

Centennial City: the City of Auckland model

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ABSTRACT: Auckland Council is lucky to care for the surviving portion of a city model made for the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition in 1940. The model represents a section of Auckland central, covering the area from Albert Park to Nelson Street, and Waitematā Harbour to what is now Aotea Square. The model was displayed in Dominion Court, one of a dozen models which represented New Zealand's main cities and towns. Fletchers' architects Ronald Muston and Lewis Walker were responsible for the design of Dominion Court and the interpretive models and dioramas within. Muston had a special interest in the models and even travelled to Hollywood to learn about current trends in movie model design and advertising techniques.

The ingenuity of the model makers included ships that "sailed" on the harbours, faux glow worms in the papier mâché Waitomo Caves, and a model of Aoraki/Mount Cook which was over 7.5m high. Thousands of wooden model buildings were made and hand-painted by artists and technical college students and were based on aerial and street-level photographs and specific colour palettes for each city. The model came to Auckland City Council after the exhibition closed and has been displayed inside and outside of council. It was recently conserved and is once again on public display.

Introduction

This paper will look at the history and significance of the City of Auckland model which was made for display in the 1940 New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, held in Wellington from November 1939 to May 1940.¹ The model represents central Auckland, its buildings, parks, roads, wharves and railways. The suburbs of Auckland are depicted as a matte drawing trompe-l'œil featuring trees, maunga, villas and bungalows.

The City of Auckland model was made for display in Dominion Court, to be shown with models of other New Zealand towns and cities

alongside models of farms, hydroelectric power stations, schools, and factories. There were also models of natural wonders, including Aoraki Mount Cook and the Waitomo Caves (complete with faux glow worms).²

The scheme for Dominion Court was designed and overseen by Fletcher Construction architect Ronald Muston, while the models themselves were made by teams of modelmakers, artists and technical school students onsite at Rongotai and throughout the country.³

Today, just one section of the City of Auckland model survives. Over time, the parts of the model depicting railways, Grafton gully and some of the wharves have been lost, leaving us with the Queen Street gully. The model covers Albert Park to Nelson Street, and the wharves up to what is now Aotea Square.

We are lucky that this portion of the model remains – it appears to be the only surviving city model from the Centennial Exhibition.

The New Zealand Centennial Exhibition

1940 was New Zealand's centennial year, marking a hundred years since the signing of

¹ Renwick "Introduction" pp 13-14.

² Toomath "New Zealand Displayed" p 46; Smith *No job*

too big: a history of Fletcher Construction, Volume I: 1909-1940 p 282.

³ Toomath "New Zealand Displayed" p 46; "Modellers fashioning units" p 14.

the Treaty of Waitangi and New Zealand's entry into the British Empire. About 40 centennial events were held around the country, 250 centennial monuments were opened, and a centennial art exhibition travelled the country.⁴ The anniversary focused on New Zealand's progress from a colony to a dominion. The events were largely Pākehā focused, although Māori participated in some events and arranged their own commemorations.⁵ The biggest event was the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition held in Rongotai, Wellington, from November 1939 to May 1940. It became the centrepiece for the celebrations and an event that people travelled from far and wide to attend.⁶

The Centennial Exhibition was like a World's Fair and was intended to promote New Zealand tourism, primary industries, manufacturing, government, arts and culture. International visitors were expected, and domestic visitors came from all over New

Zealand. The Centennial Exhibition was a significant event for hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders, with thousands of children travelling to the exhibition with their schools and thousands of visitors attending with family and friends, sometimes repeatedly.⁷ The nation's population was around 1.6 million people in 1940 yet there were 2.6 million visitors to the Centennial Exhibition in a period of six months. Even more people visited the amusement park associated with the Centennial Exhibition.⁸

The Centennial Tower and general master plan of the exhibition grounds was designed by architect Edmund Anscombe. Armed with the experience of designing the 1925 New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition, Anscombe designed sleek, streamlined Art Deco buildings to house displays, musical performances, retail stalls and more.⁹ The Centennial Exhibition grounds were on a huge scale, covering 22.2 hectares (or 32 rugby

fields). There were numerous standalone buildings, the Centennial Tower, gardens, a theme park, and a sound shell. The indoor floor space measured three quarters of a million square feet, about the same as London's Great Exhibition of 1851.¹⁰ Fletcher Construction teamed up with Love Construction to design and build the Centennial Exhibition buildings.¹¹ Several other countries from the British Empire had pavilions where they highlighted their specialities – for example the Canadian pavilion had extensive forestry displays.¹²

The 16 acres of exhibition space was taken up with a mixture of government displays and trade and industry showcases.¹³ 28 government departments were represented in Government Court.¹⁴ Each department sought to highlight its progress and successes and the services it offered. Memorable government exhibits included a giant globe in the Education Department Court and "Doctor

⁴ Phillips "Reading the 1940 Centennial" p 272.

⁵ Renwick "Reclaiming Waitangi" pp 99-111; Renwick "Commemorating other places and days" pp 112-127.

⁶ Renwick "Introduction" pp 13-14.

⁷ For example, "Visit to Exhibition: Te Karaka children" p 4; "Visit to Exhibition Masterton children" p 4.

⁸ Census and Statistics Department *Dominion of New*

Zealand Population Census p vi; McLean "'Hurrah for Playland!'" p 94.

⁹ McLean "'Hurrah for Playland!'" p 28.

¹⁰ Toomath "New Zealand Displayed" p 39.

¹¹ Goldsmith *Fletchers* p 282.

¹² Palethorpe *Official History of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington:1939-1940* p 77.

¹³ Palethorpe *Official History of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington:1939-1940* p 6.

¹⁴ Palethorpe *Official History of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington:1939-1940* p 30; *Official guide to the Government Court: N.Z. Centennial Exhibition*

Well-and-strong" the automaton in the Health Department Court. Major companies such as Ford and General Motors had large showcases, and technology, especially the varied uses of electricity, was displayed.¹⁵

The Exhibition also included a Maori Court, at the heart of which was a marae. Māori artists and carvers were also on display at the exhibition, along with kapa haka groups.¹⁶ Maori Court showed a static version of Māori life, rather than a living culture participating in contemporary society.

While all of this sounds very educational, it wasn't just the dioramas and model trains that brought in the visitors. There was also Playland, ten acres of amusement park which included roller coasters, a ghost train, dodgems and the Crazy House.¹⁷ Thousands of visitors viewed the replica crown jewels (now housed at Wellington Museum). The Centennial Exhibition had its own official radio station -

¹⁵ Martin "The Highway to Health and Happiness in the Government Court" pp 54-64; Toomath "New Zealand Displayed" p 46.

¹⁶ *Official guide to the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition* p 41.

¹⁷ *Official guide to the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition* pp 68-69.

¹⁸ *Official guide to the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition* p

5ZB - and a theme song ("Heigh ho, come to the fair").¹⁸ There were also films, talent shows, a cabaret, marching displays and even a wedding.¹⁹

As noted, 2.6 million visits were recorded: the organising committee had hoped for 4.25 million.²⁰ The outbreak of the Second World War had significantly reduced the expected number of international visitors, and the exhibition was not a financial success. The buildings were later turned over to military use.²¹

Dominion Court and its models

The City of Auckland model was displayed in Dominion Court, which was designed by Ronald Muston and Lewis Walker of Fletcher Construction Ltd. The building measured 128m by 46m and contained "New Zealand in miniature." New Zealand's "cities, towns, farms, industries, scenic beauties and travel attractions" were depicted through dioramas

60; Day "Broadcasting the Centennial" p 79.

¹⁹ "Exhibition wedding" p 6.

²⁰ McLean "'Hurrah for Playland!'" p 36.

²¹ McLean "'Hurrah for Playland!'" p 35; Renwick "Introduction" p 19.

²² Palethorpe *Official History of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington:1939-1940* p 98.

²³ Martin "The Highway to Health and Happiness in the

and models.²²

Visitors would "tour" the country geographically, which each location and province blending seamlessly into the next. Visitors entered the court as if they were entering the country by sea – through Auckland, Wellington, Lyttelton or Port Chalmers.²³ The North and South Islands were separated by a water feature with a bridge.²⁴ Models were made of 10-12 New Zealand cities, and smaller towns were depicted by backlit colour photographic transparencies.²⁵ Information boards with photographs and statistics, called the towers of knowledge, were placed around the building.²⁶

Models and dioramas were used as interpretive devices to educate visitors about the country, its industries and primary production with a focus on progress and success.²⁷ As well as models of towns and cities, there were models of railways, sheep

Government Court" p 56.

²⁴ Smith *No job too big* p 282.

²⁵ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 100.

²⁶ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 101.

²⁷ Goldsmith *Fletchers* p 282.

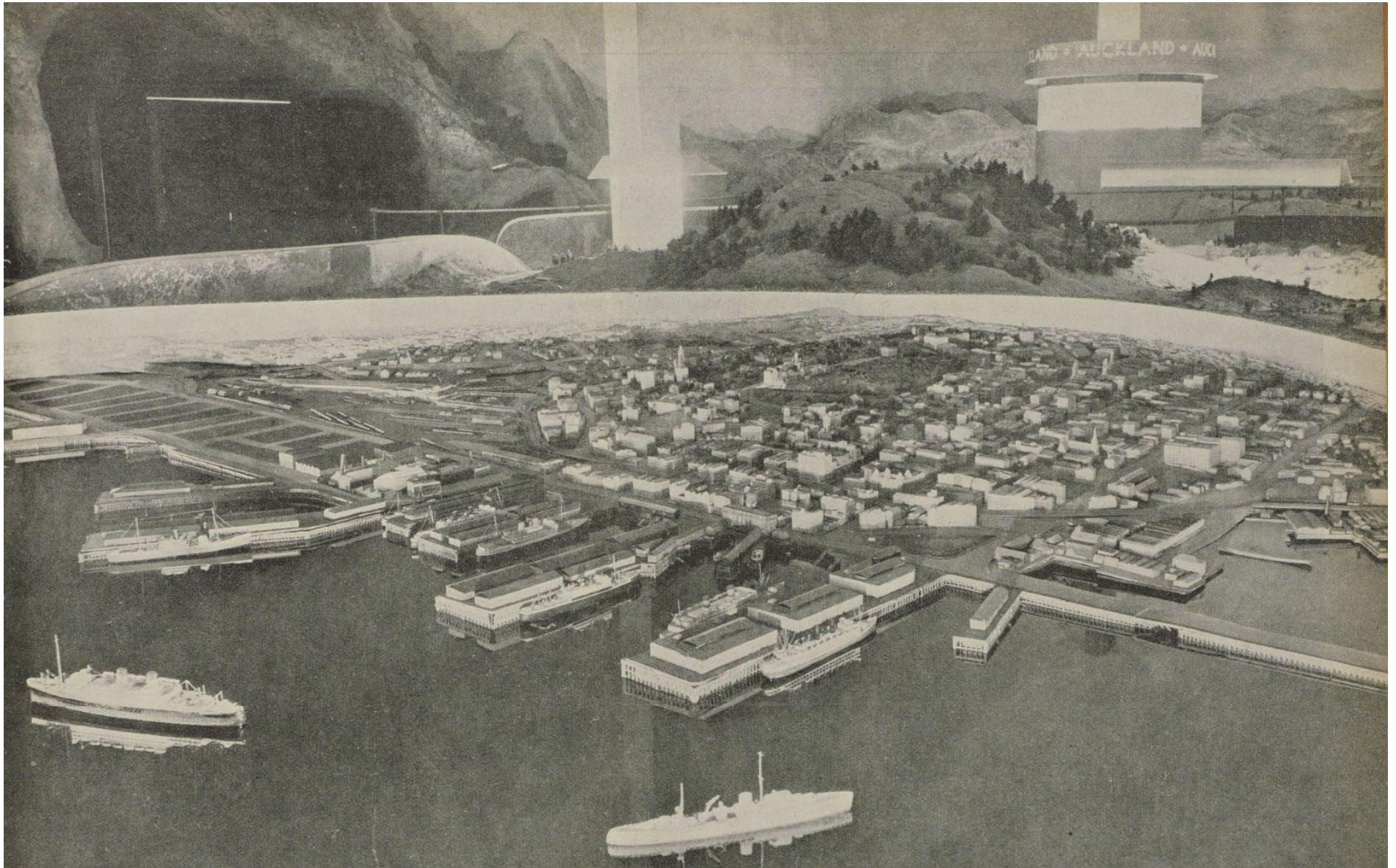


Figure 1: The City of Auckland model on display at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections AWNS-19391108-45-01



farms and hydro-electric schemes. A model of Aoraki/Mount Cook was a marvel in papier mâché at over 7.5m high.²⁸

Each province provided information and funds towards the representation of their area, with prominent businessmen and mayors sitting on the Dominion Court Central Committee.²⁹ In Auckland's case, the city council contributed about £8000 and was represented by deputy mayor John Allum.³⁰

Making the city models

The Dominion Court scheme and the models were designed by Ronald Muston and Lewis Walker. Muston was responsible for overseeing the development of the models, and travelled to Hollywood to research modern diorama and modelling design as it was used in the movies.³¹ The exhibition's official history records that Muston returned with the knowledge to "collect a staff of New Zealanders who produced work equally as good as that in America."³² In January 1939, it was reported that:

Figure 2: Artists and modellers at work. Fletcher Trust Archives, 0302.1.188

²⁸ Toomath "New Zealand Displayed" p 46; "Model farm display" p 6.

²⁹ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 103.

³⁰ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 103.

³¹ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 98.

³² Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 98.

A Hollywood expert, Mr S Nelson, has been engaged by the Government to act in an advisory capacity in connection with the Government court at the Centennial Exhibition ... to advise on modern modelling and diorama methods.³³

More than one hundred artists were employed to make the models that were displayed in Dominion Court. Ten thousand "toy houses" were built for the city models and other displays. Many of the artists were students at Wellington Technical College. Tiny buildings, based on photographs, and individually hand painted, were made by the students.³⁴ Photographs show that many of the artists were women, and the artists (sometimes described as "modellers") are not identified in newspaper reports of the time.

The models were based on detailed drawings and photographs of the actual buildings and the colours of the buildings were recorded (this was before colour photography was widely used). The official history notes that "colour keys were prepared for each centre, and this

alone entailed extensive research."³⁵ Aerial photographs (which were an expensive undertaking at the time) were also used.³⁶ The models were built to scale – one inch to 40 feet (2.5 cm to 12m). At the time of exhibition, the models were described as "completely accurate."³⁷

Several cities opted to construct their own city models or at least prepare the buildings themselves. The model buildings for the Invercargill city model were made by students from the Invercargill Technical College.³⁸ Hamilton city also prepared its own model.³⁹ It is not known whether Auckland students were involved in the making of the Auckland buildings.

There was also a specialist team which made the ships and cranes which populated the harbour city models. The harbours were constructed of resin or glass to mimic water. Ships moved across the glassy seas, presumably through the magic of magnets. The

HMS *Achilles* can be identified in Waitematā Harbour, reminding us of encroaching war.⁴⁰

Photographs of the model on display in Dominion Court show that the model was semi-circular in shape and was displayed at a low height so that visitors could view the model from above.⁴¹ The City of Auckland model was sizable, at perhaps eight to nine metres across.⁴²

Ronald Muston

Ronald Muston is generally identified as the main driver of the model scheme and was the one who researched model and diorama design and technology. Muston travelled to Hollywood on a research trip to ensure that the models were technically cutting edge.⁴³

George Ronald Colin Muston (1905-74), known as Ron, was born in Leicester, England and came to New Zealand with his family in 1907. Muston attended Auckland Grammar and studied architecture at University College

³³ "Official plans" p 16.

³⁴ Toomath "New Zealand displayed" p 46.

³⁵ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* pp 99-100.

³⁶ "Miniature land" p 11.

³⁷ Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial*

Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940 pp 99-100.

³⁸ "Invercargill Technical School students engaged" p 11.

³⁹ Minutes of the Central Committee of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition.

⁴⁰ "Miniature land" p. 11; "Official plans" p 16.

⁴¹ "A corner of the model of the Miramar peninsula" p 7.

⁴² Scale estimated from photographs e.g. Fletcher Trust Archives 0302/1/495.

⁴³ Toomath "New Zealand displayed" p 46; Palethorpe *Official history of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940* p 98.

Auckland. He became an associate of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1936 and then went into partnership with Lewis Walker. He and Walker worked on the Whakatane Paper Mills factory in the late 1930s for Fletcher Construction. Muston and Walker were based in Auckland, but Muston moved to Wellington for the Centennial Exhibition project and remained there for the rest of his life. He served in the army during the Second World War. Muston was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the American Institute of Architects in 1962. He was involved in a variety of organisations, including the board of the Dowse Art Gallery and the National Art Gallery.⁴⁴ He was also the president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in the 1960s.⁴⁵ He was awarded an OBE in 1959.⁴⁶

Muston founded Structon Group Architects in 1944 alongside William Edward Lavelle (1905-74).⁴⁷ The firm was sizable, with 80 staff by the 1950s. Their commercial work included banks,

buildings for Victoria University of Wellington, schools and factories.⁴⁸ The firm undertook significant work for Hutt City Council from the 1950s to 1970s. This included master planning the city centre and civic buildings. Muston designed the War Memorial Library and Cultural Centre (sometimes called the Little Theatre) (1956) and the Dowse Museum (1971). Muston (and his daughter Jenny) appear in the Human Endeavour mural that features in the War Memorial Library, which was painted by artist Leonard Mitchell. Muston also designed the Modernist Church of St James which opened in 1953. Muston received the 1954 New Zealand Institute of Architects gold medal for the building. It was described as "the most radical modern church design in New Zealand" at the time.⁴⁹

The City of Auckland model since 1940

The Centennial Exhibition closed in May 1940 and the displays were quickly broken up, as the buildings were required for military use.

Some items were purchased by individuals or museums.⁵⁰

As Auckland City Council contributed funding to the exhibition, the model was offered back to the council. In other centres, the city models were displayed in council buildings or department stores, which may also have happened to the Auckland city model.⁵¹ The most likely place for display for the model was the Auckland Town Hall and it may have been stored in the attic there. Auckland City Council's Central Area Planning model (another model which was made in 1968 as a planning tool) was displayed in the Town Hall, so it is possible the two models were exhibited together.

In June and July 2010, the model was displayed as part of the "Historic Landscapes: [Re] Presenting Auckland's Future" exhibition at St Paul St Gallery at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The exhibition was

⁴⁴ Walker & Muston (Firm). Walker and Muston, architects: The New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, N.Z. November 1939 to April 1940. Muston "The American Institute of Architects" pp 180-186; Bowman *1950s Buildings: Lower Hutt City's post-war modern movement buildings* p 28; "1959 Birthday Honours (New Zealand)" np; "Appointments, Promotions,

Transfers, Resignations, and Retirement of Officers of the New Zealand Military Forces" p 1828.

⁴⁵ Marshall "The acoustical design of the Christchurch town hall" pp 4-11.

⁴⁶ "OBE to Ronald Muston" np.

⁴⁷ "Swan & Lavelle."

⁴⁸ Gatley *Athfield Architects* p 8.

⁴⁹ Armstrong "A heritage tour of the Lower Hutt Civic Centre;" Mitchell Studios "Human Endeavour."

⁵⁰ Akeli "Making identities: Samoa "on show" at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, 1939-1940" p 55.

⁵¹ The Christchurch city model was on public display in 1941: "Model of Christchurch" p 5.

supported by Auckland City Council's Heritage team and AUT's Department of Spatial Design.⁵²

In late 2010, the City of Auckland model was loaned to architecture firm Cook Sargisson and Pirie. It was the centrepiece for a series of talks by the New Zealand Institute of Architects.⁵³ In 2013, the model was displayed during the launch of the proposed Auckland Unitary Plan.⁵⁴ For some years, the model was displayed within the Plans and Places department in Auckland House/ Te Wharau o Tāmaki, Auckland Council's Albert Street building.

In 2021 and 2022, objects conservator Rose Evans cleaned and stabilised the model. She reattached several buildings and building facades. This work gave us the opportunity to understand how the model makers kept track of the dozens of model buildings: one loose building had multiple notations in different coloured pencils to its base.

From December 2022 to July 2023, both the 1940 City of Auckland model and 1968 Central

Planning Area model were displayed in a temporary space by the Urban Room. The Urban Room is an organisation that promotes conversations around urban design, housing and transport in New Zealand's cities.⁵⁵ The space was open to the public on select days and the models could be seen from the street. More than 700 people visited the Urban Room and viewed the models. There were numerous public talks about the model by Sean Taylor and Liam Appleton of Auckland Council Libraries and myself.

The model today

As noted, only one portion of the Auckland city model survives. This section measures 1.8m x 3.2m. It is unclear when the model was broken up or where the other parts of the model have gone. When it was displayed and photographed at AUT in 2010, it was in its current form. It is not known why the other parts of the model were not retained, although size, fragility and storage were probably all factors. From historical images, it appears that the model was made in one piece. At some point the surviving segment has been cut into three pieces to make transport and storage

easier. These individual pieces are heavy, requiring two to four people to carry each one. Over the last 84 years, there have been losses to the model. Some individual buildings have been removed from the surviving segment of the model. These may have been removed as souvenirs, been damaged or have been removed to represent when the real building had been demolished. Other elements such as the spires of buildings have been damaged in transport or storage and are now lost. Other pieces have become loose over time and a small box of buildings and building elements which could not be reattached during conservation of the model has been retained. The section of the model showing Albert Park, while still identifiable through the landscaping and paths, has lost much of its trees and shrubbery. It retains the "grass" which is made from painted sawdust.

When on display in 1939-40, the waterfront area was made of resin or glass to mimic the water of the harbour, complete with identifiable ships.⁵⁶ This has been replaced with painted plywood and the profile of the

Plan."

⁵⁵ The Urban Room np.

⁵⁶ "Miniature land" p 11.

⁵² St Paul St Gallery "Historic landscapes – [re]presenting Auckland's future brochure" 2010

⁵³ Farrer. Request for Preparation of Memorandum of

Understanding; Farrer, Memo: CBD Planning Models 1930s and 1960s – Status.

⁵⁴ Timespanner "Launch of Auckland's first draft Unitary

wharves' sheds has also changed. Several waterfront buildings are absent.

The model features a label which states that it was renovated by T Warren. This is Tony Warren, who was one of the model-makers responsible for the 1968 Central Area Planning Model. It seems likely that the "renovation" of the 1940 model occurred around the same time that the 1968 model was made. It is not clear whether the changes to the waterfront portion of the model occurred at this point, or whether they occurred when the model was removed from display in mid-1940. It is likely that the roading layer was updated in 1968, due to the similarities with the roads in the 1968 model. It is not known whether repainting was undertaken by Warren or what exactly was altered.

In 2024, the model is displayed in the foyer of Auckland House/ Te Wharau o Tāmaki and can be seen by members of the public as well as council and other staff. There are interpretation panels about the model and its history, as well as a screen showing photographs of the models and a short film of Auckland in the 1940s. I have done numerous talks about the model for



Figure 3: The City of Auckland model on display in 2023. Photograph by Rachel Ford, Auckland Council Heritage Unit.

members of the public during Auckland Heritage Festival and for council staff.

International context

Models of cities are nothing new and there are some famous examples around the world.

Prague's Langweil model was made by Antonín Langweil during the 1820s and 1830s and has been displayed for more than a century. It is on permanent exhibition at the Prague City Museum.⁵⁷ San Francisco's city model was made in 1939-40 and bears a

⁵⁷ "Langweil's Model of Prague" np.

striking similarity to the Auckland model, particularly in its colour scheme.⁵⁸

The extraordinary Panorama of New York was built for the 1964 World's Fair, held in New York City. Taking three years to initially build, it depicts 895,000 buildings and 100 bridges. This model has been updated over time and is on display at Queens Museum. Cleverly, the museum allows people and businesses to sponsor the conservation of specific buildings.⁵⁹ The City of London has several models: the London City model was built in the 1990s and has been updated to reflect London's changing skyline. It depicts one square mile, while the New London model depicts 19 boroughs and 195km² of land, as well as 21 bridges.⁶⁰

Closer to home, Sydney also has two city models. The City of Sydney was made for display during the 2000 Sydney Olympics and is ingeniously displayed under a glass floor so that visitors can walk over it.⁶¹ Another model, used as an active urban planning tool, is on display at Sydney's Town Hall House.⁶²

⁵⁸ Whiting "San Francisco scale model finally home after 77-year absence" np.

⁵⁹ Queens Museum "The Panorama of the City of New York On Long-Term View" np.

No other surviving Centennial Exhibition models

It is likely that this section of the Auckland city model is the last remaining city model from the Centennial Exhibition. I have contacted numerous institutions around the country about whether individual city models remain in museum or council collections but have not yet located any others. We are lucky that the City of Auckland model has survived these last 84 years.

⁶⁰ NLA "The City Model" np; NLA "The New London Model" np.

⁶¹ City of Sydney "City model" np; Modelcraft "City of Sydney Model" np.

⁶² "City of Sydney Facebook page" np; Model makers, Town Hall House, Kent Street Sydney, 1996.

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