

"everything tastes better with cream": New Zealand architecture in the 1950s

Christine McCarthy, Interior Architecture, Victoria University

Philippa Mein Smith's reference to the official marketing advice that "everything tastes better with cream," reflected a 1950s' abundance: eggs and produce, full employment (for men), and the baby boom, which "boosted the market for children's toys and obliged fathers to build sandpits to encourage creative toddler play."¹ In professional architecture, a confident modernism of curtain walling, air conditioning and prefabrication might have looked, on the surface, to have been counter to a cream-laden Pavlovian mentality, but there appears to be no shyness regarding construction innovation and technological advancement.

This was an outward-looking decade accompanied with increasing levels of informality. World War II had finished and wartime restrictions concluded with the end of petrol and butter rationing in 1950.² The end of war also meant a relaxing of building controls, matched with a construction boom,³

¹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* pp 176, 188, 190.

² McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 88.

³ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 70.

and the building of war memorials, such as the Newman, Smith and Greenhough's 1956 competition-winning design for the Wanganui War Memorial Hall. This was "a radical break" for New Zealand public hall architecture, and opened in 1960.⁴ Similar post-war boldness saw "the tall office block and ... a scaling seldom encountered before."⁵ Plischke and Firth's first curtain wall for New Zealand, Massey House (1952), towered "cleanly and majestically above its drear[y] neighbours," in "a polite and elegant manner."⁶ Its neighbours soon changed with the arrival next door of Structon Group's Manchester Unity (1959), faced with an elongated pink ceramic, honey-combed pattern.⁷ Technologically, the Plischke and Firth high-rise was soon to be surpassed by Stephenson and Turners' Shell House (1957), which made comprehensive use of prefabrication, was fully air-conditioned, and

⁴ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 70.

⁵ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 70.

⁶ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 72 [caption].

⁷ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 74 [caption].

also known for its "use of quality materials and spacious entrance foyer."⁸ It was followed in Auckland by Thorpe, Cutter, Pickmere and Douglas' AMP Tower (1958) which elegantly paces down the hill to the Victoria and Queen Streets corner.⁹

But war was never too far away during the decade. The Korean War began in 1950, with New Zealand's involvement as part of the United Nations operations lasting until 1954, and later, in 1956, New Zealand supported the British invasion of Egypt and had troops participating in the guerrilla warfare on the Malayan Peninsula.¹⁰ Smith observes that "the fear of communism drove New Zealand into the Cold War," and the outbreak of war in Korea made the communist threat feel near.¹¹ Nuclear testing also formed the backdrop to military politics, with the British testing bombs in Australia and Kiribati, and America

⁸ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* pp 72, 73 [caption].

⁹ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 72.

¹⁰ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* pp 19, 20.

¹¹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 178.

using the Marshall Islands until 1958. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed reflecting New Zealander resentment "with nuclear bombs in what they regarded as their backyard," but simultaneously the need for nuclear power stations was endorsed by officials during the power shortages experienced post-war.¹² The diplomatic complexities of the competition to supply the "free world," between American and England, meant that New Zealand built electricity infrastructure along the Waikato River and proposed the Cook Strait cable instead.¹³

International treaties signed by New Zealand included the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty) signed in San Francisco, in 1951, and the Antarctica Treaty in 1959.¹⁴ The ANZUS Treaty was the reward for Australasian support of America in the Korean War and is remarkable as "the first security alliance that New Zealand (or Australia) entered into without Britain."¹⁵ We also joined SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) in 1954,

¹² Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* pp 181, 182.

¹³ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 182.

¹⁴ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* pp 19, 21; Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 179.

¹⁵ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 179.

which aimed to prevent further spread of Communism.¹⁶ The same year New Zealand took up a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.¹⁷ The earlier Colombo Plan (agreed to among Commonwealth Foreign Ministers at Colombo, Ceylon in January 1950) was a non-military, economic assistance plan to prevent Communism due to instability in underdeveloped countries. Colombo Plan scholarships funded study in Australia and New Zealand for students from newly developed countries,¹⁸ and included students of architecture.

These relations were contextualised by the Cold War and an increasing awareness of the need for full American support for defence security.¹⁹ The Antarctica Treaty followed the establishment of Scott Base in January 1957, and Edmund Hillary's expedition from the base to the South Pole the following year.²⁰ The 1950s was also the decade when the "Realm of New Zealand" was established,

¹⁶ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 179.

¹⁷ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 20; McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 92.

¹⁸ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 179.

¹⁹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 178.

²⁰ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 20.

following the Queen's proclamation in 1953.²¹ This new entity appears to be in part a consequence of our belated adoption of the Statute of Westminster Act in 1947 (needed with the introduction of the bill to abolish the legislative council (our upper house) which passed in 1950), but was also likely related to the Queen's visit to New Zealand in 1953-54 (the first official visit by a head of state) following her coronation, and Hillary's climbing of Mount Everest with Tenzing Norgay.²² The legislative council chamber still physically exists, its red interior contrasting the debating chamber's green, consistent with Westminster tradition.

The 1951 founding of the Maori Women's Welfare League by Miraka Szaszy (the first Māori women university graduate) aimed to support Māori with a focus on health, housing and education, and to target overcrowding in substandard housing.²³ The establishment of the League co-incided with both the struggles of the 151 day-long Waterfront dispute, and

²¹ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 90.

²² Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* pp 19, 20; McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 90.

²³ Derby "Māori-Pākehā relations" np; McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 89; Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 187.

the initial acceleration of Māori urbanisation, linked to the perception of young Māori as a "'reserve of industrial labour" who should be transferred from "uneconomic" areas to cities and towns."²⁴ It disrupted exports "at a time of record prices for primary products, especially high wool prices."²⁵ It illustrated the degree to which the government would use power to quash the workers with "drastic emergency regulations" later given more permanent status.²⁶ The workers locked out of the wharves occupied urban spaces in strike meetings and protest marches. Mabel Howard (Labour Member of Parliament) also identified the impact of the dispute on strikers' wives and their children, who were "separated from other pupils during playtime [at Clifton Terrace primary school] in case they illegally shared their lunches."²⁷

The rarity of seeing Māori in civic centres, such as 1950 Christchurch, has been noted by Smith, who also states that:

²⁴ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 19; Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 187.

²⁵ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 180.

²⁶ Derby "Strikes and labour disputes: the 1951 waterfront dispute" np.

²⁷ Derby "Strikes and labour disputes: the 1951 waterfront dispute" np.

[i]n Auckland, tribal settlements became engulfed by suburban sprawl. Pakeha policy-makers viewed traditional pa as a blot on the landscape. "Modern" Maori had to become urban, and suburban.²⁸

In addition to increased Māori urban migration, the English and Dutch were also migrating to New Zealand cities following the reintroduction of assisted migration in 1947, and, in 1952, Chinese gained the right to be naturalised.²⁹

Simultaneously, suburbia was idealised with detached houses,

a clipped front lawn and a more relaxed backyard where children could play, a rotary clothesline, vegetable patch, flowers for mum and a shed for dad, came to denote a national way of life supposedly accessible to all New Zealanders.³⁰

Homeownership increased, and was supported by government policy through the selling of state houses to their tenants, and state loans being made available to further assist home owning.³¹ The contribution of architects to houses during this period is well documented, with significant buildings such

²⁸ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 186.

²⁹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* pp 183, 184.

³⁰ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* pp 188-189.

³¹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 186.

as Plisckhe's Sutch House (1953-56), Kulka's Strauss House (1959), and Porsolt's Goodman House (1956) being built.³² This was also the decade when the built work of the Group, in its various manifestations, emerged: the First and Second houses (1950), followed by, for example, Hackshaw's Thom House (1953) and Wilson's Malitte House (1954).³³

The Maori Affairs Act (1953) and the Maori Trust Boards Act (1955) were passed to increase the productivity of Māori land, and, in 1956, compulsory enrolment was required of Māori voters.³⁴ The changing cultural context was reflected on in Bruce Mason's play: *The Pohutukawa Tree*, first performed in 1957, and Colin McCahon's word paintings and abstract landscapes.³⁵ New architecture supported such cultural events, and new organisations were founded, such as the New Zealand Ballet in 1953.³⁶ The Lower Hutt Library (Structon Group, 1952) was (like Newman, Smith and Greenhough's Wanganui Hall), a war memorial, and included a lecture

³² Shaw *New Zealand Architecture* pp 148-150.

³³ Shaw *New Zealand Architecture* pp 154-156.

³⁴ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* pp 90, 92.

³⁵ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 94; Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 177.

³⁶ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 90.

theatre,³⁷ while adding to Lower Hutt's reputation as a modernist enclave. Another Lower Hutt Struction building, St James' church (1951) added to this architectural reputation, when on completion, in 1953, the building apparently:

created "so much interest that difficulty is being experienced controlling the numbers wanting to see through it. People are even driving from Wellington specially to visit the church."³⁸

Other innovative church designs of the decade included Doc Toy's "modern but not eccentric" All Saints (Ponsonby 1956), and John Scott's Futuna chapel (1958), which Hodgson described as "an essay in the use of acute triangles."³⁹ Both buildings drew from Māori architectural traditions, particularly the wharenuī, with Futuna becoming "a fingerpost of design ... [and] developed an almost cult status."⁴⁰

The establishment of the Maori Women's

³⁷ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 73 [caption].

³⁸ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 80.

³⁹ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* pp 80, 82.

⁴⁰ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* pp 81 [caption], 82 [caption].

Welfare League was not the only moment of publicly recognised female leadership. Hilda Ross was the only woman in the National government, an MP until her death in 1959, and the Minister of Social Security, Welfare of Women and Children and Child Welfare.⁴¹ The protests organised by Nelson women (led by Ruth Page), opposing the removal of the Nelson railway line, resulted in a 10-day sit-in on the railway line at Kiwi in September 1955, and nine women arrested. One of the women, Sonja Davies, would later become a prominent union leader and politician.⁴² New Zealand's first family planning clinic also opened ("above a mechanic's garage in Remuera, Auckland, in November 1953") with a second clinic in Christchurch in 1956, a year following New Zealand's associate membership of the International Planning Parenthood Federation in 1955.⁴³

Large industrial developments were built or proposed, including forestry, agricultural and power-generation projects. These resulted in

⁴¹ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 178.

⁴² Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 20, Markwell "Page, Ruth Allan" np; Szczeoanski "Protest at Kiwi station" np.

⁴³ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 90; Tolerton "Contraception and sterilisation" np.

the construction of buildings, but also new towns, and transport infrastructure as well as new landscapes. In 1953 the Kinleith pulp and paper plant was commissioned to process *pinus radiata* from Kaingaroa forest, and by the late 1950s Fletchers' Tasman Pulp and Paper plant at Kawerau was in production.⁴⁴ Mount Maunganui wharf (the future Port of Tauranga) was developed for forestry, with the first log shipment to Japan in 1957.⁴⁵ Chemical research resulted in new fertilisers which converted the North Island pumicelands into grasslands and viable farming.⁴⁶ In 1956, Consolidated Zinc Proprietary Limited expressed interest in smelting aluminium using Manapouri hydro power,⁴⁷ and in 1959, the Kapuni natural gas field was discovered in Taranaki, and the Wairakei geothermal station (the second in the world), was commissioned. The same year, the Auckland harbour bridge was opened, providing an important transport connection for Auckland which, in 1953, had also been the first New Zealand city to introduce

⁴⁴ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 20; Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 199.

⁴⁵ "History" np.

⁴⁶ Smith *A Concise History of New Zealand* p 195.

⁴⁷ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 92.

parking meters.⁴⁸

The year that Auckland saw parking meters, it was also introduced to the Bledisloe Building, designed by Gordon Wilson using a slab technique.⁴⁹ "[N]arrow vertical fins between the floor slabs ... indicate[d] the interior modular planning ... [and] a composition of calm and orderly repetition."⁵⁰ Gordon Wilson had been appointed Government Architect in 1952, and under his watch large modernist buildings were built by the government, including: Otago University's Dental School (1954), Bowen State Building (1955),⁵¹ and Gordon Wilson Flats (1959). Large modernist buildings designed by the private sector included King, Cook and Dawson's economically-styled Hutt Valley Electric Power Board building (1952) - described as "one of the many softened Bauhaus-styled buildings in Lower Hutt" - and its parallel and lusciously curved Piper's

⁴⁸ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 21; "The 1950s: key events" np.

⁴⁹ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 74 [caption].

⁵⁰ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 75.

⁵¹ Shaw *New Zealand Architecture* p 151; Martin *Built for Us* p 179.

AEPB Building (1951) in Auckland.⁵² Pascoe's Tecton-influenced Christchurch International Airport also dates from this time (1955-60).⁵³

Producer board headquarters, such as Plischke and Firth's Massey House and Johns and Whitwell's Wool House (1955) in Featherston Street, were also built. Wool House is now Old Wool House, and largely credited to Bill Toomath, and its design was a result of Toomath's determination not to replicate the monotony of B-grade high-rises that he had seen in America.⁵⁴ Hodgson refers to the arrangement of windows as "flush-set or shallow bays," such detailing indicating "that more than a little thought had gone into the job."⁵⁵

This decade, during which New Zealand's population passed the grand total of 2 million,⁵⁶ witnessed the highs of nationalism. In addition to the visit of the new Queen, and Hillary's success at Mt Everest, Auckland

⁵² Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* pp 70, 71 [caption]; Shaw *New Zealand Architecture* p 150.

⁵³ Shaw *New Zealand Architecture* p 152.

⁵⁴ Toomath, Pres Comm 22 July 2005

⁵⁵ Hodgson *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* p 70.

⁵⁶ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 20.

hosted the British Empire Games at Eden Park in February 1950, and the 1911 Coat of Arms (complete with the New Zealand flag), was amended in 1956.⁵⁷ But perhaps more influential, but just as indicative of New Zealand's cultural values at the time, was the renaming of the humble Chinese gooseberry, the "Kiwifruit," in 1959.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Jackson & McRobie *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* p 19; McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 92.

⁵⁸ McGuinness & White *Nation Dates* p 95.

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