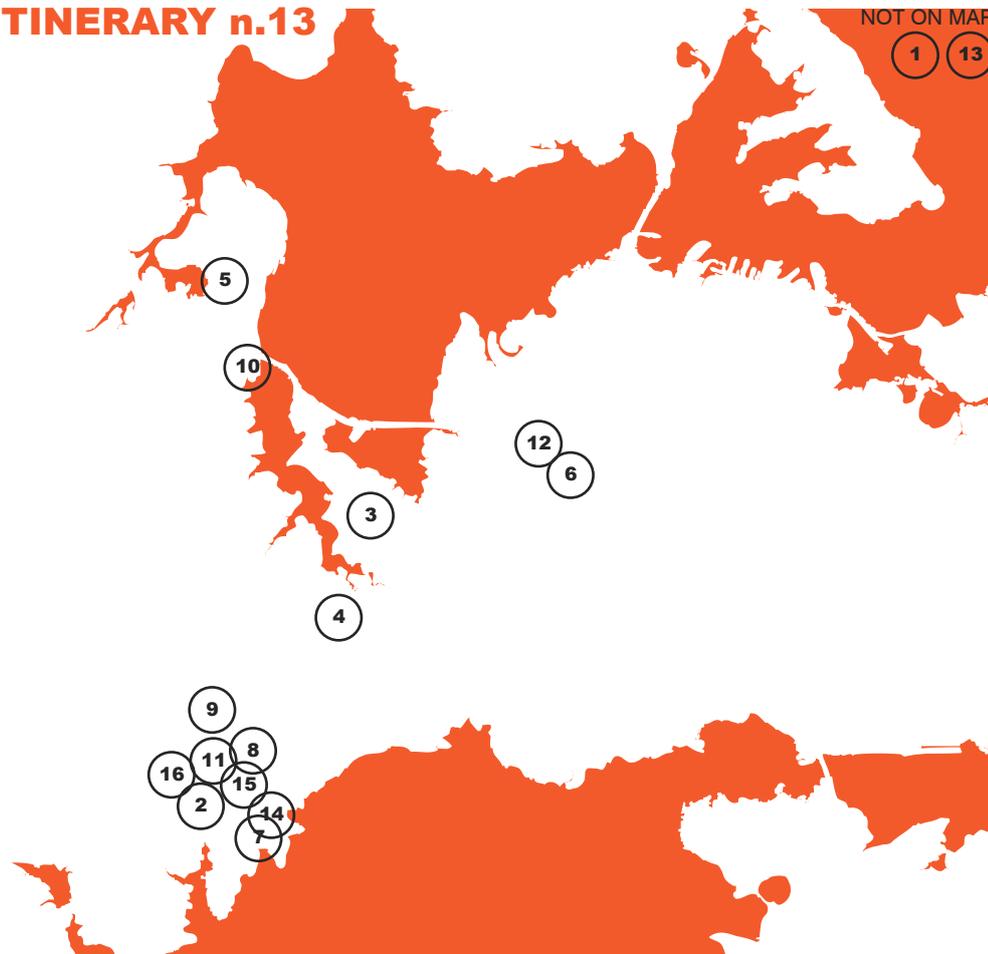


ITINERARY n.13



Pollard House

Modern Houses in the West

The Group and their values dominated Auckland architecture for a long period in the second half of the 20th Century, but out in West Auckland, particularly around Titirangi, there are a number of houses from the same era by less well-known architects. These largely flat roofed glass pavilions represent a much more International Style approach to the Modern house. For a long time these were marginalised and didn't appear in our histories, but they can be seen as an alternative International Style strand to the nationalist approach of Vernon Brown and the Group.

The tension between these two strands of Modernism was widespread in all the arts and in all countries where Modernism came ashore. In New Zealand's arts, the desire for a New Zealand voice - in a young country gradually drifting away from England - edged us towards the Nationalist. In architecture, other centres such as Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington retained a balance in the two approaches, but in Auckland the rhetoric of Brown and the Group permitted little deviation from an agenda that argued for a nationalist, regionalist Modernism: acclimatised to this country, reflecting vernacular structures, suiting the local climate, built of indigenous materials, and with social concerns framed around the needs of the New Zealand family. Simple, straight-forward, even raw. There was no place in this regime for the sophisticated and urbane, cool and geometric, for swish materials, for flat or butterfly roofs, for glassy white pavilions. Thus, until a decade or so ago, many were unfamiliar with the work of Robin Simpson, Brenner Associates, Tibor Donner, Mark-Brown & Fairhead, Heinrich Kulka, Rigby.Mullan, Vlad Cacala, and Kenneth Albert.

The association of Brown and the Group with the University of Auckland School of Architecture is well known. Their attitudes informed the School of Architecture up until the 70s. As recently as 1998, the publication *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene*, with two main essays "The Mid-Century Modern House in Auckland" and "Architectural Modernism in New Zealand 1960-1990" by very senior academics of long standing, portrayed the history of the Auckland house as that of the regionalistic, nationalistic Modern strain. The concurrent International Style buildings - "the very few, more radical examples of modern dwelling designs" - are ignored or denigrated or portrayed as the work of a couple of immigrant architects not yet fully acculturated here: "Continental modernism in New Zealand, as in the works of refugee architects and Ernst Plischke, never quite shook off an alien, dysfunctional relation to the New Zealand scene." And: "They were considered as inappropriate for New Zealand and as pursuing too simplistic and formalist an agenda". American examples of houses, such as Neutra's, revealed in magazines of the period are criticised as lacking "the sort of historical awareness, theoretical examination and searching debate maintained in the *English Architectural Review*" which argued for regionalism. And even more extremely, Modernism in architecture is labelled as simply suppressive, allied to the State and useful for "silencing any deviant architectural voices" and "halting until the late 1960s and early 1970s all architectural and social progress in the fuller sense"!

Recent work by a new generation of historians has started to look more fairly at all our buildings and the real variety and breadth of New Zealand's Modern heritage waiting to be unearthed out there in the suburbs. And there are also buildings by the Group and the many architects associated with them that are quite different to those iconic houses that we are all familiar with, exploring aspects of house form such as the courtyard. Hopefully your appreciation of the houses presented here will not be tarnished by the current retro-modern vogue for a pastiche International Style that some have dubbed JAJA Mod. May they leak in hell! *Bill McKay*

Sources:

Most of the projects presented here were well published in the journals of their times. Of particular help as general sources are Douglas Lloyd Jenkins book *At Home: A Century of NZ Design* (Auckland: Random House, 2003) and the *Home & Building* special issue "The Newstalk 1ZB 1950s Show", published in 1992. See also "Top 50 Homes" by Douglas Lloyd Jenkins and Bill McKay in *NZ Home & Entertaining* Dec/Jan 2000.

1

1940s
Wharerangi
25 Turanga Rd, Henderston
Valley
Cyril Knight



This house is interesting mainly as an example of the rather conservative work of Cyril Knight, Head of the School of Architecture during this period. He was involved in the Historic Places Trust in its early days and published the book *The Selwyn Churches of Auckland* just before his death in the 1970s. He is also known for his involvement in the University of Auckland's plan to relocate the whole campus to East Tamaki on acreage purchased in 1944, a plan that effectively stymied any construction in town for a couple of decades.

2

1947
Donner House
50 Kohu Road, Titirangi
Tibor Donner



Donner was the Auckland City Architect for a long period in the 50s and responsible for many International Style city buildings. His own house in Titirangi is tall and glass-walled with a graceful curved facade that acknowledges the splendid panorama of Auckland city. It is not a suburban house, it is very vertically oriented with cabin-like rooms and a rooftop sun terrace in the manner of a European apartment. Inside, the use of delicately curved timber veneer joinery, Modernist furniture, tiles and marble create a sense of Continental refinement, grace and sophistication. Donner also built two studio outbuildings where he again experimented with exotic materials and construction methods. See *NZ Home & Entertaining* Oct/Nov 2007.

3

1950-51
Croft House
19 Avondale Road, Rosebank
Group Architects



This little known bach of a house was designed for a pilot, who fell in love and moved to Kaikohe before it was completed. He sold it to one of the builders and his wife, who moved here in 1951. The Crofts loved everything about it except for the creosote exterior. They spent many years wire-brushing it off and applying thick coats of white paint instead. In addition to the white exterior, the house is characterised by its small dimensions, monopitch roof and overhanging northern eave. The garage was a later addition.

4

1951-2
George House
48 Rata Street, New Lynn
Group Architects (J. Hackshaw)



In fairly original condition but surrounded by infill, luckily Hackshaw conceived this as "A House that Does Not Need a View". The ground floor is very enclosed in brick with only three doors and no windows. A central atrium space and clerestories provide light with bedrooms at each end of the top floor connected by a mezzanine. The house is a single space, a beautifully controlled and proportioned work that also shows the influence of Japanese design. Very similar to the much better known Rotherham House with which it shares a rectilinear, geometric simplicity and rigour, as well as features such as the curtain glass wall and timber vent panels. See *Home and Building* Feb 1955 and *Design and Living* Aug-Sep 1952.

5

1953
Tremewan House
56 Gloria Ave., Te Atatu North
Group Architects (Bill Wilson)



A lovely, crisp U-shaped courtyard house set in a meadow on the edge of a park. The fairly blank exterior, clad in weatherboard and low monopitched roof reflect the Group's vernacular influences, but the form indicates once again a desire to explore forms from further afield. While this house has rather less spatial diversity than others, it's a beautifully successful early experiment that mostly benefits from its sensitively planted context. The house can be clearly seen from Gloria Park to the rear.

6

1953
Thom House
7 Sainsbury Road, Mt. Albert
Group Architects (J. Hackshaw)



This house, along with Ivan Juriss' nearby Mann House of 1960 (10 Violet Street, Mt. Albert), are two well-known houses by the Group - although by 1953 the Group had only three members, and that partnership split in 1958. Hackshaw's Thom House takes the ancient form of an atrium and is built of brick and sliding glass panels. The Mann House is a series of cells constructed from blockwork and carefully lit by high-level clerestories. Both the Thom and Mann Houses are quite unlike the early houses with which we stereotype the Group, but both also show very particular international influences that have little to do with the New Zealand vernacular - more examples of the unsuspected diversity of houses that are out there in our suburban hinterland.

7

1955-8
Haresnape House
4 Otitori Bay Road, Titirangi
Bill Haresnape



A little-known house hidden away in the Titirangi bush. From its rooftop pool to its cantilevered steel and glass cladding this big, confident, semi-industrial design shows the influence of the American architects Neutra and Eames. The plan is innovative for its time as well, with kids' rooms amalgamated into a playroom at the sunny end of the house, and wide open kitchen, dining and living areas. One whole side of the house opens up to the bush and harbour view. It's a much bigger, bolder and more sophisticated vision than many of his contemporaries, who criticised it as "too American" for a New Zealand house. See McKay, Bill, 'A Possum in the Kiwi Bush' In R. Blythe & R. Spense (Eds.), *Thresholds* (pp. 209-212) 1999.

8

1956
House for the Subtropics
Titirangi
Mark-Brown & Fairhead

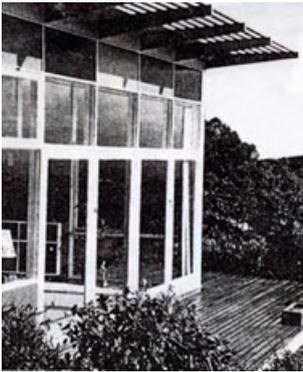


An iconic photograph of this flat roofed timber pavilion at night (inspired by the work of Richard Neutra and other architecture of the American West Coast) demonstrated this house grasped firmly the idea of an Auckland climate and lifestyle, with a design that was also hip, slick, sharp and contemporary. Simon Carnahan and Ron Sang grew up in this firm and they too have evolved the Auckland style of house that uses modern forms and materials in a rich and sophisticated way, is light filled and open, casual but elegant. See *Home & Building* March 1957.

9

1958

Foley House
Titirangi
Brenner Associates



Another simple, geometric pavilion perched on top of the Waitakeres. With a very shallow pitched roof, this house steps down the slopes, spilling out onto extensive decks. It incorporated lots of built in fittings and strong colours, including glass panels and louvres to moderate the bold walls of floor-to-ceiling glass. Brenner Associates were noted for their holistic approach, designing furniture and interiors as well. Vladimir Cacala and Milan Mrkusich went on to design the stunning Blumenthal and Mrkusich Houses respectively. See *Modern Home and Garden* Summer 1958.

10

1958-9

Mathews House
44 Covil Ave, Te Atatu South
Bill Wilson and Ivan Juriss



The last of the Group courtyard houses in the west. This low slung verandah house doesn't give away its courtyard from the street, which is oriented towards the Whau Creek. The interior again demonstrates Juriss' interest in the Japanese with big, heavily timbered mono-pitched roofs lit by clerestories at the high side, then swooping low to create intimate spaces. It may be because its such a big house, or the relaxed nature of the site, but the plan is a lot more sensitive than the preceding Group houses' rather rigorous geometry. See *Home & Building* July 1964.

11

1959

Castle House
20 Tawini Road, Konini
James Hackshaw



Built for the noted potter Len Castle and his weaver wife, this house was boldly headlined "Towards An Indigenous Architecture" when published with a text apparently by Hackshaw. The house eschews grand glass walls in favour of a less dramatic, more humble relationship with the bush. An open plan living area under a long pitched roof creates a tent like feeling, reinforced by the extensive use of vernacular materials such as corrugated roofing and creosoted weatherboard. This space also incorporated a sunny gallery and places for potting and weaving; a place combining work and home life. See *Home & Building* Sept 1960.

12

1959-60

St Helen's Hospital
28a Linwood Ave., Mt. Albert
Newman Smith



Geoff Newman and Gordon Smith followed up the Wanganui War Memorial Hall with this. Both sets of buildings and the house by the gate have the staunchness and severity of the International Modernist aesthetic. The house is a simple horizontal sweep, set on the edge of a meadow, a rigorous exercise in geometry with built-in seats, screens and shelves that are more abstract compositions than furniture. And it was done by a young Mike Austin, later to repudiate it as the work of a naif in the throes of a style. Both Austin and Smith turned from the "dark side" and embraced the bach in their later work! The building is now part of AIT.

13

1960

Greer House
30 Range Road, Swanson
Rigby.Mullan



The most perfect pavilion in the west, now unfortunately altered beyond the point of no return. This rectangle perched above the Auckland vista was once as pure as Johnson's Glass House. A floating roof hovered via a steel frame over nearly 360 degrees of non-loadbearing glass walls and deck while a central core, under a butterfly roofed clerestory, housed the services. But the house also had a particular Japanese influence in its internal shoji screens and a highly sophisticated interior design and collection of art and objects. It was destroyed by its second owner; an accountant. See *Home & Building* Sept 1960 and Feb/Mar 1993.

14

1962

Pollard House
136 Wood Bay Road, Titirangi
Imi Porsolt



Imric Porsolt was a Hungarian immigrant, lecturer at the School and one of the more astute commentators on our contemporary art. He also designed one of the finest pole houses in the New Zealand bush, showing an appreciation of the new environment and an ability to use it in a sensitive way. The house curves around the brow of a hill with a living room that fans out to encompass the panoramic bush view and a wide roof open like an umbrella over the entry way and deck - a house that lives in the tree tops and touches the land lightly. See *Home & Building* Aug 1963.

15

1965

Orr-Walker House
44 Kopiko Road, Titirangi
Mark-Brown & Fairhead



The original owner (who still lives here) trained as an architect before moving to dentistry and had definite ideas about the form of the house. A series of glazed and flat roofed pavilions in the bush, this house has a lovely progression of rooms along the site's contours, each defined by a step up or down, and opening left or right onto a deck or courtyard. Using floating timber ceilings, blockwork, curtain walls of glass and screens of stacked ceramic tubes it's a sophisticated work that also displays an oriental bent through the owner's minor alterations. The landscape was designed by Ted Smythe. The House won an NZIA Bronze Medal in 1965. See *Home & Building* March 1965 and Feb/Mar 1998. Also *NZIA Journal* May 1966.

16

1976

Brake House
73 Scenic Drive, Titirangi
Mark-Brown Fairhead Sang



The famous house designed for the photographer Brian Brake is wonderfully serene in its deep bush setting. Brake chose Ron Sang because of their shared interest in the life and architecture of the Asian countries. This house is a large platform or pavilion with rooms able to be screened off or opened up, all arranged in a straight row facing the sun. At the end of this bridge a large glass-sided tatami-matted room projects out into the bush. The swampy gully below has been transformed into a water garden pool and up above the flat roof of the house was designed as a shallow pool as well. See *Monument* 73 (2006).