

A Bi-cultural Townscape: Wellington in the 1940s

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ABSTRACT: Included in the baggage the first settlers brought to Wellington were prefabricated cottages built in London. According to their designer and maker – Manning of Holborn – these "flat-pack" homes could be erected in only a few hours. All that was needed was a wrench to put them together. For settlers, the advantage of the prefabricated dwellings was the chance to create an "instant home." Constructed together they would create an immediate and modern British-like townscape in an exotic land. Why then did so many settlers quickly abandon their prefabricated dwellings for raupō structures built by Māori? How come raupō dwellings proliferated in Wellington and not in Auckland? And why were measures were put in place to restrict their construction from 1844? This paper focuses on the early settlement of Wellington when the town had a hybrid-built environment – comprising both European and Māori-designed structures – and Māori and Pākehā lived side by side. These attributes set Wellington apart from other towns in New Zealand and similar settler societies. So why was this unique bi-cultural townscape subsumed by an overtly European one by 1850?

In surveying Wellington's twenty-first century built environment there are few structures that we might call bi-cultural buildings, that is, those that acknowledge both Māori and Pākehā architectural and building traditions. Te Papa/Museum of New Zealand was designed to be one, with its supposed northern Māori and southern Pākehā faces, but its bunker-like monumentality alienates both cultures.¹ Much more successful is nearby Te Raukura or wharewaka. It is a modern take on a traditional whare, with its low-rise gable, maihi (bargeboards) and open interior spaces. It is clearly a Māori building but Pākehā can also see elements their own culture reflected within it. Its basic form is highly evocative of a simple war memorial hall; a connotation Te Raukura's function as a community meeting and eating-place

supports.² While not intended to be a bi-cultural building, it is one of the few in Wellington that speaks to Māori and Pākehā alike.

Another function of Te Raukura is to re-establish a Māori presence on Taranaki wharf. The building is located on the harbour frontage of Te Aro pā, which was inhabited by Taranaki, Te Āti Awa and Ngāti Ruanui people at the time Europeans founded the settlement of Wellington in 1840. Historians have rightly seen the building of Wellington as a powerful colonising instrument that alienated Māori from much of their land and expunged their long history of living on it. Accordingly, the story of colonial Wellington has mainly been one of Pākehā triumphalism over both Māori and the land. Recent Treaty

of Waitangi settlements have made some redress over the loss of land and helped to publicly retrieve the district's Māori history. The archaeological discovery of a small section of Te Aro pā during a building project in 2005 and the reclaiming of Māori place names has been part of this process – for instance, Tinakori Hill has returned to its original name of Ahumairangi.

Revisiting well-worn Pākehā stories with a critical eye can also provide new or forgotten insights into the city's past and the role of Māori within it. In the researching the building of Wellington for a book I expected to follow the usual story in which the first settlers were: dumped on the beach at Petone; accommodated in tents and temporary dwellings; moved to a new location beside Lambton harbour; erected new buildings of

¹ Te Papa "Our building" n.p.

² Te Ruakura "History" n.p.

wood and brick, and a new city was born. But in delving into the primary sources it became apparent that Wellington was initially built less by Pākehā and more by Māori. Many of the buildings that we see in early images of the town and that we imagine were erected by settlers from sod or wood turn out to be raupō structures constructed by Māori. In fusing traditional Māori materials and building techniques with European design and spatial arrangements, these structures formed a bi-cultural townscape that, as with Te Raukura, spoke to both cultures.

It was never meant to happen this way. Under Wakefield's systematic colonisation scheme towns were to be European beacons that would spread civilising light over savage and indistinct hinterlands. It was from these urban coastal toeholds that the colonisation of the colony's interior would begin. The settler-built environment was to provide tangible expression to this idea: houses, hotels, churches, shops, and public buildings, of different sizes, materials and forms, would showcase European superiority over Māori and track civilisation's spread.

Instant dwellings

To hasten the process many of Wellington's

wealthier settlers brought with themselves kitset buildings made back home. In Britain a number of companies manufactured prefabricated cottages and other buildings that emigrants could take with them and assemble on site. The most prominent of these was Henry Manning of Holborn. In the late 1820s he invented a prefabrication system where grooved wooden posts were slotted and bolted into a floor plate carried on bearers. The posts carried the wall plate with supporting triangulated trusses. Standardised wooden cladding panels slotted between the grooved posts. The roof, doors, glazed windows, the roof, locks and other components were all included and each building was pre-painted, inside and out. Each component was numbered to aid assembly and a small compass was provided to orientate the structure. All that was needed was a wrench to put it together and this could be reportedly done in just a few hours.³ The cottages were in a simple English cottage style and came in different sizes – a two-roomed cottage measured 7.3m by 3.7m. Prices began at a relatively modest £15.⁴ (His firm also made New Zealand's first government house,

³ *Home Delivery* p 40; "Manning's Portable Colonial Cottages" p 4.

⁴ Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage* pp 251-256.

a capacious dwelling assembled in Auckland in 1841). Historians have identified Manning's cottages as the first (European) houses made for ease of transport and construction, the antecedent for the industrialised prefabricated housing that rebuilt cities in the twentieth century.⁵

Manning did not stop at houses. He also made dressers, sofas, tables, chairs "and a variety of economical Colonial Furniture made to pack into each other to save freight."⁶ His firm was part of a cluster of British companies specialising in "colonial outfitting," provisioning emigrants with a diverse range of goods specifically designed for conditions in settler societies.⁷ For example, in promotional material Manning gave the example of settling Perth in 1830, where his cottages

were found to be of the greatest service to settlers, both in protecting their families from the weather, and their property from theft. Many persons who took only tents, suffered severely in both respects; their tents frequently blown down in the middle of a stormy night, and their goods being thus not only exposed to the weather, but to

⁵ *Home Delivery* p 40.

⁶ "Portable Colonial Cottages" p 1; "Manning's Portable Colonial Cottages" p 4.

⁷ "Portable Colonial Cottages" p 1.

pilfering. Provided with a cottage of this description, an emigrant might land from a ship in the morning and sleep on his home on shore at night.⁸

Subsequent publicity emphasised testimonials from leading officials in Australian colonies who had lived in Manning cottages, including Charles La Trobe, Governor of Port Philip (Melbourne) and James Stirling, Governor of Western Australia.⁹

Numerous settler capitalists to Wellington and Nelson – Francis Molesworth, George Evans, Henry Petre, Henry St Hill, and Samuel Revans – all brought Manning cottages with them. Such buildings are visible in early images of the town.¹⁰ For example, a Robert Park painting of the Te Aro foreshore in the early 1840s includes a line of prefabricated dwellings joined together to form a terrace. In 1852 John Pearce painted his first lodgings at the northern end of Wellington Terrace. The dwelling's low-hipped roof and fenestration suggest it was a prefabricated cottage.¹¹ The most famous

⁸ Gregory "Journeying" p 214.

⁹ "Manning's Portable Colonial Cottages" p 4.

¹⁰ Ward *Early Wellington* pp 45, 47; "Portable Colonial Cottages" p 1.

¹¹ Park "Te Aro Foreshore;" and Pearce "J. P.'s First Lodgings."

kitset structure was Barrett's Hotel. This was a Manning building shipped out by the New Zealand Company to be used as school, but was subsequently gifted by its chairman George Evans to Richard Barrett for his help in securing the town.¹²

Although primarily designed to provide near-instant shelter, as noted before, the prefabricated homes were also intended to facilitate colonisation. Constructed in groups they would create an immediate and modern British-like townscape that would signal to Māori an explicit European claim over the landscape. Yet despite the glowing testimonials about their suitability for all colonial contexts, it seems their makers had not taken into account conditions in Wellington. Lieutenant John Wood purchased a prefabricated cottage in 1841 and had it erected near the top of The Terrace, Wellington. The first night he and his family slept in the structure it was hit by a violent southerly gale, forcing the occupants to ballast it with heavy trunks and boxes to stop it becoming airborne.¹³ Another settler, Mary Swainson, complained the walls of her

¹² Bremner "Barrett's Hotel" p 151; Ward *Early Wellington* p 250.

¹³ Wood *Twelve Months* p 10.

prefabricated cottage were too thin and the windows too large and as a result her family "felt the cold very much."¹⁴ It appears the Pākehā predilection to erect houses that are poorly suited to New Zealand's bracing climate began here.

A raupō town

While prefabricated structures provided townscapes with an instant imprint of home, in Wellington at least, the reality was most settlers lived in Māori-built dwellings. These were constructed with raupō (reeds) and flax over a tōtara wooden frame or else were made using wattled hurdle walls (supple jack covered in clay).¹⁵ The houses were distinguished from traditional whare by their design and function. The walls were higher than whare and featured external chimneys, small windows, and hipped or gabled thatched roofs. These were hybrid dwellings, their design resembling a traditional English cottage, but built using traditional Māori materials and techniques. The naturalist William Swainson (Mary's father) sketched some of those that were erected at Petone and Wellington in the early 1840s. The grid-like

¹⁴ Swainson "Letters" p 34.

¹⁵ Salmond *Old New Zealand Houses* pp 31-32.

raupō walls are the same as those on whare, but the steeply pitched gable and hipped roofs are English cottage-like. Swainson did not provide an interior view but a sense of what they looked like is provided in a painting by Alfred John Cooper a Māori-built settler's cottage at Mohaka in 1855. The structure resembles a traditional whare with two posts holding the ridgepole. Posts and rafters support the walls and roof, which are clad in raupō and thatch, but the higher stud distinguishes it from a traditional whare.¹⁶

Significantly, raupō dwellings cost about one-fifth the price of the imported cottages and were much warmer.¹⁷ "We all prefer them to the trumpery wooden houses built in England," reported George Evans.¹⁸ In Auckland, Felton Mathew employed Māori to build him and his wife Sarah a two-roomed raupō cottage so they could move out of their draughty and leaky tent. The couple bought the doors and window frames from a local carpenter and used oiled calico for glass, which provided ample light and kept out the

¹⁶ Cooper "Interior."

¹⁷ Ross "The Good Old Times: Some notes on pioneer Wellington" p 730.

¹⁸ Evans "Correspondence: Extract of a letter from Dr. Evans" p 293.

rain but blocked the magnificent view.¹⁹ In British culture wooden buildings were perceived as temporary, even uncouth, structures so many settlers found the use of the material novel.²⁰ In April 1840 Wellington's Presbyterian minister Rev John Macfarlane reported

I am getting up my home, though you would think it a rather strange one, for there is not a single stone in it. It is built of wood, thatched with reeds – 28 feet [8.5m] long, 18 [5.5m] feet wide, roof 8 [2.4m] feet high. It contains a good parlour, bedroom and kitchen.²¹

The different rooms and the multi-functional use of these dwellings – where occupants slept, cooked and socialised – set them apart from one-roomed Māori whare, whose functions were more strongly defined by building type.²²

Fire

By early 1842 the view of Wellington from Lambton harbour was of a bi-cultural townscape comprising: whare and pātaka in Pipitea, Kumutoto and Te Aro pā, the prefabricated cottages, new European-styled

¹⁹ Mathew "Extracts from diary."

²⁰ Toomath *Built in New Zealand: the houses we live in* p 25.

²¹ Ward *Early Wellington* p 25

²² Brown *Māori Architecture* p 30.

wood and brick buildings, and the hybrid raupō structures. The main problem with raupō buildings was their flammability. This was terrifyingly illustrated in a fire along Wellington's beach (Lambton Quay) during the night of 9-10 November 1842. Starting in Lloyd's bakehouse beside Kumutoto pā (Woodward Street), and fanned by a blustery northerly wind, the blaze consumed some structures and leapt over others. Sydney Wright was shipboard in Lambton Harbour and came up on deck at 11 o'clock to see "a great fire on the beach running along with the gales in solid flames."²³ One eyewitness reported: "so rapidly was the fire communicated from one to another thatched roof, that it was almost impossible to proceed along the beach at an equal rate."²⁴ "Many were obliged to catch their children in their arms and escape with nothing but their bed linen," recorded another.²⁵ Such was the heat that John Plimmer plunged into the sea to stop being burnt.²⁶ The inferno was only arrested after people pulled down three dwellings at the north end of the beach (near

²³ Wright "Journal Extract."

²⁴ "New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator. Saturday, November 12, 1842" p 2.

²⁵ *Letters from Settlers* p 57.

²⁶ "Old Wellington" pp 245-246.

Plimmer Lane) to starve it of fuel. In only 30 minutes 57 buildings and a substantial £12,000 of property were destroyed – though no lives were lost.²⁷ Settlers and Māori quickly rallied to help the fire's victims, donating money, timber, food and clothes.²⁸

A general recognition that raupō structures had aided the spread of the fire led to calls for the Governor to apply the Raupo House Ordinance to Wellington, New Zealand's first building regulation.²⁹ The measure levied a £20 annual rating on any urban building built wholly or partly of raupō, straw or thatch. New buildings of these materials were subject to a £100 tax.³⁰ The Legislative Council had passed the ordinance in March 1842 following lobbying by Auckland property owners worried that raupō houses were an intolerable fire hazard. Auckland was the first to adopt the measure but few thought it could be applied to Wellington. As one commentator noted: "the town of Wellington consists so generally of Raupo houses ... that their

²⁷ "New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator. Saturday, November 12, 1842" p 2.

²⁸ *Letters from Settlers* p 57.

²⁹ "New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator. Saturday, November 12, 1842" p 2.

³⁰ Isaacs "Early Building Legislation" p 90.

removal would have the effect of unhousing *thousands*."³¹ The point was supported by an 1843 survey of Wellington's buildings that showed that of the 621 houses in the town 306 of them were built on European plan, 315 were built on Māori plan.³² However, the fire had exposed the danger of raupō structures and the ordinance was applied to the town in October 1844.³³

Why raupō buildings proliferated in Wellington, but not in Auckland, was a function of each town's initial size. With hundreds of settlers arriving at once, Wellington lacked the infrastructure and resources to accommodate everyone in wooden houses, so became reliant on Māori provision of raupō dwellings. With fewer people arriving in Auckland, the town was better able to fend for itself. Although raupō dwellings were initially common in Auckland, the situation changed after the April 1841 land sale, when wood became the dominant building material. By July the settler Joseph Newman noted "the sound of the hammering has hardly ceased to ring in our Ears, and

³¹ "Auckland: Raupo House Bill" p 2.

³² "No. 9. - Wellington. - Houses, &c. Description and Cost of Buildings" p 2.

³³ "The Raupo Act" p 2.

Weather Board Buildings are being erected in every part of Town."³⁴ Whereas Wellington began with a hybrid-built environment, comprising both settler- and Māori-built structures, Auckland moved promptly to create one that was overtly European. Nonetheless, Wellington's raupō fabric was also fleeting. The fire ordinance, the fact that raupō became brittle through weathering, and settlers' desire for more permanent buildings meant that by the late 1840s the town's raupō buildings had largely given way to wooden or brick ones – although brick fell out of favour following the 1848 earthquake.³⁵ Among these was the Athenaeum and Mechanic's Institute opened in April 1850. The Greek Revival-styled building comprised a Doric columned portico and pediment and two well-proportioned wings, one for a museum and the other a library. It was built of wood but plastered to resemble stone. The building was the first of architectural substance in the town and can be seen as a deliberate attempt to move past the utilitarian style of the first settlers and build in a mode that put a sophisticated European stamp on public architecture. As one delighted aesthete

³⁴ Newman "Letters" (20 July 1841).

³⁵ Isaacs "Going Back" p 103.

proclaimed: at least now we have one public building that is "creditable to the taste of the community."³⁶

Conclusion

With the erection of the Mechanic's Institute the idea of the city as a beacon of European civilisation was put on a firmer footing. Such a concept had little room for a bi-cultural townscape and Wellington's Pākehā city builders subsequently got to work removing all traces of it. The unearthing of fragments of Te Aro pā highlighted how the past has ways of reasserting itself. The construction of Te Raukura on Taranaki wharf is further proof of this. While it remembers the tangata whenua of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, it might also remind us that the early building of Wellington was a bi-cultural project.

³⁶ "Wellington Athenæum and Mechanics' Institute" p 2.

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