through to Vernon Brown's assertion of a house with "All cant and humbug avoided,"⁴⁷ its flat roof responding to the realisation that "there is no snow in Arney Road."⁴⁸ The decade ended with New Zealand supporting Britain's declaration of war on Germany, gathering momentum for the formation of a Town Planning Institute (realised in 1949), and the opening of the Edmund Anscombe's New Zealand Centennial Exhibition buildings at Rongotai in Wellington.

³⁰ "Notice of Suspension of Members" p 77.

³¹ "Expulsion of a Member" p 23.

³² "Complaint Against a Member" p 83.

³³ "Obituary: William Charles Chatfield (F)" p 48.

³⁴ "Obituary: T. H. Battle (F)" p 120.

³⁵ "Obituary: Francis Eric Gooder (A)" p 120.

³⁶ "Obituary: George Penlington, Fellow" p 92.

³⁷ "Obituary: Charles Alexander Lawrence (F)" p 140.

³⁸ "Obituary: Robert Edwards (F)" p 24.

³⁹ "Obituary: J. J. Collins (Life Hon. Member)" p 36.

⁴⁰ "Obituary – S. Hurst Seager C.B.E., F.R.I.B.A., F.T.P.I., (F), Past-President" pp 58-59.

⁴¹ "Obituary: John George MacLachlan" pp 82-83.

⁴² "Obituary: David Murray Kean (F)" p 83.

⁴³ Frame, K. "Obituary: Charles John Boland (F)" p 72.

⁴⁴ "Obituary: Thomas Parry Royds (A)" p 82.

⁴⁵ "Obituary: John Sidney Swan" p 23.

⁴⁶ "Obituary: J. W. [John Willis] Warren (F)" p 35.

⁴⁷ "The architect built himself a house among the trees" p 12.

⁴⁸ "The architect built himself a house among the trees" p 12.

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