

Becoming Urban: New Zealand towns in the 1850s

Ben Schrader, Ministry for Culture and Heritage

ABSTRACT: During the 1850s the first inland towns were founded at Greytown and Masterton. They signalled a new direction in Pākehā settlement, a movement from coastal edge port "cities" to secondary towns in the (North Island) interior. It was from these centres that colonisation proceeded apace. These new towns followed the pattern of New Zealand urbanism established in the 1840s: low-density development with houses and buildings scattered over a wide domain. Could they then really be called towns? Architecturally, the built environment of all towns might be best described as utilitarian and frontier-like. But the decade is notable for the first expressions of a grander, civic architecture, best shown in the construction of public buildings, some of which are examined here. Were these New Zealand's first urban buildings?

The 1850s was a transformative decade in the development of New Zealand urbanism.¹ Whereas during the 1840s towns were characterised by temporary, often whare-like, structures, the 1850s saw the construction of more permanent European-style, wooden and brick buildings that for the first time gave the settlements an emphatically urban appearance. As one colonial historian said of Christchurch, the "whare and V hut stage of civilisation passed away and the capital began to look like a town."² This transition was important in attracting new immigrants. The existence of towns (and later cities) showed potential settlers that New Zealand was not a barbaric backwater; that if they made the journey to the colony they would not want from the amenities of civilisation. Immigration agents and boosters were therefore quick to

¹ I define urbanism as the spatial organisation and built form of towns and cities.

² "Old Christchurch" *Cyclopaedia* p 22.

point out the similarities between New Zealand and British towns. Walking up Nelson's Trafalgar Street and looking in the shop windows in the late 1850s, Edwin Hodder observed "that the difference between a Colonial and an English town is not so great after all."³ He then listed the diverse range of shops and their merchandise – grocers to stationers, crinolines to tins of salmon – to assure his British audience they would not feel out of place in a colonial town. Be that as it may, there were some important variations between New Zealand urbanism and that of Britain which few settlers and visitors would have failed to notice. The prevalent use of wood as a building material was one attribute that was novel to many, at least until stone and brick structures became more common from the 1850s. However, my focus is on three other distinguishing characteristics: the

³ Hopper, *Memories* p 34.

sprawling nature of New Zealand towns; the ubiquity of the stand-alone, often owner-occupier, house; and the proclivity for bespoke, or customised, buildings in streetscapes.

Urban sprawl

These qualities were discussed in settler correspondence and publications as well as recorded in contemporary paintings and other images of towns. Dr Alfred Barker was among those who used the modern medium of photography to capture early views of Christchurch. Of particular value is a circa 1859 panorama of the town taken from the tower of the newly built Provincial Council Buildings.⁴ It shows the size or extent of the town and highlights the low-density nature of early New Zealand urbanism, characterised

⁴ The blog site Canterbury Heritage has assembled Barker's panorama into a single view. Canterbury Heritage "1860 Christchurch 360° Panorama" n.p.

by built up areas – in this case along Colombo Street between Armagh and Gloucester Street and at the western end of High Street – with either empty space or small groups of buildings in between. Writing home to his brother, the builder William Parr, recently arrived from Liverpool, was struck by the settlement pattern. Christchurch was "well laid out with good wide streets, some of them without any houses in. But you must not think it a small town. There are somewhere about 400 houses and some of them very nice ones too."⁵ The empty or unbuilt spaces were largely due to long-term, often absentee, investors waiting for land values to rise before selling for capital gain. The effect was to reinforce the semi-rural nature of urban New Zealand, where the cusp between town and country was often ill defined. In fact, a government official examining how towns might be defended against Māori attack concluded that that the manner in which they had been built made their "defence impossible." He continued: "Houses, generally of weatherboards, are built as wide apart, and scattered over as great an extent of open land, as is compatible with their being considered a collection of dwellings (in other words, a town

⁵ Parr to Parr, 1 February 1859.

or village,) at all."⁶ Whereas European towns were usually tightly built up, and traditionally contained within defensive walls, New Zealand towns developed in a dispersed, sprawling fashion.⁷

Stand-alone house and section

In this New Zealand followed the lead of Australia. In laying out Sydney in 1788 Governor Phillip promoted the stand-alone house on an individual section and a cultivated garden. The garden was often an important element in household economies, allowing families to self-provision with fresh vegetables and fruit and so gain a degree of independence. Hobart too was characterised by single houses on their own plots with gardens. As one historian has observed, "Australia's founders anticipated a sprawl of homes and gardens rather than a clumping of terraces and alleys."⁸ The same can be said for New Zealand. Historians have located the origins of colonial urbanism in the countryside. Erik Olssen has written:

The ubiquity of the owner-occupied single-unit house on its own often quite large section transposed into the

⁶ Domett "No. 5: Memorandum for Minister" p 8.

⁷ Davison "Australia" p 44.

⁸ Davison "Australia" p 43.

urban environment the possibilities for independence once assumed to be the exclusive preserve of yeoman farmers.⁹

In other words, the colonial town was a web of small smallholdings. It is easy to see this pattern as an expression of anti-urban sentiment. Certainly, it was a refutation of the cheek by jowl urbanism that characterised large European towns and cities, where most buildings were packed together and sections or plots were either non-existent or small. It was also a rebuff to the class-defined housing typology of urban Britain: row and tenement housing for workers, terrace or semi-detached housing for the middle classes, and stand-alone villas on suburban plots for the capitalist elite.¹⁰ Moreover, by the time of New Zealand's colonisation row and tenement housing was associated with the overcrowding and squalor of industrial city slums, giving them an Old World taint that few wanted replicated in the New; aside from a few examples of row and terrace housing in Christchurch and Dunedin, medium-density housing was to be virtually unknown until the early twentieth century.¹¹ Yet opposition to

⁹ Olssen *An Accidental Utopia* p 253.

¹⁰ Toomath *Built in New Zealand* p 73.

¹¹ Olssen *Building the New World* p 242.

aspects of European urbanism did not necessarily make settler society anti-urban. Rather it signalled an ambition to create more spacious and modern towns and cities that would offer most settlers a better quality of life than in Britain. Accordingly, we can also see the pervasiveness of the owner-occupied, single-unit house on its own section as a desire to live less in the manner of the smallholder and more in the style of the prosperous and equally independent city capitalist. In this sense towns comprised scaled-down villas in parkland settings. In reality, colonial urbanism incorporated both country and city elements. The large section with a fecund garden referenced the self-provisioning smallholder; the higher population density suggested the propinquity and the sociability of urban life. We would now refer to this morphology as suburban, but in New Zealand the term originally referred to smallholding size allotments on town peripheries. Urban was the town. Yet the sprawling and shapeless nature of colonial towns showed that it had different meanings in colonial New Zealand from what it had in Britain.¹²

¹² Olssen *An Accidental Utopia* p 253.

Homeownership

This included homeownership. Official data on city housing tenure was not collected in New Zealand until the 1916 *Census* so it's difficult to ascertain the extent to which city dwellers owned their own home.¹³ But it is certain the proportion was higher than in Britain where less than ten per cent of homes were owner occupied.¹⁴ Within Victorian society homeownership was equated with greater level of independence and respectability than renting. Before universal male suffrage house ownership conferred the right to vote, increasing the owner's social status and self-respect and lessening the obligation of deference. As historians have noted the prospect of homeownership was a strong factor in the decision of working people to emigrate. Graeme Davison has written: "the only real prospect of freehold ownership for most British working men was in the colonies." He notes that Australian immigrant letters home often spoke of the desire for homeownership, its association with independence, and to their success in realising it.¹⁵ This was true for many New

¹³ Olssen *An Accidental Utopia* p 312 footnote 52; Frost *The New Urban Frontier* p 124.

¹⁴ Dennis *English Industrial Cities* p 142.

¹⁵ Davison "Colonial origins" p 11.

Zealand immigrants too, among them Dunedin resident JF Blackwood, his wife Elizabeth and their four children. In a letter home to his parents in 1861 the general hand spoke of his success in building his Maitland Street home:

We have now got into our own new house. It has been a struggle [sic] to get it up but we are now into it at a cost of upwards of Seventy £. That is one of the great comforts of a Colonist that altho [sic] the life be a little rugged you have your own dwelling and piece of Ground a thing almost out of the power of any working man in the home country.¹⁶

Blackwood acknowledges it had taken some effort to get his house up, but this was outweighed by his sense of achievement of owning his own home and section, something he recognises was beyond him back in Scotland. That he and his family moved into his own home only four years after arriving in New Zealand highlights the importance some working class settlers placed on becoming owner-occupiers. If the pervasiveness of homeownership and the move to a common housing type in New Zealand was a nod in the direction of New World egalitarianism it did not negate the importance of class. Working people might rightly luxuriate in the

¹⁶ Blackwood to Blackwood, 24 February 1861.

fact they lived in a stand-alone house on its own plot with a garden, but they also knew the larger house with the more spacious garden further up the street usually belonged to people who were above them in the social hierarchy. (It became a feature of colonial urban society that rich and poor often lived in the same streets. Spatial segregation became more pronounced in the twentieth century with increased suburbanisation).¹⁷

Cottages and buildings

Returning to Barker's panorama, we can see a range of building types in Christchurch, including: hotels, churches, shops, warehouses, public buildings and houses, which as in Britain faced the street.¹⁸ With the exception of a few earth structures, buildings were wooden, utilitarian, and of one or two stories. Most houses were in the colonial cottage architectural style. The idiom was based on the English rural cottage – both Jeremy Salmond and Bill Toomath have traced its origins to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century weatherboard houses of Kent of East Sussex – and was widespread on

the New World urban frontier.¹⁹ At its simplest, the colonial cottage was a rectangular box with a gabled or hipped roof and a chimney at one end. The front comprised a central door with two windows placed symmetrically either side of it. Smaller cottages had one-room but most had two or three: comprising a bedroom, sitting room and kitchen, the latter often a lean-to addition at the back. Some cottages had dormer windows or windows under the gable to make use of space in roof cavities. Interiors were lined with plain boards.²⁰ These provided little thermal insulation so houses were invariably cold and damp in winter, a feature that settlers and visitors often criticised, but which was never overcome until insulation in new houses was made mandatory in 1978. A few of the cottages in Barker's view sported verandahs, a feature of some Auckland houses since the early 1840s.²¹ They were to become ubiquitous throughout New Zealand later in the decade, providing shelter from the elements and a transitional zone between indoors and outdoors, a place to take off sodden coats and muddy boots or to

sit and watch the world go by.

Among those occupying the type of cottages captured by Barker was William Parr, his brother James (also a builder) and sister Mary. In another letter home he gave a description of the interior of his Kilmore Street home:

It is lined with totara – a red wood that planes very easy when it is dry. We have oiled it. The ceiling is calico. The floor is white pine. It is roofed with...shingle. ...In one corner of the kitchen we have two shelves to put our crocks on. As for furniture we have a table, a camp stool, 1 black box with a back to it for a seat. ... The window curtains are red with white leaves and flowers.

He emphasizes some of the chattels the siblings brought with them, each piece providing a psychological connection to their former home.

We have the Sefton Church [St Helens] picture over the chimneypiece. We framed and glazed the "Happy Homes of England" last night and hung it up opposite the fireplace.

To help locate themselves in their new land, the family also had a map of New Zealand, "hung beside the window." William also described their garden.

Our garden is fenced in with galvanised wire and a Cape broom hedge in the front. The back is a native

¹⁷ Hamer "Centralization" p 142; "Suburban streets" *Historical Atlas* Pl. 73

¹⁸ Salmond *Old New Zealand Houses* p 61.

¹⁹ Toomath *Built in New Zealand* pp 28-29; Dingle "Necessity" p 60.

²⁰ Salmond *Old New Zealand Houses* pp 60-63, 73-75.

²¹ Toomath *Built in New Zealand* pp 44-43.

hedge. We have some cabbages, beans & peas in our garden besides 2 walnuts, 2 cherry trees & a plum, abt [about] 100 gooseberry cuttings, besides other things to [sic] numerous to mention.²²

From William's rich description it is evident that he and his siblings were happily living out the colonial ideal of a stand-alone house and cultivated garden.

Lack of uniformity

The other defining feature of colonial urbanism was the lack of uniformity or townscape harmony. Rather than streets of buildings of a similar design and/or scale, as was common in European cities, buildings in streets were a hotchpotch of different heights and designs. Concerning Auckland in the early 1850s, George Earp observed that "[u]niformity in the town has been set at defiance, every one building according to his means or fancy."²³ William Swainson agreed and asserted "the only approach to uniformity is in the material: with a few exceptions, all are of wood."²⁴ The townscape was a result of the laissez-faire political economy of New World societies, which promoted individualism and the primacy of private

²² Parr to parents, 26 Aug 1859.

²³ Earp *New Zealand* p 48.

²⁴ Swainson *Auckland* p 29.

property rights. Within this environment property owners were generally free to construct what they liked, the size and style of buildings reflecting their wealth, power and aesthetic taste.²⁵ So in contrast to places like Bath and (later) Haussmann's Paris, where the common Neo-Renaissance idiom of the built environment aimed for a collective identity, the divergent sizes and designs of buildings in New Zealand towns expressed the diverse identities of building owners.²⁶ Even in residential streets, houses of a common type or style were usually distinguished by different architectural treatments or additions. Few were exactly alike. Twentieth-century critics were to condemn this aspect of New Zealand urbanism, leading to controls on the size and bulk of buildings but largely stopping short of regulating for style.²⁷ To restrict property owners from constructing a building of their own image would have gone against the cultural grain. (Interestingly, in 2012 the government Productivity Commission identified the predominance of bespoke houses as an important factor in making New Zealand houses among the most

²⁵ Domosh *Invented Cities* p 22.

²⁶ Schrader "Paris or New York" p 818.

²⁷ Plishke *Design and Living* p 52; Schrader "City planning" n.p.

expensive in the world in 2012).²⁸

City buildings

By the late 1850s and early 1860s the built environments of New Zealand's main towns were beginning to move past their temporary and tentative frontier origins and cementing a more durable and distinguished presence in the landscape. The change also marked their transition from towns to cities. In the early 1850s Earp had noted how brick was becoming the main building material in Auckland's newer commercial streets and how shops were now equal to those in English provincial towns.²⁹ A decade further on and Auckland's new buildings were being reported as city-like in scale and substance. In 1864 the local newspaper observed:

Streets that less than three years ago were lined with wooden buildings and shanties of unsightly appearance and doubtful security, have been replaced by handsome buildings, which would be a credit to any city.³⁰

Among these was the Neo-classical Union Bank of Australasia, erected in 1859 on the corner of Victoria and Queen streets. Its muscular Neo-classical design, in the

²⁸ Harris "Government grasps housing thistle" p A2.

²⁹ Earp *New Zealand* p 49.

³⁰ "Auckland in 1864" p 4.

Corinthian order, evoked the civic architecture of both ancient Rome and modern London. Its height and bulk meant it dominated the streetscape, towering over its diminutive and plainer neighbours. The building clearly communicated Auckland's ambition to progress from crude frontier town to a refined city.

Still, it was Christchurch that led the way in erecting buildings that were redolent of a city rather than a town. Its Provincial Council Buildings were arguably the first attempt to go beyond the utilitarian architecture of the early settlers and build in a style that was more intricate and sophisticated.³¹ Designed by Benjamin Mountford in the Gothic Revival style, employed in the recent erection of Britain's Houses of Parliament, its construction had begun at the beginning of 1858 with the laying of its foundation stone. The occasion was marked by a public holiday and an official procession through streets to the building's site. There the general outline of the building was marked by a series of flagpoles, each with a pennon, placed ten feet (3m) apart. Higher pennon poles carrying two festoons of flowers and foliage signalled the

entrance porch and a 50-foot (15m) mast bearing the Union Jack and four 40-foot (12m) masts denoted the proposed clock tower. A temporary covered grandstand was also erected for the ladies to watch proceedings. With the flags fluttering and bouquets of flowers placed about the site, "the arrangements were the most artistic that have ever been seen here," declared one delighted observer. Canterbury superintendent William Moorhouse laid the stone and gave a speech, after which "God Save the Queen" was sung, a nine-gun salute fired, and three cheers given before the crowd departed.³² The lengths gone to celebrate the milestone, not least the building's full-size representation, underscored its importance to Christchurch's emerging civic life and identity. Additions to the buildings were subsequently made in permanent stone in the mid-1860s in the same style, notably the magnificent Great Hall and Bellamy's.

Conclusion

The 1850s was the decade when New Zealand urbanism became more overtly urban. The temporary and whare-like structures of the 1840s and early 1850s gave way to houses and

buildings better resembled those in British towns. By the end of the 1850s we see the first edifices that had city-like qualities, a trend that was to amplify in the 1860s, most notably in the gold rush city of Dunedin. At the same time there were a number of elements that distinguished New Zealand towns from those in Britain. These included their sprawling nature, the ubiquity of the stand-alone house on its own section, and the preference for bespoke buildings. It might have been expected that these attributes, established in the 1840s, would have been corrected in the 1850s to better align colonial urbanism with that back home. Instead, as we saw in Barker's panorama they became even more entrenched, underscoring how "being urban" was redefined in a colonial context. During the 1850s this came to mean living in a low-density settlement, in an owner-occupier, stand-alone, and custom-built house, with a cultivated garden. This pretty much holds true today.

³¹ Brittenden "Canterbury" p 96.

³² "The New Government Buildings, Christchurch" p 4.

REFERENCES

- "Auckland in 1864" *Daily Southern Cross* (9 November 1864): 4.
- Blackwood, J.F. letter to Andrew Blackwood, 24 February 1861, "Blackwood, Andrew: Letters, 1857-1863, from J.F. Blackwood" Misc-MS-0389, Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin.
- Brittenden, W.J.A. "Canterbury provincial government buildings" *Historic Buildings of New Zealand: South Island*, Auckland: Methuen, 1983.
- Canterbury Heritage "1860 Christchurch 360° Panorama" (viewed October 2012) URL: <http://canterburyheritage.blogspot.co.nz/2008/06/1860-christchurch-360-panorama.html>
- Davison, Graeme "Australia: first suburban nation?" *Journal of Urban History*, (November 1995) 22(1): 40-74.
- Davison, Graeme "Colonial origins of the Australian home" *European housing in Australia* ed. Patrick Troy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 6-25.
- Dennis, Richard *English industrial cities of the nineteenth century: a social geography* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Dingle, Tony "Necessity the mother of invention" *European housing in Australia* ed. Patrick Troy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Domosh, Mona *Invented Cities: the creation of landscape in nineteenth century New York and Boston*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Earp, George Butler *New Zealand: its emigration and gold fields*, London: George Routledge and Co 1853.
- Frost, Lionel *The New Urban Frontier: Urbanisation and City Building in Australasia and the American West*, Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1991.
- Domett, Alfred "No. 5: Memorandum for Minister" (23rd May 1863), "Further papers on the subject of colonial responsibility in Native Affairs" *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* Auckland: Government Printer, 1863. E-No.7A: 7-10.
- Hamer, David "Centralization and Nationalism" *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand* ed. Keith Sinclair Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1990: 125-152.
- Harris, Catherine "Government grasps housing thistle" *Dominion Post* (27 Oct 2012): A2
- Hopper, Edwin *Memories of New Zealand Life* London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1863.
- "The New Government Buildings, Christchurch" *Daily Southern Cross* (19 February 1858): 4.
- "Old Christchurch" *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand: Canterbury Provincial District*, Christchurch: The Cyclopaedia Company, 1903: 65-82.
- Olssen, Erik *Building the New World: Work, Politics and Society in Caversham 1880s-1920s* Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995.
- Olssen, Erik *An Accidental Utopia: Social Mobility and the Foundation of an Egalitarian Society, 1880-1940* Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011.
- Parr, William letter to parents, 26 August 1859, "Journal of James Parr and letters of Mary, James and Will Parr" 1857-1868, qMS-1628, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- Parr, William letter to E. Parr, 1 February 1859, "Journal of James Parr and letters of Mary, James and Will Parr" 1857-1868, qMS-1628, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- Plishke, Ernst *Design and Living* Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1947.
- Salmond, Jeremy *Old New Zealand houses* Auckland: Heinemann Reed, 1986.
- Schrader, Ben "Paris or New York? Contesting Melbourne's skyline 1880-

1958" *Journal of Urban History*, (November 2010) 36(6): 814-830.

Schrader, Ben "City planning – From motorways to the Resource Management Act" *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* updated 5-Mar-10 URL: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/city-planning/5>

Suburban streets: social differentiation in Auckland, 1890-1950s" *New Zealand Historical Atlas* ed. Malcolm McKinnon Auckland: Bateman, 1997.

Swainson, William *Auckland, the capital of New Zealand and the country adjacent* London: Smith Elder and Son, 1853.

Toomath, William *Built in New Zealand: The Houses We Live In* Auckland: Harper Collins, 1996.