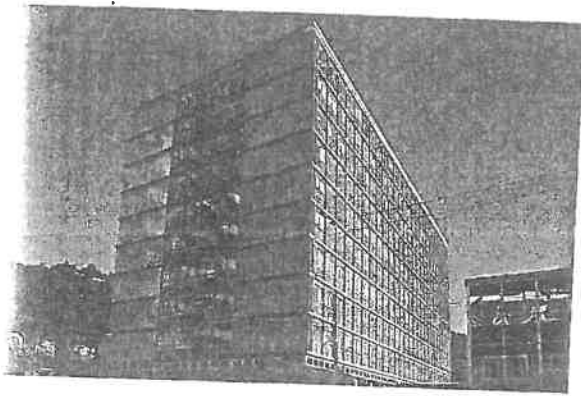


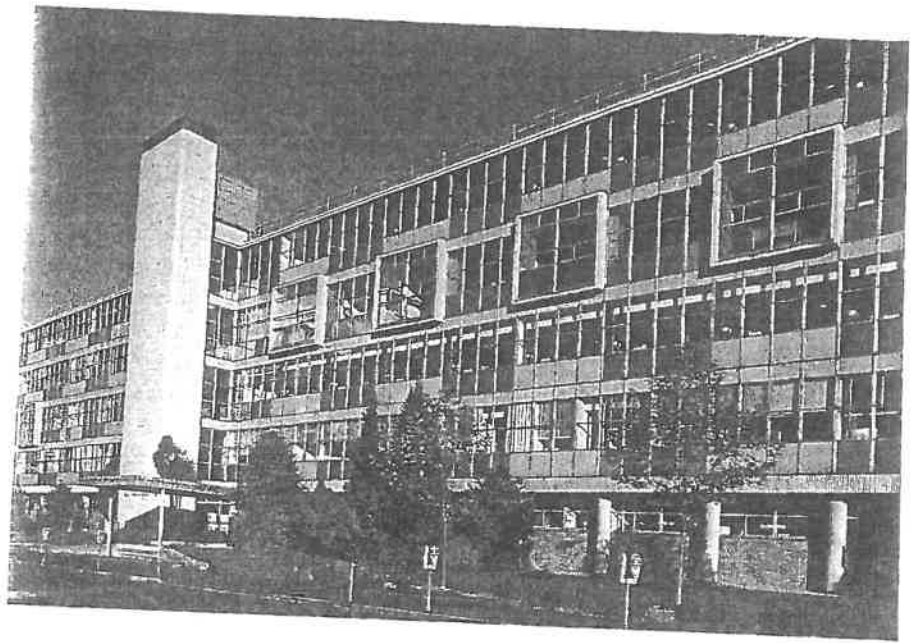
In 1952 Gordon Wilson was appointed Government Architect, ushering in a period of unprecedented Government-sponsored building activity. Wilson had travelled to the U.S.A. in 1947, where he met Walter Gropius. On subsequent journeys to Europe and England in 1954 and 1957 he studied developments in office building design, sending back copies of plans and samples of materials so that his staff had access to the latest information. In his major buildings Wilson showed the clear influence of the rectilinear forms of Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe, but he later also introduced such structurally expressive devices as walls of glass, exposed columns and pilotis, blocks of colour to give planar form, and lightweight horizontal elements which give his buildings transparency. Such features contrast sharply with the bulky solidity of his earlier multi-housing schemes.



The Bledisloe Building in Auckland designed by Wilson in 1950, was a Corbusian eleven-storey slab. Its column-and-beam shear wall structure allowed the use of extensive glazing, which adds to the building's sense of lightness. At the time, its one-and-a-half acres (6000 m<sup>2</sup>) of glass, its height, and its resemblance to Le Corbusier's United Nations Building (1947-53) in New York were made much of in the press. The Bledisloe was followed in 1955 by the Bowen State Building, Wellington. Its structure consisted of two cantilevered structural cores which carried building services and seismic loads, allowing for flexible planning and creating a model for office design which was to be much emulated in the future. The building's ground-floor walls are recessed, so that the structure appears to rest on rows of granite-clad columns. Again, like the Bledisloe, east and west walls are glazed within aluminium jambs. Labelled 'an inferno' by its office workers after regulation government sun-

shading drapes failed to arrive in time for occupation, the building has faded into obscurity as more elaborately detailed buildings have risen around it.

Wilson made greater use of colour and pattern in the 1954 Dental School of Otago University, Dunedin, where he repeated the rectilinear form, glass curtain wall, recessed ground floor and free-standing columns. This time, however, he enlivened the structure by using greater amounts of coloured glass and by articulating the stairwell, which he had buried within the walls of his earlier buildings.



## The Search for the Vernacular

RIGHT: Dental School (1954), Otago University, Dunedin, by Gordon Wilson. Constructed using the same principles as the Bledisloe Building, the Dental School's glass skin more colourful and its stairwell articulated in an attempt to enliven the facade.

Plischke's Massey House (1951-53), commissioned by the New Zealand Milk and Dairy Board, is an eight-storey office block. Its plan adopts the familiar technique of disposing office space around a central core containing lift and stairs. It too has a glass curtain wall and stands on four round, white columns, which are repeated on the top floor giving, according to the architect's intention, a sense of organic growth. The building is divided into halves; the well-known Lambton Quay front being two storeys higher than the shorter rear section on the Terrace. Fenestration is regularly patterned by the use of projecting aluminium frames which surround the whole glass wall at each level, while, within this larger frame, individual window frames have both structural and aesthetic importance.

The interior of the building is open and uncluttered too because of the extensive use of glass, natural wood veneers, built-in furniture,

LEFT: Bowen State Building (1955), Wellington, by Gordon Wilson. The size of such government buildings was a focus of public criticism. It was also reported that office girls wore colourful sunhats and sunglasses inside to combat glare and heat.

Almost invariably wealthier than the Group's in Auckland, the clients of both practices understood that it made economic sense to employ an architect who knew how to use—perhaps unconventional materials efficiently. The shocked resident of Mt Albert who observed to Mr Mann that his year-old Ivan Juriss house (see page 159) would be nice when it was finished was expressing the kind of architectural conservatism which had allowed the 1930s state house to hold the New Zealand suburban landscape in a kind of stannary. In the public mind, concrete block was regarded as a material unsuited for domestic building but so, ironically, was timber.

The worst that the conservative observer could say about any modern house was that it looked like a farm building. Group Architects and other vernacularists may have delighted in the barn- or shed-like qualities of their indigenous houses, but it was this that made them unacceptable to the public. The State Advances Corporation, which granted loans for house building, agreed; it was extremely difficult to get a loan for anything other than a standard, conventionally planned brick-and-tile house. Wood was regarded as flimsy and unreliable, but bricks looked strong; the timber-framed house must be brick clad. The much-consulted *Carpentry in New Zealand*, first set out by the Department of Education Technical Correspondence School in 1958, illustrated exactly how the brick veneer wall could be attached to a timber frame on a

concrete foundation, using a 1½-inch (4-centimetre) cavity between the brick work and the timber framing in order to prevent dampness.

In 1950 the returned serviceman who was the client for the Group Construction Company's first house managed to obtain a State Advances Loan only because the architects stood their ground and argued for construction in wood. Ivan Juriss recalled:

They weren't implacably opposed to timber, but they put all sorts of restriction on its use. Exterior vertical board and batten construction for instance was forbidden because it was regarded as likely to let in water, however, the first Group House was clad with vertical ship-lapped boards . . . it all depended on the individual building inspector.

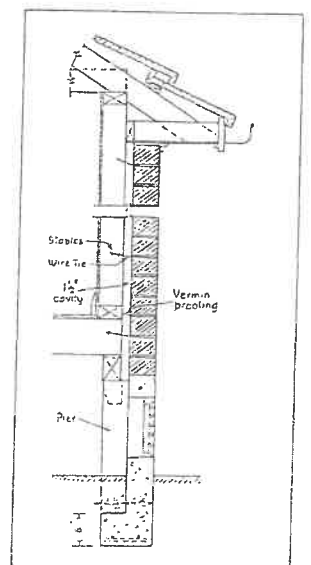
There was also official disapproval of plans which had kitchens opening out on to living areas. Sometimes it was necessary to produce two sets of drawings, one for the client showing an open-plan concept, the other showing a separate kitchen in order to satisfy a council official. To guarantee a good resale value the home owner was well advised to avoid exposed rafters, weatherboards and anything other than a concrete base. Body carpet covered fine matai floors, gibraltar board lined the walls, and ceilings were plastered over at considerable expense. In kitchens wood was banished in favour of formica, sometimes with an imprint that mimicked a timber or tiled surface. The patio, as opposed to

## Architecture as Individualism

*BOTTOM LEFT: A typical brick-and-tile house built at Avondale, Auckland, during the early 1960s. There is no wood visible, and the wrought-iron patio railing is a characteristic feature. The Venetian blinds would invariably have remained closed all day to prevent fading of the carpet.*

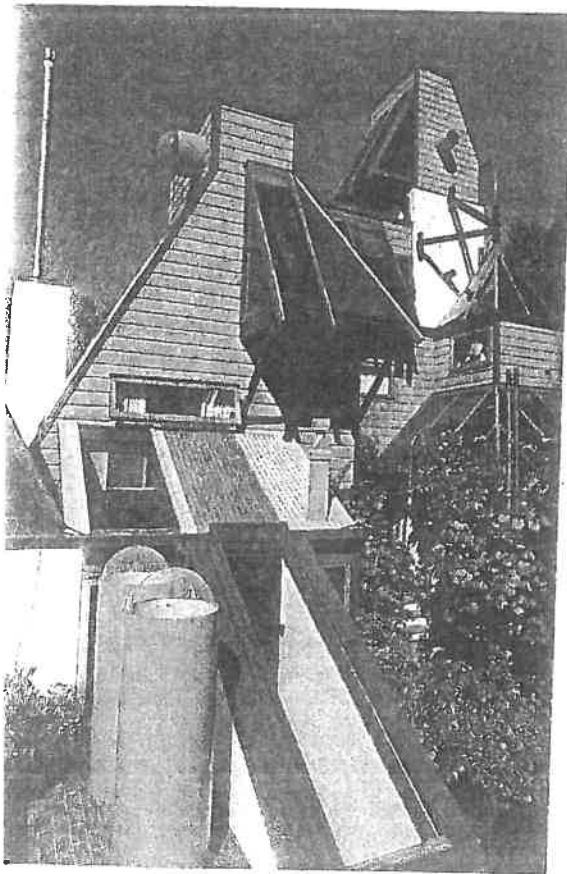


*Figure from Carpentry in New Zealand, showing how brick walls should be attached to timber frames.*

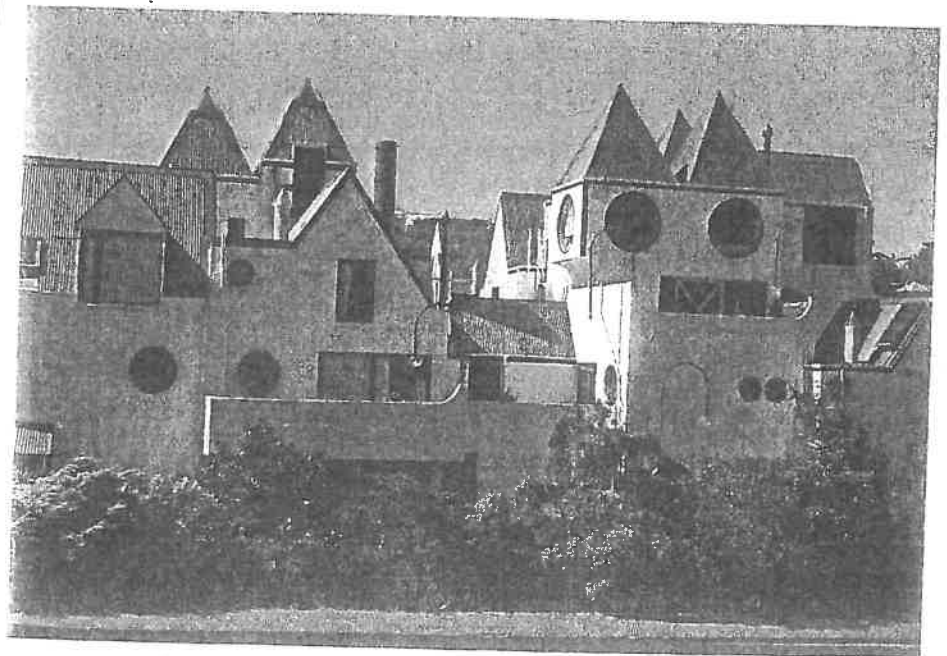


In these and other houses Athfield deliberately exploited randomness. A fierce opponent of the uniformity of state housing, he emphasised an individualistic approach to architecture, working closely with his clients, whose involvement in the construction process was a condition of the contract. Ten years later, his Buck House at Havelock North (see page 192) indicated that Athfield, in creating a dwelling that is a veritable sculpture, was still developing ideas which had their origin in his own house of 1966.

Roger Walker's Wellington houses were different but scarcely less shocking. Like Athfield, he was appalled at 'the sameness and degrading monotony of our suburban areas', but equally he despised the 'applied veneers and temporary titillations of the consumer housing brochures'.<sup>8</sup> He believed that there was an increasing demand for houses that reflected the variety of people themselves: rooms should be conceived as spaces rather than compartments, and these spaces should flow into and hang over one another, with different roof shapes and heights reflected internally (compare this with the Group's belief that if the planning was right the exterior would be too), and much stronger colours used.



Walker's 1973 Wood House, originally built as a speculative venture, used rustic weatherboards; its cottage-like form with double gables sported finials and a colonial verandah. Undoubtedly his 'domestic cause célèbre' was the large Britten house (1972-74) at Seatoun Heights, which Gerald Melling described as 'a village-house'.<sup>9</sup> The house is distributed over no fewer than ten levels, the top-most one a turret-like capsule which functions as a retreat above the main bedroom and allows the inhabitants to be completely isolated from the rest of the house and from the neighbours. The house is a series of small spaces independently roofed but with larger kitchen and living spaces opening onto a brick-paved courtyard. With its round windows set in huge drain pipes, soaring metal flues, cross braces across windows, and sliced-off gables which terminate in a horizontal roof or a square wooden box, the Britten House exemplifies Walker's distinctive architectural wit. The building won for its architect a national award in 1977 and, like Athfield's own house, attracted attention far beyond Wellington. Unlikely though it may seem, both Athfield and Walker also designed blocks of flats. David Mitchell has commented that Park Mews (1974) 'was a pop assemblage of Colonial peaks and Walker circles . . . the last thing Walker would let any building of his design say was "this is a block of flats" . . . so Park Mews looks like a huge Walker house (though a Walker house looks like a string of minute flats to some)'.<sup>10</sup>



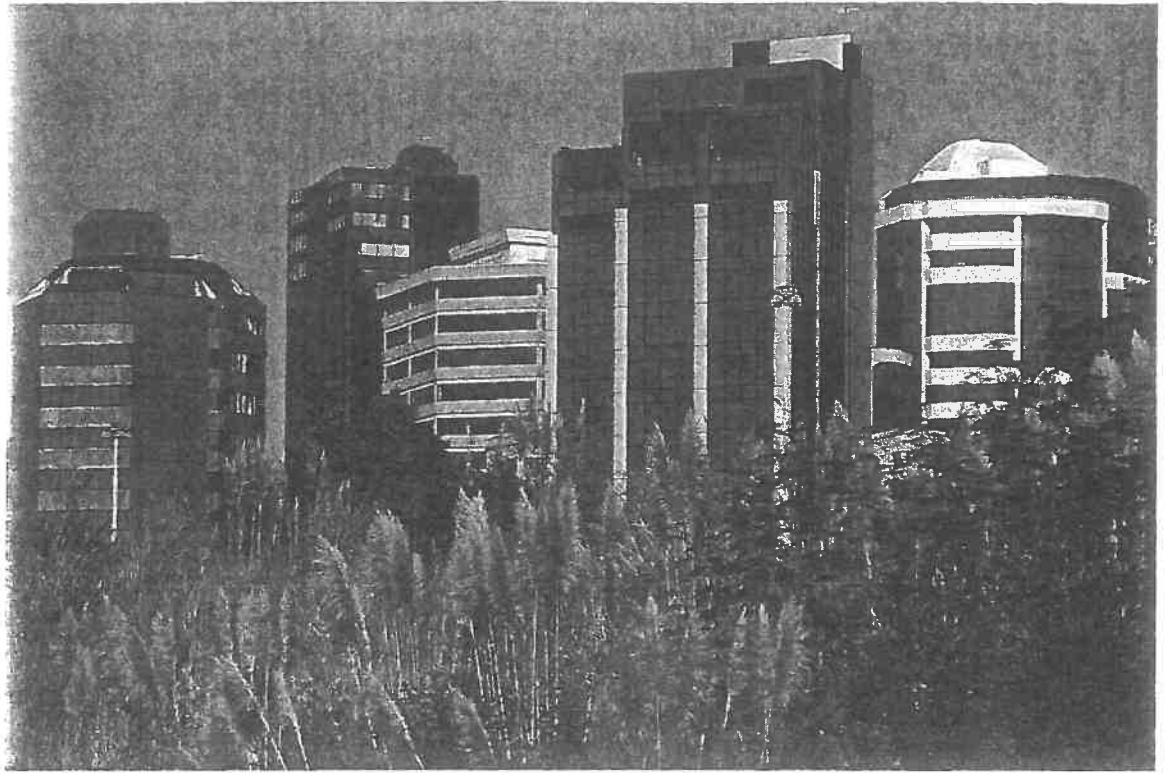
## Architecture as Individualism

*LEFT: Britten House (1972-74), Seatoun, Wellington, by Roger Walker. 'Imagination is stalking the streets,' wrote Roger Walker early in his career. This house shows just how far he was prepared to go in designing houses which bore as little relationship as possible to anything in New Zealand's architectural history.*

*Park Mews (1974), Wellington, by Roger Walker. The architect was able to adapt his highly individualistic architectural style to the problem of designing inner-city apartments.*

## NEW ZEALAND ARCHITECTURE

The view up Grafton Gully towards Symonds Street gives an indication of the types of high rise building which became such a familiar sight in Auckland during the 1980s.



Ironically, architectural awareness in the wider community increased as a boom economy during the 1980s encouraged the demolition of a great many older buildings in New Zealand's larger cities. As the result of people's growing resentment at the way their surroundings were being changed so rapidly and, it appeared, thoughtlessly, architectural *causes célèbres* were taken up in the popular press as well as in such professional magazines as *Architecture New Zealand* and *Home and Building*. By the time the nation's Sesquicentenary arrived in 1990 it was clear that New Zealanders had a highly ambiguous attitude to many aspects of their country's past, including its architectural history. The controversies concerning architecture during the decade led many towards a new respect for New Zealand's built environment, just as threats to the natural environment heightened awareness of the need to conserve natural resources.

By 1980 the avant-garde architects of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the country's senior practitioners, the best of them continuing to assimilate new styles and influences. A younger group of architects, many of them only recently released from the schools, were to adapt traditional ideological differences among the country's architects to the new pluralism of approach offered by Post-modernism. The result was an architecture characterised by variety,

display, intellectual rigour and humour. It was frequently informed, too, by an understanding of what had preceded the buildings of the present.

Sadly, many dull public buildings were also erected. Typical of those which aroused strong feelings of disapproval was the State Insurance Building on the corner of Waring Taylor Street and Lambton Quay, Wellington, built as a replacement for the uniquely Lutyensesque 1919 State Fire Insurance Building by Hoggard, Prouse & Gummer. It was completed in 1984 to a design by the firm of Hoadley, Budge & Partners, who originally envisaged two identical glass towers. The second tower, still unbuilt, was to replace Gummer & Ford's State Insurance Building of 1940 (see page 138), the survival of which in 1990 remains a subject of controversy. Claire Bengé criticised the Hoadley, Budge building for the lack of a clear relationship between its white Kairuru marble podium and its black glass tower. The podium does delineate the site boundary but, she says, 'sits heavily on the street, a bland and unrelenting three-storey band'.<sup>1</sup> A comparison between this building and its predecessor leads to the inescapable conclusion that change is not necessarily progress.

The year 1990 saw the completion of the Glossop, Chan Partnership's large National Bank Centre, which necessitated the demolition of an entire central Auckland block in favour of a