

Suburban Styles

Housing Design at Higher Densities in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Suburban housing design in Aotearoa New Zealand's cities evolved through the twentieth century with adaptable styles to suit changing fashions and various forms of external expression. Designers followed a path that saw a gradual simplification of decorative detail and material diversity, while continuing to rely on, with rare exceptions, the single paradigm of a one-level timber-framed detached structure. By 1990 style preferences in new subdivisions had settled on an unostentatious modernist architecture that suited low neighbourhood densities seldom exceeding nine dwellings per hectare. Architects had little to do with the mass of suburban housing.

The focus on the environmental and economic imperatives of urban sustainability after the publication of the United Nation's Brundtland Report in 1988 coincided in Aotearoa New Zealand with significant political, economic, demographic and social change. In response to these conditions, and under the recently adopted Resource Management Act of 1992 (RMA), the Territorial Authorities re-set planning policies to inhibit sprawl, and to encourage housing intensification in the cities. The ideologies underlying neoliberal economics now passed design controls over to the housing industry, emphasising the use of the word 'management' in the new, radical planning legislation.

Architects working for the first time in the field of higher-density housing began designing with multi-unit typologies that were outside their practice experience, and that were also unfamiliar products in the speculative housing markets. In the absence of design controls, extraordinarily inventive styles emerged in the 'first generation' after 1995. Some were

competitively styled to attract sales, or to distract attention from other characteristics of higher density. They became a refreshingly different presence in many of Aotearoa New Zealand's inner suburbs, marking the arrival of another form of housing. This paper considers styles of architecture that emerged between 1995 and 2006 in the first phase of post-RMA market housing, with a focus on Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's intensification programme and its outcomes.

Introduction

The design of suburban housing in Aotearoa New Zealand was shaped by diverse stylistic influences over a century of city building and through several generations in the suburbs of the twentieth century. After about 1950, the dominant model settled on a mainstream preference for a relaxed, generally unostentatious form of modernism. Giving a name to a style for this mainstream is unnecessary: most of our housing since the mid-twentieth century has not been consciously aligned with a particular form of expression, but has evolved with material and spatial characteristics to become simply the customary practice in our housing culture. Style took ideas from current fashions, local and external, and responded to changing ideas about internal spatial arrangement, without attaching itself to a recognisable trend.

Ken Smithies has argued that, for designers, the adoption of a style is a statement of intent: style creates a context, an association, and a location in time and place.¹ Terms used in architecture to describe style such as 'mannerist,' 'neo-classical,' 'traditionalist,' 'modernist,' and so on are helpful for classifying particular forms of expression in buildings, with extended implications for scale, material, and possibly

¹ Ken W. Smithies, *Principles of Design in Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981).

function. However, contemporary discourse in architecture does not see the concept of a style – a design solution predetermined in a separate discourse by argument or example – as a useful way to design in the modern world, and since the days of the Beaux-Arts ateliers, it has seldom been used in Western versions of architectural design education. Paradoxically, the perception of a building's style is the way nearly everyone else approaches a conversation about architecture: the urban landscape of architecture registers in the discerning public eye as a variety of building forms to which named 'style(s)' can be attached.

This paper considers styles of architecture that emerged between 1995 and 2006 in the first phase of post-RMA market housing, with a focus on Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's intensification programme and its outcomes. Since the mid-1990s population growth and the principles of sustainable urban development have become pre-eminent issues in city planning policies, shifting the design focus towards performance and environmental response for many architects and housing developers. The design models that suited the old suburban habits of density did not convert readily to the new paradigm of housing and intensified site layouts: new concepts of style emerged when it became necessary to identify forms of building that would suit higher densities.

Origins of Housing Design in New Zealand

Architectural styles imported in the nineteenth century from Great Britain were the foundation of the new urban settler's housing: generally, the products of taste in the Victorian era.² Timber-framed villas were decorated with ornate façades that established the long-standing preference for a public-facing elevation intended to express social conformity, individual taste and status. Designs changed in the early 1900s, when urban populations exceeded those living in rural areas;³ shortly before this milestone, housing in the cities had become a political issue with the introduction by Seddon's Liberal administration of government participation in housing supply.⁴ House builders responded to suburban planning theories that found fertile ground in the sprawling new cities of New Zealand and Australia. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City proposals, aimed at humanising England's tired industrial cities, became what Robert Freestone has called the "garden suburb movement" in Australia,⁵ validating the settlers' idea that dense urban form is not necessary when cheap public transport and

endless apparently vacant land is available. After 1910, the transitional, and then the Californian, bungalow replaced the villa style in New Zealand, and broadly modernist styles became popular.⁶ They included some interesting but generally tame experiments with more expressive imported architectural styles, including Arts and Crafts styles, and Art Nouveau. Art Deco was popular everywhere,⁷ and, after the 1931 earthquake, particularly popular in Napier, where it became the unifying style that now identifies the city. However, our run-of-the-mill suburban housing continued to be unpretentious and stylistically anonymous. It established housing in an unselfconscious vernacular of ordinariness, which was well matched to a conservative society that valued egalitarian social principles.⁸ New Zealand society, with its conservative instincts, sought and found a way to provide itself with conservative housing, reasonably well adjusted to a mostly benign climate and a forgiving natural environment.

Modernism, Density and Early Urban Housing Models

Conventions of housing design established between 1920 and 1939 were challenged in the 1940s and 1950s by modernist ideas influenced by European and American architects. These influences mostly appeared in the form of private houses, presenting different ideas in the monochrome suburbs. Modernism also manifested in this period in the form of high-density housing typologies from the Ministry of Works, which included Gordon Wilson's Dixon Street Flats, the Grey's Avenue Flats, the 'Star' blocks, and others. Architects involved in these projects, including Ernst Plischke and Frederick Newman, campaigned for and demonstrated modernism in housing, and for others, exposure to new ideas by more travel to Europe and America helped the modernist's cause.⁹

In the suburbs, architects experimented occasionally with small-scale low-rise typologies planned at the higher densities seen overseas; projects of this type were built in all of New Zealand's major cities in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of subdivision densities of fewer than twelve dwellings per hectare (dph), Miles Warren's practice in Christchurch designed small, dense clusters of houses at densities of up to 45 dph.¹⁰ A small but discerning market was identified for these essentially modernist explorations of other housing possibilities, even though their quirky forms attracted unfortunate epithets such as "pixie" houses.¹¹ Peter Beavan and Burwell Hunt's 1973–75 Habitat development in central Wellington (now known as Thorndon Mews and

² James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996); Alison Drummond and L. R. Drummond, *At Home in New Zealand* (Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1967).

³ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁴ Gael Ferguson, *Building the New Zealand Dream* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1994).

⁵ Robert Freestone, "Planning, Housing, Gardening: Home as a Garden Suburb," in *European Housing in Australia*, ed. Patrick Troy (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.

⁶ Jeremy Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses 1800–1940* (Auckland: Reed, 1986).

⁷ Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture from Polynesian Beginnings to 1990* (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991).

⁸ Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850–1900* (Auckland University Press, 1989).

⁹ Andrew Leach, *Frederick H. Newman: Lectures on Architecture* (Ghent: A & S Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Warren and Mahoney Architects, *New Territory: Warren and Mahoney: 50 Years of New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Balasoglou Books, 2005).

¹¹ Andrew Barrie, "Warren & Mahoney in Christchurch 1," *Block: The Broadsheet of the Auckland Branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects* 7, Itinerary No. 15 (2008), https://cpb-ap-se2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.auckland.ac.nz/dist/0/689/files/2020/03/Itin_15_Warren-Mahoney-in-Christchurch-1.pdf

Pitarua Court) was another example: a highly innovative project in its form and density at nearly 90 dph, and one that introduced a model that continues to be desirable in the local housing market.¹²

Higher densities were tested in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's inner-city suburbs in the 1980s and early 1990s with small terraced projects, for example Grace Square, in Vermont Street, Ponsonby (approximately 32 dph), and on George Street in Parnell (approximately 55 dph) (Figure 1). The developers in both schemes adopted the strategy of acquiring under-used or redundant commercial land, which they reclassified for residential use through the planning process, but were then able to elude residential density controls in force at the time.

State housing in this period developed at urban densities is represented by projects in Mount Albert, Orākei, and others. One durable and well-regarded example is the Napier-Wellington Street block in Freeman's Bay, where 98 terraced and one- and two-level houses were built at an average density of 31 dwellings per hectare. From sales into the private sector, much of this housing is now owner-occupied, but is well maintained, and an example of surviving postmodernism from the early 1980s.¹³

Initially, design sources were predictable, in one sense, but random in another. Paddington was a working-class district in early-twentieth-century Sydney, a densely developed terraced-housing suburb of about 60 hectares, still dominated today by a Victorian architectural style. By the 1990s Paddington had become a gentrified and highly priced inner-city suburb. No doubt encouraged by this reputation for high values, the architects of the George Street scheme borrowed heavily from the Paddington model. In a different style but with similar intentions, Grace Square's housing is based on a pastiche of sub-classical detail and rendered traditional façades painted in vaguely central-American colours, with a more than nod to Duany and Plater-Zyberg's New Urbanists in Florida.

Details in both schemes are sourced from design guides, and are used to reduce the visual impact of façade repetition, providing individuality to otherwise identical houses. More importantly, however, elaborate façade details help to disguise the density of the layout, which is double that of the immediate neighbourhood in both examples. Perceptions of 'crowding,' or 'density' are offset by complex façade details that slow down the eye's travel from one house to the next. The sense of higher density is also reduced by the visitor recognising (perhaps subconsciously) that, although these houses are alien to our domestic design habit, they have their roots in housing styles and traditions that can be identified from experience, or from overseas travel: in other words, they can register as legitimate forms of domestic architecture.



Figure 1. Left: George Street, Parnell. Right: Grace Square, 81 Vermont Street, Ponsonby.

Developments like these between the 1960s and the early 1990s made numerically insignificant contributions to the total stocks of housing in these cities. Their architecture was eclectic: it was seen as the personal property of the designers, rather than as a style that could be adapted, exported and amplified in the wider housing market. Their influence was limited and, to some degree, regional. In the absence of strong reasons to change, mainstream suburban design ploughed the same furrow of plain, single-storey timber buildings for sixty years between 1930 and 1990, and it provided the cities with an undeviating low-density housing culture that satisfied the great majority of New Zealand's suburban communities.

Housing Style After the Adoption of the Resource Management Act

Two major reforms to the legislation and administration of town planning in the early 1990s opened the door to radical change in urban housing design. First, the Resource Management Act (RMA) was passed into law in 1992. The RMA prioritises the principles of sustainability and specifically the concepts of kaitiakitanga, redefining planning legislation as an 'effects-based' rather than a prescriptive process for all land uses. Secondly, and following the RMA's mandate, most City and Regional Councils (Territorial Authorities) began developing policies designed to encourage housing intensification in their urban centres. Best-practice theories in urban planning now accepted that sprawl was unsustainable, and that housing being proposed for population growth needed to be steered towards various forms of higher-density typologies.

Identifying house types for the New Zealand markets that could suit these new density parameters, and finding a style of architecture that would represent our domestic aspirations, proved to be elusive. A style or styles that would satisfy the

¹² Peter Beaven, *Peter Beaven Architect* (Blenheim: Peter Beaven Architecture, 2016); Mark Southcombe, "Translating Habitat: Revisiting Pitarua Court and Thorndon Mews," in *Translation: Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 31, ed. Christoph Schnoor (Auckland: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress, 2014).

¹³ Julia Gatley, "Domestic Architecture - Postmodern and Neo-modern Architecture," *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2014, accessed October 18, 2021, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/photograph/45077/napier-street-townhouses-auckland>

real estate agent's demand for 'street appeal' also needed to express concepts of individual self, as well as our collective identity as New Zealanders.

Speculative house-builders saw the opportunity to intensify their developments with terraced houses, a model based on the millions of similar houses that had already proved their practicality in Europe and Australia. The problem of identity and individuation became more intense as architects and their clients tested density ranges by site layout designs. New styles for these projects needed to be attractive to buyers; they needed to be straightforward to build with existing skills and equipment, while concealing the reality of high density – the sense of 'crowding' – and they also needed to replicate suburban conditions as much as possible. The concept of continuity was important because many of the new residents would come from the existing suburbs. It was apparent that some people would leave the suburbs in exchange for greater convenience of location and lower property maintenance, but it was not thought that they were likely to give up car ownership, intimating another problem: how is the private car to be integrated in site planning, and what is left of the traditionally generous private external spaces that characterise the suburbs?

Overshadowing all other problems, there was also the question of appropriate design styles. Planning Departments in the Territorial Authorities made suggestions about typologies through the publication of 'good practice' non-mandatory design guides, but these were deliberately free of design instruction. The issue of style was most acute in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in the 1990s, where the combined forces of larger-scale developments, annual population growth of 2–3 percent, and a competitive market led to more extreme experiments. The house builders needed to find a distinctive, but perhaps also anonymous, style and they depended on the inventiveness of the designers. New Zealand's architects had no habit of approaching their work with contextuality in mind: they have thrived on a housing-design tradition of buildings as separate entities. There were no readymade answers to the style question, nor were local precedents useful for showing ways to negotiate such an issue in a conservative market.

Some Early Design Solutions: Auckland Innovations

In the first few years, house buyers in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland were only persuaded if the property offered was either in a coveted location or if it was the lowest-priced housing on the market. The latter option began with development of disused industrial sites previously classified as Business 4 (B-4) zoned land in Isthmus suburbs from Henderson to Panmure. Developers were attracted to B-4 land because it offered the freedom to build outside the rules that regulated housing in the suburbs, making previously unthinkable densities possible.



Figure 2. Mary Street, Mount Eden: high-density townhouses in a Mediterranean-modernist style.

In the mid-1990s design solutions materialised rapidly, but in a disorderly parade of styles. Early projects include the two phases of terraced townhouses at Mary Street, Mount Eden (Figure 2), where about 180 three-storey units were built between 1996 and 2000. The architects used an understated 'Mediterranean-modernist' aesthetic, expressed in smooth plaster finishes, earthy colours, parapets (no projecting eaves), and vertically aligned fenestration. Some of the challenges of layout design that are seen in this illustration became apparent in the first generation of the new typology.

Other large-scale schemes in the early phase of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's intensification included Waitākere City's Harbour View development on Te Atatu Peninsula (372 units, mostly in terraced layouts), and the redevelopment of the old Crown Lynn pottery site at Ambrico Place in New Lynn, for about 400 units. A wide range of new architectural styles emerged in both of these developments, many of them based on New Urbanist design principles that promote traditional architecture.¹⁴

In New Lynn the 100-unit Tuscan Towers project adopted the architecture of a medieval Italian city; there was also a pastiche 'Mediterranean-Mexican' cul-de-sac of 45 units in Avondale (now gated and renamed Saintry Close). In the 2003–2005 development of 83 terraced houses off Mount Lebanon Way, Henderson, seven builders distinguished between their separate projects with styles that included traditional Dutch Cape double-curved gables, Breton country-town terraces, another terraced group with Paddington-style wrought-iron balconies at first-floor level, and a short three-storey terrace of colourful Art Deco houses with rounded bay windows and corners on their street façades (Figure 3).

In practice, styles that suited the aesthetic of parapets with metal cap-flashings and sheet claddings became fashionable. Designers abandoned eave projections – traditionally an effective detail to protect external walls from heavy rain – in order to save space onsite under regulations that governed height-to-boundary relationships. Regardless of the style adopted, densities in the range of 40 to 50 dph became the new standard for the two- and three-storey terraced typology where some suburban features, such as individual garages and small patio-type urban gardens, have been retained.¹⁵

¹⁴ Andreas Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2001).

¹⁵ David Turner, John Hewitt, César Wagner, Bin Su, and Katherine Davies, *Best Practice in Medium Density Housing Design* (Wellington: Housing New Zealand Corporation, 2004), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351993158_Best_Practice_in_Medium_Density_Housing_Design_A_report_for_Housing_New_Zealand_Corporation



Figure 3. Left: Tuscany Towers, Ambrico Place, New Lynn, 1997. Right: Art Deco, Winery Way, Henderson, 2003. Bottom Left: Saintly Close, St Georges Road, Avondale, 1999.

Looking Back: The First Post-RMA Generation Revisited

The early period of the post-RMA generation of speculative higher-density housing now registers as a bravura experiment in which competitive housing markets, public opinion and the demands of real estate advertising campaigns all bore down on architects seeking new design solutions, who found some of their answers in bizarre places.

Looking back, it is clear that identifying the potential sales market was an important part of the design process. From the start, a sales strategy that aimed to supply houses at the lowest possible price was based on an assumption that housing at increased densities would mainly attract investors and lower-income buyers. Low costs were helped by keeping floor areas down to under 120 square metres,¹⁶ and, together with tight site-planning for vehicle access and minimal private garden spaces, layout designs were able to maintain a position in the bottom range of property prices.



Figure 4. Tuscany Towers, New Lynn, 1998 and 2012.

Initially, although the typology's attraction was based on its economy,¹⁷ it also presented buyers with choices not seen previously in price, density and particularly in architectural styles, some of which were enticingly different, and in this suburban context, positively exotic.

Leaky Buildings and Rebuilding the First Generation

The reputation for adventurous styles gained by the new typologies was devastated within a decade, however, by the 'leaky building' disaster.¹⁸ This event followed soon after the national deregulation of the construction industry in the early 1990s, a calamitous error of legislation that undermined market confidence in the property values of all of these higher-density housing models.¹⁹ It also discredited the entire intensification project as a system for housing supply.

The result of the defective revision of the New Zealand Building Code in 1992 has been a rebuilding programme forced on almost all of the first-generation projects. Few of the original styles have survived the repair process. Housing styles that signalled difference, that tested market willingness to experiment, and that revealed a genuine public interest in styles other than the safe-but-dull suburban paradigm all but disappeared, as body corporate managers and their client communities took the opportunity to minimise reconstruction costs and replace disintegrating external walls with traditional materials.

In the rebuilding programme the double-curved gables of the Dutch Cape-styled terrace at 28-44 Winery Way, Henderson, have given way to a straightforward pitched-roof gable, and the terracotta-coloured faux-Italian Tuscan-style block in New Lynn is now an undistinguished cream-coloured series of weatherboard-clad terraces (Figure 4); Saintly Close in Avondale is reclad, also mostly in weatherboard but painted in dark colours and with other external details modernised to improve the building's appearance, which no longer misrepresents a Mexican village (Figure 5). Although the interior layouts and site plans are unchanged, original styles have been purged, and the materials, surfaces and

¹⁶ David Turner and Bin Su, "A Classification Methodology for Medium Density Housing Based on Site Layout Analysis," in *Fabricating Sustainability* (Wellington: ANZAScA, 2006).

¹⁷ Bernard Orsman, "Intensified Housing Unpopular with Aucklanders," *New Zealand Herald*, September 10, 2004.

¹⁸ BRANZ, *The Hunn Report: Report of the Overview Group on the Weathertightness of Buildings* (Wellington: BRANZ, 2002).

¹⁹ Geoff Cumming, "Buyers Search for a Backstop," *New Zealand Herald*, September 11, 2004.



Figure 5. Saintry Close, St Georges Road, Avondale, 1999 and 2016.

colours of mid-twentieth-century domestic architecture in New Zealand have been reinstated. The seven houses in the Art Deco terrace at 2-14 Winery Way, Henderson, are an exception, as are the earlier examples (George Street and Vermont Street), which both preceded in time the defective construction systems that led to the 'leaky building' disaster and have survived intact.

Reflections and Conclusions

Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's middle suburbs have lost the strange, alien, provocative and occasionally confusing (but in the event, short-lived) presence of the many different styles of housing architecture in the higher-density ranges. It is suggested that their disappearance corresponds to a maturing of public taste, and to a waning of public resistance to intensification, initially a potent obstacle in the public debate, but now subverted by the insistent logic of the case for sustainable city form.

These two factors have advanced to become embedded in the way residents imagine the city, and the New Urbanist's proposition – that selected superimposed styles of traditional architecture are useful for disguising higher-than-suburban densities – can now be superseded by a return to more conventional forms of expression. Social and demographic changes are reflected in greater public acceptance of higher density, with the growth of smaller households, and with the attractions of urban living evidenced by the increasing numbers of apartments in all our cities.

Furthermore, the wholesale removal of the original styles of developments discussed here can perhaps be seen as an indirect way of blaming the style itself for the repair costs – associating the style with costly losses in order to justify its removal. There is also a sense of public fatigue with experiments in un-traditional styles that can be detected in the rebuilds: regardless of density, our weatherboard claddings are safe, as they always were; our urban and suburban landscapes are rich enough, and have no further need for the added excitement of architectural fictions. This explanation corresponds to a widespread market distrust of the regulatory authority that first permitted substandard non-traditional construction in the building industry, and then denied liability for the consequences.

Most of the audaciously different first generation of higher-

density housing architecture has now gone from the suburbs. It can be seen in retrospect as a deviation, perhaps delightful for a brief period, but replaced now by more reliable materials, tighter construction regulations and practices, and simpler external designs in essentially modernist styles. Design since the mid-2000s has been increasingly confident in form, material and colour, with, in some projects, prominent architects leading the way towards a more coherent urban housing landscape. Arguably, however, the subsequent generations of house builders and their architects owe a debt to their predecessors for the experiments that were conducted in the styles of higher-density housing architecture.

Author

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