

From the collection



As well as meaning a destroyer of religious images or sacred images, the word “iconoclast” can be used to describe a person who contravenes established or traditional principles and laws.

A champion of vernacular design in architecture who has lived in Massachusetts since 1958, Maurice Smith has been described as “too radical for [New Zealand’s] conservative establishment” by his former colleague Tony Watkins.

Perhaps because of his radicalism rather than in spite of it, Smith had the opportunity to design at least a dozen houses in the four years he practised architecture in Auckland from 1954 to 1958. His is a distinctive style with its roots in New Zealand’s wooden vernacular building traditions. Rather than striving for the pure lines and uncluttered silhouettes of European modernism, Smith’s domestic architecture looks like a homage to DIY with an agglomeration of units seemingly haphazardly assembled into a whole. Like a three-dimensional collage, his buildings appear to have grown organically into and on their sites. His paintings and murals are similarly compartmentalised, each one comprising abstract geometrical patterns formed out of blocks and dots which are arranged within the confines of a rectangle like a maze.

Hamilton-born, Smith always knew he wanted to be an architect. Even before he had graduated from the School of Architecture at Auckland University College in 1950, he had designed his first house for friends at Mangere. Sitting on a concrete slab foundation, this single-storeyed dwelling has an L-shaped plan, oriented northwest to capture sun and view as was typical for local adherents of modernism. Following Vernon Brown’s example, Smith went the Scandinavian route with the finishing of the house, specifying a coat of dark creosote be applied to the exterior weatherboards, and the windows are picked out in white trim.

The Thompson house’s L-shaped plan has its origins in the so-called Usonian houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, an ideal template for economical and simple mass housing. Smith’s admiration for Wright led him to travel to America as a Fulbright Scholar in 1952 where he worked and studied at Kansas State University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Returning to Auckland, he became involved not just in domestic construction but a range of projects and collaborations from the Dargaville Fire Station to the offices for Firth concrete in Hastings. His most remarkable undertaking was a Buckminster Fuller-type 28 metre-wide geodesic dome built out of cedar with plywood and coloured fibreglass panels which was

erected for a fortnight-long carnival at Western Springs in the summer of 1955.

Murals made their way into many of his houses, but unlike his mentor Vernon Brown, rather than commission other designers, Maurice Smith made the murals himself. His expertise led to the creation of a large-scale mosaic downstairs in the Odeon Theatre building in Queen Street in the autumn of 1958. He left New Zealand permanently shortly afterwards to resume teaching at MIT in Boston. Apart from a brief sojourn back at the Auckland Architecture School in 1968 while he was on sabbatical, he has lived in Massachusetts ever since.

This painting dates from three years before his departure and was recently donated to the University by Mark Thomas, on behalf of the estate of Theo Thomas, his late father, who commissioned Maurice Smith to design a now-demolished house at 37 Ridings Road, Remuera in 1951. It is to go on permanent display in the School of Architecture and Planning.

Linda Tyler

*Maurice Smith (b.1926)
Iconoclast 1955
Mixed media on board
2490mm x 1216mm*