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Jewish Culture and Modern Architecture in New Zealand

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In recent years, I have become increasingly concerned with what is commonly thought of as the community of Jewish refugee architects who arrived between 1933 and 1939 from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and those other central European states that fell victim to Nazi Germany at the start of the Second World War. My research on the Viennese architects Alexander and Friedrich Neumann, later known as Frederick Newman, as well as my work on the Berliner Helmut Einhorn, resulted in published studies that have, to an extent, forced the community of architectural historians, here and elsewhere, to change the presuppositions with which we deal with New Zealand's modern movement heritage. Others working in complementary fields have likewise observed the importance of this community to New Zealand's cultural makeup. Speaking in the context of a symposium concerned with Jewish culture in this country, I would like to do two things. Firstly, I wish to reflect on the extent to which two Jewish architects impacted upon the development of modern architectural culture here in New Zealand. In doing so, I knowingly speak of a generation of European-born Jews and overlook, for several reasons, the community of New Zealand-born Jewish architects, about which I know next to nothing. Secondly, I wish to point out the difficulty with which we sustain a notion of 'community' as a vehicle for considering these individuals in historical terms by recourse to their (1) ethnicity, (2) their common language of German, or (3) their apparently shared approach to architectural practice.

Of the refugees who came to New Zealand from Hitler's Third Reich, numbering more than one thousand, over a dozen were professionally trained as architects. Several historians have made much of the professional obstacles that confronted a group of, in several cases, well-established architects with international experience and reputations. It is true that architects from outside of the Commonwealth were required to retrain, or to re-sit professional examinations, before being allowed to register as professionals in New Zealand, but that remains true today. In 1938, a relatively substantial influx of architects relied, to an extent, upon the availability of architectural practice in Government agencies, where they would work in a reduced professional capacity; this period in the professional history of the architect in New Zealand thus appears less enlightened than that the present, which it is not. I would rather suggest that the speed with which these architects came to have a direct impact on New Zealand's architectural culture, cities, infrastructure and regions during a time of war suggests a degree of enlightened intellectual leadership within that historical setting. This was largely enabled by Gordon Wilson, head of housing construction under the first Labour Government and the Government Architect appointed to oversee the vast reorganisation of public works infrastructure that took place in 1946. There are several Jewish architects about whom we could speak, but I will draw upon two primarily: the Viennese Friedrich Neumann (later Frederick Newman) and the Berliner Helmut Einhorn. And there are others, I know, who equally deserve our attention. But time is against us.

One of the characteristics of architectural historiography in New Zealand is its tendency to privilege the private house as a building type. In so doing, we make an important oversight in looking to the post-War project of cementing national identity rather than constructing the means for national modernisation. Our subjects today tended to disappear into the latter project: Einhorn designed the master plan for the University of Canterbury, Newman and Einhorn were responsible for the architectural design of a dozen hydroelectric power stations, Einhorn made the Wellington Urban Motorway what it is today, or at least what it was yesterday, took a leading role in planning polemics and led the recognition of the landscape profession in New Zealand; as Fletcher's architect, the Czech Heinrich Kulka took on responsibility as the principle architect in the country's most civic-minded construction company. Yet the private houses designed by Kulka and Einhorn for themselves, and Hamburger Ernst Gerson for Irene Koppel (about which my colleague Len Bell has written) were understood by a generation of younger architects as a signal for a modernist domestic design rooted in European avant-garde traditions, in the tenets of the Bauhaus. These houses demonstrated how Walter Gropius's call for the architect to become concerned with scales extending 'from the teaspoon to the city' could be manifest here. And so we might well credit the work of Gerson and Einhorn, in Karori, for instance, as important predecessors of such better known modernist houses as Alington's and Beard's, and Toomath's

elsewhere. In Wellington, more so than in Auckland, the constant exchange between public architectural responsibility and private architectural expression received significant attention. In Auckland, the houses of Kulka remain among the most important modernist houses in the city, though their importance is tempered by the over-dominant Group-led discourse on nation building through house building.

I prefer to think of the impact of the Jewish refugee community as lying outside of this quintessentially New Zealand dimension of our architectural history. It was Einhorn, alongside Gerson, Plischke, John Cox and Ian Reynolds, who founded the Architectural Research Group in 1942 as a local response to CIAM, the international congress of modern architecture, advocating planning and good design in all dimensions of civic and private life. Their articles in *Better Business* and *Straight Furrows* founded a discussion on planning that bridged the professional and public domains with such efficiency that their work was internalised into the Organisation for National Development, a branch of the Prime Minister's Department concerned with planning in the post-War years, and then completely forgotten by architectural historians. The most prominent housing blocks of the Department of Housing Construction from 1938 to 1946 were designed by Newman, working in close collaboration with Gordon Wilson. They included the Symonds Street Flats in Auckland and McLean Flats in Wellington; Newman's touch is found also in the Dixon Street Flats (the project with the most contested authorship from this time) and in Grey's Avenue. In 1948, Newman was given responsibility as the chief architect in the Hydro Design Office, designing Maraetai, Whakamaru, Cobb River and Roxburgh Power Stations; Einhorn, as mentioned before, transferred his planning experience to the project team for Canterbury University at Ilam, where he drew the masterplan and designed the Engineering Campus. He then took over from Newman in the later 1950s as Power Architect in the Hydro Design Office, where he oversaw the construction of Benmore, Aviemore and three new stations on the Waikato. Newman was appointed as Housing Architect in 1956, where he developed such model medium density housing units as the Start Flat and Duplex Flat among a dozen or so standardised types. From the late 1960s Einhorn became a staunch advocate of environment in its fullest sense of the word, from landscape and ecology to the smart design of cities and communities and their collective heritage; this is manifest in the Wellington Motorway, in the grounds of Parliament, and in a number of small urban projects around New Zealand.

These are just a handful of examples from two of the most prolific Jewish refugee architects in public service during this era. I wish to turn now, to the way in which historians, and thus a wider public, have come to characterise the contributions of this community. In the most basic terms, to treat such a diverse group as a community is something that I already regard with a great deal of suspicion. In our tendency to cover over complex events with simple historical abstractions, we now speak easily of a community of Jewish refugee architects. This may, to an extent, and as such historians as Anne Beaglehole have demonstrated, be due to a perception of shared nostalgias, for a kind of culture specific to the cities of central Europe in the 1930s, and to a common language of German, and thus (as cultured individuals, the history goes) sharing knowledge of art, literature, music, politics and philosophy that few among the local population could relate to in such direct terms. In architecture, this translated into a formula whereby those refugee architects (we would say Jewish, but we include also Ernst Plischke) brought first hand to New Zealand an experience of avant-garde modern architecture and design, encapsulated in the popular memory in the forms and figures of the Bauhaus, and of the Dessau Bauhaus in particular. The closer one looks into European architectural history from the end of the Great War to the start of the Second World War, the tendency for these architects to import a very specific, and in many ways rather homogeneous, brand of architectural debate, attitude towards design and society, and formal strategies, seems more and more strange. My most recent writing on this topic has thus raised an historical problem: what decides the degree to which an architect from among this community of, typically (though not exclusively) Jewish, refugees to set aside their education and European experience as architects in favour of a standardised 'European' modernism, encapsulated in the Bauhaus, and in many cases foreign to their previous work.

Einhorn, for instance, barely worked for two years before travelling to New Zealand; he was rather young, and so his record in Europe is limited to a few pieces of furniture and his student works. His study environment is the most telling of all; in taking his engineer's diploma at the

Berlin Technical University, he was in the studio of Heinrich Tessenow, billed as the arch-conservative, anti-Semite teacher of Albrecht Speer. This characterisation in itself is only partly true. Tessenow *was* conservative, and his work *was* hijacked by the Nazi cause, but his design principles were very much based on an appreciation of traditional craftsmanship. His architecture and planning, most evident in the German garden city of Hellerau, likewise appears conservative and regionalistic; his buildings tend to imitate rural huts and he privileges the picturesque quality of towns. Einhorn's final project is conceived in this tradition, and demonstrates little of the claim that he, and his family after him, made for the importance of the Bauhaus in his pre-New Zealand architectural experiences. Importantly, though, Tessenow was a contender for the first directorship of the Bauhaus in its Weimar setting; his emphasis on crafts and on the Gesamtkunstwerk differs little from the early Bauhaus and its predecessors.

One would likewise have to try very hard to make a claim on the homogeneity of Newman's work among his refugee contemporaries, and this is perhaps due to his being already a decade older than most of those architects who came out to New Zealand. Newman's work fits easily within the tradition of the Viennese bourgeois. His father was a knight of the Empire, and Friedrich in turn enjoyed the privileges of wealth: he studied at the Technical University of Vienna, the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and enjoyed an entry to the profession through his father's well-established practice with Ernst von Gotthilf. When the younger Neumann became more politically conscious, he joined the hoards of architects who left Vienna behind the red flag of Hannes Meyer (and not Ernst May, as I had earlier assumed) to work in Moscow on projects that formed part of the Five Year Plans. Nevertheless, Neumann's work from this moment caters to a vision of Stalin's soviet man rather than that of Lenin's communism. Thus, the place of collaborative factory environments, self-sufficiency and design for life that permeated the German and Austrian avant-garde throughout the 1920s and 30s, remains ultimately foreign to Newman *while in Europe*. Both Newman and Einhorn, in their writing (neither, it seems, wrote essays prior to their time in New Zealand), belie rather conservative notions about taste and aesthetics, but temper this with well-defined ideas of public responsibility and social morality that align them, ultimately, with the democratic socialist agenda of the Government under which they arrived in New Zealand.

New Zealand's most important connection with the European architectural avant-garde lies with Heinrich Kulka, who settled in Auckland, as did his Czech compatriot Imric Porsolt, who later taught at the University of Auckland's School of Architecture. Kulka has drawn, in the last decade or so, an extraordinary amount of attention for his saving of the Adolf Loos archive, though his work in New Zealand, as Douglas Lloyd Jenkins observes in his book *At Home*, is rarely seen as a continuity from his architectural and cultural life in Brno or Vienna. This is ironic, precisely because Kulka, just a couple of years older than Newman, offered one of the only genuine examples among New Zealand's Jewish architects of continuity from a European avant-garde to a New Zealand manifestation thereof.

The overwhelming body of works produced under the authority of Government Architect Gordon Wilson owe a lot more to his architectural predilections, evidenced in his work with Gummer and Ford and even more explicitly in the Centennial Flats at Berhampore or the Dixon Street Flats, where he remains the most likely key designer. The challenge to historians of modern architecture, and those concerned with this community in particular, is that of reintroducing the complexity into our histories that imbued the landscape of modern architecture in Europe after the Great War. Just as it is impossible to describe continuities that bind all of the various strands comprising modern architecture in Europe, it is impossible to ascribe meaningful continuities to a community forced to leave this professional, cultural and intellectual environment. The story that sees these Jewish architects introduce a modern architecture to New Zealand that provokes New Zealanders to overcome the tight parameters of domestic housing advanced by a nationalist architectural ideology may, in the end, be the *right* story. But we have responsibility to look at it closely and examine it for flaws. And in so doing, we raise a question that is perhaps important for this symposium: just how far can a community of professionals and artists whose escape from Europe is predicated by a common cause, for many both ethno-cultural *and* political, be abstracted out to stand, one for the other, as a single phenomenon? We have a lot to learn from looking more carefully at this moment in our architectural history, but we must remember (and this isn't always easy) to see in it the same degree of complexity that pervades the present.