



Bill Wilson

Photo: UoA Architecture Archive

The exhibition, *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture*, runs at the Gus Fisher Gallery from 15 October – 27 November. Among the public events is a bus tour of key buildings on October 16th. See www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz for more info.

The Group: Public & Commercial Work

First House. Second House. Rotherham House. Catley House. Mallitte House, Juriss House. Mann House. I could go on: the Group are largely known for houses. Yet their drawings and specifications in The University of Auckland's Architecture Archive reveal the many other building types on which they worked: medium and high density housing, kindergartens, factories, shops and offices, as well as several competitions.

What does this public and commercial work tell us about their interests, ideas and priorities? How do these projects relate to Bill Wilson and the Architectural Group's famous claim in their 1946 manifesto, that 'overseas solutions will not do. New Zealand must have its own architecture, its own sense of what is beautiful and appropriate to our climate and conditions'?

Ivan Juriss said to me earlier this year that he and Bill Wilson didn't talk about making a New Zealand architecture. It just wasn't what they were actually thinking about when they were designing. What they did care about was making good modern design affordable for everyday New Zealanders and designing for living rather than for keeping up appearances. It's not enough to interpret the Group's work solely on claims the Architectural Group made when they were students; it's not enough to assume that the design lineage for their buildings lies solely in huts and whare and baches.

In fact Wilson was very widely read and the main architectural influences on all the Group members were Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto, with a secondary tier of influence from Japan, California and Scandinavia more generally. So our supposed New Zealand architecture was in fact heavily influenced by a raft of overseas precedents.

More than this, the Group weren't obsessed with designing houses. They were interested in housing more generally and in the much broader issues of the city and the built environment. And they had aspirations to work on substantial public projects both in Auckland and as far afield as Wanganui, Christchurch, Dunedin, Sydney and even Toronto. They were unsuccessful in their initiatives to build big, with their designs for the Sydney Opera House, the Otago University Library and the Onewa Domain Stadium all remaining on paper.

Of their bigger buildings that were built, the most prominent have been ravaged by time and development pressure: Naval Housing at Devonport, the Auckland Builders and General Labourers' Union Building, the Auckland Engineers' Union Building and the St John Ambulance Station in Great South Road have all been demolished.

The public, commercial and industrial buildings that survive are mostly smaller and more consistent with the received interpretation of the kind of work the Group did. The kindergartens in particular exemplify the desire to make good modern design affordable for everyday New Zealanders – for 'Everyman' as he and she were called in the 1946 manifesto; or 'Everykid' as the occupant became in the case of the kindergartens. That said, there would be no mistaking the Nagels Factory or the Arthur Martin Building for houses.

It is important to remember the Group's public and commercial work, even though much of it either went unbuilt or has been demolished. These projects challenge assumptions, stereotypes and over-simplistic generalisations about the lives, ambitions, careers and outputs of New Zealand's most mythologised firm of modern architects. *Julia Gatley*

Firmography:

The charismatic Bill Wilson is widely recognised as the leader of the Group, which between 1946 and 1968 went through four incarnations:

1. Architectural Group (1946). Signatories to the Architectural Group's constitution were Wilson, Marilyn Hart, Bruce Rotherham, Bill Toomath and Allan Wild. Barbara Parker's name was added in her absence. All six were second year architecture students at Auckland University College. Others contributed to the magazine, *Planning*.
2. Group Construction Company (1949-51). Members included three from the Architectural Group – Wilson, Rotherham and Wild – joined by Campbell Craig, Ivan Juriss and Bret Penman and to a lesser extent Jim Hackshaw.
3. Group Architects (1951-63). The appearance of clients beyond family members enabled the progression to Group Architects. Craig, Wild and Rotherham then left the Group in 1952; Penman left in 1954; and Hackshaw in 1958.
4. Wilson & Juriss Architects (1963-68). Bill Wilson and Ivan Juriss continued to practise together until Wilson's premature death in 1968.

1 1951-58 (demolished 2003 except for duplex)

Royal NZ Navy Housing
Ngataranga Rd, Devonport



In 1951, Bret Penman's father Robert convinced the Navy to buy a large plot of land he owned in Ngataranga Bay and to commission housing designs for the site from his son and the other Group members. The scheme went through many design iterations, with changes demanded by consecutive government architects R. A. Patterson and Gordon Wilson. The final scheme, incorporating two storey terrace housing, was a frustration and a disappointment to the Group. Most of it was demolished in 2003. The surviving duplex is located on Lake Road.

2 1954-55, additions 1960

Takapuna Bowling Club Pavilion
Bracken Ave, Takapuna,



The Group are known for friendships and connections with Auckland's literary and artistic communities, and the Takapuna Bowling Club is their only sporting facility to have been built. Stage 1 comprised the single-storey wing, with the two-storey portion following it five years later. The Group did not design the floor plan. Rather, they inherited it with the commission and made constructional and material decisions intended to minimise costs. Much of the ground floor level is given over to one large space, notable for its exposed rafters and plywood truss at the ridge.

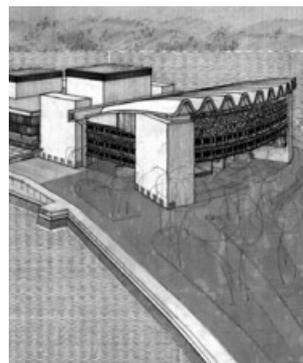
3 1954-56 & 1956-59
Glen Eden & Oranga
Kindergartens
3 Clayburn Rd, Glen Eden
48a Waitangi Rd, Onehunga



The Group produced at least six kindergartens in Greater Auckland. Glen Eden and Oranga were the first two to be completed and exhibit design similarities, with play spaces and various ancillary service spaces separated into two lines and positioned parallel to each other. The Group are said to have found kindergarten work particularly rewarding. It epitomised their desire to create an egalitarian and unpretentious architecture. In addition, the buildings are not unlike some of their houses, with open living areas reworked as open play spaces for children.

4 1955-64 (unbuilt)

Sydney Opera House
Circular Quay, Sydney
Australia



Wilson, Juriss and Hackshaw prepared the Group's entry for the Sydney Opera House competition in 1955-56. By the due date, they were two drawings short of the number specified in the competition regulations and as a result, decided not to submit their entry. Wilson and Juriss revisited their scheme in 1964, completing the drawings and submitting them as a joint thesis for the belated completion their architecture degrees. The design is notable for its rippling roof, surely a response to the magnificent harbour location and perhaps the concrete shells of Pier Luigi Nervi.

5 1956-60 (demolished)

Auckland Builders & General
Labourers' Union Building
Hobson St, Auckland City



Photo: Sparrow Industrial Pictures

Consistent with their left-wing politics, the Group did work for various unions in the 1950s and 60s. This building, generally known as either the Union Building or Klipper Ties after the long-standing tenant, was perhaps the most abstract of the firm's commercial work. Three bays were defined by steel framing, with glass bricks to the street facade. The building measured less than 6 x 12 metres and comprised only a lower level showroom with a mezzanine above. It is one of many Hobson Street buildings to have been demolished in the last 20 years.

6 1957-59

Milford Kindergarten
14 Pierce Road
Milford



Milford differs from the other Group kindergartens in that it has a square-ish plan and the wide gabled roof that is recognisable from several early Group houses. The interior was originally zoned for different types of play: 'the block corner, the dollies' corner, the painting corner and the reading corner and in each the children can concentrate undisturbed by the activities in the other areas' (*North Shore Times*, 30 Sept 1959). This is believed to be the Group's only non-residential building to have been local authority heritage listed.

7 1959-60

Hughes Shops
Cnr Fanshaw Rd & Sylvan Cres
Te Atatu



This small suburban shopping centre is not what you expect when you go looking for a Group building: it is pragmatic in the extreme with concrete block side and rear walls and a front facade that is divided into a series of shops in modular fashion, each predominantly glazed. The original drawings show a two-storeyed wing at right angles to the single-storey building, but this was never built. Door and window joinery appears original in about half the shops, other than security bars fitted inside the glazing.

8 1959-60 (unbuilt)

University of Otago Library
Competition Entry
Cumberland, Castle and
Albany Sts, Dunedin



The Group's competition entries are interesting in demonstrating their desire to undertake large and complex public and institutional work, and to extend their practice beyond Auckland. In 1959 they even registered for a competition for Toronto's Civic Square. Their Otago University Library design followed the podium-tower typology, with ground-level lecture theatres and teaching rooms and upper level accommodation for Humanities departments complementing book storage, shelving and display.

9

1960 (unbuilt)

Onewa Domain Stadium
Northcote Road
Northcote



This design for a stadium is one of the biggest surprises in the Group Architects archive, far removed as it is from small detached houses. The North Shore Sports Association's brief was for a stadium built to Olympic standards, seating a minimum of 50,000 spectators, possibility increasing to 100,000 in the future. The perspective shows soccer in play, while the related floor plan also makes allowance for athletics and cycling. The scheme did not progress beyond sketch design and the netball stadium which was built in Onewa Domain bears no resemblance to it.

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1961-62

Nagels Factory
44 Wharf Road
Te Atatu



The Group produced industrial buildings for a range of manufacturers and wholesalers, including lingerie manufacturer, Nagels. Their Te Atatu building has the wide and shallow gabled roofs of early houses and the Milford Kindergarten, filled with glass to illuminate the interior. The building presents two such gables to the street, that on the west side indicating the extent of the original building and that on the east, an addition which mirrors it. Steel portal frames ensure that the interior is uninterrupted by columns.

11

1963-64 (demolished)

St John Ambulance Station
Great South Road
Greenlane



Photo: Marshall Cook

The Group/Wilson & Juriss produced at least three stations for the St John Ambulance (Greenlane, Helensville and Paeroa) as well as additions and alterations to their Pitt Street premises. The Greenlane building, located on the corner of Great South Road and Matai Street, was linear and built of concrete block with clerestory glazing that carried the words 'The St John Ambulance Association'. The Helensville building was demolished in 2009, about a week before I got there with my camera. The Paeroa one is shrouded in additions.

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1964 (unbuilt)

Wilson Home: Chapel
Competition Entry
Lake Road, Belmont



This competition entry earned Ivan Juriss third place. The judging panel, which included M. K. Draffin and Prof Charles Light, rated it 'highly for its original thought', but also concluded that it appeared 'over-dramatic and too sophisticated for the purpose of this chapel'. The spiral design was given glass walls and a sculptural roof at its highest above the altar. The roof can be seen as a miniature and simplified reincarnation of the smaller of Kenzo Tange's two stadia for the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

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1965-67

Arthur Martin Building
(a.k.a. Martex)
57 Boston Rd, Eden Terrace



Like the Nagels Factory, the Arthur Martin Building is characterised by its wide and shallow gabled roof, but this time it is a two-storeyed building. Exterior walls are predominantly of concrete block, some with a pink-coloured aggregate but mostly now painted pale green. The interior has also been altered to accommodate changing usage. The building is still owned by the Martin family, relatives of Nancy Martin who was in the same year as the Architectural Group at Architecture School and had a successful career at Sydney University.

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1965-68
(demolished ca. 2007)
NZ Engineers' Union,
Auckland Branch
St Martins Lane, Auckland



Photo: Barry Mckay Industrial Photography

Arguably the strongest of Wilson & Juriss' public and commercial work to have been built, the NZ Engineers' Union was an assertively rectilinear building with concrete columns and beams and concrete block infill. Large windows capitalised on eastern views over Grafton Gully, contrasted by narrow ones in the south-west corner near the entry. The building showed a considered response to its steep site, with street level access provided at three of the four levels. Juriss designed the lampshades, positioned in synchronicity with the structural grid.

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1968-69

Freemans Hotel Public Bar
Drake Street
Freemans Bay



Photo: Unknown

In addition to stand-alone buildings, the Group's commercial work included various interior fit-outs including the Public Bar in the Freemans Bay Hotel, a nineteenth-century hotel described at the time as the oldest in Auckland, complete with classical cornices, window heads and parapet. The owners, Leopard Breweries, wanted to retain the pub's Victorian atmosphere, and thus existing elements were retained and renovated. New decor included the bar, plush carpets, deep-buttoned red vinyl seating, William Morris-type wallpaper and fibrous plaster ceilings.

Sources:

All recent photographs are by Julia Gatley. All historic photographs and drawings are from The University of Auckland's Architecture Archive. This itinerary draws from the book, *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland University Press, 2010). This is the first book on the Group. It makes extensive use of materials held in the Architecture Archive, and interviews with surviving Group members and their families and friends. Other key sources include Graham Pitts' BArch research report on the Group (1968); David Mitchell's 'Hot and Cool' article in the *AAA Bulletin* (December 1977) and his TV programme and book, *The Elegant Shed* (1984); Peter Shaw's *Metro* article (no. 20, 1991) and his work for the *1950s Show* (*Home and Building* special issue, 1992); Allan Wild's autobiographical papers (particularly 'Post-War Generation'); Justine Clark and Paul Walker's revisionist book, *Looking for the Local* (VUP, 2000), and Clark's subsequent essay, 'Ephemera' in *Fabrications* (December 2004); and Douglas Lloyd Jenkins' many articles, particularly those in *Home and Entertaining*.