


CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE | THEORY | CRITICISM | HISTORY

View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by  **CORE**

provided by University of Queensland eSpace



Author Leach, Andrew

Title 'Modern architecture in Wellington'

Date 2005

Source Lecture to the Museum of Wellington, City and Sea, Wellington, New Zealand, 16 July 2005.

Modern Architecture in Wellington

Andrew Leach

Lecture to the Museum of Wellington City and Sea
Wellington, New Zealand, 16 July 2005

One of the failings of historical writing on architecture in this country is its reliance upon 1946 as a watershed year, wherein the full force of the European, British and North American modern movements became manifest as an architectural programme built upon the terms of a search for national identity, a delayed reaction to the celebration of the Centenary. One consequence of this tendency is the confusion, in historiographical terms, of national and professional emancipation, whereby we have come to rely on the spirit of that age in order to articulate a mature position for the profession in New Zealand, one clearly distinguished from other players in architectural culture. This might be a rather negative observation to begin with, but it is important to our topic today, 'Modern Architecture in Wellington'. For most of the twentieth century, and in distinction from all other cities and towns in New Zealand, Wellington enjoyed an architectural development both complicated and enhanced by the presence of central Government. Among those twentieth century agencies known to us for their advocacy for good architecture and planning, the Architectural Centre has come to assume pride of place. Established in 1946, the Centre relied largely on strong connections with Government and more specifically the Government Architect's Office, both for its interesting and culturally varied membership and for its insider's understanding of the complex interactions that lie behind the production of architectural, urban and infrastructural environments.

The Architectural Centre's targets, right through to the mid-1970s, implicate the often complicated and necessarily political nature of architectural practice concerned with the city. These extend from the canonical Te Aro Replanned of the early Centre and the 'project' mode of the modernist Centre, to the heritage battles for St Paul's and the Bolton Street Cemetery, the engagement with issues of transportation and vertical planning of the 1960s, the heightened environmental consciousness of the late 60s and 70s, to the legitimate antagonism of the Ministry of Works hierarchy and of the nature of planning practices exercised by the Wellington City Council during the 1970s and early 80s. However, and while these processes and arguments are echoed elsewhere, the presence of Government within the city held that debate to a higher level of accountability. In the years since the mid-1970s, Wellington has shifted its attention away from the very involved discussions that once determined the siting and appearance of new buildings, especially tall structures, and even more particularly in the Government precinct. We might partly attribute this development to the loss of the Government Architect's authority, a process that began on the watch of Fergus Sheppard and which was realised with the privatisation of Works in 1987. The late-1980s also witnessed the demise of what we might call the 'big firms' of Structon, Houghton and Mair, Stephenson and Turner, each still to be found, one way or another, in the phone book, but each a shadow of its former self. The Stock Market crash of 1987 brought architectural production in this city to a grinding halt for close to a decade, but the general development away from big firms and Government towards small offices and sole practitioners, as well as a newer focus on the house as the domain of architectural practice (and the city tower as the domain of development and speculation), precedes this economic development by some years.

For the purposes of our topic today, this has one important consequence. The histories of New Zealand architecture have tended to be written after this development has occurred, Peter Shaw's important survey of New Zealand architecture being first published in 1991, for instance. While a number of more modest tracts and exhibitions lay claim to architecture's complexity, and complicity with the city, the trajectories that overlay the earliest attempts to document New Zealand's architectural heritage rely upon an historiographic strategy more closely aligned to the relationship of Auckland or Cantabrian architecture to its urban development. This is to say that when we talk about the Architectural Centre now, or more generally of the experience of Wellington city as a setting for a twentieth century architectural history, the historiographical perspective that the last twenty years has brought to bear upon its heritage renders it more difficult to extract different kinds of lessons than those traceable to an heroic moment of the Centre's development, and those clearly pertaining to architecture as opposed to planning, a profession comparatively underrepresented in architectural debate today. Put another way, we now tend to look at buildings and their production, rather than the buildings as a product of architectural design inextricable from the production of their environments; this, in turn, has more to do with how we now understand how buildings are made now than with how they were made then.

For these reasons, my concern today is with 'environment' as an agglomeration implicating the city, and with some revision of the motivations for establishing the Centre, something I will address with reference primarily to its prehistory, but also with a nod towards its post-heroic years of the 1960s. And by 'environment' I do not mean 'context' in the romantic sense often invoked as a knee-jerk reaction in the tired coupling of 'architecture and landscape' that dominates our local architectural mythologies. Rather, I refer to a sense of the (once) more carefully choreographed integration of architectural production within broader production mechanisms that included planning, master planning, infrastructural engineering and, something quite foreign to us nowadays, an ideology of public architecture. While this claim might be tinged with nostalgia, it isn't intended to be so. Nostalgia is precisely the thing that I think is a problem when the *Design Review* era of the Architectural Centre becomes an irrecoverable standard to which the present can only ever aspire. However, I hope to point towards the presence of a close cooperation, and often hard negotiation, between agencies that included Government at central and local level, architectural and engineering firms, as well as planners, artists and clients that provided a framework within which carefully, necessarily in fact, argued architectural proposals received scrutiny from all quarters. This resulted, I think, in a more intelligent and rigorous context for constructing buildings and structures that became inextricable from their urban context. And I think that this, while lost to us at the present moment, is something that the Centre ought to feel historical responsibility to redress. In the meantime, as I will show in conclusion, this confronts us with a heritage issue in the present: how to value individual architectural works that survive from that context of production, and how to measure their value independently of whatever nostalgia might prompt us to reflect upon a better age.

+ + +

Last week we heard two of the original members of the Architectural Centre, Bill Toomath and Alan Wild, speak about the organisation's formation. The story goes like this: in the 1940s, there was only one architecture school in New Zealand, in Auckland, although students of architecture could become 'articled' to offices outside of Auckland *in lieu* of

attending a certain number of prescribed classes at Auckland University College, for which they would receive course credit. The Architectural Centre drew upon the high concentration of architects and architectural students, whose focus was the (then) Department of Housing Construction and Organisation for National Development and from late 1946, the Ministry of Works itself, with its newly rationalised Architectural Division. The high number of young men and women returning from military service overseas and resuming their professional studies generated an unprecedented demand as several years worth of students swelled the system in 1945 until the end of the decade. While this is part of the story, it is a mistake to regard the Centre's establishment as an autonomous event with no pre-history. Most of what we know of the two organisations that preceded the Architectural Centre is summarised in an unpublished memoir by founding Centre member Helmut Einhorn, a distinguished architect and early professional advocate of the landscape architect. Einhorn was barely two years out of his studies at the Berlin Technical University before he left Germany with his wife Ester, the two being among the large number of refugees that arrived mainly in 1938 and 1939. In 1939, and fresh of the boat, he began working in the productive office that was then called Crichton and McKay, but within a decade or two became Haughton and Mair.

Einhorn was one of many architects who arrived only to find that their qualifications could not be transferred across to grant them professional standing in New Zealand, a difficulty that had always confronted European architects seeking work in New Zealand, but which was more pronounced in this case because of the large number of highly qualified individuals who simultaneously presented themselves in the same circumstances. Einhorn is interesting in this setting because he was helped into private practice rather than a Government position (in contrast to Newman, for instance, who applied for a Government job from Vienna), but also because he was more or less inexperienced as an architect, while being a 'fresh' graduate of one of Germany's most distinguished, if historically difficult, professors, Heinrich Tessenow. He claims to have missed the camaraderie of student life, and together with a number of others in the same position as he, namely that of unqualified architects and architecture students in private practice, a small group founded the Wellington Architectural Students' Club, which lasted (as far as we can tell) from 1940 to 1942. Einhorn's memoir suggests that the projects undertaken by the Wellington Architectural Student's Club continued to exist somewhere, in the 1980s at least, but I know neither where they are nor who was involved in them. Unlike the Government agencies concerned with architecture and planning during these brief years, private practices had little opportunity for varied internal critique of the projects that students were concurrently undertaking for their firm and for their assessment. The Club laid out a plan, Einhorn describes, for a 'typically New Zealand' riverside town plan (he says, much like Wanganui), to which the articulated architecture students would contribute buildings designed by their respective offices. To this exercise they anchored European and British town planning debates, particularly drawing on the arguments played out by Gropius for the mixed density development of towns and the residential areas as well as the ideas of Unwin, whose Hampstead Garden Suburb Einhorn had (like many refugees), briefly stayed in before departing for New Zealand. Balancing the necessary but heavy workload of generating architectural designs for examination at Auckland, members of the Wellington Architectural Students' Club undertook small projects relating discrete architectural objects to town planning issues, producing *esquisses* for those constituent elements of a township not suggested by the work undertaken by the private practices represented. By 1942, he writes,

most men in good health had entered into active war service, and the project became impossible to continue.

+ + +

However, under the intellectual leadership of planner John Cox, the idea of planning as a necessary element of good design carried increasing weight amongst the war-time architectural community in Wellington. Cox was old enough to serve, but health prevented him from doing so overseas; instead, he was stationed in the Security Intelligence Bureau from 1942-1944. Many among the group Cox was in contact with were refugee émigrés who, more often than not themselves enlisted in the military services, though were not posted overseas. While the tendency to regard the German-speaking refugees as a homogeneous community, with similar backgrounds, architectural and political values, and shared experiences of disenfranchisement, is problematic on many counts, they were in a position to advocate, alongside many English architects and planners, for an integrated approach towards architecture and town and regional planning. The planners picked up where the Wellington Architectural Students Club left off, and Einhorn, Ernst Plischke, the Hamburger Ernst Gerson, and others grouped together to form the Architectural Research Group, which was modelled on Britain's MARS (the Modern Architectural Research Society) and which was active in the years 1942-44. With an eye towards the eventual necessity of post-War reconstruction in Europe and elsewhere, Architectural Research Group positioned itself as a useful vehicle for pursuing modern planning principles towards 'a better way of living'. Their work was very clearly geared towards the integration of domestic design with supportive infrastructures, and their manifesto, as far as Einhorn can be a trustworthy source included four key lines of investigation.

1. developmental trends in New Zealand's agriculture and industry;
2. centralisation and decentralisation in New Zealand's urban development;
3. the effects of standardisation in building on solutions to the housing shortage;
4. the history of the New Zealand house (as a pioneering approach to building).

Members of the Group (not to be confused with the legendary Group Architects of Auckland) published a number of short articles addressing these subjects during the early to mid-1940s, particularly in *Straight Furrows* (the journal of Federated Farmers) and *Better Business*. In *Straight Furrows* they included such pieces as J E Strachan's 'Social Problems of Farming' (1942), the jointly authored 'Rural Housing' (1943), 'Do Country Towns Meet Farmer's Needs?: Impacts of Industry on Rural Life' (1944), and 'Must Housing Swallow our Richest Land?: Fallacy of Home Gardens that "Grow Just as Much"' (1945). In *Better Business* they include M H Taylor's 'The Home of the Future' (1942), 'Sunshine Homes for Everyone' (1943) and 'Your Next Home in the Making' (1943); J Hastings's 'Good Roads bring Progress' (1942), A Leigh Hunt's 'Peopling New Zealand' (1942), E Fuchs's essay 'And So Does a Town Planner' (1943), W Adams and J Normile's, 'Your New House is On the Way' (1944), J D McDonald's, 'A Solution to the Housing Problem NOW!' (1944); Helmut Einhorn (writing as John Leslie) published 'MARS Straddles the Empire' in 1944; A R Webster wrote 'Prefabricated Houses Need Not Lack Variety' in 1945; and the 'Souvenir Peace Issue' of *Better Business* included Einhorn's 'Whither Industry?' and B Hooper's 'Replanning London'. Also, in *New Zealand* magazine, Einhorn writes articles entitled 'Space in the Sun: A

Challenge to Outmoded Ideas on Housing' (1945) and 'Tomorrow if we Wish: New Zealand Could Boast Cities that Live' (1945). Einhorn also drafted a book on town planning during this period; although it was refused for publication (due to its length, he suggested). I recite these references not in order to fulfil any requirements for a bibliography, but to point out that the heroic aims of the post-War generation of young architects had an immediate precedent implicating many of the individuals that would found the Architectural Centre, and that declared a much broader territory as its concern.

The work of the Architectural Research Group was put into action on a number of fronts, building awareness of planning issues in Wellington, even to the point of publishing a counter-scheme for the Wellington civic centre, which provocatively ran contrary to the requirements set out by the Council itself in order to articulate principles of 'good planning'. Ernst Plischke, another prominent member of the Group, published his own studies from this time in *Design and Living* (1947), a book Einhorn that occupied a much needed wider educational role for the Group. Of their work, Einhorn later wrote:

The lesson learned early on, was, that to merely present and explain once some new ideas is ineffective unless supported by continuing advocacy, revision, adaptation and finally participation from the public. Thus the continuous involvement with voluntary public interest groups, even assistance in the conscious creation of them is of great importance in assisting the breakthrough of ideas.

There are two reasons why the efforts of the Architectural Research Group might have faded from our collective memories of architectural history around the War years. The first is that these individuals clearly regarded planning as the emphasis of their work, and as recent historiography has privileged the practice of architecture as distinct from that of town and country planning, that this dimension of the debates, proposals and completed projects that preoccupied a number of important architects of this moment have been forgotten. The second is that the end of the Group coincides with the establishment of the Organisation for National Development, to which Einhorn was appointed, alongside Plischke and later Ian Reynolds, under the leadership of John Cox. In other words, and importantly, the protagonists of a polemic against dominant urban and rural planning practices already won out before the end of the War by having their principles and practices adopted and internalised by this extremely important, though often overlooked, branch of the Prime Minister's Department. The participation of Helmut Einhorn, Ernst Plischke, John Cox, George Porter, Jim Beard and others in both the Architectural Centre and, within a couple of years, the Architectural Centre School of Architecture and Town Planning, must surely have been predicated on a notion of the Centre as an agent of public education, capable of stimulating awareness of the environment and of good design, *building upon* these earlier efforts, and not beginning with a clean slate. Cox's tenure as chief planner in the Organisation for National Development extended to 1947, after which the OND was subsumed into the newly restructured Ministry of Works scheme, and planners brought into closer collaboration with the Government Architect's Office.

+ + +

These two antecedent organisations are not well known, but the influence of former members of the Architectural Research Group is manifest in the early years of the

Architectural Centre, in *Te Aro Replanned* for instance, even if the composition of the participants becomes much younger by the late 1940s. The development of a modern culture of building in Wellington over the course of the late 1940s and 1950s *has* become relatively well-known, largely through the persistent efforts of such historians as Julia Gatley, Justine Clark and Paul Walker, and through the 1996 Cuttings from the Centre show at City Gallery marking the Centre's first fifty years. However, these efforts at rightfully claiming the Centre's importance to mid-century debates on architecture and the city tend to focus on the modernist Centre, the Centre of utopian or ideological projects. I would like to indicate another line of the Centre's heritage that bears more important implications for Wellington as a setting of architectural production, more important because it informed (largely through the respect with which a younger generation regarded Helmut Einhorn's anti-authoritarianism) what followed the turning point of 1960.

The sixties witnessed the launch of a new direction for the Centre, one which responded directly to threats against specific buildings, sites, and precincts, and which turned the Centre's efforts away from abstract problems considered in specific settings towards pressing issues that called for direct action and public agitation of authorities, and often against Government agencies at central and local levels. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust was established by parliamentary act only in 1954, and the very idea of architectural heritage only twenty years after the Centenary remained a difficult concept to introduce. Certainly the Centre's historical strategy of Greenfield clearance of existing context, manifest in *Te Aro Replanned* for a variety of logical reasons, ran contrary to its heritage line from the mid 1960s onwards. However, under its efforts such buildings as the old St Paul's Cathedral and the Thistle Inn survived, and the Bolton Street Cemetery escaped the worst possibilities presented to its future by the new Wellington Urban Motorway. The Centre, during these years, was also in recovery from the loss of one of its most important and enlightened advocates, Government Architect Gordon Wilson, whose 1959 death marked the beginning of Fergus Sheppard's twelve-year tenure in the position. The confluence, then, of Sheppard's heavy handed planning, which lacked Wilson's intellectual generosity, with the last phase of the Government's national infrastructural works, offered a particularly difficult challenge to Wellington.

If the exhibition 196X began the decade with a warning, the near-miss disaster that could have been realised in the design and construction of the Wellington Urban Motorway offered a tangible reprimand for the city. In both of these projects, the Architectural Centre played a major role. But more than this, the Motorway scheme demonstrated the impossibility, under Sheppard's leadership, of the kinds of collaborations that had allowed the Centre's dominant modernist approach to find synchronies with Government ideologies and building practices. The Centre of the 1970s became a subversive agency, more pursuing the aims of good design, and now urban heritage, but without the backing of Government. This constituted a reversal of its relationship with Government of the 1940s and 50s, and by extension planning appeared to assume the part of a legalistic barrier to good architecture rather than an advocate alongside the architectural profession. An excellent example of the stand-off that ensued is found in Chris Brooke-White and Ian Athfield's send up of Athfield's neighbour, Merlin Muir, in an article entitled 'The Battle for Amritsar Heights', an amusing description of the irreconcilability of architects and local authorities surpassed only by the apology published as a result of Muir's defamation suit against the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

These developments, which I have only lightly touched upon, point towards one of the paradoxes of both architecture and planning, the impossibility of simultaneously looking forwards and backwards, which is to point out the disciplinary burden of architects and planners in saying that their work concerns the future, and that their view of the past will always be shaped by that which follows. No where in Wellington's history has this been better demonstrated than in the project for a new Urban Motorway. Einhorn's vociferous objections to the inevitably desecration of the Bolton Street Cemetery cost him a professional yellow card and eighteen months on secondment in London, and forced the issue of whether public servants in the Government Architect's Office could also be members of the Architectural Centre. The Centre's ongoing protests, and collaboration with the new Friends of the Bolton Street Cemetery, raised an important issue: at what cost to heritage does the present proceed into the future? The Government line, as well as that of Wellington city, involved the need to balance heritage with functional urban systems. The Centre advocated a more integrated and design orientated approach towards the problem than had been proposed at a regional scale. After Einhorn's time out, he was assigned the task, but as head of a new division which promised to draw the architectural, traffic, infrastructure, planning, engineering and (now) landscape specialists into conversation. Under the name of Environmental Design, the Motorway project proceeded to redress the heritage issues within a design scheme that sensitively and economically solved the complex problems raised by the city's increasing suburbanisation. This structure remains one of the most important and elegant additions to this city of the last fifty years. The result stands as a testimony to the hard-fought debate and negotiations between the advocates of necessity, vision and practicality.

+ + +

In Wellington today, different kinds of necessities prevail that bring into question the way that we value our city and its history. I would like to finish by pointing towards one example of a building that entered Wellington's cityscape better for the inter-agency debate that its design entailed. The ICI (Imperial Chemicals Industries) Building in Molesworth Street was designed by Stephenson and Turner between 1961 and 1964. Sited in the Government precinct, immediately adjacent to the new Saint Paul's Cathedral, it quickly became the subject of intense negotiations between the Town Planning Committee of the Wellington City Council and the Commissioner of Works. At stake was the question of whether the new tower block was sympathetic to its important neighbour. The architects collaborated with John Blake-Kelly, Assistant (and future) Government Architect and Senior Divisional staff in the Government Architect's Office to resolve a contextual issue with the building by rotating its plan 90 degrees to allow for increased height and a narrower street façade, mimicking the rhythms of the cathedral tower next door. While to all intents and purposes a functional office building, the care entailed in addressing the broader environment in which ICI House sits even now is evident in the building's treatment as an architectural object. It does not resist its context, but as an object, its careful massing, corner details and generous podium constitute an interesting and important example of the possibilities available to private architectural firms at this moment.

The building's generous podium makes it a prime target today, though, for rather less honourable reasons. In an contemporary urban climate where the developer is the most important player in the construction industry, the temptation of extrapolating the entire base

of the ICI House podium into a tower of substantially increased rentable floor area has proven too strong, and a proposal now sits with Council to subsume this modest tower with a full site coverage glass object. This development ought to be of concern to many, because it targets a generation of competent, functional, well-designed, contextually sympathetic architectural works that did not receive the distinction in their own era of winning medals from the architectural profession, and which were not believed to be so easily under threat until recent years. And so just as the Evening Post could once declare that the Old Molesworth Street is disappearing in the face of expanded Government and commercial prospects, we might now say that we not only observe the defacing of modern Molesworth Street, but a perpetual undermining of two forms of heritage.

The first is an architectural heritage, whereby Wellington's urban character builds up decade by decade as the rich aggregation of histories. The second is more worrying, in fact, though it implicates the first. I refer to the professional heritage of a way of building in Wellington that was once hard won, but considered, involving all manner of interested parties but avoiding the perils of design by committee. It harks back to a truly cooperative era of architecture in Wellington spanning from the late 1930s until the early 1970s, and which constitutes the core of our city's modern movement. This heritage is under greater peril because it is a cultural heritage, and is only artificially claimed (largely out of necessity) in terms of the artistic merits of individual buildings. The New Zealand modern movement, much like New Zealand culture at large, is reluctant to declare masterpieces, and when it does, the modernist house wins out as a kind of modest (though deserving) compromise. Urban heritage, implicating both the slow, measured and debated development of context and the often well-crafted objects that comprise both commercial Wellington and Government Wellington, too often defers to the pressures of economics. Nonetheless, the demolition of ICI House will mark the passing of this heritage, both architectural and ideological. We have found a way to survive the loss of these urban stalwarts, of which Shell House is the most recent to fall, but that is regrettable, I think, because it removes us further and further from the intelligent and informed discussions about architecture and the city that made Wellington what it is today.