



## Context: Affluence, Consumerism and Sprawl

By the end of the 1940s, people had grown tired of the rationing and controls that remained in place post-war. They wanted to relax, to enjoy the peace, to take some of Labour's achievements for granted and to get on with other things.<sup>1</sup> As Erik Olssen writes: '[P]eople were impatient to return to the domestic certainties which life had so far denied them. For many women and men, marriage, a family, and a house and garden in the suburbs was the consummation of their dreams . . . Life had given them more than their share of excitement.'<sup>2</sup>

Indicative of the general dissatisfaction, Sidney Holland's National Government was swept to power in the general election of 1949, after fourteen years of Labour. National soon put an end to the rationing of everyday items such as butter and petrol and removed controls on many imports. Other restrictions remained in place. For example, steel and cement – both essential for public and commercial building – continued to be in short supply and their use was restricted until the mid-1950s.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, though, New Zealand enjoyed a period of economic growth and prosperity that lasted until 1967–68: 'Pushed along by handsome prices for primary products, farm production set new records, group-housing suburbs of young families called for schools and

Looking west over the city from Mount Victoria in 1957. PHOTOGRAPH BY B. CLARK, NATIONAL PUBLICITY STUDIOS COLLECTION, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, HELD BY ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, F27590-1/2 [A48317].

telephones and streets, factories spread, dams rose, trees fell, and over a quarter of the entire national product was thrust into capital formation.<sup>4</sup>

Increased car ownership provided access to the new suburbs, with families and individuals also filling their homes with new appliances. Possession of washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners became widespread in the 1950s and televisions appeared from 1960. The shopping experience was changing – the opening of the first Foodtown supermarket was reported in the August 1958 issue of *Home and Building*.<sup>5</sup> Even housing was ‘caught in a nexus of consumerism’ when clusters of houses were designed, built, stuffed full of desirable items and put on display in the annual Parades of Homes.<sup>6</sup>

More than ever, the detached house was the desired norm. The new National Government favoured private home ownership over and above state-owned rental housing. The prosperity of the period meant that home ownership was now a viable option for greater numbers of people. In addition, National eased conditions for State Advances Corporation loans and passed legislation allowing tenants to buy their state houses off the government. For men and women who had struggled through the depression and then war, the security of home ownership was consistent with the domestic model to which they now aspired. And the suburbs continued to grow, as did the level of concern about the impact of the suburban sprawl – in particular, the loss of market gardens and agricultural land. In 1959, the *Dominion* reported that market gardening and glasshouse land in the Hutt Valley had dropped from 500 to 85 acres in the preceding twenty years.<sup>7</sup> Hiroshima provided the other worry; the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear disaster lingered in the background as an ever-present insecurity.

From the mid-1950s when the restrictions on the use of steel and cement were lifted, there was enormous government expenditure on public works, from hydro-electric development (and the associated towns like Roxburgh and Twizel) to roads (including the Auckland and Wellington motorways), and individual buildings such as Auckland’s Bledisloe State Building, Wellington’s Bowen State Building, the School of Engineering Building at Canterbury University and the Dental School Building at the University of Otago. National favoured private home ownership but acknowledged that housing was still in short supply and thus maintained a state-housing programme of somewhat



New tracts of housing in the Hutt Valley in the mid-1960s.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY WHITES AVIATION LTD, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WA-65222-F.

reduced public profile. The Housing Division’s output from the 1950s and ’60s is characterised by a variety of house types, from low-density detached and semi-detached houses, through to the high-rise Upper Greys Avenue Flats in Auckland and Gordon Wilson Flats in Wellington, both of which were started in the mid-1950s. By the late 1960s about half of all state housing was medium density (that is, up to three storeys high).<sup>8</sup>

With the improved economic conditions, private and commercial work escalated too. A twenty-page *Dominion* supplement titled ‘Architecture in Wellington 1963’, published in May that year, provides a valuable snapshot of architecture





## CONTEXT: AFFLUENCE, CONSUMERISM AND SPRAWL

in the capital city mid-way through this period of extensive redevelopment.<sup>9</sup> The supplement was compiled by the Wellington Branch of the NZIA to promote modern architecture, town planning and a higher density of housing. Alluding to the title of one of Le Corbusier's most influential books, it stated: 'In our city today architects are planning our city of tomorrow.' While it featured modern houses and recent churches, including Futuna Chapel, the focus was on the city centre, including a proposed civic centre, and new high-rises, both commercial (such as Plishke & Firth's Massey House, Structon Group's neighbouring Manchester Unity Building, Bernard Johns' Wool House, Structon Group's Racing Conference Building and Stephenson & Turner's Shell House) and residential (including Porter & Martin's Clifton Towers and Gabites & Beard's Hamilton Court Flats). The city skyline was going up. The supplement gave high-density housing a particular push: 'Various factors make these city flats desirable, including: convenience, value to the owner, cost-saving to the city, conservation of valuable land, personal preference, re-vitalisation of the city's heart, reduction of potential traffic problems, etc.'<sup>10</sup>

Such commissions meant that increasing numbers of public servants were attracted into private practice, leaving the Ministry of Works short-staffed. Recruits were sought from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, but the ministry continued to be haunted by a shortage of qualified and experienced architects and engineers for most of the 1950s and '60s.<sup>11</sup> Some public building projects had to be let out to architects in private practice, creating something of a vicious circle as it tended to encourage more architects out of the public service and into private firms.

To a certain extent the founders and stalwarts of the Architectural Centre countered this trend by remaining in public service, where they moved into positions of increasing authority. They included Gordon Wilson who was Government Architect from 1952 until his death in 1959; Fergus Sheppard who succeeded him as Government Architect; Graham Dawson who was District Architect within the Architectural Division, first in Wellington and then in Auckland; Helmut Einhorn who worked in the Architectural Division from 1953, the Hydro-electric Design Division from 1956 and finally the newly established Environmental Design Division from 1967; and Fred Newman who became the chief architect of the Housing Division in 1956. George Porter was one who left the Ministry of Works, setting up private practice as an architect and

The north end of the CBD in 1963. The first glass-clad high-rises, including Massey House and Shell House, can be seen. NATIONAL PUBLICITY STUDIOS COLLECTION, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, HELD BY ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, 16099-1/4 (R2842).





Stephenson & Turner's Shell House (1957–60), said to be New Zealand's first fully curtained-walled office building. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES FEARNLEY, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, 1/4-075735-F.

town planner in 1952 and then entering partnership with Lewis Martin in 1954, shortly after Martin's return from overseas. The shortage of experienced staff in the ministry ensured job opportunities for young graduates such as William Alington and James Beard.

With the building boom, those in positions of leadership like Wilson and Cox had less and less time to give to Centre activities. The ministry's patronage began to wane. By the mid-1950s, for example, monthly meetings were no longer being held at the ministry offices but in members' houses. Younger staff took up the



Porter & Martin's Aston Towers (1963–64) offered much higher density housing than its neighbours. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES FEARNLEY, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, 1/4-075728-F.

reins, complemented by individuals from other disciplines and backgrounds. Their input gave rise to new initiatives, notably the publication of a journal and the establishment of a gallery for presenting modern art, architecture and design to the Wellington public. These were formative years for arts journals and non-institutional galleries, and the fledgling ventures had impact and influence. These initiatives also demonstrate both ambition and generosity, with an extraordinary amount of voluntary labour dedicated to achieving the desired ends. The Centre's entrée into politics followed at the end of the decade.



# Design Review

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1950 \* ONE SHILLING



**A HOUSE AT PINEHAVEN—Charles Fearnley**  
**COLOUR IN THE HOME—Graham Dawson**  
**ART AND THE CINEMA—Gordon Mirams**  
**LIGHTING THE HOUSE—R. T. Parry**  
**THREE DRAWINGS—T. A. McCormack**  
**GRAMOPHONE NOTES—John Gray**

## Bursting into Print

*Paul Walker and Justine Clark*

The Centre's programme of educating the public with *Te Aro Replanned* and the Demonstration House found a natural extension in its strategy of publishing.<sup>1</sup> In August 1947, in the Centre's second year, a proposal to set up a regular journal was developed and put to the organisation's executive committee by the first president, John Cox. It would be quarterly, supported by advertising, with Ian Reynolds as its editor. The journal did not get going until the following year, however, with the first issue of *Design Review* appearing in April 1948. It was less ambitious than *Planning*, the journal established by Auckland's Architectural Group in 1946. *Planning* was impeccably designed: in landscape format, its title in large, lower-case, sans serif letters proudly borne on its otherwise white cover. The layout of each article was likewise modernly spare. The Group's ambitions were signalled by the inclusion in *Planning* 1 of an endorsement from Richard Neutra (a prominent Los Angeles architect and office-holder in the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) for their manifesto. But the only *Planning* issue ever to appear was the first. *Design Review*, by comparison, appeared on a two- rather than three-monthly schedule till 1954. So while the

*Design Review* was published by the Architectural Centre from April 1948 to April 1954. COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE.