

Images of Homelessness: The Home of the Needy Aged

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ABSTRACT: Homelessness in 1880s New Zealand, as reported in the press, appears to be more intimate and less melodramatic than overseas examples. House fires, such as that of William Beals' eight-roomed house in Epsom, the destruction by fire of Mr Keogh's seven-roomed dwelling on the north-west side of Mount Pukekaroro, and the 1884 fire which broke out "on the grounds of St. Mary's Orphanage, Ponsonby" are examples. Chronic homelessness, when it appears, occurs via the reporting of institutional and architectural support structures. The paper will examine a specific example of an architecture for the homeless: the Home for the Needy Aged in Newtown, Wellington.

Given the degree of economic trauma recorded in New Zealand in the 1880s, it seems no surprise that this was accompanied by the experience of homelessness, but the newspaper reporting appears to under-emphasise chronic homelessness in New Zealand. Newspaper serials tinged homelessness with the ache of romantic love. The love of Mary, for example, in Charles Read's "Love and Money," published in the *Otago Witness* in 1884, made William Hope rich in his "poverty, and happy in my homelessness."¹ The dreary chambers of the *Bruce Herald's* "Model Bachelor" illustrated "the utter homelessness of the place ... and he would willingly give up all his past enjoyments for one kind voice to cheer him, for one person whom he loved to be hear him ..."² The reporting of homelessness in New Zealand was instead dominated by

¹ Reade "Love and Money" p 25.

² "The Model Bachelor" p 6.

international disasters: the 3,000 people homeless because of the 1882 fire in Badzinilow,³ the 1,000 homeless in Illinois devastated by the 1888 cyclone,⁴ "the homeless and starving people" resulting from the 1885 revolution in Panama,⁵ and those affected by the 1886 eruption of Mount Etna.⁶

The reports of New Zealand homelessness appear to be more intimate and less melodramatic. House fires, such as that of William Beals' eight-roomed house in Epsom,⁷ the destruction by fire of Mr Keogh's seven-roomed dwelling on the north-west side of Mount Pukekaroro,⁸ and the 1884 fire which broke out "on the grounds of St Mary's

³ "3,000 Persons Homeless" p 2.

⁴ "The Illinois Cyclone" p 3.

⁵ "The Revolution in Panama" p 3.

⁶ "The Eruption of Mount Etna" p 3.

⁷ "Fire at Epsom" p 2.

⁸ "Destructive Fire at Pukekaroro" p 5.

Orphanage, Ponsonby"⁹ are examples. These were stories where neighbours such as Mr Hill "gave the homeless family shelter for the night,"¹⁰ or the loss was minor and "will be shortly repaired."¹¹ In contrast, the January 1886 bush fires in the Stratford district, which rendered "a great number of people ... homeless and destitute,"¹² and the June 1886 eruption of Mount Tarawera in which "many people have met with a terrible death, while others have been rendered homeless and penniless,"¹³ caused widespread and unusual devastation.

Chronic homelessness when it appears, occurs via the reporting of institutional and architectural support structures. The establishment of institutions such as "a home

⁹ "Auckland" p 15.

¹⁰ "Fire at Epsom" p 2.

¹¹ "Auckland" p 15.

¹² "Stratford Fire Relief Fund" p 2.

¹³ "Municipal Sympathy with the Distressed" p 6.

... for the reform of fallen and the accommodation of destitute women," or the Albert Street soup kitchen which provided "accommodation from night to night of homeless females"¹⁴ and the Women's Temperance Union's building purchased to hold "meetings for the instruction of boys and girls, for giving temporary shelter to the homeless, and for a refuge for persons just out of prison until they get employment"¹⁵ indicate this.

It is within this context that the Home for the Needy Aged was proposed, initially by Wellington mayor, George Fisher, who wrote, in March 1882, to the editor of the *Evening Post*, referring to a proposal to use 10 acres of Wellington's town belt for a home, suggesting a "haven of rest in their declining years for deserving persons of the poorer classes who, by reason of age and infirmity, are no longer able to provide for themselves."¹⁶ By April 1885 an anonymous donation of £1000 had been made,¹⁷ and decisions were being made regarding which on the "list of Government and Corporation reserves in the city and

¹⁴ "Women's Refuge" p 2.

¹⁵ "Dunedin Women's Temperance Union" p 3.

¹⁶ Fisher "The Home for the Aged. To The Editor" p 3.

¹⁷ "A Benevolent Project" p 2.

neighbourhood ... would be suitable for a site for the proposed Home."¹⁸ At this time it was also apparent that at least one motivation for the proposed home was to relieve "the Hospital of the aged and infirm."¹⁹

In June a plan had been drawn by Mr Dudley - "the steward of the Hospital."²⁰ Support for the proposal and use of hospital land was given by Dr Chilton, and a site which would provide a north-west front, accessibility to morning and afternoon sun, gas, water and roads had been identified.²¹ The plan proposed two wards, segregated by gender, for 60 people, with an anticipated need to accommodate 34 people in the short term, 20 of whom would be old people currently resident at the hospital, who Dr Chilton "desired to get rid of."²² Mr Chatfield was named as the architect.²³ The same month a deputation waited on the Colonial Secretary (Mr Buckley) with the aim acquiring 15 acres of land on the hospital reserve "a site for a

¹⁸ "Home for the Aged Needy" (1 April 1885) p 3.

¹⁹ "Home for the Aged Needy" (1 April 1885) p 3.

²⁰ "The Proposed Old People's Home" p 3.

²¹ "The Proposed Old People's Home" p 3.

²² "The Proposed Old People's Home" p 3.

²³ "The Proposed Old People's Home" p 3.

Home for the Aged Needy."²⁴ Part of the argument was urgency, given that Wellington was believed to be "the only large town in the colony that was without one."²⁵

By 1886, the project was commonly known as "the Old Men's Home,"²⁶ and by February the government had selected and surveyed 5 acres and 14 perches of the Lunatic Asylum and Hospital land, but an Act of Parliament was required before the land could be used because it was a public reserve.²⁷ The initial subscribers to the fund for building the Home debated whether it was best controlled by the Charitable Aid Board, and commenced a campaign to increase subscriptions.²⁸ To the disappointment of the subscribers, the Special Powers and Contracts Act provided only 3 acres, 3 roods and 15 perches, and a move was made to incorporate to enable the subscribers to operate under the Hospitals and Charitable Institutions Act.²⁹ Concern was expressed that "[t]he project had been dragging on for

²⁴ "Home for the Aged Needy" (16 June 1885) p 2.

²⁵ "Home for the Aged Needy" (16 June 1885) p 2.

²⁶ "Site for the Old Men's Home" p 2.

²⁷ "Site for the Old Men's Home" p 2.

²⁸ "Site for the Old Men's Home" p 2.

²⁹ "Home for the Aged and Needy" (9 September 1886) p 2.

many years, and, unless it were carried out at once it would be in danger of falling into desuetude - the abyss into which, unfortunately, too many Wellington matters came to grief."³⁰ A government subsidy was considered as enabling architectural quality, more specifically "the Home could be made an ornament to the architecture of the city, and not a disgrace."³¹ The subscribers had raised £2,134 by September 1886, with a further £222 as an annual contribution.³² On 30 March 1887, at a meeting of the newly incorporated society for the relief of the aged and needy (Wellington Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy),³³ it was proposed that "the most fitting way to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee would be the erection of a home for the poor and needy, such institution to be called "Victoria Home,"³⁴ and to discuss this further with the Mayor.³⁵

Following up on this idea to mark Victoria's Jubilee promoted significant reader support

³⁰ "Home for the Aged and Needy" (9 September 1886) p 2.

³¹ "Home for the Aged and Needy" (9 September 1886) p 2.

³² "Wellington News" p 4.

³³ "Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy" p 2.

³⁴ "Wellington" p 2.

³⁵ "Wellington" p 2.

Proposal	Votes	%
Home for the Aged and Needy/ Orphan Home/ Sailors' Home/ Home for Habitual Drunkards/ Home for Civil Servants/ Home for Boys	388	58.1%
Free Public Library and Art Gallery/ Free Public Library and Art Gallery combined with a Gymnasium	257	38.5%
A Victoria Park and Cricket Ground	8	1.2%
Statute of Her Majesty/ Statute of Her Majesty with a Drinking Fountain/ Statue of Duke of Wellington	7	1%
Other (Market House/ Choral Hall/ New Cemetery/ Silver Medal to Volunteers/ Bonus to Civil Servants/ Exchange Town Hall and Market/ Free Baths)	8	1.2%
TOTAL	668	100%

Figure 1: "The Local Commemoration of the Jubilee" *Evening Post* (23 April 1887): 3.

for the Home for the Aged and Needy with 380 votes (56.9%) for the Home, and 388 votes for some kind of home (58.1%), including a proposal for a Home for Civil Servants.³⁶ Discussion regarding the architectural form of the building in April 1887 suggested the edifice would accommodate 10 married couples, 25 men and 15 women.³⁷ It was proposed that the building be brick "and so constructed that it might easily be enlarged if necessary."³⁸ Competitive designs were

³⁶ A report of a meeting of the society on 26 April noted that accounts from the *Evening Post* and *Evening Press* were passed for payment. "Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy" p 2; also "Wellington News Notes" p 3.

³⁷ "Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy" p 2.

³⁸ "Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy" p 2.

received by June 1887, and the plans signed "Domus" by Joshua Charlesworth were successful.³⁹

The Charlesworth design was described by the newspaper as a "neat and substantial-looking structure,"⁴⁰ and it quoted his description also:

The plan is perfectly symmetrical, evenly balanced, and well provided with means of access to the several rooms. The whole of the rooms are designed with regard to light, aspect, ventilations, and general supervision. ... The style of architecture adopted is very plain and substantial, as being most in harmony with the purposes

³⁹ "Society for the Relief of the Aged Needy" p 2; "The Proposed Home for the Aged Needy" p 2.

⁴⁰ "The Proposed Home for the Aged Needy" p 2.

to which the erection of the building is to be designed. The sanitary matters have been carefully considered, the conveniences being together, and disconnected by a passage from the main building the "dangerous area" is circumscribed, and with first-class fittings and proper ventilation of the drains and traps, I think no unsavoury consequences need be feared. The extension of the building can be easily carried out by lengthening the wings and building another wing at each side. Provision has already been provided in the dining-rooms to accommodate a larger number of patients.⁴¹

Charlesworth's drawing was photographed by Henry Wright.⁴² The photograph shows a careful water-coloured perspective of an east-facing, symmetrical "H" planned building, typical of one structured by corridors. Its fashionable Georgian hipped rooves, porte cochère and quoined stone facings convey a northern-hemisphere stability, understandable given Charlesworth recent arrival in New Zealand from England in 1879, long after the 1855 earthquake.

Perhaps because this is an exterior image of the building, Charlesworth has drawn a foreground populated with the aged and

⁴¹ Charlesworth quoted, "The Proposed Home for the Aged Needy" p 2.

⁴² Photograph of a drawing by architect Joshua Charlesworth (1860-1925) depicting the Home for the Aged Needy.

needy inhabitants, from whom the building gains its identity. Walking sticks proliferate; gentlemanly in the right foreground, with increasing levels of disability as figures regress from the picture plane and approach the building. It was at this time, the late nineteenth-century, that the walking-sticks - which replaced swords as a gentleman's accessory - were being surpassed by what would become a twentieth-century fashion for the umbrella.⁴³

As implicit occupants, the figures in the image infer interior qualities of the building, just as the gender division anticipated in the plan is also reflected in the depicted figures. Men predominate, but concentrate on the southern wing of the building (left of the image), women (including nurses) are more pictorially reticent and located proximate to the northern wing.⁴⁴ The proposed administrative gender balance of 25 single men to 15 single women (a ratio of 5:3) might explain the pictorial imbalance. These people occupy the building grounds awkwardly as the Home for the Needy Aged represents its occupants by

⁴³ "Walking Sticks & Canes" n.p.; "How to Understand the History of Walking Canes" n.p.

⁴⁴ This direction is assumed from the cast shadows rather than the final position of the building on the site.

placing them outside in disparate modes of homelessness, which range - with the assistance of the park bench and the walking stick - between degrees of the mobile and the incapacitated.

Walking is a prime pastime for the homeless. Institutions - Carrington and Oakley come to mind - inflict walking on their inmates with their seemingly infinite corridors of hotel plans, and the resulting perversions of having to move and yet have nowhere to be and nowhere to go. Hodgetts et al. refer to mobile technologies, such as the MP3 player to construct private space for homeless people,⁴⁵ where public space can be both occupied and made exclusive, while Hopper finds an affinity between the homeless condition and the transit-appropriate behaviour of air travellers: beraggled appearances, sleeping in public, and baggage content management becoming publicly acceptable.⁴⁶ These are complex issues of social displacement and its imaging. Charlesworth's drawing consequently struggles to depict this architecture - which, in its competition-winning way, appeals to contemporary modes

⁴⁵ Hodgetts et al. "The mobile hermit and the city" pp 285-303.

⁴⁶ Hopper *Reckoning with Homelessness* p 126.

of both institutional and architectural fashion. As a drawing trying to convey the accommodation of homelessness, occupation becomes externalised and torn between representational conventions of picturesque parklands (including more abled-bodied groundsmen) and socially rejected frailty.

By January 1888, impatience for the new home was apparent in Wellington Hospital's annual report, published in the *Evening Post*. Dr Hassell, the hospital's house surgeon referred to:

the number of old men and women of the chronic class remaining in the Hospital throughout the year. It is to be hoped that these cases will ere long be transferred to the new Home for the Aged and Needy, for the beds they occupy have often been urgently wanted for suitable patients seeking admission into the Hospital.⁴⁷

A year later the Home had been furnished ready for opening, the annual meeting of subscribers recalling that the home "had its origin as an institute wherein a home could be provided for their older settlers who had been overtaken by old age, and who perhaps had not had the same advantages of providing for future needs as others."⁴⁸ It noted that

⁴⁷ "Wellington Hospital" p 4.

⁴⁸ "The Home for the Aged and Needy" (11 January 1889)

government subsidies were insufficient to meet the need of accommodating the elderly, and referred to data proving that "a great deal of destitution prevailed in the principal centres of the colony."⁴⁹ The building was opened by the Governor [Lord Jervois] on 11 February 1889 at 4.30pm. Newspaper reports described it as a "handsome and commodious building," and "erected in a manner which reflects the greatest credit on all concerned ... one of the best-appointed institutions of the kind in the colony."⁵⁰ At the time of opening the building was incomplete, awaiting one wing - the building of which was not anticipated in the near future, and photographs suggest that the building was finished by the 1910s. HS Wardell, Chairman of the Trustees, acknowledged at its opening that the Home was insufficient in the context of the wider need of homeless Wellingtonians.⁵¹ He distinguished the Home's new occupants from this larger group:

the inmates would be those whose reputation was such

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⁴⁹ "The Home for the Aged and Needy" (11 January 1889) p 2.

⁵⁰ "The Home for the Aged Needy. Opening Ceremony" p 2.

⁵¹ "The Home for the Aged Needy. Opening Ceremony" p 2.

as entitled them to consideration other than that necessary for the ordinary poor of the city. At the same time the Home was not necessarily for the poor of a superior class socially, but for those whose antecedents, at all events, carried no discredit.⁵²

At the opening it was also revealed that the original anonymous donation of £1,000 was made by Mr Joseph Burne, who had died and bequeathed a further £2,000.⁵³

The mid-air camera position of a second image - a photograph dated 188-?⁵⁴ - lays bare the recent construction site, and New Zealand's perennial ability for incompleteness. The photograph seemingly predicts the partiality of our Parliament building - with its similarly deficient left wing. The raw post-construction landscape - the foreignness which accompanies all new buildings - is thinly populated by punctuating tussock, the black and white photograph teasing us with the illusion of snow, in the same way that a better known 1880s photograph produces the uncanny jarring of Hinemihi covered with

⁵² "The Home for the Aged Needy. Opening Ceremony" p 2.

⁵³ "The Home for the Aged Needy. Opening Ceremony" p 2; also "The Home for the Aged and Needy" (18 February 1889) p 4.

⁵⁴ Home for Aged Needy, Wellington

Tarawera's volcanic ash and Surrey's snow.⁵⁵ In contrast to Charlesworth's water-colour, the photograph conveys a barren and hostile abstraction; discomfort and potential. This haunting quality of the building, suspended between states of completion, betrays faint traces of habitation at the windowed interface between inside and outside, because unlike the Charlesworth drawing the photograph admits us into the interior - even if only slightly. Blurred bodies, open windows, and half open blinds infiltrate at this more intimate scale.

As a c1910 photograph⁵⁶ attests, completion arrives with mature planting and its obscuring vegetation. In this image of the occupied Home, women dominate the entrance way, the interface between homelessness and another kind of institutionalisation, as the conservative images of manor servant and rest home nurse conflate. The building is no longer part of the hospital complex that would grow up around it. Later known as Te Hopai Home it was demolished in the 1970s, but - like many things architectural - its more adaptable

immaterial form endures, with Te Hopai Trust being the oldest charitable trust dedicated to the care of the elderly in New Zealand.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hinemihi meeting house at Te Wairoa

⁵⁶ Home for the Aged Needy, Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington

⁵⁷ Te Hopai Trust Group "Vision and Values" n.p.

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