

No free love: the dearth of media output from the Architectural Centre in the swinging sixties

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ABSTRACT: The Architectural Centre, having made a powerful impact on the design profession in New Zealand in the '40s and '50s, appears to have taken a back seat in the 1960s. Were the drug-crazed psychedelic sixties to blame, or was there still signs of life behind the closed doors? No longer publishing *Design Review*, the Centre continued to work on projects, mainly behind the scenes, such as the campaign for better town planning in Wellington. The effort that went into this campaign may have led to the Centre having "sucked its bottle dry" and an almost stagnation at times during the 1960s, but in the end achieved its aim with the publication by Wellington's Council of a Town Plan, and the creation of a Town Planning department within the Council. This paper follows the actions of the Centre throughout its "mute" decade, and exposes its continuing influence on the City, on subject matter that is still being discussed today, via the publication of a special supplement in the *Dominion*, a publishing coup that is unparalleled today..

The 1960s was a supposedly politically active decade in world circles. It was an era of burgeoning technology with the space race affecting design of many things, from cars, planes, and toasters, to buildings and fashionable clothing. In the United States, the assassinations of promising American Presidents promised instead an end to optimism and hopes of world peace. It was the era of music populism (Beatles, Rolling Stones, Nana Mouskouri), and evidently a freer attitude to drugs, nudity, and alternative cultures. "Hang loose," and "let it all hang out" were common terms. At least, that is what we are lead to believe went on in that decade.

For many years, the drug-elitist saying of "If you can remember the sixties, then you weren't there" promoted wide-ranging and excessive use of mind-altering drugs, and derision for those that were not into the

"counter-culture." Evidently many people had a fine time in the '60s, spent in tie-died trousers smoking pot, taking LSD, and doing or remembering nothing of significance. For many others however, the 1960s are well remembered as a time of change and progress. Fins on cars went from tall and vertical; to flat and horizontal. Roof pitches on domestic houses similarly reclined, and the low pitch roof was a feature on many architecturally-significant houses in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some people, of course, continued on in a pot-smoking way and evolved the Kiwiana classic "A" frame house, the bastard child of Swiss alpine meadows and back blocks Kohimarama, shaming New Zealand with its kitsch-ness and awful inappropriateness.

Others continued to design, and to document design, with a serious intent in the production of quality design journalism. The

Architectural Centre (AC) was one of the strongest early publishers of design and architecture in New Zealand, with the production of *Design Review*, a magazine lasting from 1946 till 1954. Following the cessation of *Design Review*, future proposed Activities of the Centre were outlined as being:

- 1 Registration of architecturally-distinguished buildings in Wellington
- 2 "Beautification" of the approaches to Wellington
- 3 Recording of proceedings of meetings
- 4 Magazine Service
- 5 Luncheons
- 6 Any activities which would encourage younger members to join¹

While there is ample evidence that items 3 and 5 were (and still are) ongoing, and item 6 is still a perennial problem, item 4 has lapsed.

¹ Architectural Centre AGM (1955)

No records of any further published magazines from the Centre are recorded, with the effort to produce *Design Review* evidently having sapped a fair amount of energy from the early founder members. While the Centre still continued to meet and debate questions of design, there appears to be a lessening of interest in the activities of the Centre. Indeed, in 1958 Toomath suggested of the Centre that: "It had become evident that the most useful function was to make public issues out of otherwise unpublicised problems, by means of press statements and pointed exhibitions."²

In the 1960s therefore, the Architectural Centre was facing an uncertain future. A book had been planned by the Centre, reviewing recent and historic New Zealand architecture. The idea of the book was strangled by internal politics of the Centre, with a letter³ addressed to "collectors" from W. Alington, explaining why the Centre had resolved not to "proceed with the publication of its proposed book of New Zealand Architecture." It seems that there were two views on the editorial stance of the proposed book - either "straight reporting with limited written sections on

background" or primarily "appraisal or a critical analysis related to a definite theme." The letter noted that the two trains of thought "did not converge and the impetus and enthusiasm for the work disappeared." Sadly therefore, no book was published by the Architectural Centre at this time, and nor, for that matter, has one been published since.

Official organs of the NZIA continue publication throughout the 1960s, with scarcely a nod to the political or populist developments of the time. Certainly no drugs or humour were approved by such serious organizations as the NZIA, a situation that continues today. The "alternative" voice of the Centre was however close to being silenced by argument and by apathy, and a new rationale had to be found for the continuation of activities. Events going on elsewhere may have inspired action, as the April 1960 newsletter of the Centre noted:

Roger Hay writes of the formation of "The Group" in Auckland in 1958. This small band is "a loosely bound set of architects interested in town planning ... and ... has so far produced a comprehensive criticism of the basis of the Auckland City Plan."⁴

Indeed this seemed to have some resonance: in the 1960 AGM of the Centre, outgoing AC President DG Porter stated that: "A year ago the Centre was nearly defunct and in order to keep it together the aim of "Town Planning of Wellington" was decided upon."⁵ The Architecture Centre therefore took it on itself to lobby Wellington's Council for a more proactive attitude towards the establishment of a Town Planning department, and the creation of a Town Plan to map out the way forward for the city. This initially fell on deaf ears.

While the Centre continued its lobbying, discussion evenings and visits to new projects continued, with an early 1960s visit noting: "26 Nov 1960 @ 2.30 – a job visit with John Scott to the Roman Catholic chapel at "Futuna," Karori on Sat afternoon."⁶

The next newsletter, from December 1960, noted on:

a very successful job visit... After having heard John speak and after seeing illustrations of his work, those present found it quite an experience to move about and examine one of his jobs. The building, though not

² Architectural Centre AGM (1958)

³ Letter to Collectors

⁴ Newsletter (April 1960)

⁵ Architectural Centre AGM (1960)

⁶ Newsletter (November 1960)

everyone's "cup of tea," is certainly arresting and a piece of architecture to be reckoned with.⁷

Other, later comments on the building were more positive:

Each generation produces a smaller proportion of what can be called "visionary" work. This, though of the world, is more other worldly. Its mysticism is bought down to material terms and yet has an immaterial quality. Of all three designs, the impact of "Futuna" may be greatest even if the most subtle. Here is a building by a mind that expands beyond the normal, and on first sight and study, much of the form of the design remains a mystery. If there is a naive and exuberant quality about the work so much the better. It is alive in spirit and even has the dreamy quality of classical chamber music.⁸

In parallel with its campaign for a Town Plan, the Centre continued its mission of "pointed exhibitions" with the successful exhibition (mostly by 1961 President NJ Burren) "Wgtn 196X" and followed up with a brochure of the exhibition to accompany the exhibition on its tour around the country. It also continued with its newsletter – indeed, apart from the monthly production of the two page, loosely

⁷ Newsletter (December 1960)

⁸ Pascoe "Three Of The Churches In Karori" pp. 10-11; also "As an architect from outside Wellington, I may be permitted to speak in strong comparative terms in reviewing these three works of such different kinds."

stapled, plain newsprint paper of the monthly Newsletter, there seemed to be little else on file as having been produced by the Centre.

By mid-decade there had evidently been progress of sorts, behind the scenes at least, on the Town Plan. In 1964 and 1965 the newsletter has frequent mention of both the Draft Town Plan and the "Transportation Plan for Wellington City" which was based on external consultants from the US, named De Leuw Cather. Argument over the Transportation Plan continued both in the newsletter and also in the two newspapers of the time, with the *Evening Post* regularly reporting on progress of the Transport Plan and the encroaching motorway behind the Terrace. The Architectural Centre rightly noted however that no matter how comprehensive the Transportation Plan is, it is no substitute for a Town Plan, with the Council in Wellington being slow to catch on to this point. Architectural Centre representatives met semi-regularly with the Council officers, to discuss the points of the proposed plan. The members concerned were indignant with rage however when shortly after a meeting between the Centre and the Council, and without warning or consultation, the Council produced a draft Town Plan.

The Centre's AGM of 1965 noted indignantly that the WCC had disclosed the Draft Town Plan to the public without allowing, as requested at a meeting between the Centre and the Council, for the Centre to have the draft plan reviewed "by a competent planner."⁹ Understandably, this did not sit well with the Council: and the publication of a Press Statement by the Centre on this matter did not help relationships. Indeed, the Centre's May 1965 newsletter, under a section entitled "Comment on the Town Plan" by Lew Martin, stated:

I was disappointed to see the Centre's press statement, which impressed me as chiefly destructive; so that I was not surprised to read Cr. Morrison's furious reply. Statements ignoring the plan and calling for overseas consultants or better staff before the plan is considered are bound to infuriate councillors and I can't see much being achieved.¹⁰

The short term outcome of this lapse of judgement by the Centre however was soon overcome in 1965 by a public relations coup for Wellington architects, in the special supplement "Architecture in Wellington" published in *The Dominion* on Thursday May 30, 1963, produced by members of the

⁹ Architectural Centre AGM (1965)

¹⁰ Newsletter (May 1965)

Wellington branch of the NZIA (most, incidentally, also heavily involved with the Architectural Centre). It also featured a number of buildings by the architects concerned, where a number went on to write their own articles in the supplement, such as "Wellington: A View Of The Future" by AL Gabites and W Alington:

Architects may be pardoned if occasionally they take a brief look into the future of their own city. After all, the buildings which individually they are designing today will, collectively, form the townscape of tomorrow, and moreover, as architects they may reasonably ask, "If we don't pause occasionally to consider how our city will look in 20 years' time, who else will?"

However, when we examine our present city with both its endearing qualities and its shortcomings it is apparent that limitations and petty irritations mostly arise from a conflict between a rigid pattern of streets and buildings and an ever-increasing flow of people, vehicles and goods within this pattern.¹¹

Gabites and Alington (both formerly in leading roles at the Centre) went on to note:

Essential to modern urban living are vehicle free courts and sheltered civic places where office boys may pause to gossip, typists may parade the latest hair styles, toddlers may feed the pigeons, pensioners may sit in quiet contemplation, students may ponder the subtle

¹¹ Gabites and Alington "Wellington: a View of the Future" p 2.

relationships between the buildings and the spaces they enclose, and mayors may greet distinguished visitors. Concepts such as these cannot be applied like cosmetics to a master transportation plan disgorged by electronic computer. They must be fully integrated with the planning process from start to finish if a richly human, imaginative, and visually worthy urban environment is to be created.¹²

In another part of the 1965 Special newspaper report, under the title of "Enthusiasm for Civic Centre," an unattributed writer noted that:

There has not been much public comment upon the recently adopted civic centre scheme for Wellington. It may be because the city council has not explained it in any detail to the public. Informing the public has never been a strong point in the capital. Certainly the experts who have studied it have been loud in its praise. The Wellington branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects saw the problems and endorsed the solutions indicated by the scheme. The Architectural Centre, long-time critics of the city council, found in it real worth and dubbed it "thoroughly realistic." In a penetrating report they found the scheme "the most heartening prospect for Wellington for years."¹³

The Architectural Centre continued to play an important role, although not producing magazines or even quality newsletters, but

¹² Gabites and Alington "Wellington: a View of the Future" p 2.

¹³ "Enthusiasm for City Centre" p 7.

certainly producing thorns to stick in the sides of business and bureaucracy if they were not acting in the perceived best interests of Wellington's built urban form.

In an *Evening Post* front page article labelled "Despoiling of Harbour is going too far" the newspaper printed an: "illustration produced by two council members of the Architectural Centre who claim that the Capital's harbour is being turned into a vast and oppressive junkyard." And the members concerned claimed that "In order to protect ourselves and future generations from the spectre of senseless destruction, the local authorities promoting the various schemes should be required to publish well in advance of commencement, competent and explicit development plans."¹⁴

The *Evening Post* noted the influence of the Centre in 1968: "Not for the first time prominent members of the Architectural Centre have felt impelled to protest, to point out to the public of Wellington that their harbour is being turned into a "vast and oppressive industrial junkyard ... the amount

¹⁴ Staff reporter "Despoiling of Harbour is going too far" p 1.

of fill proposed is quite staggering. An extensive section of pleasantly curving foreshore will be obliterated [by the 11 separate sites]."¹⁵ Evidently this had the desired effect, and reclamation was reined in to a certain extent.

In the November 1967 newsletter, editor Roger Hay summarised recent Architectural Centre history when he noted:

For years and years, we have worked mainly for one object: to get Wellington a workable Town Plan, forgetting our salad days of the Demonstration House, *Design Review*, and the setting up of the Architectural Centre Gallery. Now, on the eve of our 21st birthday, we have a town plan sufficiently workable that we have decided not to object to it, and the gallery returns to share our new full time clubrooms.¹⁶

The Interim Newsletter No. 2 from January 1968 went on to note that:

The reason for wanting to produce something more extended, in both content and typography, than this dreary foolscap, is not just the vigorous example of the Architectural Association's Bulletin ... but also the belief that the rather stagnant brew of architectural thought on this city needs a good dose of ferment to restore its sparkle.

¹⁵ "This Phobia to Reclaim" p 6.

¹⁶ Newsletter (November 1967)

The feeling that the Centre had so preoccupied itself with the pink elephant of the Town Plan that it had just about sucked its bottle dry was a good part of the reason for finding and establishing clubrooms. Here, the theory runs, is the *locus operandi* in which we can get our heads together whenever we can, and see what new spirit can be tried.¹⁷

The new full time clubrooms were in fact the leasing of a space from a government department and they did not last long: nor did the Centre Gallery, as both of these disappeared within the next decade.

In contrast to the meagre range of printed matter available then, there is now a (still increasing) number of design, housing, renovation, entertaining, and other magazines available. In the 1940s there was *Design Review*, and in the 1960s there was both the *NZIA Journal* and the *Home and Building*. The curious omission of any viable alternative publications to the mainstream press is not so much an inditement on the enthusiasm of the members of the time, but possibly a reflection of the increasing option of the public to watch television or read alternative publications.

What did arise however, of lasting value, was the formation in the 1970s of the Architectural

¹⁷ Interim Newsletter No. 2 (January 1968)

Centre's newsletter *Off-Centre* where it was no longer typed on "dreary foolscap" but photocopied onto crisp white paper in an A5 format, and featured the editorial talents of R Walker and the much welcome and irreverent addition of cartoons by the highly talented Chris Brooke-White. That era was to belong to the 1970s however - the '60s were to bow out with the newsletters still tired, in a boring shade of beige.

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