

## House or flat?

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**ABSTRACT:** The modern argument of high density versus low density living is not new. In 1915 Florence Taylor wrote an article for the Australian journal *Building*, entitled "The Home - or the Flat?" (Taylor "The Home - or the Flat?" pp 125-126), Before reading on, the reader knew from the article title that a house was a home and a flat was not. Taylor's argument was that women who lived in flats would become "flaccid and unwomanly" and fail to bear children (she was childless). She believed that "cheap and convenient suburban transport [based on "State-owned trams" which made "communication ... easy and cheap"] ... together with wide suburban areas offers the best solution of the healthy, prolific population." By the 1920s she had changed her opinion in favour of flats. A similar process at later dates occurred in New Zealand where in 1919 Samuel Hurst Seager used the report of the 1918 town planning conference in Brisbane to promote the garden village with its separate homes as the answer to the New Zealand housing problem. However, by 1936 in the first issue of *Building Today* (later *Home and Building*) the inner city Cintra House flats in Auckland were hailed as "... a very fine practical home for modern living" (Anon "Cintra" pp 19-21). The architect was Horace Massey and much of the fitted interior furniture that gave this practicality was designed by RGS Beatson, the newly appointed co-editor of *Home and Building*.

This paper discusses the change between seeing flats as the epitome of awfulness in 1915 to their resurrection as the housing of the future some 20 years later. In doing this it touches on early housing of the poor in Europe where inner city multi-storey housing was seen as the only answer since the time of the Roman Empire, and the reinvention of multi-storey housing with fitted interiors by European modernists, such as Ernst May in the 1920s in Frankfurt.

### Introduction

This paper has its roots in the 1910s but like many historical studies it has to stray outside the decade in order to investigate and make sense of the strange statement made by Florence Taylor in 1915<sup>1</sup> that living in flats would lead to a drop in population as women would no longer become mothers. Since flat dwelling dates back to at least the 1st century AD as a response to providing affordable housing in cities,<sup>2</sup> it might be assumed that survival of the human race was not threatened by apartment living. The better class of these

Roman apartments had a wide arcade style corridor fronting the street with rooms at either end the full depth of the building, also with windows to the street, and in between smaller rooms lit from the corridor.<sup>3</sup> However, these apartments could be, and were, sublet. The less wealthy probably lived in shop houses, inhabiting one or two rooms behind or above their place of business.<sup>4</sup> From the start, therefore, the apartment has been both a gracious dwelling and a place of potential

squalor. This is not far different from the cottage or single-family home. In the early twentieth century the cottage was viewed by many as the ideal means of housing the urban working class, with the architect George Allen, noting in 1919,

the townsman ... and his family can often enjoy a cottage and garden in the country at no more cost than that of the suburban house or town flat.<sup>5</sup>

However, when Seeborn Rowntree investigated the conditions of the rural poor in 1913 amongst many tales of trying to make ends meet he described a cottage, occupied by

<sup>1</sup> Taylor "The Home - or the Flat?" pp 125-126.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* p 157.

<sup>3</sup> Frier "The Rental Market in Early Imperial Rome" pp 27-37.

<sup>4</sup> Frier "The Rental Market in Early Imperial Rome" pp 27-37.

<sup>5</sup> Allen *The Cheap Cottage and Small House* p 6.

a husband and wife and five daughters, of two ground floor rooms, a rough loft used as a bedroom by the two older girls, and a lean-to "scullery" occupied by shoes and an old bicycle.<sup>6</sup> The cottage could also be both an elegant and a squalid dwelling.

Roman apartments also affected urban form by presenting "dangers from fire, danger from deterioration of the strength of the structures themselves, complaints of the darkened streets etc."<sup>7</sup> Architects, particularly modernist architects, came to love the block of flats as it provided large modules for mega planning, such as in the cities proposed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> These same urban forms were disliked by sociologists because they isolated and alienated people.<sup>9</sup> In the early twentieth-century architects in the UK also had a love affair with cottages and the search for the cheap cottage was pursued with an intensity

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<sup>6</sup> Rowntree and Kendall *How the Labourer Lives* pp 140-142.

<sup>7</sup> Anon "The "Sky-scraper" not a Modern Institution" p 329.

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* pp 238-249; 242-243.

<sup>9</sup> McCarthy and Saegert "Residential density, social overload, and social withdrawal" pp 253-272.

similar to that of those looking for the Holy Grail.<sup>10</sup>

Because the same arguments are made today about whether the single-family house or the apartment should be the ideal dwelling form for New Zealanders, this paper looks at attitudes to both in the early years of the twentieth century in the Dominions.

### **Florence Taylor and the flat**

Florence Taylor was the first Australian woman to qualify as an architect and, with her husband, George Taylor, most of her life was devoted to editing and writing articles for a number of construction industry journals.<sup>11</sup> From the start articles written by Florence on providing houses that could be made into homes by women became a regular section in the journal *Building*. However, homes went with houses and flats were always a second best as noted in a 1910 article. Here the flat in Australia was described as

reprehensible, it being undesirable in our life to see an undue prevalence [sic] of flat living, as to a considerable extent it breaks into the privacy so essential to the true

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<sup>10</sup> Allen *The Cheap Cottage and Small House*; Weaver *The Country Life Book of Cottages*.

<sup>11</sup> Freestone "Anti-planning in the 1940s: the paradox of Florence Taylor" pp 191-209.

home.<sup>12</sup>

A flat was permissible as a second home in the city where you lived in the working week, retiring to your country home when you could, and examples of these "residential chambers" were illustrated, such as those of Blight Street, a seven storey block.<sup>13</sup> This idea of the flat as a second home had stemmed from London in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Later, also in London, the term residential chambers was used to refer to apartments for professional women. The idea of residential chambers was not a new one. In 1859 a letter to an English magazine had put forward the idea of "a self-supporting house for gentlewomen of small incomes."<sup>15</sup> By the 1880s the problem of finding accommodation for working women was more acute. Among several responses in 1888 a company was formed called the Ladies' Residential Chambers Ltd. Their intention was to build two-, three- and four-roomed self-contained flats that would be let at a rent that would yield a 5% return on investment. Meals could

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor [?] "A New factor In Construction" p 39.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor [?] "Residential Chambers, Bligh-Street" p 38.

<sup>14</sup> Pearson *The Architectural and Social History of Cooperative Living* p 8.

<sup>15</sup> Crawford *Enterprising women* p 206.

be bought from a common room, with an attached kitchen, in the basement.<sup>16</sup> In 1889 the first set of Ladies' Residential Chambers was constructed in Chenies Street, London. The Taylors' interpretation of the flat as acceptable as a second home meant that for the average person who could not afford two homes (residential chamber in the city and house in the country) the stand-alone house was the answer. The separate house was also preferred for the normal working family as good light could be obtained in every room. The argument was also made in their discussion of tall tenement housing in Germany along wide streets that building high raised the cost of land in the locality, making it more difficult to be able to afford to set this expensive land aside for the necessary open spaces and playgrounds.<sup>17</sup>

In a 1913 article on the slums of The Rocks in Sydney (possibly written by George or maybe by both Taylors) the tenements built by the Harbour Trust to rehouse people after slum clearance were described as

a mistake, and only another way back to the old conditions ... A change to a better built house is not

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<sup>16</sup> Crawford *Enterprising women* pp 207-208.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor [?] "House and Town Planning pp 70-77.

sufficient for the slum dweller. He must be set in a new environment<sup>18</sup>

Further, this new environment was to encourage the innate love of beauty through having a garden. For Florence the garden was also a "cure" for the ills of being a woman: "The bending of the body, the exercise of the arms in digging and weeding is better than any physical culture exercises in existence" although she did abjure her readers not to overdo things.<sup>19</sup>

Florence was also a person not afraid to be blunt and felt people should put their name to what they felt.<sup>20</sup> In the 1915 article she stated:

The flat dweller because of her environment, becomes flaccid and unwomanly, losing physical mental and moral tone - her muscles are all untrained, her body unnaturally weak through drugs intended to destroy the germ of life - for the whole circumstances of her existence, as well as her condition, make her a coward, afraid to face the discomfort and pain of motherhood.<sup>21</sup>

It should perhaps be noted here that Florence never had any children, apparently by

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor [?] "The Tragedy of "The Rocks"" pp 90-93.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor "The Building of a Garden - 1" pp 78-80.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor "Editorial Footnote" p 158.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor "The Home - or the Flat?" pp 125-126.

choice.<sup>22</sup> Moreover she was a working woman who was more than appropriately fitted for life in a flat, free from issues of having to look after the garden and maintain a pristine house front to the street, aspects that she deemed important in home-making.<sup>23</sup> She was also not afraid to praise strong women, even discussing the changing role of women in modern and historical (when they were more powerful political figures) France in an article on the restoration of Versailles.<sup>24</sup> Florence also objected to flats in the name of architecture stating

Architecture, as an art, is no doubt most seriously concerned with the housing of people, and yet what can the architect do in tenement design and construction, other than what he has already done?<sup>25</sup>

She felt that the terraces in Sydney suburbs had extracted the best of European tenement architecture and were a model for how to increase density in the city, coupled with suburban developments of separate houses along the railway and tram lines.

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<sup>22</sup> Freestone *Florence Taylor's Hats* p 37.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor "The Home - or the Flat?" pp 125-126.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor "Feminism, History, and some French Chateaux" pp 33-41.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor "The New Broom" pp 57-60.

Florence did temper her attitudes to flats. In the same 1928 issue in which she encouraged people to be blunt in expressing their opinions, there is a note in the middle of a critical review of *Towards a New Architecture* ("It is queer that a person who can express such sound theories on art and design ... could be guilty of leaving out of his own compositions the very qualities which contribute to the success of these structures which he praises"<sup>26</sup>) to the effect that:

Life in a flat, or hotel or boarding house, or in an apartment house, has not as much exclusiveness as these isolated residences [referring to an illustration] have, and yet the advantages which they offer are so many that numbers of people live in them by preference rather than necessity.<sup>27</sup>

### **The dwelling in New Zealand**

Flats only became relevant in New Zealand as its cities grew. The architect and lecturer Samuel Hurst Seager<sup>28</sup> wrote a comprehensive report on the 1918 town planning conference held in Brisbane, reporting "the need for ... the most up-to-date ideas as to the best type of housing"<sup>29</sup> but without specifying what this

housing was to be. However, the conference delegates kept coming back to the idea of garden city suburbs and villages. This would have pleased Hurst Seager who in 1902 had built his cottage in the small settlement of the Spur at Sumner as a model of a garden suburb for New Zealand.<sup>30</sup> The Brisbane conference report claims overcrowding in cities would be addressed by creating garden villages and small, self-contained garden cities with good connections into the city. Doing this "would not only provide homes and places of work under the very best conditions, but would at once prevent the overgrowth of our cities."<sup>31</sup> From this it is clear that going upwards was not an option for the new breed of Dominion town-planners. This lack of enthusiasm for flat living was echoed in a long article from 10 years earlier in the *Nelson Evening Mail* where the merits of city centre and suburban living were debated for Wellington. "Will Wellington swing its arms and legs into the suburbs or cramp its chest in the city? Will the capital develop healthfulness or congestion of the lungs?"<sup>32</sup> The problem here is how to clear the slum properties from the city centre and provide homes that people will want. This

was a question that had vexed housing reformers in London 50 years earlier, after the 1851 UK census showed for the first time more people lived in towns than in rural areas.<sup>33</sup> The issue was whether to build on the edges of London with the problems of working men and women commuting long distances to work or whether to go up and build decent homes in the form of apartments close to work. If you had invested in the railways then extending the city and commuting was in your interest but others were prepared to invest in apartment housing for a small return (circa 5%), such as George Peabody who established his housing trust fund in 1862.<sup>34</sup> Early Peabody flats were blocks of five storeys. Flats, with from one to four rooms, could be rented and the shared lavatories and sinks were situated in landings where they could be easily inspected to ensure they were kept clean. One of the stipulations of being a tenant was that the whole family had to be vaccinated against smallpox.<sup>35</sup> Only in 1910 did Peabody build their first set of self-contained apartments in Bethnal Green. Each flat had its own lavatory, although bathhouses and laundries were still

<sup>26</sup> Taylor [?] "Towards a New Architecture" p 91.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor [?] "Towards a New Architecture" p 91.

<sup>28</sup> Lochhead "Seager, Samuel Hurst" np.

<sup>29</sup> Hurst Seager *1918 Town-Planning Report* p 5.

<sup>30</sup> Anon *The Spur Sumner* pp 7-8.

<sup>31</sup> Hurst Seager *1918 Town-Planning Report* p 12.

<sup>32</sup> Anon "Housing of the people" p 1.

<sup>33</sup> Tarn *Five Percent Philanthropy* p 41.

<sup>34</sup> Tarn *Five Percent Philanthropy* p 43.

<sup>35</sup> Peabody "Peabody through the ages" np.

communal. Peabody tenants had to wait for the 1928 Cleverly Estate in Shepherds Bush to rent a flat with its own bathroom.<sup>36</sup>

Although known for their blocks of flats, The Peabody Trust also built suburban houses, the first being the 1901-5 Peabody Cottages at Herne Hill, south London.<sup>37</sup> The use of the word "cottages" is critical for this discussion. At that time, a reasonably prosperous working-class family (the poor have never been, and probably never will be, well housed) looking to improve their housing could either rent a flat close to their work in the city or a cottage in the suburbs. The latter would be cheaper to rent but the cost of fares for the daily commute had to be included. By the early twentieth century the cottage had already acquired the rosy glow of nostalgia through efforts to preserve it. The Victorian artist in water colours, Helen Allingham, epitomised the romantic ideal of the English cottage as she strove to record these picturesque rural homes, mostly in Surrey where she lived, before they were overtaken by those wishing to gentrify or demolish.<sup>38</sup> She wrote:

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<sup>36</sup> Peabody "Peabody through the ages" np.

<sup>37</sup> Peabody "Peabody through the ages" np.

<sup>38</sup> The Helen Allingham Society *Helen Allingham* R.W.S.

The pictures that linger in the mind, called up in a moment by such sensations as the smell of roses or of new-mown hay, are of a simpler nature. A little cottage nestling among wayside trees, the blue smoke curling up against the green, and a bower of roses round the door.<sup>39</sup>

An article from 1901 debating the housing question in the UK proclaimed

It is here, in larger dwellings [flats] erected on the vast area now covered by leasehold cottages [insanitary houses] and not in the cottage estates about to be developed by the London County Council, that the labouring population of London will probably prefer to live.<sup>40</sup>

For the wealthier classes imagining the horny-handed worker contentedly at home with his family in his suburban "cottage" perhaps prevented them worrying about his wages and working conditions, although whether living in a cottage estate gave you the same lustre of nostalgia is debatable. However, for those wealthy enough to afford good housing, a cottage meant a modest and relaxing summer home in the country. In 1901 architect CHB Quennell wrote of his own summer

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(1848-1926)

<sup>39</sup> Allingham *The Cottage Homes of England* p 8.

<sup>40</sup> Anon "The Housing Question" pp 432-457.

cottage in Sussex with its separate stables block,

What is then required is only a small dining-room and a good large living or sitting-room ... The kitchen and offices need not be large: two servants should keep the house running.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Ebenezer Howard did as much as anyone to promote the worker's cottage rather than the flat. In 1902, in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, he writes

while a sum of £1,400, instead of providing 1 family with "three rooms sufficiently small in blocks at least three storeys high," would provide 7 families in Garden City with a comfortable six-roomed cottage each, and with a nice little garden.<sup>42</sup>

There is just a lot more romance tied up in a "cottage" than a "flat."

However, the advocates of higher rise inner city living never go away. In 1908 arguments in favour of flats were being put forward in the New Zealand press.

Now and then anybody may notice in the prints a flat on offer to persons who tire of house-hunting. Once the flat or suite of rooms - a commodity made necessary in the large cities of the Old World - was regarded with more

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<sup>41</sup> Quennell "A Summer Cottage" pp 124-131.

<sup>42</sup> Howard "Garden Cities of Tomorrow" p 54.

or less horror by New Zealanders, but Wellingtonians are overcoming their prejudices. "Here," says one of the critics, "a man may dream that some day a rich uncle will leave him enough money to buy a place where he will be able to raise the polyanthus and the cabbage. In the meantime he may be able to rent a house for himself, but what a backyard does he get? Just enough to get sloppy or muddy on a wet day; just enough to make him feel stifled. With a flat he knows that the backyard business is indefinitely postponed. He can house himself comparatively cheaply and cleanly. At all events, flats are coming into vogue."<sup>43</sup>

The nearest Hurst Seager in his report of the Brisbane conference came to reporting about flats is mention of Homesgarth at Letchworth described as "its co-operative house."<sup>44</sup> Like the residential chambers for women, this 1910 block of small apartments with shared facilities was designed for single working women. Designed by the architect H Clapham Lander, the buildings were modelled on an Oxbridge College. The central communal part contained the dining room, tea room, reading room and smoking room. Heating was also communal although the apartments had fireplaces to ensure proper ventilation. The apartments consisted of a sitting room and one, two or three bedrooms, together with a bathroom and a pantry fitted with sink and

<sup>43</sup> Anon "Housing of the people" title page.

<sup>44</sup> Hurst Seager *1918 Town-Planning Report* p 25.

small gas stove.<sup>45</sup> The idea of apartments that shared one central kitchen rather than each having its own full separate kitchen was also borrowed by Howard and his architect from early experiments in cooperative living in both the UK and USA.<sup>46</sup> There is also a connection with Germany. In Berlin apartments were constructed with communal kitchens, such as the 1909 blocks by Hermann Muthesius, each of which also had its own "toit jardin," and those by Albert Gessner, although flats in both schemes were for families rather than single professional women.<sup>47</sup> However, these experiments were not deemed a success.<sup>48</sup> This contact with Germany moves this discussion on to the development of the modern flat as a dwelling that is more convenient to run and that also offers the same health-giving properties as the house with its garden in the suburbs.

### **The modern flat**

At the end of the 1910s in Germany the domestic role of women was being redefined and at the core of this definition is the modern

<sup>45</sup> Dillon "Homesgarth" pp 574-582.

<sup>46</sup> Hayden *The Grand Domestic Revolution*.

<sup>47</sup> *Einküchenhaus*. np.

<sup>48</sup> Stratigakos *A Woman's Berlin: Building the Modern City* p 80.

apartment.<sup>49</sup> The role of the working woman was recognised in the fitted apartment that was streamlined to make domestic work professional. The normal illustration to such a remark would be the 1926 Frankfurt kitchen, which accompanies the apartment buildings in that city designed under the auspices of Ernst May. This kitchen was both standardised and prefabricated as part of developing affordable housing.<sup>50</sup> However, the Frankfurt kitchen designed by Margarete Lihotzky (Schütte-Lihotzky after her marriage) has its origins in her earlier designs for a kitchen in Vienna. The working people of Vienna had been saved from starvation in WWI by the provision of allotment gardens. After the war, and under Adolf Loos as head architect, settlements of very small houses, with long back gardens to continue this tradition of food growing, were designed to be both extendable and partially self-built. Those who were to live in them had to contribute 2,000-3,000 hours of labour to building the new community.<sup>51</sup> The extendable houses designed by Margarete Lihotzky in this period contained a main

<sup>49</sup> Henderson *Building Culture* pp 143-147.

<sup>50</sup> Denby *Europe Rehoused* p 134.

<sup>51</sup> Hochhaeusl "From Vienna to Frankfurt inside Core House Type 7" np.

room with a kitchen built into one corner that was described as a live-in kitchen. When the house was extended this became a kitchen niche with a new attached scullery with prefabricated fittings.<sup>52</sup> The origins of the modernist prefabricated Frankfurt kitchen thus curiously stem from the stand-alone cottage.

### Flats in New Zealand

As in the 1910s, the New Zealand housing stock still continues to be dominated by the stand-alone dwelling. In the 2013 census 81% of dwellings were stand-alone and 75% of these were single storey.<sup>53</sup> Despite the predictions of the *Nelson Evening Mail*, the average New Zealander preferred some backyard, however muddy, to none. Blocks of flats were constructed in Auckland in the 1920s but visually these looked back to what was being built in London at the start of the twentieth century. Examples include the 1926 project of 77 luxury flats, Princes Court in Waterloo Crescent, Auckland, described as the "Largest Block of Flats in Dominion,"<sup>54</sup> the

<sup>52</sup> Hochhaeusl "From Vienna to Frankfurt inside Core House Type 7" np.

<sup>53</sup> Statistics New Zealand 2013 *Census QuickStats about housing*

<sup>54</sup> "Largest Block of Flats in Dominion" p 11.

1927 four storey block of 12 flats in upper Queen Street and complete with electric light, hot and cold water and a gas stove, which was described as being "up-to-date in every detail," albeit in the "Spanish mission style,"<sup>55</sup> and the 1929 block in Eden Crescent, which typified "The Modern City Dwelling."<sup>56</sup>

However, the 1936 apartments of Cintra House with their fitted interiors could be viewed as the first true "modern" flats in New Zealand. The *Building Today* (later *Home and Building*) article on this new development stated:

Shrinking incomes, the servant problem and the many new calls on people's time and attention have led them to seek houses that are central and inexpensive, convenient, comfortable and satisfying ... And so the trend towards flat-dwelling was accentuated.<sup>57</sup>

Designed by Horace Massey this reinforced concrete structure sat on a brick faced plinth and was organised into blocks of 4-8 flats. The interiors were claimed to be "a triumph of compact planning"<sup>58</sup> with built-in fittings designed by the architect RGS Beatson, who in

<sup>55</sup> "Elaborate New Flats" p 9.

<sup>56</sup> "The Modern City Dwelling" p 6.

<sup>57</sup> Anon "Cintra" pp 19-21.

<sup>58</sup> Anon "Cintra" pp 19-21.

1937, in partnership with C Irwin Crookes, took over the editorship of *Building Today*, a job that continued for a decade. The Cintra flats came with built-in ironing boards, refrigerators, radio cabinets, sideboards and mirrors. Living in the centre of the city means land is expensive and so affordable flats tend to be small. For architects this was a challenge in designing not just the building shell but complete interiors. Beatson's background as a woodwork teacher before becoming an architect provided the skills for designing these fitted interiors not just in Cintra House but in many of the houses he designed later.

### House or flat?

Are flats a necessary evil or are they the means of creating an urbane city living environment? The fact Florence Taylor could change her mind about flats suggest she saw their advantages in urban design terms. Architects like Beatson also saw they offered the chance for the complete design of exterior and interior by creating a flexible living environment in a small space, something that Margarete Lihotzky had explored with her small, extendable houses for Viennese workers post WWI. New Zealand was slow to take up the idea of building flats and during these early years flat living still had its critics.

A 1926 article in the *Evening Post* gave advice on living in a flat; "Never sleep with your feet in front room and head in back room. Reversing the order is more refined ... To make room for a cat and a goldfish place fish inside cat."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Rules for flats" p 17.



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