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Translation in the Transition: Examining Innovations in the Design of Auckland's 'Transitional Houses'

Auckland experienced a building boom shortly before the Great War, in which hundreds of houses were constructed on the then suburban fringes of the city, in areas such as Balmoral. Most of these houses are in a style referred to as 'transitional houses' or 'transitional villas'.

Many of these houses have been subjected to considerable alteration, frequently involving the enclosure of verandas and modification of the rear service areas. Some original floor plans have survived (usually electronically) in plan records at Auckland Council. In their absence layouts can be inferred from later plans for alterations. Plan records illustrate innovations in planning and layout not normally associated with the villa. These innovations include large verandas suitable for semi-outdoor use, similarly generous reception rooms which replace the traditional vestibule at the front end of the central corridor, rear verandas and even side verandas forming transitional spaces between particular rooms and the outside. In some ways the approaches anticipate the more informal planning that became common in the Inter-War period and beyond.

Such freedom of layout appears not to depend on the stylistic or aesthetic presentation to the street. Many houses suggest the translation of the precepts of the Arts and Crafts Movement to the New Zealand context. Some houses demonstrate the inventive spirit of the Art Nouveau and also represent it stylistically in decorative elements, while others opt for the decorative style only.

In this sense, style and substance do not necessarily correlate, but evidence exists to argue that the transitional house should no longer be regarded as an antithetical development of the villa that compromised or tamed its essential qualities.

Introduction

I have always found the transitional house, often called the transitional villa, appealing. It appears at the end of a fifty-year period in which the villa dominated as New Zealand's preferred domestic house. Its lower rooflines, more restrained use of applied ornament and generous use of lead-light windows - frequently with Art Nouveau patterns and motifs, and sometimes depicting scenes such as yachts on the Auckland Harbour - result in highly-crafted houses with great beauty, and less visual clutter than earlier expressions of the villa style, especially high-Victorian examples. The transitional house is evocative of a less formal style of life that is attributed to the Bungalow style,¹ as shown in its larger sprawling versions, and to later 'Modern' houses.²

While undertaking research to evaluate the heritage values (primarily architectural heritage values) of particular examples or groups of these houses across Auckland, I discovered that additional porches or verandas (in addition to the almost ubiquitous front veranda of the Edwardian villa), were a frequent feature of the transitional houses. In two instances, both for which original plans no longer existed, later plans produced for alteration purposes show a proposal to modify a recessed but in-filled side porch, to enable the space to be incorporated within the interior of the house. Such features suggest that the transitional house was more than a villa with new, in some instances ill-fitting, clothes. In my view, this type of house has a sufficiently identifiable blend of characteristics to regard it as belonging to a particular style which runs parallel to the late villa and early bungalow, without being a subset of either style.

Development in Auckland in the 1910-14 era

Just before the Great War, a building boom led to extensive residential development in Auckland. Farmland subdivided as spacious plots in the late 19th and early 20th century on the fringes of established suburbs was developed as the electric tram supported the spread of suburban development to create whole new suburbs. In 1912 this building boom was well underway. Thousands of houses were built. The *Auckland Star* of 8 April that year included a series of articles on the 'Growth of the City' and noted that the previous year's predictions of an unhealthy boom (which today we might call unsustainable or a 'bubble') had not come to pass, and that construction was continuing apace in the absence of vacant rental property. Mount Eden was specifically addressed as an area where such development was taking place, with a house being completed almost daily.³ Various suburbs were further individually addressed as part of the series. In regard to the borough of Mount Eden, the issue of house design was specifically commented on: "A striking feature about

1 Jeremy Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses, 1800-1940* (Auckland: Reed, 1986), 201.

2 Julia Gatley, ed., *Group Architects - Towards a New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010), 26.

3 "Growth of the City," *Auckland Star*, 8 April 1912.

Mt. Eden residences is their variety in architecture - as if their designers were endeavouring to evolve the perfect suburban dwelling."⁴

The building boom occurred at the time the villa was being replaced by the bungalow. It led to many houses which had an ambiguous character that does not fall clearly into the villa style or the bungalow style. A century later, many of the houses have been considerably altered, masking or changing their original character. Research using original council plan records raises some interesting issues regarding approaches to domestic design at this time.

For much of suburban Auckland, over-enthusiastic disposal of council archives and loss due to fire have resulted in very few public plan records remaining to document and describe what was constructed a hundred years ago or more. While some architects' drawings do feature in architectural texts and council archives, these tend to be the exception rather than the rule in terms of the documentation required by councils at the time. Fortunately relatively good records remain for parts of Mt Eden, especially Balmoral, and parts of Auckland's North Shore. This has allowed more systematic use of this material, and led to this paper as component part of a Council project to better understand the heritage values of the Albert-Eden Local Board area, part of the wider Auckland Heritage Survey being undertaken by the Heritage Unit of Auckland Council.⁵ In preparing this paper I have been mindful that the surviving plan records in the Council's property files are not the only archival source of plans. The view presented is complementary to other archives which are typically a repository of drawings by known architects. Given that the vast majority of houses constructed in the period are not the work of architects, the Council's records are seen as very relevant, and they have particular application in regard to local heritage and character studies undertaken for planning purposes. For suburbs which are well-represented in remaining public records, there is the opportunity to view hundreds of plans, generally accompanied by documentation providing the date of the application for a building permit, as well as insight into changes made by comparison with later drawings. Part of the purpose of writing this paper is to highlight the presence and value of these public records.

Origins of the Transitional House

In the last decades of the 19th century, and the opening years of the 20th century, most New Zealand houses took the form of the villa - a building type that has been extensively studied by architectural historians over the years. Jeremy Salmond describes the development of the villa in New Zealand. His 1986 book shows the villa as a style or type that evolved from a basic rectangular form of house with a hipped roof and a central hall, becoming increasingly complex in plan and form over time. It

4 "Growth of the City," *Auckland Star*, 8 April 1912.

5 This paper has resulted from both the research I conducted as part of the project and the observation of interesting features on a small number of plans I encountered in the course of research for the former North Shore City Council, which aroused my interest in this topic. While the paper focusses primarily on architectural heritage values, the broader Heritage Survey Project consisted of a team of seven who considered a broad range of heritage values.

explores in detail the use of decorative ornament primarily derived from Gothic patterns and motifs in the early stages of development, but increasingly incorporating Classical detail. It also notes the role of technology, in particular steam powered wood-working machinery. Salmond demonstrates that by the time the villa had run its course, it had been clothed in ornament derivative of the traditional decorative styles from the Old World such Gothic and Italianate, the Queen Anne style that became popular in England in the late 19th century, and the Eastlake and Eastern Stick styles that developed on the west coast of the United States, where construction in timber led to new styles of decoration as well as new approaches to domestic architecture.⁶

Having observed strong similarities between early houses, in particular the 'villa' style houses in North American and other New World towns and cities, William Toomath demonstrated in his 1996 book that there were strong similarities in Victorian domestic architecture (and in particular the New Zealand villa and its trans-Pacific cousins), in terms of form, plan layout, materials, detailing and decoration, as well as strong contrasts with contemporaneous British domestic design. He recognized the value of the central corridor running from the front to the back of the house as a useful feature in hot climates because it functions as a breezeway. He built a strong argument for the villa, like the bungalow after it, being something of a translation of architectural ideas, detailing and practices within the New World resulting in the New Zealand villa being parallel to, if not derivative of, its North American cousins.⁷

Salmond suggests that by 1914, the villa had very much run its course, as had the 'Battle of the Styles' between the picturesque and the classical approach to architecture.⁸ He retrospectively refers to the evolving style of house that emerged in the 1910s as a 'transitional house', a style that modified the villa to give it a less dramatic roofline and incorporated new details such as eaves with exposed rafters in place of boxed eaves, and simple timber adornment on verandas such as tapering wooden 'wings' in places of ornate decorative detail.⁹ He discussed these transitional houses with limited enthusiasm:

"The Transitional houses - villa in substance and bungalow in manner - have been largely rejected as an illegitimate by-product of a change in popular taste. At worst they were timorous, awkward and ill-proportioned, but the best deserve recognition for the skill with which two styles aesthetic philosophies were reconciled in satisfying and convincing buildings."¹⁰

Toomath regards the 'transitional villa' in New Zealand as a 'toning down' of the villa at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, in reaction to the elaborate nature of late-Victorian examples by the adoption of Arts and Crafts precepts, in preparation for the bungalow which itself was an

6 Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses*, 89-182.

7 William Toomath, *Built in New Zealand - The Houses We Live In* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 1996), 64.

8 Salmond. *Old New Zealand Houses*, 177.

9 Salmond. *Old New Zealand Houses*, 87.

10 Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses*, 87.

amalgam of British and American precedents. While some architects combined aspects of the late 19th century Shingle Style and Bungalow Style from the West Coast of America with those of the English Arts and Crafts style, the 'Californian Bungalow' in the New Zealand context became the preferred style for New Zealand builders and their clientele, but certainly not architects, as New Zealand emerged from the Great War.¹¹

Toomath also recognizes the introduction of the bungalow to New Zealand by architects such as George Selwyn Goldsbro' and Samuel Hurst Seager in the late 19th century, but does not make a direct link between these events and the transitional villa he discusses later in his book.¹² Seager's group of houses in a garden setting at the Spur in Sumner, which he developed from 1902 using Garden City concepts,¹³ included examples which share characteristics with some transitional villas seen in Auckland. However, the Sumner houses, although intended to relate intimately to their setting, in the main used enclosed porches rather than open ones,¹⁴ likely due to their exposed southern location.

In a 1979 New Zealand Historic Places Trust publication, Chris Cochran mentions two houses designed by Frederick de Jersey Clere in Khandallah, Wellington, in the mid-1890s, and referred to the use of a T-shaped plan.¹⁵ Examination of one of these house plans reveals that while the T-shaped corridor departs from the typical villa plan based around a central corridor extending the length of the building, it still retains its entrance on the main elevation of the house, and the plan is not dissimilar to some farmhouses of the villa era. Notably the front veranda of this house is somewhat shallow, in the manner of the villa, than some later transitional houses.¹⁶ The (later) common bungalow plan device using a shorter corridor centrally placed within the house, and accessed by an entrance hall at the side, also results in a t-shaped passage but with a different orientation.

Di Stewart attributes the impact of the Californian Bungalow, through importation of house plans from America and Australia, as the catalyst for the 'transitional phase' which produced the transitional villa, which in her view was a change in decorative expression rather than the form or layout of the house.¹⁷

The ambivalence that these authors display towards the transitional villa notably contrasts with the enthusiasm Australian authors use to deal with Australia's 'Federation' houses, despite the fact that many of the design features that appear in the various threads of the Federation houses have

11 Toomath, *Built in New Zealand*, 164.

12 Toomath, *Built in New Zealand*, 161.

13 Ian Lochlead, "Seager, Samuel Hurst," from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 12 Feb 2014. URL: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3s8/seager-samuel-hurst>.

14 Samuel Hurst Seager, *The Spur, Sumner: the property of S. Hurst Seager Esq.* (Christchurch: Christchurch Press Printers, 1914).

15 Christopher Cochran, "Wellington Houses," in Frances Porter, *Historic Buildings of New Zealand: North Island* (Auckland: Cassell, 1979), 234.

16 Rob Ansell, "All Clere: Bungalow Beginnings," *Cross Section: NZIA News* (December 2007): 12.

17 Di Stewart, *The New Zealand Villa - Past and Present* (Auckland: Viking Pacific, 1992), 46-8.

similarities to our transitional villas. In Australia the architectural term 'Federation' covers a variety of buildings, and is by no means used solely in regard to domestic architecture. For houses, the term Federation includes 'Federation Queen Anne', 'Federation Bungalow', 'Federation Arts and Crafts' and 'Federation Art Nouveau'. Rather than seeking the distinctions identified by New Zealand authors, Australians appear to take pride in the totality of this architectural history, relating it to events in their national history, and regarding it as 'Australia's Own Style'.¹⁸

What can Research of Original Plans show about the Transitional Villa?

In Auckland's inner suburbs, many houses were converted to flats, altering the original layout. Others have been enlarged to provide more internal space, particularly to the rear. Original verandas and porches often become a casualty to such alterations, but their former presence and form can be gleaned from surviving records, often with interesting results.

Council plan records, particularly when viewed in combination with the remaining houses, reveal a rich variety of approaches to planning and design of houses for the few years immediately before the Great War. While many houses still retain the ubiquitous villa plan based around a central hallway, with a hierarchy between the reception rooms close to the street and the private areas of the house to the rear, others indicate new ideas. These include the development of the formal front veranda into a better-proportioned and more usable semi-outdoor space, a usable reception room in place of a narrow central hall or vestibule giving access to the parlour, and a growing desire for connection between the interior of the house and the outdoors. While existing texts identify such ideas as being part and parcel of the Californian bungalow, they do not highlight their presence within transitional houses constructed before the Great War.

These observations led me to consider whether the transitional house has been undervalued in New Zealand's architectural history, perhaps because many of its interesting features easily fell prey to changes during the process of creating additions or conversion to flats, both of which tend to impact on entrance porches and lobbies.

Generously Proportioned Front Verandas and Entry Halls

There are a number of examples where the front veranda was a readily usable space with the proportions of a room rather than those of a transitional entry space or adequate shelter for an entry door. The illustrated example (fig. 1) was a plan for the second of a pair of identical adjacent houses developed together in Balmoral for Mr George Hatcher. While the first, shown in a plan

18 Hugh Fraser and Ray Joyce, *The Federation House - Australia's Own Style* (NSW Australia: Lansdowne Press, 1986), 20-39.

dated 4 March 1913,¹⁹ has been significantly altered in a conversion to flats, the other can be seen in Balmoral Road with its front intact.²⁰

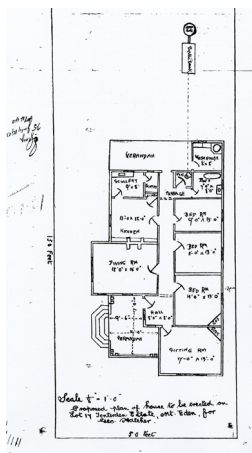


Fig. 1. Plan of transitional house in Balmoral, 25 dated July 1913. Used with permission.

In plan it is only modestly modified from a villa, with a central corridor running full length through the centre of the house, broadened out to a reception hall at the front entrance, approximately 2.4 metres wide and deep, with a west and south aspect. The front door opens from the side of the hall to veranda 2.7 metres to the balustrade at this point, which wraps around the front of the reception hall to create an increased depth of 4.2 metres. The overall length of this veranda is over 5 metres. It is spacious enough to accommodate arrangements of tables and chairs for socializing. This transitional house is of particular interest because stylistically it can be considered on the cusp between a villa and a bungalow. While externally it has a strong flavour of a bungalow, in some detailing such as its double-hung windows, its villa heritage is clear. Like many other examples of transitional houses in Balmoral, it was also designed with a wide rear veranda. This example had a desirable north aspect to the yard, and fully accessible to the residents through the central corridor rather than another room. Rear verandas are discussed further below.

19 Auckland Council Pathways B/1913/377 Building Consent Application and Proposal - Building Permit Isthmus.

20 Auckland Council Pathways B/1913/376 Building Consent Application and Proposal - Building Permit Isthmus.



Fig. 2. Image of same transitional house in Balmoral, 2013. Used with permission.

Recessed Side Porches

Two examples were encountered of a side porch, totally separate to the front door or its associated veranda. One example (fig. 3) shows a house constructed in 1910 in Devonport. Claremont Africa Wood, born in Claremont, Africa in 1853,²¹ purchased the site from a member of Devonport's well-known Allison family late in 1909.²² He is recorded as resident in a street directory in 1911 when he was described as a contractor,²³ but the next year he appears (only once) described as a compositor,²⁴ suggesting that he was building the house in 1910.²⁵ The 1911 street directory also shows him living in Great North Road, Grey Lynn, indicating he was resident in both addresses when the directory was compiled in 1910.²⁶

This double-bay villa in Edwardian style would have been regarded as out-of-date at the time of its construction. This could suggest Wood's preferences were conservative, unsurprising for a man in his late fifties. All the fenestration on this side of the house was replaced in the 1986 renovations, however the cover-boards over the weatherboard joints appear in similar locations to the edges of the former recessed porch. The use of cover boards in these locations is atypical, but can be explained by their apparent correspondence with the location of the re-entrant corners of the porch. (Normally in villas the joints in the weatherboards on side walls are positioned at the edge of the windows or over them.)

21 Judy Vedder-Price, "Woods Central Cheap Store," *The Treasury Journal*, Volume 1 (2008), accessed 29 January 2014, www.thetreasury.org.nz/Woods/Woods.htm.

22 Deeds Index Z3A-84.

23 Arthur Cleave and Co. Ltd, *Cleave's Auckland and Provincial Directory*, (1911), 299.

24 Arthur Cleave and Co. Ltd, *Cleave's Auckland and Provincial Directory*, (1912), 1441.

25 Arthur Cleave and Co. Ltd, *Cleave's Auckland and Provincial Directory*, (1912), 313.

26 Arthur Cleave and Co. Ltd, *Cleave's Auckland and Provincial Directory*, (1912), 1332.



Fig. 3. Double bay villa at Devonport, constructed 1910. Used with permission.

Regrettably the original plan does not survive, but plans relating to renovations in 1986 indicate a step-down to a recessed side-porch on the west side of the building, which was filled in to create a smaller side entrance and a service room.²⁷

Another example of a transitional villa in Northcote Point, constructed for an owner who was first in residence in 1912,²⁸ was found recorded on plans lodged in 1968 for a toilet addition to an existing sunroom. This plan clearly showed a sunroom, partly set into a former semi-recessed porch, was previously built.²⁹ Interesting in both these instances is that while recessed porches are common in bungalows, they have never been regarded as part of the architectural grammar of the villa, even in its transitional form.

Rear Verandas

Figure 1 above showed a rear-veranda in a house constructed in 1913. Such verandas were common at this time, often accessed through the kitchen because in late villas the bathroom was brought inside and frequently took its place at the far end of the central hall. Sometimes a part-length veranda was included to give access to an attached external laundry, and would have also been useful for hanging washing out on wet days, but obviously many examples are much larger than needed for this purpose, and would have had considerable recreational value as a sheltered semi-outdoor space facing the rear yard.

A veranda at each end of the house also offered the occupants a choice of semi-outdoor spaces, to use according to their desire for privacy and the weather conditions at the time. In this sense the incorporation of a rear veranda is a significant change in terms of use of the house and lifestyle opportunities.

27 Auckland Council Dataworks: Technology 1 Document Number 3273353.

28 Arthur Cleave and Co. Ltd, *Cleave's Auckland and Provincial Directory*, (1912).

29 Auckland Council Dataworks Document Number 1492536.

Figure 4 shows a plan for a small square-fronted or cottage villa by local architect W. H. Glover,³⁰ which probably no longer exists.

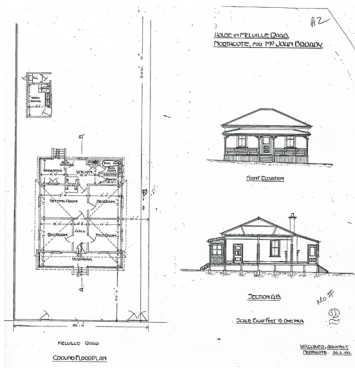


Fig. 4. Plan of house designed for site in Northcote Point in 1912. Used with permission.

This was designed in 1912 when the transitional villa was the style of choice, in a form not dissimilar to examples of 50 years earlier, except for its Edwardian style veranda rail, and its rear veranda. This design shows the rear veranda accessible not only from the kitchen, but also the living room, apparently through French doors. The design is a curious combination of a very dated style and a well-executed innovation in its second veranda with direct access to the living space.

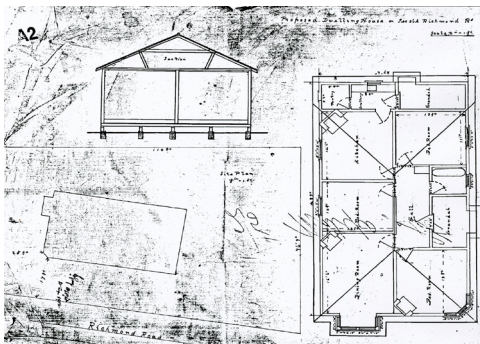


Fig. 5. Original Plan of transitional house at Matipo Street, Balmoral, dated 1912.

Another example (fig. 5) was built in 1912 in what is now Matipo Street, Balmoral.³¹ It was constructed side-on to the street in a less-than-elegant but interesting combination of villa and bungalow features. The site on which it sits presents its longer boundary to the street, so that the recessed

30 Auckland Council Dataworks Document Number 2313855.

31 Auckland Council Pathways General Property Document Application and Proposal 346084, 10 September 1912.

entry porch that one would expect to see on the side of a bungalow actually directly faces the street. Notably this plan uses the nomenclature associated with the villa, referring to the recessed entrance porch as a 'veranda'. As the design shows, a veranda across part of the end of the house faces to the side, where the 'back' yard is. In doing so, however, it provided a useful amenity of a north facing veranda while dispensing with the formal front veranda of the villa altogether.

The last example presented in this paper is an early bungalow, constructed about 1912 in Pine Street in Balmoral.³² It has a large porch with a northeast aspect fully recessed into the body of the house under a roof with a single gable to the front. A door in the southwest corner of the porch accessed a central hall which itself gives access to the various rooms on all sides. While rooms are not labelled on this plan, access through to the rear veranda is through a room that would seem to be a kitchen with an associated pantry or scullery, with the rear veranda providing external access to rooms of the proportions expected for a laundry and toilet. The principal point of interest in this very early example of a bungalow (in the Auckland context) is that it retains much of the detailing of a transitional villa. The springing points of the low shingled arches have decorative elements that are the transitional villa equivalent of the capitals on the columns, and the casement window and joinery is similar to that of a transitional house. The house could be referred to as bungalow in substance, transitional in detail.



Fig. 6. Bungalow at Pine Street, Balmoral, constructed 1912. Used with permission.

Observations and Conclusions

While New Zealand architects and architectural historians have dealt with the transitional house (normally referred to as the transitional villa) as a stepping stone to the bungalow or even as an illegitimate architectural expression of style,³³ examination of plan records reveals a progression towards a type of house with a stronger relationship to the grounds of the house, and with the frequent use of transitional spaces, in a large number of houses for which here is no indication of the hand of an architect. These are the houses of the 'common person'.

32 Auckland Council Pathways General Property Document plan 361004, 3 October 1912.

33 Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses*, 187.

In many ways these plans appear more outward looking than those of the bungalows which replaced them, in that while bungalows had more porches, they were often designated as 'sleeping porches' with a physical openness to the air but no direct pedestrian access to the grounds. Yet these houses have been regarded as poor relations to the villa because they are neither pure villa nor pure bungalow. This may be because they are part of an evolutionary tradition rather than revolutionary one.

Rather than just being a popular expression of taste or timidity in design, the designs evident in the transitional house seem to demonstrate a desire to modify the home to increasingly connect with its garden or grounds, and to create transitional spaces that work for the occupant as well as the visitor to the front door. In my view the style reflects a translation of a changing way of life into an established architectural type, worthy of consideration as a style of its own, where the 'transition' retrospectively identified in terms of architectural style is also a valid reflection of the actual transition to a less formal way of living.

My proposition is therefore that the transitional house has validity as a style of its own, in which not only the decoration but also the substance of house is a reflection of the changing way of life in this country. New ideas were translated into the villa, a style losing relevance at the time, redefining and irrevocably changing both its style and substance. Thus a new style was created that expressed a more relaxed way of living by adapting the architectural language of the New Zealand villa, in terms of its form and planning, while using local materials and ways of building, and creating better connections with the garden, in the manner of the Arts and Crafts movement. I consider this new style highly significant in that it translates Arts and Crafts principles into the New Zealand villa, anticipating aspects of the planning of the bungalow in a manner previously not fully recognized. A challenge to be overcome is that the outward architectural expression is so varied, reflecting a more creative and less formulaic approach to house design. The examples chosen have been used to demonstrate the variety of design approaches in use at the time. In a sense this variety almost defies a strict definition.

While this paper is a starting point, there are opportunities to pursue research further. I see value in more systematic research across other areas of Auckland, particularly where the records are less complete. Also, inferring the presence of side porches from later plans and physical evidence, there is an opportunity to strengthen the evidence base by a more extensive evaluation of original plans. Regional comparisons would also be interesting, to examine the influence of climate and other factors. Another broader area of research that would add to our understanding of this topic would be an exploration of how societal influences impacted on family life in the early 1910s, and how subsequent changes to the fabric of society, including those wrought by the Great War, might have resulted in the relatively fleeting appearance of the transitional house.