

Frederick Tschopp, Landscape Architect, OE in New Zealand 1929-32

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ABSTRACT: Frederick Tschopp was a naturalised American of Swiss birth who had trained as a horticulturalist specialising in landscape architecture. He and his wife arrived in Auckland in September 1929 and he soon found work with some of the local bodies there. Works and Development in Wellington later employed him in designing gardens for several important government properties. This was not a permanent position however and about July 1931 he moved to Rotorua with a major contract to beautify the city, including extensive street plantings and an upgrade of the lake shore. Most of this work was well-received but there were some dissenting voices. The contract was terminated in November 1932, but with several goodwill gestures. While in Rotorua, Frederick had visited both Hamilton and Tauranga, commenting on landscape design aspects. The family (now with the addition of a son) left New Zealand for home in Los Angeles in late November 1932. Frederick had a subsequent career with the Department of Water in California and died at Laguna Hills, Orange, California in February 1980.

The reasons for Tschopp's visit to New Zealand can be interpreted in two ways. Clearly the newspapers regarded him as an overseas expert with a talent for landscape design, still a fairly new concept in the country in the late 1920s. He undoubtedly stood out as an American with drive and initiative. But he was only 24 when he first arrived, and his motives may well have been to gain overseas experience (OE) to help his chances of obtaining a lucrative job on his return to America. One paper described him as being in the course of a world tour but there is no conclusive evidence for him having spent long in other countries at this time.

Introduction

The specialised profession of landscape architect was virtually unknown in New Zealand in the late 1920s and early 1930s although modification of landscapes for the purpose of beautification had been carried out from the early days of European settlement.¹ Small-scale modification resulted in the creation of cottage gardens. Later on, when large landowners had ample money for the purpose, they used estate gardeners or nurserymen to create elaborate gardens and forest vistas around large homesteads often

based on English models as illustrated in the magazine *Country Life*.²

The most noted garden designer of the 1920s and into the 1930s was Alfred Buxton, a Christchurch nurseryman, who worked with a large team on many estates and some smaller properties in both the North and South Islands.³ While seldom modifying landscapes to the extent carried out by earlier English designers, such as Capability Brown or Repton, Buxton did introduce features such as ponds and lakes, walled gardens, and long avenues. While Buxton believed that exotic

flowers, shrubs, and trees were necessary for variety, he also planted cabbage trees, kaka beak and berry-producing shrubs to complement other species. Basic English estate designs were copied but the additional use of New Zealand species added a special local flavour.⁴

In towns and cities, the local council usually had a Parks and Reserves Department responsible for establishment and maintenance, but these were commonly conservative in their approaches to design and species planting.⁵ Where these were

¹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 1.

² Bradbury *A History of the Garden in New Zealand* p 150.

³ Pollock "Landscape architecture" n.p.

⁴ Bradbury *A History of the Garden in New Zealand* p 150.

⁵ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 46.

excessively conservative or perceived to be lacking in initiative, Beautifying Societies were set up by private citizens to encourage such things as the planting of street trees to soften the urban environment.⁶ In some instances, ordinary architects joined these societies to advise on garden design. An example was Mr La Trobe Hill who was a prominent member of the Rotorua Beautifying Society from June 1931.⁷

Arrival of Frederick Tschopp in New Zealand

The arrival of Frederick Tschopp and his wife from Vancouver on the *Aorangi* at Auckland was reported in the Auckland Star of the 8th of September 1929.⁸ They established a base there and he soon found temporary work with the Mount Albert Borough Council.⁹ He described his background as a horticulturalist who had specialised in landscape architecture in Los Angeles.¹⁰ Subsequent studies show that he had spent some four years working on landscape design for at least two horticultural firms there, mainly on garden commissions

⁶ Pollock "City parks and green spaces" n.p.

⁷ "Beautifying Rotorua" p 10.

⁸ "Shipping News" p 4.

⁹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 47.

¹⁰ "Personal" p 9.

for rich landowners.¹¹ This followed his arrival in America in 1925 and his subsequent naturalisation.¹² He was in fact born in Switzerland in September 1905 and received a broad training which included landscape design and construction.¹³ Shortly before departing for his overseas trip he married Alice Lauriette Strange,¹⁴ so the world trip could be regarded as something of an extended honeymoon as well as a chance to increase his work experience.

Initial Employment: Auckland

The work with the Mount Albert Borough Council only lasted until the early months of 1930 but did result in the adoption of some of Tschopp's ideas regarding curved vistas, use of trees and shrubs and retention of natural rock outcrops without modification.¹⁵ The main area to benefit from his suggestions was Fowlds Park.

Public Works Employment in Wellington

This temporary contract started late February and ran to the end of May 1930 within the

¹¹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 2.

¹² Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 2.

¹³ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 43.

¹⁴ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 2.

¹⁵ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 49.

Wellington District Engineer's Department. It resulted in plans to reorganise the gardens around the parliament buildings and those surrounding what was then known as the ministerial residence in Tinakori Road (now the Prime Minister's residence). Both these plans now exist only as aperture cards held by Archives New Zealand, but both show meticulous detail, a tribute to the drafting skill of Frederick Tschopp.¹⁶

Neither plan was followed through to any large extent, possibly because of the extreme financial hardship of the times. The area now occupied by a car park immediately through the first gate to the house in Tinakori Road was laid out as a rectangular pond with ornate pathways through the surrounding grounds. Several curved pathways were also proposed through parliament grounds as were a number of flowerbeds, none of which exist today. For parliament, Tschopp suggested that all the plantings there should be of native trees, shrubs and ferns.¹⁷ This would have necessitated the removal of

¹⁶ Ministerial Residence, Proposed Landscape Development, March 25, 1930; Proposed landscape design for new Parliament Buildings, 1930.

¹⁷ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 50.

Norfolk Island pines and other colourful exotics which continue to add variety to the surroundings today.

More Work in Auckland

Tschopp's next job was for about nine weeks (in November and December 1930) with the Auckland City Council in their Engineer's Department.¹⁸ Because of the prevailing depression, it was financed from a relief projects fund.¹⁹ Detailed records of his work for them have not been found, but it is likely he worked on designs for parts of Craigivon Park (near Avondale) and Waitatarua (near St Johns). During this time, he also started to approach the Rotorua Borough Council with a view to obtaining work with them.

The Rotorua Project

Frederick Tschopp's most ambitious project while in New Zealand was the work he did for the Rotorua Borough Council between July 1931 and November 1932.²⁰ He first approached the Council in June 1930, suggesting he might be able to assist with planning the lake frontage improvements which were already being discussed and had

aroused considerable local controversy.²¹ Somehow between then and his engagement in July 1931 he managed to persuade them that he should report on the overall beautification of the entire town including both the business and residential sections.

Tschopp was probably fortunate in that a new beautifying society had only just been established in Rotorua and its members were keen to have a suitably qualified man to advise them. So much so that they offered to pay his salary for a month and the council, not to be outdone, also contributed, eventually considerably extending the period of his employment.²² By mid-September 1931 he had completed a 52-page report on the beautification of streets and reserves.²³ This included an analysis of the ideal width of roads, footpaths, stormwater systems, placement of public utilities, treatment of avenues and boulevards and best distances between trees. Specific tree and shrub species were also recommended for planting with an emphasis on using many New Zealand natives.

The report was not the end of Tschopp's work for the Rotorua Council. He was kept on in their Parks and Reserves Department firstly to interpret the report to the public and secondly to start to implement some of its plans and recommendations. The development of Kuirau Park, which provided a source area for some mature native trees required for town roadside plantings, was commenced by Tschopp after his main report had been released.²⁴ He was also empowered to start laying out a boulevard with associated plantings along Tryon Street using up to 120 men from one of the town's unemployment schemes.²⁵ Work was commenced too on Fenton Street, then the most important street in the town.

To understand Tschopp's success in Rotorua we need to consider certain historical aspects of the town's growth prior to 1930 as the circumstances were unusual from many points of view. The prime interest in the area as a tourist destination from the 1880s onwards centred around the hot springs and geysers, known for centuries by the Māori. The government of the day recognised the

¹⁸ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 4.

¹⁹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 4.

²⁰ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 7.

²¹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 8.

²² "Town Beautifying" p 13.

²³ Tschopp. Report on Beautification of Streets and Roads, 1931.

²⁴ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 52.

²⁵ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 15.

potential of the area for establishing a spa town for both recreational and medicinal purposes and acquired much of the land, building baths, hospitals, and other structures. Gradually the supporting population increased and a small town was laid out, but all the sections were leased from the government and services were rudimentary. For example, the early roads were only made of pumice with no gravel and were extremely dusty in dry weather.²⁶ From 1901 the town administration was taken over by the nationwide Department of Tourist and Health Resorts, but it was not until the 1920s that the population sought their own control of the land through freeholding and the election of a Mayor and council.²⁷ Despite the general lack of services, the government put quite a lot of effort into developing the Government Gardens, including building the Rotorua Bathhouse in 1909 (later known as Tudor Towers) and eventually metalled the roads. It also carried out tree planting with planes along some of the main roads.²⁸

By 1930 the total population was only an estimated 5,000 people.²⁹ A fourth mayor, Thomas Jackson, had taken office in 1931. He was known to be progressive and held the post for 10 years. But the nationwide depression badly affected the town, with unemployment rising from 400 to 550 in April 1932. Some government-sponsored relief funds were available, but it was generally a time of severe belt-tightening.³⁰

It is therefore somewhat remarkable that Frederick Tschopp was able to gain employment in Rotorua under the prevailing conditions but his experience throughout New Zealand shows that he was a very persuasive man. His time and efforts in Rotorua were not universally welcomed however, although the backing of the mayor ensured his continued employment until he himself decided to resign near the end of October 1932.³¹ After his report was released in 1931, an anonymous correspondent wrote to the *Rotorua Morning Post* criticising the choice of native trees and suggesting that

more ornamental species should be used.³² Perhaps more serious was the resignation of a Councillor and two members of the Works Committee on the grounds that Tschopp had been using council staff to carry out his schemes rather than unemployed labour. The mayor publicly denied this, and the work continued.³³

Other Activities in New Zealand

Tschopp either visited or contacted local bodies in several other parts of New Zealand during the course of his stay in the country, usually with a view to seeking short-term employment with them. His visit to Christchurch in July 1930 was well reported in the *Press*.³⁴ He was given a tour by the Superintendent of Parks and Gardens and commented afterwards on how impressed he was by the town planning abilities of the early pioneers.³⁵ His main suggestion for further beautification was that all hedges should be removed to give more open vistas, but he acknowledged this would probably run contrary to the residual English ideas of the residents.

²⁶ Rockel *Taking the Water* p 32.

²⁷ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 7.

²⁸ Rockel *Taking the Waters* p 32.

²⁹ Boroughs, Estimated Populations, New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1930. n.p.

³⁰ Stafford *The New Century in Rotorua* p 171.

³¹ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 12.

³² Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 12.

³³ "Councillors Resign" p 6.

³⁴ "Beautifying the City" p 17.

³⁵ "Beautifying the City" p 17.

An article in the *Bay of Plenty Times* headed "Potentialities of Tauranga" recorded Tschopp's day visit from Rotorua. In it he mentioned the fine climate of the area and the town's potential as a seaside resort. He recommended extensive tree planting and the development of a comprehensive plan for beautification, possibly using unemployed relief workers to help carry it out.³⁶

Adam and Bradbury record that Tschopp also contacted the Mount Maunganui Town Board, the Devonport Borough Council, the Hamilton Beautifying Society and the Napier Borough Council, but none of these responded by offering him further work.³⁷

The Context of Frederick Tschopp's Visit to New Zealand

The term "landscape architect" was certainly not unknown in New Zealand prior to Tschopp's visit, although it was comparatively rare. Several individuals advertised their services as such in the early 1900s in places as diverse as Auckland and Whanganui, more in connection with garden design than anything on a large scale. An example was J Cameron

³⁶ "Potentialities of Tauranga" p 3.

³⁷ Adam and Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) pp 5-6.

of Westmere, advertising in the 1913 Wanganui Chronicle.³⁸ Alfred Buxton in his advertisements coupled the term with "and Gardener" and his work in some instances more closely approached the type of labour undertaken by Tschopp.³⁹

At least two previous American landscape architects had made visits to New Zealand in the first quarter of the twentieth century, although neither of them sought employment here. The first was Mr JW Zeagler of Denver, Colorado in 1909 who seems to have been mainly on holiday.⁴⁰ The second was a Miss EH Fairley of New York who said she was studying New Zealand botany with a view to selecting species which might be used for landscaping purposes in America.⁴¹

Several "conventional" architects such as William Gummer and Horace Massey of Auckland had broad interests in civic or garden design but were unable to pursue their

³⁸ J Cameron "Consult J Cameron, Landscape Architect [advertisement]" p 1.

³⁹ A W Buxton Ltd "Now is Planting Time [advertisement]" p 10.

⁴⁰ "Personal Items" p 7.

⁴¹ "Local & General" p 2.

concepts on any large scale.⁴² AJ Brown, another Auckland architect, lecturing in June 1927, recognised the importance of landscape architecture in America, but did not think the trend would spread to New Zealand for many years.⁴³ Frederick Tschopp was to prove him wrong.

The Balance Between the Overseas Expert and Overseas Experience

There is no question concerning the recognition of Frederick Tschopp's expertise as reported in the newspapers at the time of his visit as "a highly trained horticulturalist who has specialised in landscape architecture" and who "has had extensive experience in the United States of America."⁴⁴ Also his apparent facility in obtaining work from both government and local body organisations shows a high degree of skill and persistence, particularly in view of the onset of the worldwide depression of the 1930s. One of his attractions must have been him bringing in new ideas of overall integrated planning from overseas firsthand at a time when most people who were interested in them could only read about them in journals or other publications.

⁴² Mew *Architects at the Apex* pp 11, 152.

⁴³ "Garden Designing" p 12.

⁴⁴ "Personal" p 9.

The applications of these ideas were somewhat limited by the size and duration of the projects he was involved with around the country, except for Rotorua.

Rotorua offered Tschopp an unrivalled opportunity to display his talents and allowed him to find out more about New Zealand plants and their potential for landscape enhancement. Because of the relatively small size of the town and its relatively embryonic state of local body development, it presented a manageable planning project over a relatively short period of time once funding issues had been resolved. Previous planning by the government had been concentrated almost entirely on the Government Gardens and thermal areas with a view to making them as attractive as possible to tourists wishing to visit a premier spa area. Tschopp wanted to make the entire town attractive and functional both for visitors and residents,⁴⁵ hence his comprehensive plan.

The detailed study of Tschopp's time and experiences while in New Zealand by Adam and Bradbury reveals only a few relatively minor instances where Frederick showed a

lack of experience or possibly poor judgement. His recommendation that all exotic trees and shrubs be removed from parliament grounds and replaced by native species was an extreme one⁴⁶ and unlikely to be accepted, although the nationalistic idea may have had some merit. Similarly, his heavy emphasis on the use of native species for road beautification in Rotorua drew active criticism from several sources,⁴⁷ both on the grounds that few were considered attractive enough, but also the attendant difficulties in transferring and maintaining large specimens.

The integration of landscape architecture into general town planning was in its infancy in New Zealand in the early 1930s despite the appointment of JW Mawson as Director of Town Planning in 1928. Further developments were clearly hampered by the Depression and then the onset of the Second World War. Undoubtedly Frederick Tschopp was a pioneer in this field in New Zealand and might have had much more influence had he stayed longer and decided to make a career here. From his own personal point of view, he had clearly honed his skills in dealing

effectively with a wide variety of people, giving satisfaction in most instances and proving by his plans and reports that he could adapt to many different circumstances. What more could one want from one's OE?

⁴⁵ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 50.

⁴⁶ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2003) p 55.

⁴⁷ Adam & Bradbury "Fred Tschopp" (2002) p 12.

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