

"Ruffled by the number of windows": The 1948 Halberstam House by Henry Kulka

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ABSTRACT: In March 1940 architect Henry Kulka arrived in New Zealand as a refugee of the Second World War. He had enjoyed a successful career in Vienna, including collaborations with his former teacher Adolf Loos. Kulka's wife Hilda followed with the couple's children a few weeks later and during her journey she met another refugee family, the Halberstams - Hugo, Martha and their daughter Lucie. Eight years later Henry Kulka designed a house for a section the Halberstams had bought in Karori. In an oral history interview with Lucie, she recalled that once the house was completed, her parents invited people they had met while renting in Kelburn to visit their new home. The feedback received about the number of windows and the wood-panelled living and dining room gave the distinct impression that their former neighbours felt they had built a house "above [their] social level." This paper looks at the reaction to the Halberstam House and similar houses built by émigré architects when they were completed. It concludes with the perspective of a current inhabitant - how well does it suit contemporary living?.

Halberstam House

Halberstam House is situated on a small rise in the large suburb of Karori, to the west of Wellington's city centre. It was built in 1948 for Hugo and Martha Halberstam, who had arrived in New Zealand as refugees with their nine-year-old daughter Lucie in 1940.¹ The family were German-speaking Czechoslovakians from the city of Bratislava. Bratislava was declared the capital city of the Slovakian Republic, a new "client state" of Nazi Germany, in 1939. As a Jewish man, Hugo was subsequently dismissed from his position as the Technical Director at the Apollo Oil Refinery and the family had to escape

increasing persecution.²

Following amendments in 1931, in order to gain entry into New Zealand, the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1920 required aliens (non-British immigrants) to have guaranteed employment, a certain sum of money, or knowledge and skills which would facilitate their integration into New Zealand society.³ As well as skills as an analytical chemist and funds from both his career and wealthy family background, Hugo Halberstam had an offer of a job in New Zealand with fellow Jewish refugee brothers, Otto and Arthur Hirschbein (Hilton).⁴ Hugo had

worked with the brothers at the Apollo Oil Refinery in Bratislava.⁵

The Halberstam family travelled to New Zealand via Italy and Australia, arriving in Wellington on the TSS *Awatea*. Also aboard the TSS *Awatea* were Hilda Kulka, wife of architect Heinrich (originally spelt Jindrich, later known as Henry) Kulka, and the Kulkas' two children.⁶ Hilda Kulka was also a Jewish refugee whose husband had arrived in Auckland a few days earlier.⁷ The families obviously kept in contact as when the Halberstams later bought a section of land, Henry Kulka designed their house. Kulka's

¹ Naturalisation - Application for - Halberstam, Hugo; Halberstam, Martha Maria Mrs.

² Interview with Lucie Halberstam np.

³ Beaglehole "Immigration regulation" np.

⁴ The Hirschbeins changed their surname to Hilton soon

after their arrival in New Zealand and became well-known in sporting and arts circles.

⁵ Interview with Lucie Halberstam np.

⁶ Naturalisation - Application for - Kulka, Heinrich; Kulka, Hilda Mrs; "H Kulka New Zealand, Archives

New Zealand, Passenger Lists, 1839-1973."

⁷ Naturalisation - Application for - Kulka, Heinrich; Kulka, Hilda Mrs.

style was hugely influenced by Loos' approach to design with its clean exterior lines, rich interiors featuring materials such as timber and marble, and most notably "complex spatial planning ... which combined changes in floor levels and ceiling heights to produce rooms of varying volume."⁸ In 1930 Kulka published a monograph on Loos, in which Kulka coined the term "raumplan" to describe Loos' approach to planning, a term that is now routinely used in discussion of Loos' work and legacy.

When the Halberstam family commissioned their home from Kulka, the section was covered with gorse.⁹ The 1250 square foot, single-level (with basement laundry) house is now surrounded by an established garden, which includes mature natives. On approach, the horizontal profile is emphasised by a flat roof and extensive glazing in white frames, which contrast with the dark-painted horizontal weatherboards. The front door, accessed via an elevated patio, opens into a small, tiled entrance. A short carpeted hallway leads either to the living area through a single door at the right, or a left-turn to a longer carpeted hallway off which there are doors to

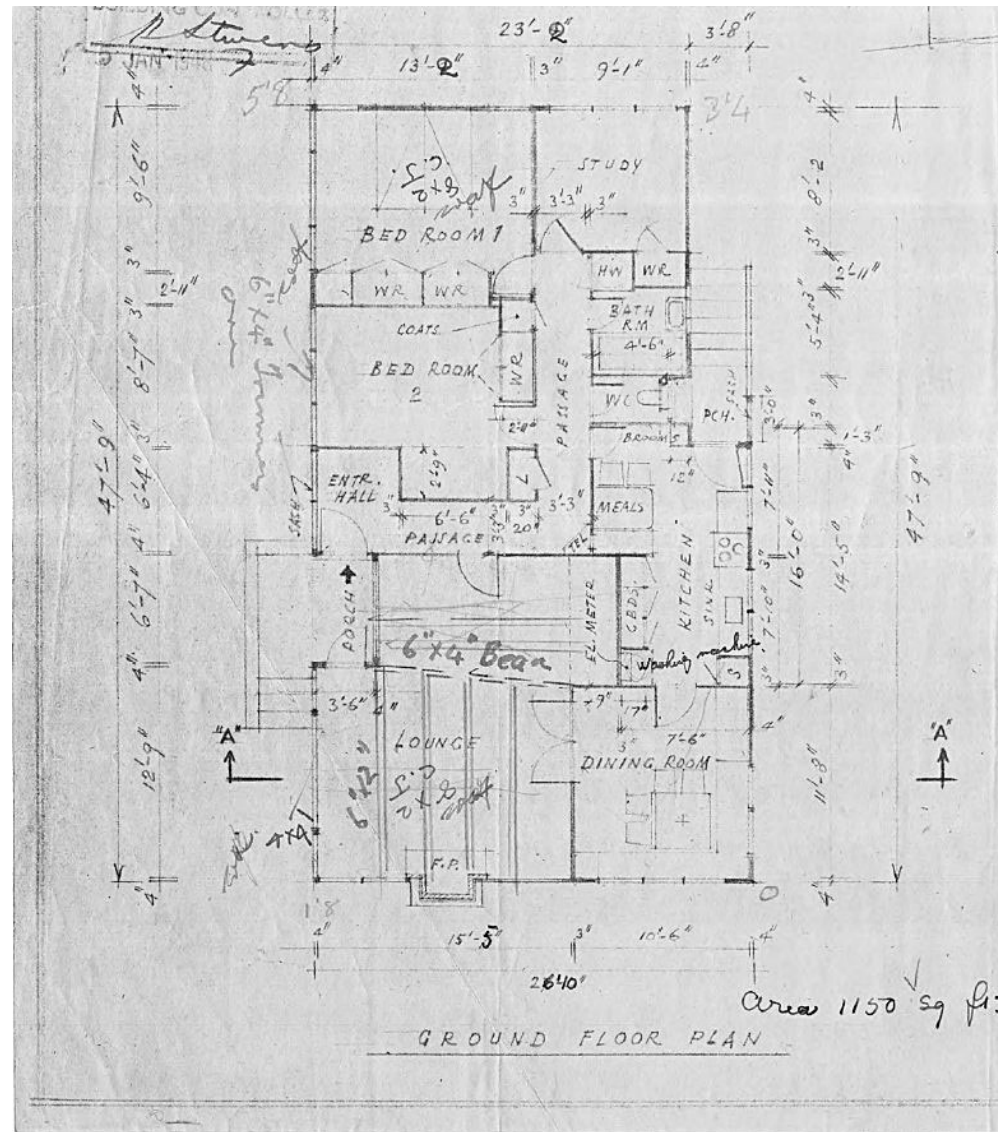


Figure 1: Halberstam House plans, Wellington City Council Archives, 00056-B26573

⁸ Gatley "Halberstam House" *Modern: New Zealand Homes*

from 1938 to 1977 p 44.

⁹ Interview with Lucie Halberstam np.

the kitchen, separate toilet and bathroom, and three bedrooms. The original plans for the house name the smallest bedroom as a study,¹⁰ although it has a wardrobe and does not have a built-in desk, which seems unusual given there are two other built-in desks in the house. Labelling this room the study may have been to satisfy post-war building restrictions which limited the size of a house based on the number of children in the family. The two other bedrooms have built-in shelving and cabinetry, and one bedroom has its single bed built into the wall.

The living area has wooden floors and wood panelling to three-quarter height. Apart from a nook with a lower ceiling height, which was home to a baby grand piano during the Halberstam family's time, the perimeter of the room has a built-in desk and shelves, bench seating and a brick open fireplace. Double doors open into the carpeted dining room which also has wood panelling, built in cabinetry and bench seating on two sides of the dining table. A single door opens from the dining room into the kitchen which includes a breakfast nook with a bench seat on one side of

a free-standing table. A telephone carousel makes the telephone accessible from both the hallway and the bench seat by the breakfast table. The builder was WA Flack and the finish is to a very high standard.¹¹

Hugo Halberstam died in 1964 and Martha in 1990. Both are buried in Karori Cemetery. Lucie, a lecturer in history at Victoria University of Wellington, continued to live in the house into her eighties and made no alterations. She is photographed sitting on one of the bench seats in the living area in the 2013 book *Modern: New Zealand Homes from 1938 to 1977*. Thanks to this long family occupancy and subsequent owners who appreciated the house for its architectural value, Halberstam House is one of the most enduring examples of Kulka's work in New Zealand. Many of his other houses and public buildings have been significantly altered or demolished.¹²

Reaction to houses designed by émigré architects

For their first eight years in Wellington, the Halberstams rented in the nearby suburb of Kelburn. In a 1947 police report, prepared as

part of Hugo's application for naturalisation, the constable stated that the family's home at 117 Kelburn Parade was "clean and tidy, although not particularly well furnished."¹³ This may have been because the family were saving to build their own home, or it may indicate the constable's personal response to a more minimal approach to interior decoration and furnishing. Certainly, when the Halberstams did have their house built, it contained a lot of built-in furniture as well as free-standing furniture designed by Kulka. Gisi Hirschfeld, an Austrian Jewish refugee who also arrived in New Zealand in 1940, recalled asking fellow refugee and architect Ernst Plischke to design her and her husband some furniture as "there was nothing available in New Zealand that we would have wanted to own."¹⁴

In a 1984 oral history interview with Ann Beaglehole, Lucie recalled her parents inviting some of their previous neighbours to visit their new home. She recalled that:

A number of them were very put off and very ruffled by the number of windows we had - it was above our social level ... The living room was panelled in wood rather

¹⁰ 117 Campbell Street, dwelling.

¹¹ 117 Campbell Street, dwelling.

¹² Gaudin and Reid *Henry Kulka* p 334.

¹³ Naturalisation - Application for - Halberstam, Hugo;

Halberstam, Martha Maria Mrs.

¹⁴ "A Client's Memoir" p 11.



Figure 2: Halberstam House photographed by Hugo Halberstam, date unknown.

than having wallpaper on it and some people - one person - declared this sumptuous. In actual fact I remember it cost precisely £16 more than the wallpaper would have done because the wooden panelling meant that you didn't have the jib board at the back of it, so you saved all the jib board. But this was not done, you see. It was unusual, it was not what New Zealand houses generally had and therefore it was an offence. And these people cut us from then on and quite a number of people actually did as soon as we moved to Karori because we no longer behaved like poverty-stricken refugees, by having a house which was designed by an architect friend who had come out.¹⁵

Lucie and her parents' experience raises an interesting question about how everyday New Zealanders reacted to Modernist housing designed around the same time by émigré architects who arrived from Europe. This is not an easy question to answer. We can find out what those in the architectural and design community thought through publications such as *Design Review*, *Home & Building* and *Building Progress*, which showcased examples of housing designed by émigré architects, but the perspectives of those living on the same street as newly built Modernist houses is harder to find. Writing about another Kulka House known as Four Winds, Julia Gatley notes that:

The exterior is understated, although in the latter 1940s and the 1950s, the extent of the glazing was a talking point

¹⁵ Interview with Lucie Halberstam np.

amongst neighbours, who nicknamed the house the Glass House.¹⁶

Expanses of glazing certainly seemed to attract attention. An anonymous writer in a 1936 editorial of *Building Today* advised:

Before deciding to adopt the modern style for your new home it would be well to consider carefully whether you really require such broad windows, or whether a few tall windows of generous width, tastefully draped and framing a pleasant glimpse of garden or distant landscape, will not better produce the idea of a home ... It is questionable whether we have really discovered so much new about housing as to justify doubling the area of glass in our rooms.¹⁷

Ernst Plischke has become the best-known of the émigré architects in New Zealand. The first house he designed here was for the Kahn family, fellow refugees, in 1941. Positioned on a hill in Ngaio, with large expanses of glazing, including the first glass sliding door to be used in a private home in Wellington, the house had impressive views, including of the harbour. This led some neighbours to suspect that the Kahns were spies, indicating these neighbours were not only ruffled by the number of windows but also the size of them.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gatley "Four Winds (also known as the Harvey House)" p 45.

¹⁷ Anon. "Evolution or Revolution" p 81.

Ann Beaglehole conducted oral history interviews with many Europeans who came to New Zealand as refugees during the Second World War. These interviews contributed to her book *A small price to pay: refugees from Hitler in New Zealand, 1936-46*. One of her interviewees was Henry Lang, Plischke's stepson. Plischke began designing a house for Lang and his wife Octavia in Karori in 1948. It was built in 1952, with the garden designed and planted by Lang's mother, landscape architect Anna Plischke. In his interview Lang reflected that Ernst Plischke:

did a lot of houses and things but these were all people who were a narrow, sophisticated group - you know, the Bill Sutchs of this world, who were interested ... it's the type of architecture that in New Zealand though influential, was never representative of the character of New Zealanders. You know, it's what they call international style. It never really took off here the way it did in America and Europe. And he had a lot of influence on young architects and was very highly regarded here by the young architects, but people ... well, didn't put enough emphasis on it, on the type of architecture that he represented, for his taste.¹⁹

A review of Plischke's 1947 book on the principles of modern design, *Design and Living*,

¹⁸ Tyler "The Urban and the Urbane" p 37.

¹⁹ Interview with Henry Lang np.

²⁰ Pascoe and Hall "Modern Architecture and Town

in *The Press*, reinforces Lang's observations:

This book gives [Plischke] ample freedom to express his views, which are at the same time the views commonly held by those architects here who belong to the modern school. To many colonials, modern architecture typifies ugly, new, box-like buildings, and in their nostalgia for old-world picturesqueness they sweepingly condemn good contemporary architecture along with the "modernistic" hybrid.²⁰

A satirical piece in a 1950 issue of *Here & Now*, billed as "New Zealand's independent monthly review," was titled "Design – Or Living?" Clearly a play on the title of Plischke's book. It begins by sending up the expanses of glazing associated with modern houses.

I awoke much refreshed but could not, for a moment, realise where I was. The light was so strong it was almost painful. I glanced across to my neighbours, the Brownes, but they were still asleep ... I arose and, stepping round a hydrangea bush before I realised it was outside the window, I opened the door of the forage (sorry, storage) wall.²¹

After ridiculing various elements of Modernist houses, including the open plan "divided into areas by latitude and longitude, named respectively, reading, play, eating, relaxation"

Planning" p 8.

²¹ Riggs "Design – Or Living" p 23.

and new technologies in the kitchen, the narrator departs:

I looked over my shoulder at the receding conglomeration of "contrasting forms," "designs for livings," "functional designs," "dominant roof masses," etc. I hope to God I get lost on the way home.²²

There was certainly interest from the general public in modern architecture, as evidenced by the Demonstration House built by architecture students at the Architecture Centre during 1948 and 1949. The Demonstration House attracted significant attention upon completion, including being officially opened by Prime Minister Peter Fraser, but in December 1949 the *Otago Daily Times* reported that:

When no applications to buy at the original price were received, the house was offered for sale by tender but after further consideration it has now been decided to sell it by auction at the end of January. Various furnishings, including floor coverings, will be offered with the house, which about 20,000 people saw during the six weeks in which it was open for public inspection.²³

Unsurprisingly, opinions on the house varied from "enthusiastic through lukewarm to

antagonistic."²⁴ Writing in 1996, Julia Gatley noted that:

Criticisms of the site, the site plan, the floor plan and the hypothetical owners provide some explanation as to why the Demonstration House was not the *piece de resistance* that it might have been.²⁵

It seems the initial price was the main reason it was not snapped up by a buyer at the first opportunity and the house ended up being sold at a loss to the Architectural Centre.

Many people encountering Modernist housing in their neighbourhood would have been unlikely to know whether it was designed by an émigré architect or a locally trained one. Their reaction would have been to the style rather than the designer. As the anonymous writer of the 1936 *Building Today* editorial put it,

These "modern style" houses, how dramatically different, how astounding, with their clear hard outlines, wide windows bolding facing the sun and their flat roofs, their austerity – some we like, some are repellent.²⁶

Helmut Einhorn, another émigré architect, designed a house for his family in Karori. In

fact, the Einhorn House is visible from the back steps of the Halberstam House. Beaglehole's interview with Helmut and his wife Ester provides insight into what European émigrés thought of New Zealand housing.

On their arrival in Wellington in 1939 the Einhorns spent their first weeks living in Berhampore and the housing was definitely a culture shock. In Europe, corrugated iron roofing was only for "shacks or animal coops."²⁷ Accustomed to red or grey tiled roofs, they found the colour of the corrugated iron roofs "hideous ... green, blue, yellow."²⁸ The interiors were no better, characterised as "the sort of bastardised Victorian taste that was in the houses of the 1920s."²⁹ They particularly recalled leadlight windows and tiled fireplaces "of horrible colours" and found

all that sort of thing simply terribly tawdry - well let's be snobbish - really petit bourgeois to us - was really mostly in very bad architectural taste."³⁰

²² Riggs "Design – Or Living" pp 23-25.

²³ "No Buyers" p 4.

²⁴ Gatley "A Contemporary Dwelling" p 93.

²⁵ Gatley "A Contemporary Dwelling" p 93.

²⁶ Anon. "Evolution or Revolution " p 81.

²⁷ Interview with Helmut and Ester Einhorn np.

²⁸ Interview with Helmut and Ester Einhorn np.

²⁹ Interview with Helmut and Ester Einhorn np.

³⁰ Interview with Helmut and Ester Einhorn np.



Figure 3: Living area of Halberstam House photographed by Mary Gaudin, 2020.

Their views show just how different the sensibilities of those arriving from Europe were compared with their new neighbours on the streets of Wellington.

Living in the Halberstam House today

The reaction of New Zealanders to houses designed by émigré architects, or even Modernist houses in general, were coloured by architecture they were familiar with and what was considered the typical way of living at the time. Over seventy years later, how well does a 1948 modernist house designed by an émigré architect suit contemporary living?

Functionally, the house works very well. Although the plan is essentially a rectangle, like many contemporary houses it is divided into two "wings" – the living spaces at the western end and the bedrooms and bathroom at the eastern end. The living area, dining room and kitchen are separate but connect in a way that invites circulation – small children love running (or crawling) in a big circle to prove it. The living area and dining room work particularly well with the double doors between them enabling the rooms to function like one big space, especially during a large

gathering.

As "mid-century modern" has returned to fashion, many visitors love the built-in furniture and wood panelling. Some are bemused at feeling as if they have stepped back in time, perhaps aided by the Crown Lynn honey glaze mugs in which they are served tea and coffee. The wood has unfortunately fallen victim to borer, which has been comprehensively treated but most of the panels bear a constellation of holes.

In the 1940s, the nuclear family reigned supreme – a father, a mother and a few children. The Halberstam House was built for a single-child family, which would have been considered unusual at the time but is becoming a more common family unit today.³¹ Lucie Halberstam was a teenager when she when moved into her new bedroom with its built-in single bed. Many teenagers today would not be content with a single bed but given the built-in furniture and double wardrobe, putting a bigger bed in the room would not be possible without some kind of alteration. Fortunately, when we have solo guests, they love staying in the built-in bed and report that it feels like a

very cosy nook. It has also been popular with our young nieces.

The master bedroom is a generous size with two double wardrobes and cabinetry, including a hinged-lid dressing table. The built-in headboard was designed to accommodate two separate single beds – the footboards are in storage under the house. The house is well-served for storage, including a coat cupboard near the entry and storage under the bench seats in the dining room and kitchen.

My partner and I bought the Halberstam House in 2018 as a couple in our thirties with no children. We attended all but one of the open homes while the house was on the market and were alarmed to hear other prospective buyers talking about how the house was quite small and whether it could be extended. We were drawn to the house for its architecture and original condition and were determined that if we were successful in purchasing it, we would not be changing it.

The house is incredibly light and the northern windows look out to established trees and

³¹ McIlraith "One and done: Why some parents are

opting to have only one child" np.

across to Johnston Hill. All that light does mean anything that can fade, will, despite the eaves. In the summer the house can become incredibly hot. Kulka may have been a European architect but the house has that classic New Zealand experience of temperature – hot in the summer, cold in the winter. We used the open fireplace once and decided it was best left as decorative as unless you were almost sitting in it, it didn't put out much heat. We decided to invest in German standalone radiator style-heaters, including a bold red one to sit on the hearth in front of the fireplace in winter, as they felt like a good fit for the house aesthetically. Photographs of Kulka and Loos houses in Europe show built-in radiators so, had central heating been common in New Zealand, it's likely the house would have had similar style heating.

The house does not have any sense of indoor-outdoor flow, beyond the views. In his 2023 book with Mary Gaudin, *Henry Kulka*, Giles Reid notes that:

The muted modernism of [Kulka's] exteriors and lack of flow from garden to interior, or from inside to out, are unacknowledged but undoubtedly reasons why Kulka's work did not occupy a more prominent place in the

discussion of New Zealand architecture at the time.³²

Like other writers on Kulka, Reid highlights Kulka's focus on creating "an interior realm,"³³ a continuation of his work with Loos, born from the necessity of their work for Jewish clients in Europe who wanted to avoid flashy exteriors that might attract unwanted attention. The lack of indoor-outdoor flow or outdoor living area doesn't bother us. Most of the time the weather isn't particularly conducive to outdoor dining anyway.

It amazes me that Lucie lived in the house into her eighties given various details like the steps up to the property, the shower over the bath which requires a big step into, and the external access laundry which requires going down the back steps and along a sloping path. Such a laundry would be unheard of in a standard new-build today.

We know we are incredibly privileged to own a house, let alone one we love. We are pleased that the house has been added to the Wellington City Council's Heritage Buildings Schedule in the District Plan to ensure it remains a good example of émigré architecture in New Zealand. One thing that's certain is that

no one visiting today would be "ruffled by the number of windows."³⁴

³² Gaudin and Reid *Henry Kulka* p 336.

³³ Gaudin and Reid *Henry Kulka* p 336.

³⁴ Interview with Lucie Halberstam np.

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