

Anscombe's plans for Highrise Living

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ABSTRACT: In the 1930s New Zealand was yet to invest in inner-city living via large scale apartment buildings. Few examples of flats existed. A. Sinclair O'Connor's Courtville (1914-19) at the corner Waterloo Quadrant and Parliament Street, Auckland, and Francis Petre's Manor Place Flats in Dunedin were exceptions to conventional living. In the 1930s greater interest was shown in the design of inner-city apartments – most famously by the Department of Housing Construction's Berhampore Flats, Adelaide Rd (Wellington, Gordon Wilson, 1938-40), and Symonds Street Flats, Symonds Street (Auckland, Friedrich Neumann, 1939-47), anticipating their 1940s work: the Dixon Street Flats, Dixon Street (Wellington, 1940-44), the Maclean Flats, The Terrace (Wellington, 1943-44), the Hanson Street Flats, Newtown (1943-44), and the Greys Avenue Flats, Greys Avenue (Auckland, 1945-47).

In Wellington, Edmund Anscombe dominated the design of privately funded inner city flats, designing six art-deco/modernistic apartments during this time: Belvedere, Hamilton Flats, Olympus, Linfield, Alberts Flats and Franconia. This paper examines these apartments in the context of Anscombe's comments on house design, and housing, and his 1936 proposal to replan the area of Adelaide Road as a residential area to accommodate superblocs of high rise apartments.

Introduction

In the 1930s apartments and blocks of flats were both new and old architecture. While a lineage of apartment building design can be traced from the long houses of the Iroquois, communal dwellings in the Roman empire, sixteenth-century apartment buildings in Paris and Edinburgh,¹ through to the mid-nineteenth-century emergence of slum dwellings such as New York "railroad flats"² and developments such as the 1864 Peabody Tenements,³ proponents of modernism located the flat as "a building type peculiar to our own era; without precedent in the architecture of the past."⁴ Apartment

buildings and flats were seen as part of a new approach to architecture. As VRJ Hean stated in 1933: "[t]o-day's building programmes were all fresh and demand expression in style ... society had created new forms of home - namely the apartment house and flats, as well as the revolutionising of the house plan. ... The architects were now giving as much attention to the kitchenette and bathroom as to the major rooms."⁵

Reading architectural literature from the decade three dominant lines of thought surface: a prosaic one (often American) for which apartment houses are an

uncontroversial reality, a conservative one (often English) for which blocks of flats are a very last and unappealing housing option forced on us for economic reasons, and a modernist one, where blocks of flats are advocated for and twinned to both the aesthetic and utopian aspirations of modernism. Flats in this scenario were said to make a positive contribution to modern living and are considered as part of wider issues of site and town planning. A divide between English and American attitudes was also evident in printed objections observed by architects. In England, Ashworth notes, the "[s]erious psychological objection of all Englishmen towards living in crowds, an objection by no means obsolete."⁶ His

¹ "Apartment House" p 104.

² "Apartment House" p 104.

³ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 10.

⁴ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 8.

⁵ Hean "Modern Architecture" p 66. c.f. "The flat has produced a building type peculiar to our own era; without precedent in the architecture of the past." Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 8.

⁶ Ashworth *Flats* p 2.

assessment of the English "national trait of obstinate refusal of all innovations,"⁷ was clearly challenged by:

[t]he idea of the flat [which] revolutionizes the sense of freedom, ownership and privacy, all very personal national traits. It is not easy to eradicate the results of centuries of usage and custom as has been proved in other directions. Human nature cannot be hurried, and any attention is a slow process, always assuming it possible at all.⁸

The American reception of the apartment block in the 1930s was also mixed - but it seems for often very different, and more explicitly architectural, reasons. An anonymous article in *Architectural Forum* strongly stated that mediocre buildings were being constructed because of the lack of understanding that apartment architecture required "an entirely new kind of design."⁹ This writer argued that "the same process of intelligent thought [which had corrected the "architectural mistakes" of early office building design] must be used for the development of appropriate apartment house design."¹⁰

⁷ Ashworth *Flats* p 2.

⁸ Ashworth *Flats* p 2.

⁹ Anon. "Criticism of Apartment Architecture" p 271.

¹⁰ Anon. "Criticism of Apartment Architecture" p 272.

Arguments for promoting flats included the high cost of (inner city) land and building construction,¹¹ the increasing commuting distance between work and home,¹² the "servant problem,"¹³ the facilitation of slum clearance, and the prevention of "ribbon development and similar atrocities."¹⁴ Other less universally accepted positives included the assertions that flats were more appropriate models for modern living (which had made large houses redundant),¹⁵ and that the apartment house was able to include features unable to be found in private houses;¹⁶ communal facilities such as heating, refuse disposal, hot water supply, laundries, nurseries,¹⁷ and the provision of open spaces for recreation.¹⁸ Flats were also promoted as

¹¹ Bancroft "The Modern Apartment House" p 269; Ives "The Moderate Priced Apartment Hotel" p 309.

¹² Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 9, Greenwood "Foreword" p v, Ashworth *Flats* p 2; Ives "The Moderate Priced Apartment Hotel" p 309.

¹³ Bancroft "The Modern Apartment House" p 269; "Cintra" p 19.

¹⁴ Ashworth *Flats* p 1.

¹⁵ Bancroft "The Modern Apartment House" p 269; Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 29; also Ives "The Moderate Priced Apartment Hotel" p 309; "Cintra" p 19.

¹⁶ Bancroft "The Modern Apartment House" p 269.

¹⁷ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 13.

¹⁸ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 16; Ashworth *Flats* p 1.

relieving onerous garden maintenance,¹⁹ and providing better views, more natural light and fresh air, because of their location in taller buildings.²⁰ Hence ideas of blocks of flats often assumed a landscape context and the image of a modernist park ideal, rather than the frequent reality of a closely packed urban fabric which gave less idyllic options for siting.

New Zealand

In 1930s New Zealand similar conflicts of opinion were also evident. Gatley points both to Cedric Firth's 1949 assertion that "any excursion into the erection of apartment blocks demands an excuse, even an apology"²¹ and to the low numbers of flats (1.5%) built under the first Labour Government's state housing scheme. She also notes Ferguson's observation that New Zealand's tradition of detached suburban houses (along with its strong association with the nuclear family, and the use of suburban sections to "grow fruit and vegetables and raise an animal or

¹⁹ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 13; Ashworth *Flats* pp vii, 1.

²⁰ Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* p 20.

²¹ Firth quoted, Gatley "Going Up Rather than Out" p 140.

two"²²), had become symbolic of New Zealand aspirations for living.²³

Prior to the 1930s apartments had been built,²⁴ but these were an exception to the predominance of the detached house. Yet, while New Zealand was yet to invest significantly in building blocks of flats, by the 1930s greater interest was shown in the design of inner-city apartments - and not only by the Department of Housing Construction. Private developments at this time included E Rupert Morten's Berrisville Apartments (Symonds Street, 1937),²⁵ Llew S Pipers' 87 Grafton Rd (1939)²⁶ and his Mission Bay Flats (1939),²⁷ Surrey S Alleman's Garden Court (Mission

Bay, c1936),²⁸ and Kenneth W Aimer's Marina Garden Flats (Mt Eden Rd, 1936).²⁹ Contemporary to this, Gray Young's Wellesley Club in Wellington, which included inner city apartments, received the NZIA Gold Medal,³⁰ as did Surrey S Alleman's Hampton Court Flats (Wellesley Street, Auckland) in 1930,³¹ and Horace Massey's Cintra (9-13 Whittaker Place, Auckland) in 1936.³² These awards indicated an endorsement of good apartment design by the architectural profession but the day-to-day reality of the situation might be hinted at by the diminished ambitions of such projects. Fletcher Construction's intentions for Cintra (published in both the newspapers and the architectural press) were the initially much larger-scale construction of "probably 70 flats in blocks [on four acres] ... There would be four, six and eight flats variously in the blocks, according to the size of the sections, and the project would be a comprehensive scheme on the most modern town-planning lines."³³ As can be seen, the final built project

is less than a tenth of the initial proposal for "[f]ifteen individual blocks ... each containing from four to eight flats."³⁴

The international interest in the building of flats and apartments was available to New Zealand architects via overseas magazine subscriptions, travel and references in the pages of the *NZIA Journal*. Articles by Francastel and Greenish referred to the work of Sauvage (1912), He'brard, Garnier (1914),³⁵ and Gropius,³⁶ linking collective housing and tenement buildings with modern architecture. Simultaneously other NZIA members located flats and group housing as less than ideal, especially because of the "entirely different conditions in New Zealand."³⁷ Hammond, for example, noted that:

It would probably be agreed, however, that for this country the best type of house to be encouraged wherever practicable was the single-family detached house. In certain cases it may be found desirable to introduce group housing for the sake of economy. It may also be found desirable to introduce flats under certain circumstances, particularly where for certain reasons a section of the population has to be re-housed in existing areas on relatively expensive land. ...

²² Gatley "Going Up Rather than Out" p 140.

²³ Gatley "Going Up Rather than Out" p 140.

²⁴ Early examples include: A. Sinclair O'Connor's Courtville (1914-19) at the corner Waterloo Quadrant and Parliament Street, Auckland, and Francis Petre's Manor Place Flats in Dunedin which were exceptions to conventional living. Gatley refers to flats built in the 1920s including in Auckland: Shortland Flats (Shortland Street, 1923), Espano Flats, Mayfair Flats, Wellesley Street Flats, Brooklyn Apartments; in Wellington: Inverleith (Oriental Bay, 1922), Braemar, Mayfair Flats, Chevening Flats; in Christchurch: St Elmo Courts.

²⁵ "Berrisville: New Auckland Flats" pp 13-15.

²⁶ "Eighty-Seven" p 32.

²⁷ "Seaside Flats at Mission Bay" p 23.

²⁸ "Flatting Up-To-Date" pp 21-22.

²⁹ "Flatting Up-To-Date" p 20.

³⁰ "The Wellesley Club, Wellington [1932 Gold Medal]" p 41.

³¹ "The N.Z.I.A. Gold Medal, 1930" p 60; Mandeno "Presidential Address" p 3.

³² "Cintra" pp 19-21

³³ "70 Flats in Blocks" p 13.

³⁴ "Cintra" p 19.

³⁵ Francastel "Modern Architecture in France" p 68.

³⁶ Greenish "The Urge of the Modern" p 81.

³⁷ Hammond "Housing and the Architect" p 41.

Experience has shown in other parts of the world that from the point of view of health, as well as that of amenity, separate houses or groups of houses are preferable to flats and should be built wherever it is practical to do so. There is much to be said in favour of the group housing from the point of view of economy.³⁸

Responding to Hammond, even Greenish, an admirer of Gropius' apartment work, noted that:

Continental experiments of community dwellings ... were questions where social evolution had to be considered. Life in the Dominion was more individualistic than communal, and for that reason such methods did not apply and individual dwellings were more likely to be acceptable than tenements or flats.³⁹

It was hence concern for the New Zealand character, and what an appropriate building for this person was, that meant these architects questioned the viability of apartment living.

The ambivalence about the appropriateness of flats in New Zealand in the institute journal was less apparent in Wellington's popular press. *The Dominion*, published both local and English opinion of flats. English ideas ranged from a proposal by the English Commissioner

³⁸ Hammond "Housing and the Architect" p 42.

³⁹ Hammond "Housing and the Architect" p 43.

of Works, George Lansbury, to convert disfunctional school buildings "into flats for middle-class people,"⁴⁰ to reports of Sir Harold Bellman's observation that "'the flat, in short, is the price we must pay for our past neglect, though it is doubtful whether it is the type of accommodation the average worker really prefers.'"⁴¹ Letters to the Editor were damning of flats, one by "C.C." writing that:

On Mount Victoria, Te Aro Flat, Tinakori Road, Thorndon and Upper Willis Street one can discover whole areas providing less air space for human beings than would be allowed in a London slum doshouse. Really, Wellington needs a Dickens, a Reade, or a Morton to give a word picture of the rottenness of its housing conditions.⁴²

S/he concluded that "very little can be expected from a council where not one member has had contact or experience with modern housing development,"⁴³ and advocated for "the erection of dwellings on the "group-housing" plan."⁴⁴ While the contemporary situation and predominant experience of Wellington flats as "slumdom" is clearly conveyed, the public (as reflected in

⁴⁰ "Open-Air Schools: Mr. George Lansbury's Ideas" p 11.

⁴¹ "Housing Plans: Britain's New Standards" p 5.

⁴² C.C. "The Flats of Wellington" p 11.

⁴³ C.C. "The Flats of Wellington" p 11.

⁴⁴ C.C. "The Flats of Wellington" p 11.

the press) distinguished between the inadequate timber houses unsatisfactorily subdivided into flats and specifically-designed modern apartment buildings. In fact, *The Dominion* seemed to advance the idea of flats "designed on modern lines,"⁴⁵ or "modern principles,"⁴⁶ as a way to address the "intolerable shortage"⁴⁷ of housing in the city, which was instead causing houses to be "converted into flats without the knowledge of the council,"⁴⁸ and "slumdom."⁴⁹

It is within this context that Edmund Anscombe's foray into apartment building design, a phenomenon which appears to be confined to Wellington and the 1930s, is situated.

Edmund Anscombe

Anscombe was born in England in 1874. After a career as a builder in New Zealand, he moved to America as a carpenter in San Francisco (1902-3) and St Louis (1904), and as a draughtsperson in New York (1905-6),⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "Housing as an Election Issue" p 8.

⁴⁶ "The Problem of Flats" p 10.

⁴⁷ "The Problem of Flats" p 10.

⁴⁸ "The Problem of Flats" p 10.

⁴⁹ "The Problem of Flats" p 10.

⁵⁰ McCarthy "The making of an architect" forthcoming.

before returning to Dunedin and establishing an architectural firm in 1907. His early architectural career was based in Dunedin and included early success in local architectural competitions, an appointment as architect to the University of Otago, and as architect of the 1925 New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition. He moved to Wellington in 1929 following a lengthy trip overseas with his two daughters. Anscombe held strong opinions and both wrote articles for, and was reported about in, the press. From 1920 to 1925 four articles present Anscombe's views on housing.

Anscombe's texts on housing

The texts suggest Anscombe approached the subject of housing in a broad sense, considering it an economic and political issue as much as one about architectural design. For Anscombe, housing had implications for industrial productivity,⁵¹ and the character of people.⁵² Housing should be "sanitary and

⁵¹ "Bad or inadequate housing is a prejudice to labor, and progressive manufacturers the world over are fast becoming alive to the fact that in order to secure and hold the services of the best type of workmen they must interest themselves in the living conditions of their employees." "The Housing Problem: A workable scheme suggested by local architects" p 4.

⁵² "Better houses mean better children, better children

hygienic," free from vermin, fire-resistant, provide privacy, receive "a proper amount of light, ventilation, and direct sunlight," and have "sufficient bedrooms for the sexes to sleep apart."⁵³ He was very conscious about the economic and pragmatic benefits of good site selection for houses,⁵⁴ and the need for houses to be "pleasing to the eye,"⁵⁵ accommodate technology,⁵⁶ and be ergonomic ("to save unnecessary walking on the part of the housewife"⁵⁷).

In his opinion, the government should subsidise housing, but "[t]he onus of providing housing accommodation in their

mean better men and women, better men and women mean better citizens, and better citizens mean a better New Zealand" Anscombe "Dunedin North End Schemes" p 9.

⁵³ "The Housing Problem: A workable scheme suggested by local architects" p 4.

⁵⁴ "The selection of a location for a home was almost as important as the choice of a life partner" "Home Building: Address by Mr E. Anscombe" p 61.

⁵⁵ "the design of a house should be pleasing to the eye ... [but] An artistic plan was useless if it was not practicable, and therefore these two points should be considered in conjunction." "Home Building: Address by Mr E. Anscombe" p 61.

⁵⁶ "every labour-saving device" "Home Building: Address by Mr E. Anscombe" p 61.

⁵⁷ "Home Building: Address by Mr E. Anscombe" p 61.

respective communities should be upon local bodies,"⁵⁸ while residential zoning, and the replacement of slum dwellings, would enable better living conditions for "our less fortunate citizens."⁵⁹ These texts also reveal Anscombe's interest in intensive use of space, and in group housing. Breakfast alcoves, disappearing beds, and combination baths ("which comprised a seat, foot bath, shower, and child's bath, all in one") were encouraged to save work and enable "an intensive use of space" which Anscombe labelled "the "efficiency" idea." He also proposed "the idea of grouping houses in the form of a court" as appropriate for New Zealand housing, illustrating at least one lecture with lantern slides "to give an idea of the pleasing results that could be achieved under the group [housing] system."⁶⁰

The texts suggest that Anscombe considered that housing needed to be a large-scale business,⁶¹ and that control of building

⁵⁸ "The Housing Problem: A workable scheme suggested by local architects" p 4.

⁵⁹ Anscombe "Dunedin North End Schemes" p 9.

⁶⁰ "Home Building: Address by Mr E. Anscombe" p 61.

⁶¹ "In these days house-building must be looked upon as big business, and should be handled as big business is handled; the position to-day renders large-scale operations imperative." "The Housing Problem: A

materials (through standardisation and set prices)⁶² was critical to achieve in housing what the market had not. He was also a keen advocate of concrete construction arguing that timber should be discouraged as a building material because of the need for fire-resistant houses, for economic reasons, and "the absolute necessity of conserving timber."⁶³ In 1920 he patented the "O.K." concrete block system and began using this to construct houses, including "Cintra" his own house in Dunedin. His later writing on houses focus more narrowly on the benefits of building concrete block over timber and brick veneer.⁶⁴

workable scheme suggested by local architects" p 4.

⁶² Anscombe argued for standardisation of "interior finish, joinery and other fittings" ("Infinite variety is possible by tastefully combining harmonious standardised designs of fittings and finishes"), and a change to the current conditions of building contracts, to provide set prices for building materials and labour, as part of an economic strategy to address the then housing problem. ("Under this contract ... it would be necessary for the Board of Trade to prepare a schedule of rates, at ruling prices, for all building materials and labor, to form a basis from which contractors could compile their estimates"). "Housing Problems: the practical side" p 7.

⁶³ "The Housing Problem: A workable scheme suggested by local architects" p 4.

⁶⁴ "Shortage of timber must very soon force us to substitute concrete for building walls of houses ... to continue using timber for walls and partitions ... is just sheer folly ... Concrete would not only provide better

Anscombe's Flat Design

During the 1930s Anscombe was involved in designing numerous buildings in the Hawke's Bay (particularly following the 1931 earthquake), the 1940 Centennial Exhibition, as well as continuing his regular Wellington practice. This decade also appears to be the only time that he designed multi-storey flats, namely Belvedere,⁶⁵ Hamilton Flats,⁶⁶ Olympus,⁶⁷ Anscombe Flats,⁶⁸ Alberts Flats,⁶⁹ and Franconia.⁷⁰ While most of the flats were built in the late 1930s (from 1936-1938), many, such as Albert Flats and Anscombe Flats, were initially designed much earlier.⁷¹

and more permanent houses at practically the same cost as timber, but walls and partitions built of it would fool the borer, be fire-resisting, and reduce maintenance charges to a minimum." "Walls for Houses: the Timber Famine" p 11. see also "Experiments in Building" p 8; "Housing Methods: described as "tragic"" p 9.

⁶⁵ cnr Austin and Majoribanks Streets, 82 Majoribanks St, 1937, see also McGill *Landmarks* p 249.

⁶⁶ 9 Hawker St, 1937

⁶⁷ 280 Oriental Pde, 1936-37

⁶⁸ also initially known as Lynfield, 212 Oriental Pde, 1936/1937, see also McGill *Landmarks* pp 143, 249.

⁶⁹ now Invincible House, 161 Willis St, 1938

⁷⁰ now Lintas House, 136 The Terrace, 1938 see also McGill *Landmarks* p 249.

⁷¹ In the case of Albert Flats an initial building approval was given on 12 April 1930, with alterations requiring approvals at the end of 1934. Town Clerk Letter to Messrs Anscombe and Associates (12 April 1930); see

These concrete apartment buildings draw on a moderne design, which often demonstrates a clarity of line stressing the rectilinear, as well as a curvilinear streamline. Vertical and horizontal geometries are explored as well as relationships between the circular and the rectangular. As Bowman notes of Anscombe Flats:

[t]he horizontal is emphasised on the facade, in the spandrels and window hoods, and the window joinery. This is a building of clean lines, with generous fenestration underlying the building's response to light and views.⁷²

Anscombe employed a range of vertical strategies in his planning which no doubt reflect his clients' briefs. These included: the repetition of floor plans, the use of shops on the ground floor, undercutting the building on the ground floor to allow vehicle access to the rear yard, and a vertical progression of apartments differentiated by size, view, and generosity of planning. Franconia, described by Bowman as "a mixture of parts,"⁷³ exemplifies this stratified planning. Increases

also Hart "Erection of Shops: Willis Street" (3 April 1930).

⁷² Bowman *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory* n.p.

⁷³ Bowman *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory* n.p.

in height bring increases in the quality and expense of each apartment, a result of the invention and use of the elevator or lift, which had removed the long walk up many flights of steps to the upper apartments and hence inverted the nineteenth-century economics of flat tenancy - an elevator and a view now surpassing the close proximity of the ground floor to the street in its appeal.

Socioeconomic variation in tenancy can also be read through the three dimensional form of the building's exterior. In Franconia, rectilinear form softens with height, moving up from a tightly planned bedsit to the two storey penthouse apartment. Like Anscombe Flats, it is the semi-circular, rather than simply curvilinear streamlining, which indicates significant increase in status. Olympus likewise bulges to the west to both acknowledge the street corner and to reflect the larger flats on the north-west side. The harbour views, access to more sunlight, larger bedrooms, and dining areas contrast sharply with the adjacent flats on the same floor with their snug dining alcove, limited outlook and darker corners. Olympus' curve relaxes and avoids the tight pinch of the intersection of Grass and Oriental Parade as it mediates the relationship between architecture and traffic.

Bowman suggests Anscombe's treatment of Franconia is similar when he notes that "[t]he "turn" of the building gently emphasises the street corner of the facade."⁷⁴

Inside Franconia, false curves in the upper floors' living areas continue to reinforce an association of curve with wealth. The boxier lower middle class consistency of Albert Flats, Belvedere and Hamilton Flats contrasts with this more sculpted form of both Franconia and Anscombe Flats. This consistency also crosses their closely related plan forms, familiar to both Olympus and the middle floors of the highly stratified Franconia, though the use of an internal corridor or external gallery access, seen in the less expensive Hamilton Flats and Belvedere, contrasts Anscombe's more predominant use of the more desirable group direct access planning, advocated by Ashworth in his 1936 book *Flats: Design and Equipment*.⁷⁵

Room functions include those specifically developed with an apartment domesticity in

⁷⁴ Bowman *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory* n.p.

⁷⁵ Ashworth describes direct access planning as the most desirable. Ashworth *Flats* p 14; see also Yorke and Gibberd *The Modern Flat* pp 22-26.

mind. These aimed to distort conventional domestic space - compacting space (dining alcove, bedsit, combined bath and shower units) and expanding it (sunroom, den, study). Domestic drudgery (laundry, kitchen, bathroom) is diminished, and at times displaced. As an example, Anscombe's flats have linen cupboards but no laundries, and Franconia is the only apartment block with a communal laundry; reflecting the advance of domestic appliance technology which enabled an architectural expansion of leisure simultaneous with a lack of servants.

A seemingly favourite motif, present in four of the apartment buildings (Olympus, Franconia, Anscombe Flats and Belvedere), is the v-shaped oriel window. These tall windows stretch up, emphasising the building's multi-storey character as the oriel runs through the horizontal streamlining stripes of the moderne. These verticals construct the buildings as contemporary urban structures conscious of the high value of their site and the compulsion to maximise their worth through height. Strong vertical lines also occur in the façade of Franconia. Bowman describes these as deliberately playful and conceptually detachable:

... the three dominant "pilasters" [on the street façade] are purely (and ironically) stylistic ... stylised guttae and taenia above the pilasters [are] ... one suspects in an ironic reference to the decline of the classical (and therefore historicist) ideal.⁷⁶

Anscombe Flats (also initially known as Lynfield)

In 1933, shortly after Anscombe arrived in Wellington in 1929, he bought his property on Oriental Parade which was to become the site for Anscombe Flats. A preliminary proposal had been submitted by 1933⁷⁷ and a preliminary application lodged three years later in 1936⁷⁸ with permit approval granted on 18 December 1936. Designed, built, and owned by the 62 year-old Anscombe, who occupied the penthouse apartment and the flat on the floor below it with his daughter,⁷⁹ the building can be considered to represent Anscombe's ideals in apartment living. The

⁷⁶ Bowman *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory* n.p.

⁷⁷ Anscombe. Letter to The City Engineer (13 December 1933) see also Luke "Erection of Flats: Oriental Parade" (7 December 1936); Anscombe Letter to City Engineer (30 November 1936).

⁷⁸ Luke "Erection of Flats: Oriental Parade" (7 December 1936); Anscombe Letter to City Engineer (30 November 1936)

⁷⁹ Luke Memorandum to Town Clerk "Erection of Detached Room"

penthouse in particular reflects his personality as the man who reputedly lived to the motto that work was his hobby, as the space can be seen to simultaneously over-emphasise both work and leisure. Unlike the more pragmatic and traditionally organised apartments below it, the penthouse succinctly defines living as work (den, studio) and its proximate pleasure (the sun room, the roof, and its views) A 1939 issue of the *New Zealand Women's Weekly* described the penthouse as

an essentially masculine atmosphere. It contains an office-cum-library, a den, and a bedroom with dressing-room and shower-room off it. Opening off this suite is a most delightful sunroom built out in a half circle and glassed almost to the floor. Barred doors lead from this sun-trap to a railed balcony, from which the view is superb.⁸⁰

The Anscombe Flats follow true to Anscombe's self-expressed interest in progress and modernity via, in particular, the domestic technology deployed in the house. The *Women's Weekly* noted that "[e]verything has been planned for labour-saving and comfort."⁸¹ The apartments were centrally steam-heated, and included foreign fittings.⁸²

⁸⁰ "Luxury Living" p 7.

⁸¹ "Luxury Living" p 6.

⁸² "Luxury Living" p 7.

"[T]he wash basin ... [had] a novel chromium plug which lifts when a knob on the tap is raised," and electric dish-washers were imported, causing a slight concern with the realisation that their plumbing mismatched the dimensions of Wellington's city sewers.⁸³

Unlike Anscombe's other apartment designs, each flat provided maids' quarters at the rear of the building with a separate entrance into the flat, and separate ablution facilities. These miniaturised versions of the main flat were seemingly self-contained, partitioned from the apartments' living spaces by the dining room which bridged and mediated living from service.

Access into the building was via the garage or a very discrete entrance at the western side of the building, or the rear. The meek side entrance strongly suggests it was Anscombe's intention that he would always arrive home by car. Like Franconia, garages line the street. This contrasts with the Albert Flats which provided a ground floor vehicle tunnel through to rear yard parking. Garages are

⁸³ "Luxury Living" p 7; "I have had imported 4 Electric Dish Washers, for my Flats, Oriental Parade: and find that the wastes are 1½". Anscombe & Associates to The City Engineer (23 February 1938)

also on the ground floor of Belvedere, beneath the apartment block. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that cars were accommodated with variation. The designs for Hamilton Flats and Olympus, for example, assume the availability of street-parking or pedestrianised inhabitants. Franconia and Albert Flats each provide four car parks for their seven and 16 flats respectively, while Anscombe's Flats, with four apartments, provided three single car garages. Anscombe's car park reflects a certain indulgence in cars. Its plan discloses the simple garage supplemented by a workshop, a mechanics pit, and another double garage.

The Anscombe Plan

Contemporary with the building of his Wellington apartments, Anscombe published a housing scheme for Adelaide Road.⁸⁴ This was initially prepared in April 1936 and presented to the Mayor (Mr TCA Hislop), the Minister of Internal Affairs (Hon. WE Parry), and the Minister of Finance (Hon. W Nash).⁸⁵ The argument behind the Anscombe scheme was to exploit the forthcoming opportunity of the 1940 New Zealand Centennial Exhibition

⁸⁴ McCarthy "Traffic and the City" pp 417-433.

⁸⁵ "N.Z. Centennial: Betterment Scheme for Wellington City" p 8.

to address "the broader aspect of the city's town-planning problems, and its future development".⁸⁶ His chosen site was the Basin Reserve end of Adelaide Road, up to John Street.⁸⁷ It was "a considerable area [that] could be secured without interfering with a single modern building, as it would be found that a large percentage of the existing buildings have a very short life ahead of them."⁸⁸ Anscombe acknowledged that:

"there are areas which need replanning, perhaps more than this one, but none of them would meet the requirements of an exhibition at anything like the same cost. Since Government House, the Public Hospital, Wellington Boys' College, Museum and Art Gallery, are permanently located in close proximity to each other ... the intervening section through which Adelaide Road runs should not be permitted to become a manufacturing area but should be "zoned" for strictly residential purposes. It lends itself to such, and if reconstructed upon the lines I am suggesting, would undoubtedly become a most attractive section of Wellington."⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Anscombe quoted, "N.Z. Centennial: Betterment Scheme for Wellington City" p 8.

⁸⁷ "Exhibition Site: Mayor Replies to Slum Clearance Proposals" p 6.

⁸⁸ "N.Z. Centennial: Betterment Scheme for Wellington City" p 8.

⁸⁹ Anscombe quoted, "N.Z. Centennial: Betterment Scheme for Wellington City" p 8.

The housing scheme was presented in a perspective drawing dated April 1936. 18 blocks of five storey apartment blocks symmetrically line Adelaide Road below the grounds of Government House. The foreground of low-rise buildings fade into insignificance and the whiteness of the page. Eight U-shaped apartment blocks turn their back on the road and envelop culder-sac access ways. Each block is framed by small gardens and neat criss-crossing footpaths, and the footprints of the buildings thicken at the perimeter of the site suggesting the accommodation of circulation stairways. The scheme to rehouse current slum dwellers is intensely rectilinear and seemingly without the pleasure the interplay of lines and curvilinearity brought to his other projects. This Adelaide Road proposal is of a deceptively grand scale, similar to large housing schemes which had been proposed for St Andrews Garden, Liverpool, Leipzig Tenements, Quarry Hill Estate, Leeds Corporation Housing, and the Flats at Drancy, Paris. It echoed the sentiment and intention of Anscombe's earlier 1924 scheme, published in anticipation of the 1925 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition where he also proposed a housing scheme. This time though, it was modelled on a garden suburb model, to

achieve slum clearance and civic betterment.⁹⁰

The Adelaide Road scheme became public in August 1936 with its publication in *The Dominion*. It was not however the first suggestion of this type. On the 25 August 1936 a suggestion from Captain S Holm was published in *The Dominion* two days prior. The Holm scheme proposed that the blocks north of the Dominion Museum up to Vivian Street ("the worst slum area in Wellington"), be cleared, the "few good buildings on the site ... be worked in with the requirements of the exhibition" with the exhibition buildings built in permanent materials so the buildings could be re-used following the exhibition.⁹¹

Following the publication in *The Dominion* of the Holm and Anscombe plans, over a month of debate, mainly through the "Letters to the Editor," but also by published comments from the Chamber of Commerce, W Duncan, a city councillor, and Sir James Elliott, a Wellington doctor. Public support was given for both the Holm plan and the Anscombe scheme, though Anscombe's plan was pre-eminent, with comments referring to its preferred

⁹⁰ Anscombe "Dunedin North End Schemes" p 9.

⁹¹ "Proposed City Site for Exhibition" p 3.

"ambitious" nature, but also the disadvantage of the proposed Rongotai site due to wind, and traffic congestion.⁹² The advantages of the Anscombe plan were seen to be its vision for Wellington,⁹³ slum clearance,⁹⁴ up-to-date flats,⁹⁵ its central location,⁹⁶ the lasting civic benefit of improving the city,⁹⁷ and its ability to combine government aims of leaving a lasting monument of the exhibition, addressing housing shortages, and to provide city betterment.⁹⁸ The explicit reference to flats was limited. The Chamber of Commerce expressed interest in the proposal to use the exhibition site "for garden flats ... [to] make Wellington a garden city in New Zealand,"⁹⁹

⁹² Centennial 1940 "Centennial Plans" p 13; Interested "Exhibition Site" p 11.

⁹³ Plan Wellington First "Centennial Plans" p 11.

⁹⁴ Interested "Exhibition Site" p 11; "New Site Urged" p 10; "Exhibition Site: Councillor's Doubts About Rongotai" p 11; "Plans for Centenary Exhibition" p 8; "Slum Clearance: "The Crying Need of Wellington"" p 10.

⁹⁵ "Exhibition Site: Councillor's Doubts About Rongotai" p 11.

⁹⁶ Plan Wellington First "Centennial Plans" p 11, "New Site Urged" p 10; "Exhibition Site: Councillor's Doubts About Rongotai" p 11.

⁹⁷ Centennial 1940 "Centennial Plans" p 13; "New Site Urged" p 10; Clean-Up "Civic Betterment For 1940" p 11.

⁹⁸ Plan Wellington First "Centennial Plans" p 11.

⁹⁹ "New Site Urged" p 10.

and Councillor Duncan supported Wellington doing "what the Prince of Wales did at Kensington a few years ago - clear out a lot of shabby 50-year-old places and build decent, hygienic flats - approximate to the city."¹⁰⁰ There was no published opposition to, or outrage about, the huge scale of Anscombe's super-block apartment scheme by the general public. Rather overall praise was garnished, Plan Wellington First, for example, asserted that: "[t]he people would be fixed with enthusiasm over the possibilities of such a proposal, and the question of finance would melt away."¹⁰¹ Anscombe himself explicitly contributed to the conversation in only one letter saying that "it matters little which section of Wellington is used for the exhibition, if it will be the means of improving the city."¹⁰²

By 14 September, two and a half weeks after the initial publication of Anscombe's scheme, public opinion was such that the Mayor (Mr TCA Hislop) published a response addressing the public interest in Anscombe's and Holm's schemes. The Mayor stated that "The cost of

¹⁰⁰ "Exhibition Site: Councillor's Doubts About Rongotai" p 11.

¹⁰¹ Plan Wellington First "Centennial Plans" p 11.

¹⁰² Anscombe "Centennial Plans" p 13.

either scheme would be prohibitive ... [and] the time factor would preclude the carrying out of such schemes, unless Wellington were to break new ground by holding the celebrations long after the centennial had passed."¹⁰³ He acknowledged the desire for slum clearance, but stressed the negotiations required would be too lengthy. While both schemes would cost more than the £225,000 allocated for the exhibition (he estimated over one million pounds), he acknowledged that the cost of land acquisition in Anscombe's scheme would be less than for Holm's.¹⁰⁴ Four days later a report of city council meeting recorded the Mayor declaring that "it was inadvisable to link the exhibition with any scheme for slum clearance on Te Aro flat" on the grounds that "[i]t seemed to him to be confusing ideas to tie up an exhibition with the clearing of slums."¹⁰⁵

Support for the proposal was raised again when the Chamber of Commerce approached several government Ministers lobbying for either the Anscombe or the Holm scheme.

¹⁰³ "Exhibition Site: Mayor Replies to Slum Clearance Proposals" p 6.

¹⁰⁴ "Exhibition Site: Mayor Replies to Slum Clearance Proposals" p 6.

¹⁰⁵ "Plans for Centenary Exhibition" p 8

This was anticipated in a *Dominion* report that the Chamber of Commerce had decided that "Either [the Anscombe or Holm] scheme would entail too heavy a financial burden for the city to undertake and the committee considered Government assistance necessary."¹⁰⁶ The Chamber of Commerce group met R Semple (Minister of Public Works), WE Parry (Minister of Internal Affairs) and P Fraser (Wellington MP and Minister of Education) on Thursday 24 September. The eight representatives of the Chamber of Commerce included both Holm and Anscombe suggesting the possibility that the publication of the two schemes, the consequent letters to the editor in their support, and the articles reporting on the Chamber of Commerce opinion, may not have been entirely coincidental. Holm and Anscombe had also run a parallel letter writing campaign to the ministers since July of that year, almost three months prior to the meeting.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ "Either Scheme is Suitable" p 13.

¹⁰⁷ Semple and Parry had received letters from written from Anscombe (7 September 1936, 9 September 1936) and Holm (4 July 1936, 12 June 1936), and Anscombe had also written to Walter Nash (Minister of Finance) on 16 July 1936.

The meeting that followed had few surprises - yet discussion explicitly referenced the proposal to build flats. While Semple supported slum clearance "in conjunction with the Exhibition," he preferred the area to "be used for business purposes" rather than flats.¹⁰⁸ Both he and Fraser did not appreciate the proposal for flat buildings. Semple argued that while Wellington had open spaces "we do not want to think about flats."¹⁰⁹ Fraser was more direct saying:

Frankly I do not like flats. I think they are alien and foreign to the country. The more I saw of them in England the more I dislike them. The best scheme in England is the Manchester housing scheme where the houses are semi-detached with gardens. Flats for richer people are a different matter; but people with limited incomes should not live in flats.¹¹⁰

Interest in Anscombe's proposal remained alive however and beyond the limits of Wellington. In October *The Wanganui Chronicle* published an editorial in its support, describing the plan as:

¹⁰⁸ Semple paraphrased, Minutes, Wellington Chamber of Commerce Meeting p 12.

¹⁰⁹ Semple paraphrased, Minutes, Wellington Chamber of Commerce Meeting p 12.

¹¹⁰ Fraser paraphrased, Minutes, Wellington Chamber of Commerce Meeting p 11.

A bold, yet businesslike scheme has been advanced for the holding of the Exhibition on Te Aro Flat. This would involve a preliminary scheme of slum clearance, and can be objected to on the ground of expense, which, of course, ignores the fact that slums are in themselves expensive. The scheme which has become known as the Anscombe Plan, combines with the holding of the Exhibition just below Mount Cook, the levelling of a great portion of Te Aro Flat and the building of a series of up-to-date blocks of flats on the land between the Exhibition site and the centre of the city.¹¹¹

While the "Anscombe Plan" did not proceed, it certainly contributed to the 1930s debate about building flats in Wellington. Material from *The Dominion* suggests a divide between public and politician opinion, though discussion reported in the other Wellington newspaper (*The Evening Post*) may reveal a different story.

Conclusion

Anscombe's super-block housing scheme was clearly ambitious, and as such it must be seen in the context of his later proposal for a Combined Factory on Wellington's Aotea Quay.¹¹² Both of these projects were large-scale and found their origins in socialist thinking informed by a modernist, rather than a moderne, architecture. In contrast, for

Linfield (Anscombe Flats), Anscombe's design of accommodation for himself, he used Art Deco moderne design. I suspect this wasn't a co-incidence.

¹¹¹ "The Anscombe Plan" p 8.

¹¹² McCarthy "East meets West" pp 2-9.

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