

Outside the Crazy House, New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington

Peter Wood

ABSTRACT: Writing on public buildings for the war time publication series *Making New Zealand*, Paul Pascoe described the Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai, Wellington, as displaying the degree of modernity that was then generally accepted and approved of by New Zealanders. An accompanying photograph (in all probability selected for inclusion by Pascoe's brother, John) shows Edmund Anscombe's Moderne tower building, and it is noted in the caption that the exhibition drew favourable comment from overseas visitors. At a moment in New Zealand's history when the heat of World War was once more accelerating, Anscombe's restrained stream-lined modernism was met with approval. But not excitement. That reaction was reserved for Playland, the collection of amusement park attractions operating on the periphery of the exhibition grounds, and which, for many, offered the most compelling argument for attending. Of the varied offerings in Playland, the most popular attraction was The Crazy House where visitors were promised to encounter - without warning! – innumerable diversions and never-ending sources of mirth-making. The Crazy House, like all elements of the Centennial Exhibition, was temporary, but unlike the latter, very little documentary of it remains. The few photographs of it present a modest façade with little hint of mirth, and of the interior of we have no descriptions at all. With reference to historic developments in entertainment attractions, this paper assembles what little information we have of The Crazy House to make a case for its significance as a defining development in New Zealand architecture. Just as the academic assurances of the Exhibition buildings would become a swansong to architectural stylism, The Crazy House would signal the appearance of demands on architecture that it now compete in an emergent field of international architecture called "popular entertainment."

The Dominion Court featured a huge diorama of New Zealand with roads, railways, ports and cities. The miniature transport and city models were out of scale relative to the physical landscape, so exaggerating the human contribution to the land. ... But most visitors made straight for the Crazy House and roller coaster in Playland.¹

Predictably, my first response to the decade theme for this years' AHA Symposium was to immediately search the National Library image collection for inspiration. The photograph that caught my eye was one attributed to Eileen

Deste showing "The Crazy House,"² an amusement attraction at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, held in Wellington over the summer of 1939-40. It's not a "good" image. The particularly flat and plain entry façade is caught slightly off axis, with the only concession to architectural "craziness" being found in skew-whiff nomenclature, and an animatronic sailor sitting above the ticketing booth. Four juvenile trees thinly defend the nakedness of the wall from the litter of figures

blowing past. This is not a particularly heroic architectural image, but it is one that throws into focus the nature of interiority, if only through denial. The Crazy House was a wildly popular destination in Playland, the amusement park that accompanied architect Edmund Anscombe's vision for national celebration that was staged at a moment in our history when the determinations of nationhood, and associated political associations, were being violently tested in

¹ "The Centennial Exhibition" np.

² Long "Deste, Eileen Olive" np. Eileen "Dusty" Deste was successful in securing the role of official photographer to the Centennial Exhibition. In this capacity she had a mandate to photograph all aspects of the Exhibition, from construction through to the closing.

However, it is also recorded that she delegated Neville d'Eresby Aickin to make many of the images and that, on the whole, the Exhibition Company were dissatisfied with the style and quality of the photographs. Deste's post-war photography in the UK show her to have been very accomplished, as are many of the Centennial

Exhibition photographs taken inside the exhibition buildings. In my view the compositional failings in the photograph of The Crazy House are not consistent with Deste's ability, and I consider it very probable that the photograph I am considering here is actually the work of Aickin.



Figure 1: "Outside The Crazy House, New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington" Deste, Eileen, 1909-1986: Collection of prints and negatives. Ref: 1/2-036221-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Europe. In this context, the Centennial Exhibition provided a particularly positive reinforcement of national identity, Commonwealth bonds, and the global

citizenship of New Zealanders. Against the deco-derived formality of Anscombe's main Exhibition buildings, Playland offered a more frivolous respite of amusements,

entertainments, rides and events in which The Crazy House featured. But what do we actually know of the entertainment it offered? The photograph I've started with gives almost nothing away about the nature of the interior, and that seems to be the point. The Crazy House presents to the public as an architectural enigma, a poker face whose only promise is that this experience should be "crazy" to any conventional understanding of "house." In its blank expression, The Crazy House is an architectural conceit contrasting a particularly bland invitation to the turmoil inside. This is a contract of surprise, and consequentially there was a desirable – and economic – motivation to keep the interior of The Crazy House a close secret to ensure that a continued supply of unsuspecting patrons could be ambushed in the service of their entertainment. A preliminary search – pictorial and textual – confirmed that what little information was retrievable on The Crazy House was highly superficial, and I subsequently prepared my symposium abstract on the expectation that any material evidence I could find to define the interior of The Crazy House would, by its very collation, be worthwhile research. I was however undone by Peggy Stead, a student of Kakanui Normal School, Kaukapakapa, winner of a writing competition held in 1939

for the best letter about the Centennial exhibition written by an attending student from Northland.³ I reproduce Stead's experience of The Crazy House in full:

On the Thursday afternoon that we visited Playlands the rain came down in torrents and very soon the water was rushing down the alleyways like miniature rivers. However, our pleasure was not spoilt by this and to get a [sic] shelter we decided to go to the Crazy house. I loved it. Above the ticket box on the roof was a sailor who rolled from side to side laughing, perhaps at amusing entertainments inside and perhaps at the many surprises in store for us. After passing through narrow corridors [sic] I came out into a huge room. As I took a step on to a wider landing the floor beneath me began to rattle. I took one step off it, but before I had landed air whistled up from the ground. Then we passed across a bridge which rolled from side to side. After air shooting up at unexpected places we came down stairs on to a solid "motionless" floor. Everyone was laughing at two unfortunate boys who had fallen while going through the great revolving barre and were rolling hopelessly around in it. The whoops of laughing as children came sweeping down the great slides gave one a very fine feeling.⁴

I don't think I can add anything to this first-hand account other than to confirm the mechanical devices involved in Stead's experiential account. Upon the end of the Centennial Exhibition, the site material was

either requisitioned as a part of the war effort or were auctioned off, with one public notice leading with the hook: "Are you Building a Bach? Purchase your Building Materials at Playland Office, in large or small quantities."⁵ The following Crazy House items were put to bidders in July, 1940:

- One crash and bumper floor
- One shaking barrel floor
- One drop floor
- Nine electric air valves and keyboard for operating
- Seven distorting mirrors
- One camel back
- One inclined whirl
- One joy wheel
- One moving staircase
- One revolving barrel
- One shuffle board
- Three bumping stools
- Three volume blowers.⁶

Between Stead's account, and the auction inventory, we can reasonably summarise the interior of The Crazy House as a manipulative sequence of mechanical devices designed to purposefully disorientate, destabilise, confuse and in all ways befuddle the spatial expectations of patrons in the interest of pleasure. It was, to use current phrasing, a

manipulative spatial instrument for inducing phenomenological hysteria in the interests of activating a hedonistic pleasure response (or, in Stead's words, "whoops of laughing"). The starkness of The Crazy House façade offers little clue to the entertainment contained within, and it appears this is an explicit strategy of contrasting exterior expectations with interior experience. But for whom does the architecture of an Exhibition owe its aesthetic standards?

Henry-Russell Hitchcock, writing ahead of the 1939 World Fair New York, identified architectural dissemination as an essential character of an Exposition:

Their particular atmosphere of holiday and ballyhoo, their very transience, indeed, appeal to the imagination of a wide public which is otherwise rarely stirred by any ideas of architecture at all. Real innovations of structure or design seldom make their first appearance in expositions. But World's Fairs are sounding boards for ideas, both good and bad, which have already taken solid form under more obscure conditions.⁷

But this is not what we find in here. In the photograph the façade seems little short of denying entertainment. There is the skewwhiff

³ Stead "The N.Z. Centennial Exhibition" p 2

⁴ "The N.Z. Centennial Exhibition" p 2.

⁵ "[untitled]" p 3.

⁶ "Crazy House Equipment" p 12.

⁷ Hitchcock "Exposition Architecture" p 2.

signage, and mechanical sailor (which issued loud and continuous laughter), but these are gimmicks. Otherwise, The Crazy House presents to its potential patrons in an architectural language that could be considered normalised, if not downright boring, for its context in Playland.

The obvious counter to this pejorative judgement would be to suggest that the façade served to contrast exterior expectations with the interior experience described by Stead. In this argument is The Crazy House is purposefully not architecturally "crazy" in appearance to heighten the ambush of the spatial theatrics.

That may well have been a factor, but other considerations also exist, including a general reluctance on the part of the Centennial Exhibition architect, Edmund Anscombe, toward it. In a note to the Secretary of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition Company Ltd. (NZCECL) he deemed it a secondary attraction, while stating "I look upon a Fun Factory as an absolute necessity."⁸ We must start here by considering the distinction the

architect was making when he distinguished a Crazy House from a Fun Factory. To understand this as something more than a semantic discrepancy it is necessary to appreciate that sideshow entertainments were not universally popular. The organisers of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition refused to allow an amusement park component on the argument that, as entertainments, they would be incompatible with the Fair's tone of moral improvement.⁹ Not all shared such a puritanical view. No less a figure than Frederick Law Olmstead thought that people visiting the "White City" of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair were bored by the grand vistas and processed the same "melancholy air" found in the haggard crowds of New York. As improbable as it may seem, the parade of cultural, social and technological advancement could, on its own, become relentlessly serious, and in Olmsted's view, even the exotic entertainments of the "varieties of the heathen" could be preferable.¹⁰ The Chicago World's Fair (officially, the World's Columbian Exposition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World) was the organisational archetype for

the dual themes of the modern exposition. Set against the monumentality of Daniel Burnham, John Wellborne Root and Olmsted's White City was the entertainment urbanity of carnival rides, ethnographic encounters, "hootchy-kootchy" dancers and empty games under the banner Midway Plaisance.¹¹ As de Winter writes of The White City:

The vendors make a tremendous amount of money. The people are happy. They attend the White City, but the fair organizers recognize that the people were not getting out of the fair the specified cultural lessons. The tension between play and exhibition could not have been better exemplified than at the birth of the Midway, a place here games and rides are introduced for the first time among the novelties of the mysterious Others.¹²

A systemic clash between grand but expensive educational ambitious displays, and popular low-brow entertainments that proved financially lucrative, became the pattern for world fairs and expositions after Chicago, with variation of balance between these extremes depending on the individual examples. However, even in this mix, Anscombe was presented with a particularly difficult situation. There was a social expectation – and financial motivation – that the Centennial

⁸ Anscombe quoted, McLean "Hurrah for Playland" p 89.

⁹ Ley and Olds "Landscape as Spectacle" p 199.

¹⁰ Olmstead quoted, de Cauter "The Panoramic Ecstasy" p 9.

¹¹ de Winter "The Midway in the Museum" np.

¹² de Winter "The Midway in the Museum" np.

Exhibition would have a significant entertainment component. But a centennial event, and especially one opening in the early stages of the Second World War, was a more fraught proposition than a world fair or theme park. A century on from the signing of New Zealand's most important constitutional document, the exhibition was an important test of national character. It opened in November, 1939. The following month *HMNZS Achilles* was a key participant in the successful disabling of the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*. By 8th May 1940, when the exhibition closed, Michael Joseph Savage was dead and the country was well advanced preparing a military division to fight a land war in Europe. National unity in the Land of the Long White Cloud was served by the Centennial Exhibition, and the spectre of long dark cloud gathering over Europe found respite in Playland.

Anscombe couldn't have foreseen the specific events of WWII, but the immediacy of war would have been apparent before preparations for the Exhibition had begun and this may have lent to his vision for the architecture of

Playland a sombre note, perhaps explaining how he was able to make a distinction between a Fun Factory and a Crazy House. The background for this claim is found in the architect.

Anscombe was unusually well placed to act as the Centennial Exhibition architect. This finds an origin story in a youthful visit to the Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, in 1888. Nonetheless, as the son of a Dunedin-based builder, Anscombe's career began modestly with a carpentry apprenticeship in Waiwera South. In 1901, he left New Zealand for the US where it is believed he began his architectural training by correspondence while working as a builder.¹³ In this capacity he is known to have worked on the preparations for the Louisiana Purchase Fair in 1904, and as a draftsman in the offices of McKim, Mead & White,¹⁴ which placed him in a circle of influence only slightly removed from Root and Burnham. With Anscombe's appointment as architect to the New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition in Dunedin (1925-26), as McCarthy wryly writes, Anscombe's self-perception as an exhibition

expert was complete.¹⁵ Attendance when possible at other international exhibitions (including the Turin exhibition, in 1928) only reinforced this,¹⁶ so when he was offered the opportunity to design the Centennial Exhibition it must have felt an earned entitlement.

This suggests Anscombe brought a tremendous integrity to the design of the main Centennial Exhibition buildings. But what of his contribution to Playland, which was, after all, literally a sideshow to the main event. Moreover, to what extent can we describe the bland presentation of The Crazy House as having been a design decision?

Some clues to Anscombe's approach to Playland can be found in comparing the architect's proposed plan to the realised plan. Playland occupied the northern edge of the Exhibition site, using available space that was then, as it is now, occupied by the playing fields of Rongotai College. In a preliminary site plan dated to June 1937, the "Amusement Park" is laid out in generic geometric shapes – circles and rectangles – on an axial alignment with the

¹³ Bowron "Anscombe, Edmund" np; McCarthy "The Making of an Architect" pp 61-62.

¹⁴ McCarthy "The Making of an Architect" pp 62-64, 68.

¹⁵ McCarthy "Narrating the City Beautiful" p 768.

¹⁶ McCarthy "Narrating the City Beautiful" p 768.

main Exhibition buildings, and forming a built-up barrier to the Rongotai College boundary.¹⁷ However, with the finalisation of the site plan in 1939, this area is now labelled "Playland," and its footprint is larger and more independent in organisation.¹⁸ The Rongotai boundary is controlled by the dynamic geometry of the roller coaster, which has required further encroachment into the school. In turn the dominant visual orientation of the roller coaster has set a new alignment for Playland that now diverges by five degrees from the main pavilion axis. In plan, at least, this sets in place a difficult formal tension between these two elements. In contradiction to the symmetrical centralisation of the main Exhibition buildings, Playland's wilful skew would seem to be more interested in nodding to the intrusion of the suburban pattern (Coutts Street and Tirangi Road). It is apparent that for his first version Anscombe needed to make an intelligent guess at the physical requirements for the Amusement Park, which he probably derived from his experience with the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition (which didn't have a roller coaster and wasn't so controlled by adjacent housing). It would have

¹⁷ Anscombe, Edmund, 1873?-1948: New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940. 1937.

¹⁸ Plan of New Zealand Centennial Exhibition,

only been after the issuing of the ride concession that Anscombe could make final planning decisions for what became Playland. This is important as it sets up a demarcation of responsibility between the technical and architectural aspects of Playland. At times these overlapped, with the roller coaster becoming a dominant architectural feature of the Exhibition. However, in the example of The Crazy House, the mechanical apparatus required for the experience described by Peggy Stead existed as a collection of independent devices needing a housing, which was provided – and aesthetically determined, I would suggest – by Anscombe to be purposefully modest as a foil between the roller coaster and the main exhibition pavilions. But if this is the case, why so?

I have already established that Anscombe was personally and professionally invested in exhibition design, as evidenced by his visits whenever possible to such sites. As described in his *Evening Post* obituary, "Exhibitions drew him as a magnet."¹⁹ The Golden Gate International Exhibition (GGIE), held in San Francisco, was one such magnet. Built on an

Wellington.

¹⁹ Obituary quoted, McCarthy "The Making of an Architect" p 71.

artificial island specifically constructed for it, the site's name, Treasure Island, reinforced the conceptual theme of the Expo as "Pageant of the Pacific." Franklin D Roosevelt, speaking on the occasion of the opening, declared this stating that "Unity of the Pacific nations is America's concern and responsibility; their onward progress deserves now a recognition that will be a stimulus as well."²⁰ As a response to this refrain the Exposition architect WP Day created a novel architectural style by combining Streamline Moderne with Asian and Latin American architectural features to produce "Pacifica." The GGIE was contemporary with the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, beginning a few months earlier (February, 1939) and ending at the same time (May, 1941). The extent of Anscombe's visit to San Francisco is unclear to me, but McCarthy has shown that he was well aware of it architecturally.²¹ It seems probable that he would have had at least a passing familiarity with Playland, the seaside amusement park that had been operating near Ocean Beach since 1928. I'm unable to gauge the extent to which Anscombe might have known of Day's architectural plans in advance on his own for

²⁰ Roosevelt quoted, "Golden Gate International Exposition" np.

²¹ McCarthy "Edmund Anscombe (1874-1948)" p 47.

the Centennial Exhibition, but a strong visual association can be made between the exhibition buildings at San Francisco and those at Rongotai. The similarities of axial formality might just be betraying the domineering shadow of the World's Columbian Exposition, and the Streamline Moderne aesthetic probably speaks to a late attempt to evoke the romance of travel and speed in a unified way. But smaller details, such as the graphic design of proportional material, suggest that an tacit relationship between the two events was understood. But if Anscombe saw some commonality between the South Pacific emphasis of New Zealand's Centennial celebrations and the Pageant of the Pacific theme of the GGIE, this wasn't a generosity of vision that extended to all parts of the latter's attractions. This, in fact, may account for the distinction Anscombe makes in desiring a Fun Factory over a Crazy House.

The title "midway" has become synonymous with the amusement element of American fairs and amusement parks. As is the case with the rise of large international exhibitions, this origin can too be tracked to the World's

Columbian Exposition where the amusement area, featuring the original Ferris Wheel, was concentrated around Midway Plaisance. Central to the entertainments of the midway area was the display of world villages, including examples from Germany, Japan, Turkey, two from Ireland, and a "South Sea Islands Village" contributed by Samoa.²² But by the Golden Gate International Exposition this trend toward spectacle was displaying voyeuristic tendencies. In a particularly clunky attempt to sensationalise midway, the amusement area was branded "Gayway," and although this name did not contain any inuendo, a number of the "amusements" did test the limits of societal tolerance regarding sexual and cultural norms. For a price, visitors could view premature babies in incubators, be titillated by the Dreamlands' "Girl Show" and Sally Rand's Nude Ranch, or, in a flashback to the "freak shows" of the late nineteenth century, take in Ripley's Believe it or Not "Odditorium." It is not hard to imagine Anscombe reeling from the crass commercialism that epitomised Gayway.

At this point I would return to the seminal

scenario of fourteen-year-old Edmund Anscombe from Dunedin, New Zealand, travelling (alone?) by ship, to Australia, to attend the 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition. "Precocious" springs to mind as a given, but so too do the parental condemnations such as "reckless," "irresponsible," and "negligent." There is no obvious evidence to think that Anscombe fabricated this story, and in a court report from 1887, Anscombe is described as "an intelligent youth."²³ But if we take this founding mythology at face value, what would the young Edmund have seen? Well, certainly a wide variety of national and international exhibits dedicated to displaying cultural, technological and social development. If Anscombe had ventured into the amusement arena he would have had the opportunity to ride a switchback railway (the precursor to the modern roller coaster). Entertainments, as we might understand them today, were typically limited to technical demonstrations, choral and symphonic recitals, theatrical sketches and, as one specific example, a bicycle performance.²⁴ Which is to say, the "entertainments" celebrated achievement of scientific and artistic

²² "The Midway Plaisance" np.

²³ "Justices' Justice" p 1. Anscombe was appearing as a

witness to the systematic physical abuse by a mother of their two-year-old child.

²⁴ Mastoris "Daily Programmes" np.

note. Anscombe would also have undoubtedly visited the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, held in Dunedin the following year in 1889-90, and here too a distinct distance was made between the main exhibition and the amusements. In a site-plan published by the *Evening Star*,²⁵ the side shows are a truncated addendum to be arrived at only after the full extent of the main exhibits have been experienced, and even then entry was via a small gateway, beyond which - the illustrated plan suggests - one will find an Eiffel Tower, switchback railway, and lavatories. This was then, first and foremost, a principle of entertainment where wonder was found in progress. As Jock Phillips observes in *Te Ara*, the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition (1889-90), the 1500 works of art on display received such a positive reception that it fuelled public demand for an enlarged art gallery for Dunedin.²⁶ Subsequent local exhibitions through to the end of the century leaned even more heavily into the celebration of local industry and manufacturing.²⁷

²⁵ "The Evening Star Exhibition Supplement" p 2.

²⁶ Phillips "Exhibitions and world's fairs" np.

²⁷ Noted by Phillips are the industrial exhibitions to mark provincial jubilees:

New Plymouth in 1891; Dunedin in 1898; and Christchurch in 1900. In 1895 the Christchurch Industrial

Association staged an exhibition, Wellington hosted an Industrial Exhibition in 1896 and, Auckland an Industrial and Mining Exhibition in 1898. Phillips "Exhibitions and world's fairs" np.

However, the exhibition emphasis on industry and societal virtue had changed by the New Zealand International Exhibition, Christchurch (1906-7), which was praised in one "Letter to the Editor" of *The Press*, for the splendid moral atmosphere, from entering the front gate until the entrance to Wonderland.²⁸ This was inevitable rather than radical. As Toulmin has written, the Victorian period was an age of optical illusion, magic tricks, freak shows, penny arcades and fairgrounds, all of which was consistent with the rise of a leisure class attracted to the fleeting entertainment provided by ephemeral shows.²⁹ By the turn of the twentieth-century social distinctions between cheap, sometimes exploitative, but always temporary, "shop" shows, and the longer, larger and altogether more serious industry exhibitions, and dedicated Midway-type amusement parks featuring permanent rides, had collapsed (figuratively), and while large exhibitions would retain spatial separation between the seriousness of education and the frivolity of amusement,

Association staged an exhibition, Wellington hosted an Industrial Exhibition in 1896 and, Auckland an Industrial and Mining Exhibition in 1898. Phillips "Exhibitions and world's fairs" np.

²⁸ "No-License" p 8.

²⁹ Toulmin "Curios Things in Curios Places" p 117.

there no longer existed such a clear social separation between these classes of entertainment.

One amusement example from the 1906 Christchurch Exhibition pertinent to this paper is found in Katzenjammer Castle, the faux medieval fortress, from whose small windows hung "figures suggestive of the darkest deeds" (as *The Canterbury Times* would put it³⁰) and into which innocent visitors were subjected to any amount of unexpected terror. This particular Katzenjammer Castle was surpassingly resilient. After Christchurch it was reconstructed in Wellington as a part of Wonderland, the short-lived amusement park associated to the speculative land developed in Miramar³¹ and where it promised the same ambush of "ghoulish shrieks, thunder and lightning, a grisly skeleton or two."³² Thereafter it was sold on to become a lucrative part of the Auckland Exhibition, from 1913-14.³³ However, formal hostilities with Germany ensured there was little chance that a sideshow

³⁰ "The side shows" p 22.

³¹ "Miramar's Wonderland" p 8.

³² "Miramar's Wonderland" p 8.

³³ "Auckland Wonderland, Limited" p 9.

entertainment with such a pronounced German title would endure after 1914, and in the post-war period the names for the kind of enclosed immersive experience Katzenjammer Castle multiplied. Crazy House emerged as a favourite, with the spelling often utilizing a "K" for the "C." A visitor to the Glasgow Empire Exhibition (beginning in December, 1938) would certainly have found this semantic distinction to be the case when they come across the Krazy House, which carried a new name over a pseudo-Medieval manor house that owes its architectural language to Katzenjammer Castle, and was completed by a mechanical sailor whose hysterical soundtrack cackled across the amusement park.³⁴ In fact, this would be the same mechanical sailor, and the same recorded laughter, that visitors to the Centennial Exhibition would encounter. In 1937 both the chairman and general manager for the Centennial Exhibition travelled to the Glasgow Empire Exhibition to view firsthand the amusement park where the Krazy House had been designed and constructed by British firm Double Grip Tubular Steel Devices.³⁵ The importance of this connection is found in the earlier appointment of Double Grip Tubular

Steel Devices as the concessionary contracted to oversee Playland, operating in New Zealand under the direction of Mr. Henry Seff.³⁶ In March, of 1937, the *Dominion* carried a report from Seff that Mr. Charles Paige, "the constructional engineer who would erect the devices,"³⁷ and six experienced assistants, would soon leave England to begin construction. Paige, an American, was a leading roller coaster designer of the period, and his obituary mentions his designs appearing in England, France, Belgium and New Zealand as career achievements.³⁸ His work as the designer of the celebrated Grand National, the wooden roller coaster at Pleasure Beach Blackpool, which opened in 1935, is well recognised. Less acknowledged is his association to the National Amusement and Device Company of Dayton, Ohio.³⁹

Anscombe's frame of reference for exhibition design was forged in the USA, but the Centennial Exhibition took its model influences from the Glasgow Empire Exhibition. However, the appearance of the Crazy House took its own direction. The bland façade fashioned by Anscombe for Wellington

was in stark contradiction to the feudal cartoon found in Glasgow. Even the change of spelling from "Krazy" to "Crazy" suggests a certain sobriety toward this most garish of entertainments and we should take it as a purposeful decision that the Crazy House assumed such a conservative appearance. It might have been that Anscombe wanted Playland to fall broadly under the Moderne aesthetic he had in mind for the entire Exhibition, but we really need to look back another couple of years to find a more probable source for Anscombe's design.

In 1940, there was no possibility that the castellated form and name of Katzenjammer Castle would be acceptable. Similarly, the grotesque domestic interpretations that are a feature of the Crazy House after the decline of Katzenjammer Castle might well have been considered too irreverent for the occasion of a Centennial celebration during war time. But it is my view that, given a larger budget, and more time, the Crazy House might have revealed its genealogical resemblance to Joseph Emberton's streamline Moderne design for the Fun House of William Bean's Blackpool

³⁴ "The Glasgow Story" np.

³⁵ The Chairman of the Amusement Park Committee was RH Nimmo, and the General Manager Charles P

Hainsworth. N.Z. Centennial Exhibition Company *New Zealand Centennial Exhibition 1939-40* p 21.

³⁶ *New Zealand Exhibition 1939-40* p 63.

³⁷ "Work on Playland to Begin" p 10.

³⁸ "Charles Paige" p 11.

³⁹ "Charles Paige" p 11.

amusement park, completed in 1935, and where Charles Paige had built the roller coaster.⁴⁰

Moriarty and Breakell have observed that Emberton was particularly successful at creating "settings," especially those taking place on a grand scale.⁴¹ The Blackpool Fun House displays more obvious Deco mannerisms and a determined asymmetry to the façade, but, in Emberton's embrace of clean modern lines over theatrical disguise, there is an alignment to Anscombe's approach in Rongotai. Emberton's Fun house, I suggest, had a significant influence on Anscombe's approach to the appearance of The Crazy House, although it also needs to be said that a seaside amusement park in Blackpool is not a grand provenance for a centennial celebration. In this regard the Glasgow Empire Exhibition offers a far better touchstone narrative. Whatever the case, the barely decorated shed that Anscombe erected worked well to not disclose the nature of its interior. If it was a point of the Crazy House to

surprise, then this bland façade served to give little of the experience away in advance.

And what of that experience? The feature of the Crazy House was physical encounter. For those entering the first time, this was, no doubt, a heightened emotional experience. For those on a repeat visit, the excitement involved spectating others. In both cases secrecy about the contents of the Crazy House was paramount. A 43-second colour film of The Crazy House has survived.⁴² Shot at night, probably by either Edmund Anscombe or Henry Seff,⁴³ it offers little documentation of the architecture, but serves to record the hysteria well, beginning with the electrically lit name, and culminating with the spectacle of patrons being thrown down a rotating barrel. Even in the grainy footage it is clear that for most the attraction of the Crazy House lay in participating in the physical discombobulation of spatial experience. But for others destabilised space was also an entry into breaking down other social norms, including

those regulating contact between bodies. Writing more generally of the emergence of the American amusement park, Pursell writes:

Besides having rides that produced thrills through the illusion of danger, amusement parks also importantly were sites of hetero-social interaction where – especially young – men and women could mix promiscuously, clinging to each other on wild rides, watching each other caught literally off balance in fun houses and simply spending time together without direct supervision.⁴⁴

(Thankfully, this element does not appear as a topic in Peggy Stead's Centennial letter).

Anscombe, I suspect, had deeply ambivalent feelings toward Playland, and especially towards the Crazy House. The significance of amusement parks for the success – financial and social – of large exhibitions was well understood, with the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition Company noting that the amusement section was an "essential part" of any Exhibition of national proportions.⁴⁵ At the same time, Anscombe's personal passion for Exhibition architecture was, I feel, founded in

⁴⁰ Carullo "Welcome to the house of fun" np.

⁴¹ Moriarty and Breakell "Joseph Emberton" p 28.

⁴² "Film Clip: The Crazy House" np.

⁴³ Two origins for this film are probable. *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, has a short colour film of the Exhibition in operation, including Playland, that it

attributes to Edmund Anscombe. The clip of the Crazy House in operation, cited above, does not provide an photographer credit. It is recorded that Henry Seff made about 3000 feet of 16mm film, "mostly in colour," but this is described as recording the late construction phase of the Exhibition (including Playland). "News of the Day "

p 6.

⁴⁴ Pursell "Fun Factories" p 76.

⁴⁵ N.Z. Centennial Exhibition Company *New Zealand Centennial Exhibition 1939-40* p 63.

an older model of educational wonder rather than wonder entertainment. After 1900 any distinction between these two types of "wonder" had been lost, but the unique conflation of acknowledging national identity at a time of war set the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition apart and created a heightened sensitivity concerning the representational characteristics of the architecture. In this politicised context, any Fun House evoking themes of parody, caricature or burlesque could have been accused of trivialising, even mocking, the seriousness of the times. Anscombe's response had a two-fold inspiration. The first, which I have discussed, was external by taking influence from Emberton's Blackpool Fun House, and he coded any risk of irreverence in a veneer of Moderne neutrality. His second approach though, was more far more internal in nature. McCarthy has argued, persuasively, that Anscombe's categorisation as an Art Deco-architect needs to be tempered by his genuine and successful work as a designer of factories based on distinctly Modernist principles:

The factory building, as well as anticipating and embracing the architectures of Modernism, also became

⁴⁶ McCarthy "War, America, and Modernity" p 77.

⁴⁷ "Air Force training at Rongotai" p 16.

the superficial exterior cover of the inner workings of the plant, much the same way that streamlined industrial design would later emphasise the design of the outside in order to hide the inner workings.⁴⁶

It might be argued further that Anscombe's interest in exhibition architecture was, at its core, simply a fascination with industrial building types, albeit factories in the service of producing "culture." The Centennial Exhibition added to this notion of "production" with a mandate to manufacture national identity, and national pride, at a crucial juncture in New Zealand history. From there it is a very short step to see that the architect's approach to Playland was to conceive of it as another factory space, this time dedicated to – and contained by – expectations of "fun." However – and quite unlike the main exhibition buildings – we don't see factory walls in Playland, but we do see the machinery of manufacture in the form of rides and arcades, and one of these machines is the self-contained Crazy House presenting as a factory within the factory, at once a key unit of entertainment production, but at clear aesthetic distance from the risk of representational production.

⁴⁸ "Nearly Down" p 13.

⁴⁹ "Exhibition Tower Coming Down" p 8.

At the end of the Centennial Exhibition the vast investment into materials was quickly co-opted into the war effort, with the remaining exhibition hall becoming the Rongotai Air Force Training Station: As the *Evening Post* would report it:

The exhibition buildings were ready at once to provide the huge floor space needed. It is not an ideal building by a long way – no ready adaptation can be – but the taking over of the Exhibition buildings was better business for the shareholders (dividend, if any, as yet not announced) and quite fair and faster business for the Government and the Air Force.⁴⁷

It was a pragmatic repurposing that revealed that "factory" was at the core of the architecture. However, unlike the militarily useful Centennial Exhibition buildings, Playland was completely demounted, and over 100 thousand feet of tubular steel (scaffolding) was absorbed into the New Zealand building industry.⁴⁸ In late July the Crazy House was demolished, and by the end of the month Double Grip Tubular Steel Devices representative, Henry Seff, had left Wellington for Auckland, from where he would sail back to England.⁴⁹ This leaves me very much where I began, so I will end with another first-hand

account of Playland from a young visitor.

Published in the *Evening Post*, in December 1939, was a sketch of the laughing sailor, made by Peter Watson, "aged 11."⁵⁰ It is, by many standards, a pretty good drawing. The manic bravado of the mechanical barker is detectable in the mask-like face, while below Watson labelled the ticketing booth in an astute commentary on the financial success of Playland. His gaze is just as shrewd when turned to the architecture. "CRAZ" is all we need of the façade to confirm that this is, indeed, the Crazy House, and the circular return cradling the collapsing "C" is accurate to the extent of architectural flamboyance as anything legible in Dreste's photograph. To the left of the composition is Anscombe's Centennial tower, made iconic as an architectural brand on countless souvenirs sold during the exhibition. The elegance of the tower is obvious, but the scale is confused. In the world of an eleven-year-old artist it is a far less interesting subject.



Figure 2: "Have you seen the "Laughing Sailor" of the Crazy House? Peter Watson, aged 11, made this sketch of him" (*Evening Post* (30 December 1939)). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/17212114>

⁵⁰ "Have you seen the 'Laughing Sailor'" p 13.

REFERENCES

- "Air Force Training at Rongotai " *Evening Post* (26 October 1940) p 16.
- Anscombe, Edmund, 1873?-1948: New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, 1939-1940. 1937. Ref: Plans-76-0679. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23023134>
- "Auckland Wonderland, Limited" *Observer* (8th June, 1907) p 9.
- Bowron, Greg "Anscombe, Edmund" *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (July, 2013) *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4a17/anscombe-edmund>
- Carullo, Valeria "Welcome to the house of fun" *RIBA: The RIBA Journal* (8 June 2022) npn. <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/south-shore-amusement-park-blackpool-joseph-emberton>
- "The Centennial Exhibition" (2018) *Manatū Taonga: Ministry for Culture and Heritage* <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/centennial/centennial-exhibition>
- "Charles Paige, 72, Area Native, Dies" *Sunbury, Pennsylvania* (31 October 1951):11.
- "Crazy House Equipment" *Dominion* (23 July 1940): 12.
- de Cauter, Lieven. "The Panoramic Ecstasy: One World Exhibitions and the Disintegration of Experience" *Theory, Culture & Society* (1993) 10: 1-23.
- de Winter, Jennifer "The Midway in the Museum: Arcades, Art, and the Challenge of Displaying Play" (2014) *Reconstruction* 14(1) np.
- "The Evening Star Exhibition Supplement" *Evening Star* (November 1889): 2.
- "Exhibition Tower Coming Down" *Dominion* (26 July 1940): 8.
- "Film clip: the Crazy House at the Centennial Exhibition" *Manatū Taonga: Ministry for Culture and Heritage* <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/video/film-clip-the-crazy-house>, updated 9-Feb-2015.
- "The Glasgow Story" Mitchell Library, GC ef606.4 (1938) Glasgow City Council <https://www.theglasgowstory.com/image/?inum=TGSA00429>
- "Have you seen the "Laughing Sailor" of the Crazy House?" *Evening Post* (30 December 1939):13.
- Hitchcock, H.R. "Exposition Architecture" *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (1936) 3(4): 2-8.
- "Golden Gate International Exposition" *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Gate_International_Exposition
- "Justices' Justice" *Evening Star* (7 October 1887): 1.
- Ley, D. and K Olds "Landscape as Spectacle: World's Fairs and the Culture of Heroic Consumption" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (1988) 6: 191-212.
- Long, Moira M. "Deste, Eileen Olive" (2021) *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5d18/deste-eileen-olive>
- McCarthy, Christine "Edmund Anscombe (1874-1948): Early Competition work" *AHA: Architectural History Aotearoa* (2004) 1:44-56
- McCarthy, Christine. "The Making of an Architect: Anscombe in America, 1902-06" *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* (2006) 16(2): 60-82.
- McCarthy, Christine "War, America, and Modernity: Anscombe's revival of the Combination Factory" *AHA: Architectural History Aotearoa* (2008) 5: pp 72-82. <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/aha/article/view/6767/5910>
- McCarthy, Christine. "Narrating the City Beautiful: Edmund Anscombe and his 1928 World Trip" *Translation: Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* ed. Christoph Schnoor, Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress (2014): 761-771.
- McLean, Gavin "Hurrah for Playland" *Creating a National Spirit: Celebrating New Zealand's Centennial* ed. William Renwick, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004: 87-96.
- Mastoris, Natalie "Daily Programmes from the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888" Museums Victoria Collections: <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/15571>
- "The Midway Plaisance" <https://worldsfairchicago1893.com/home/fair/fairgrounds/midway/>
- "Miramar's Wonderland" *Dominion* (25 October 1907): 8.
- Moriarty, Catherine and Sue Breakell "Joseph Emberton: The Architecture of Display" *PHG Magazine* (2015) 3: 27-30 https://research.brighton.ac.uk/files/439067/PHG_Magazine35_11-02-2015_EmbertonArticle.pdf

- "Nearly Down" *Evening Post* (8 August 1940):13.
New Zealand Exhibition 1939-40 Official Souvenir Catalogue Wellington: N.Z. Centennial Exhibition Company Limited, 1939.
- "News of the Day" *Evening Post* (18 November 1940): 6.
- "No-License at the Exhibition" *Press* (12 December 1906): 8.
- "The N.Z. Centennial Exhibition" *Northern Advocate* (23 April 1940): 2.
- N.Z. Centennial Exhibition Company *New Zealand Centennial Exhibition 1939-40: Official Souvenir Catalogue* Wellington: National Magazines Limited, 1939-40.
Official History of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition Wellington, 1939-40
Rongotai, Wellington ed. N. B. Palethorpe, Wellington: The New Zealand Centennial Exhibition Company Limited, 1939.
- Phillips, Jock "Exhibitions and world's fairs" *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/mi/exhibitions-and-worlds-fairs/print>
- Plan of New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington. Anscombe, Edmund, 1874-1948: Photographs of plans, drawings and completed buildings. Ref: 1/1-039318-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
<https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22750592>
- Pursell, Carroll "Fun Factories: Inventing American Amusement Parks" *Icon: Special Issue Playing with Technology: Sports and Leisure* (2013) 19: 75-99.
- "The side shows" *Canterbury Times* (7 November 1906): 22.
- Stead, Peggy "The N.Z. Centennial Exhibition" *Northern Advocate* (23 April 1940):2.
- Toulmin, Vanessa "'Curios Things in Curios Places': Temporary exhibition venues in the Victoria and Edwardian entertainment environment" *Visual Culture* (2006) 4(2):113-137.
- "[untitled]" *Evening Post* (13 July 1940): 3
- "Work on Playland to Begin" *Dominion* (7 March 1939): 10.