

## Cultural identity and the city – Auckland and Wismar

What forms the cultural identity of a city? As architectural historian and theorist, I will apply this question to the “Baukultur”, this German term, on the one hand heavily loaded and on the other hand virtually impossible to translate.

“Baukultur” stands for a culture of architecture and the built environment in its entirety. Thus I will ask: how can the identity of a city be defined via its built culture? This notion of Baukultur is less narrow in its definition than one would most likely expect to see in Wismar, a town so heavily focussed on its status as UNESCO World Heritage.

Is not the city as a whole in its built development a testimony to past and present architectural culture? If this is so, a discussion of built culture needs to be geared to what has marked and continues to mark the development of a city, rather than asking for the ‘beautiful’ constituents of the city. As Aldo Rossi did in his 1966 *Architecture of the City*, we will follow the notion of typology as defining element and of the ‘tessuto’, the fabric as a quasi-sculptural basic element of the city.<sup>1</sup> Please allow me to answer the question regarding built culture via a brief investigation of Auckland, hoping that this may stimulate reflections on this very question in Wismar.

Auckland and Wismar – these two cities could hardly be any more different. Here is the North German port town, with less than 40,000 inhabitants and a continuous history as a town of more than 800 years – and in the Southern Hemisphere there is a very young city, founded only in 1840, situated between Tasman Sea and the Pacific, housing circa 1,5 Million inhabitants in its conurbation. But since topography has a strong influence on the way in which cities develop and are inhabited, Auckland and Wismar as significant ports resemble each other in their cultural and economic importance far beyond their own city limits. Auckland is situated on the Isthmus between Tasman Sea and Pacific, on the North Island of New Zealand, in an area formed by volcanic activity. Nearly 50 extinct volcanoes have shaped the municipal area of Auckland, with their cones rising from the city as vantage points. Where the volcanoes are wide and shallow, they have shaped streets and urban patterns with their ridges and craters.

A central aspect of Auckland’s built culture is its web of motorways. It is debatable whether the decision to develop a transport network for a city of currently 1,5 Million inhabitants almost exclusively via motorways is in any way sustainable. But it is undeniable that the structures of the motorways have a strong effect on the development of the city, its appearance and daily life. Since Auckland’s CBD lies in the centre of a shallow and broad extinct volcano, its cone has formed a valley all around the city that resembles a moat. The motorway has been built in this natural ‘moat’; where North-western and Southern Motorway meet, the so-called Spaghetti Junction forms a spectacular crisscross of on-ramps and off-ramps.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982, first published as *L’architettura della città*, Padua: Marsilio, 1966.

### ***A few basic types of urban and suburban built structure in Auckland***

Whereas in Berlin the fabric of the city, the *tessuto*, has been formed by tenement blocks of the years between 1890 and 1910, Auckland does not have a similar type of dwelling units, which could form a dense quasi-sculptural “mass” of the city. Instead, the ‘villa’ lends itself for comparison, an almost universal type of house of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that was produced in mass-production and provided the main type of dwelling from circa 1890 onwards. As such, the villa establishes an equivalent to the fabric as formed by the Berlin tenement block – with the important distinction that the Berlin block indeed forms a sculptural mass whereas the Auckland villas, even when built in close proximity to one another, always remain an accumulation of separate buildings.

The origin of the New Zealand villa is disputed. The architect William Toomath has indicated numerous possible sources, amongst which he pointed at the early ‘export’ of the veranda of traditional Bengali bungalows to England, as early as 1770. Another type of house with veranda was native to Haiti in the Caribbean; this type was taken to the Mississippi by French colonists.<sup>2</sup> Toomath has further pointed out that the resemblance of early 1900s New Zealand houses to Californian models suggests an American genealogy of the villa.<sup>3</sup>

#### Ill. 1) A typical ‘single-bay villa’ on Ardmore Road, Ponsonby, Auckland

The villa presents a type that happily did without architect, in similarity to the Berlin tenement block. It was assembled by builders, not just physically, but also in terms of its design. The villa could be built with one or two bay windows. In most cases it was equipped with a veranda, always oriented towards the street, no matter whether that meant to direct the living room to the North or the South. The villa possesses a number of roughly equally sized rooms to the left and right of a corridor that leads from the street entry to kitchen and sanitary installations, facing towards the garden. The basic type provided almost endless variations, allowing diagonally oriented corner entry, a second storey, and several gable types. The fretwork is a typical element of the villa, often in timber, sometimes made from cast iron. Stylistic collisions of Gothic and Classical ornamentations were of no concern, as Peter Shaw has pointed out: “No one worried that fretwork designs deriving from Gothic tracery might be incompatible with a roof supported on Classical modillions [brackets], or that Italianate arched windows and Gothic pointed ones ought not to be found in the same house.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the villa which enjoys great popularity today, shows itself as a mixture of cultural elements, originating from all around the globe.

The villa forms the urban tissue of Auckland of the decades between circa 1880 and 1920 – before the Californian bungalow began to replace it as the basic type of house. The bungalow, again was replaced after 1936 by the State House, the model of a house for every New Zealander, introduced by the Labour

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<sup>2</sup> William Toomath, *Built in New Zealand. The House We Live In*, Auckland: Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 40ff.

<sup>3</sup> Toomath, *Built in New Zealand*, pp. 78ff.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Shaw, *A History of New Zealand Architecture*, Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2003, p. 46.

Government of Joseph Michael Savage.<sup>5</sup> The State House lasted until the 1960s, replaced by privately financed simple houses, often colloquially named “Auckland vernacular.” These four basic house types together form the substance of the residential areas of Auckland, except for the small area of the CBD.

A further type needs to be mentioned here: the ‘Main Street building.’ Almost exclusively made from brick and mostly two storeys high, at times just two bays wide, at times of a broader stature, the ‘Main Street building’ is of strongly American appearance. It subdivides the otherwise rather uniform domestic development of the suburbs by generating sub-centres which can be as small as consisting of just one or two of these buildings. On Dominion Road, on the other hand, this building type stretches over several kilometres. Such buildings mostly contain retail on the ground floor and apartments on the upper floor, or offices and surgeries.

Where side streets meet, this building type shows its spatial restrictions. Although, planning-wise, it can be adjusted to fit street corners, it was mostly built as oriented frontally towards the Main Street, even if this meant that the side street cut through its sides as through a long section of a building. When walking from Main Street into one of the side roads one experiences the inadequate transition from the two-storey commercial architecture to the adjoining villas or bungalows: the speculative system did not provide a standard solution for this case.

All these five types form the urbanistic backbone of Auckland outside the CBD, and as such they constitute the basis of the city’s built identity. Nevertheless it is common to forget these everyday types in architectural investigations since they seem to add so little to the architectural ‘high culture.’ Such individual buildings stand out against the fabric of the everyday city.

### ***Timber or Stone?***

In late 19<sup>th</sup> century Auckland, buildings were erected as Gothic or Classicist; in this, New Zealand was no different from Europe at the same time. A difference though appears in the translation of stone construction into timber: Frederick Thatcher is a prominent exponent of the “Antipodean Gothic”, well known through his wooden Gothic churches, for example St John the Evangelist in Auckland of 1847. He transferred the Gothic formal language that had developed through the conditions of building with stone into timber structures that are unrivalled in their beauty and spatial expression. Thatcher’s technique was continued by William Mountfort in his church buildings, such as St Mary’s Pro-cathedral in Parnell, Auckland of 1888. And William Mason’s Old Government House in Auckland of 1856 demonstrates the stunning craft of the ship carpenters available at the time in their ability to translate Renaissance architecture into timber.<sup>6</sup> This is a cultural translation of a unique kind.

Ill. 2) Carrington Hospital, 1865, today Unitec Institute of Technology

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<sup>5</sup> Toomath, *Built in New Zealand*, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Compare John Stacpoole and Peter Beaven, *Architecture 1820 – 1970*, Wellington/Sydney/London: Reed, 1972; and Shaw, *A History of New Zealand Architecture*.

James Wrigley's Carrington Mental Hospital deserves a mention here because of its significance for Unitec. In 1857, the number of mentally ill compared to the healthy New Zealanders was twice as high as in England.<sup>7</sup> This demonstrates the necessity of erecting Auckland's own mental hospital which, at the time of its opening in 1865, was the biggest public building in Auckland. The plans were purchased in England and modified and put out to tender by Auckland architect James Wrigley. Made from yellow brick with red ornamental brick elements, baked in local brickworks, it presents itself as more European in style than many other buildings in Auckland. Originally only one of the two planned wings was erected because of high building costs. But after a fire had destroyed much of the recently opened building in 1877, it was not just repaired but extended by Auckland architect Philip Herapath in 1881.<sup>8</sup> Thus the initially planned eastern wing completed the complex. During its existence as mental hospital, the building was extended and added to many times, even spoiled by additions, until its closure as a hospital in 1993. Only one year later, in 1994, Unitec's School of Architecture and Design took over the complex.

### ***Culture of European emigrants in New Zealand***

While a substantial development of public housing is missing in Auckland, the few exceptional housing schemes by European emigrants need to be mentioned. Architects like Friedrich Neumann (who called himself Frederick Newman in New Zealand), Ernst Plischke and others attempted to introduce European modernist models of multi-storey housing to the young country. They all worked in the Department of Housing Construction, under its chief architect, Gordon Wilson. These buildings have remained slightly out of place in the cityscape and are still detectable as cultural imports. Newman's housing scheme on Symonds Street or the generous block of flats on Greys Avenue – which cannot be indisputably attributed to either Plischke or Newman – show elements of German modernist developments of the 1920s. Bruno Taut's architecture might have provided inspiration for some of the Greys Avenue details, and the Symonds Street Flats reminds the observer of Mies van der Rohe's block of flats on Afrikanische Strasse in Berlin-Wedding of 1926.

#### Ill. 3) Frederick Newman, Symond St Flats (1939/1947)

Newman's Symond Street Flats were designed in 1939 but not erected until 1947. They are developed over a t-shaped plan, the 'head' of which forms a six-storey building, with a slight concave bend towards the street. The courtyard side drops away towards Grafton Gully – and thus towards the motorway these days. Here, the building opens to the left and right into loggia-like corridors as can be found in Vienna. The central staircase is joined by a further six-storey building mass which, following the drop of the terrain, is situated one storey lower than the building towards the street.

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<sup>7</sup> See the conservation plan for Carrington Mental Hospital, by Salmond Architects, Devonport, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Conservation plan Carrington Mental Hospital, p. 5.

While working for the Department of Housing Construction, Ernst Plischke developed suburban “community centres” all over New Zealand but their realization failed, for political reasons, in almost every single case. However, in Orakei, close to Mission Bay in Auckland, a few of his ‘multi-units’ were built in two different versions between 1939 and -41. Their design closely followed Plischke’s units for the Werkbund settlement of 1932 in Vienna.

Ills. 4, 5) Ernst Plischke: Werkbund settlement Vienna, 1932 and ‘multi-units’ for Orakei, Auckland, 1939/40

His Vienna Werkbund settlement units were composed on a simple but efficient plan: on an almost square plan, the living room occupied the right half of the dwelling from front to back, whereas a small room, kitchen and a small forecourt took up the left half. The half-spiralled staircase jut out slightly from the plan and thus shaped an extension of the building’s main body towards the street. On the upper floor, the plan was almost identical, with a large bedroom above the living room and bathroom, toilet and a small bedroom above the other side of the plan, and a loggia above the forecourt. Plischke adopted as much of this plan as possible for his Orakei units, of which he said that three or four dwellings combined would form a ‘unit’.<sup>9</sup> His ‘multi-units’ were built in two different versions that did not match the elegance of the Vienna examples. It is astonishing to see that despite the mild climate of Auckland, these units were more enclosed than the Vienna ones. Nonetheless, Plischke managed to avoid the inconvenient entry solutions as found in comparable buildings designed by his superior Gordon Wilson.

On occasion of the Vienna Werkbund settlement, Plischke had analyzed the situation in which modernist architecture found itself. In his article “Was nun weiter?” – How to continue? – he defined built culture via what he called “Gesinnung” – mentality. He states that “[o]nly if mundane everyday is permeated with an idea, the dull mechanisation of life can be overcome.”<sup>10</sup> In a language typical for his time he sees this idea represented in collectivism – which should however not be mistaken for a socialist collectivism: “It does not create all-levelling opportunities for the mediocre but is the strictest and demanding task [...] to say in a comprehensible language what is to be said – and not in an affected, pseudo-subjective form.”<sup>11</sup> Such an approach Plischke calls the most noble which manages “to bring everything into a form that remains generally imperceptible to those who do not feel it in an essential way, and does not give rise to a formalistic pose.”<sup>12</sup> This fundamental position may seem surprising these days where architects tend to aim at attracting attention with their buildings. For Plischke however the value of a built culture lay in an inconspicuous, timeless quality, determined by the skills of the designer and the builder. This is an enormously important approach that does not easily fall on fertile grounds in New Zealand: architecture is either purely “utilitarian”, as Plischke would have called it, or it tends towards the spectacle.

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<sup>9</sup> Ernst A. Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, Vienna: Löcker, 1989, p. 242.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted after Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

### ***The “Group” architects***

A few students of architecture from Auckland University founded the “Architectural Group” in 1946. This group of young architects occupies a central position in the mythology of New Zealand’s architectural history because one of their battle cries was: “overseas solutions will not do. New Zealand must have its own architecture.”<sup>13</sup> They were convinced that the architecture that had hitherto been created in New Zealand was not ‘their own’, or, as founding member Bill Wilson said: “there is no architecture in New Zealand. NONE!”<sup>14</sup> This attempt at creating their own architectural language coincided with the appointment of a Professor of Architectural Design at the country’s then only architecture school, Auckland University. Ernst Plischke had applied but a British exponent of the Beaux-Arts, Charles Light, was appointed in 1947. The young Group Architects demonstrated their desire to shape an architecture of their own by designing and building light timber houses but at the same time they aimed at catching up with international modernism. Their practice shows a contradictory, slightly desperate attempt at creating, or even forcing a national built culture into existence. Such a nationalist self-discovery may be seen as disconcerting, but to a certain extent it is understandable with regard to New Zealand’s intellectual and cultural dependence upon England at the time.

### ***JASMaD***

No matter if typical New Zealand or else, the architecture of JASMaD, a group of architects who joined their initials to this innovative company name in 1963 (and who grew into today’s Jasmax) was of a particular kind, characterized by Auckland and leaving their own stamp on the city. Three of their early projects are presented here: first of all there is International House, a hall of residence for Auckland University, of 1971. Situated in Grafton Gully, just below Newman’s Symond Street Flats, International House was beautifully located amidst lush greenery long before the motorway was cut through the gully. In its use of yellow brick as well as through its distribution of building mass the complex obtained a strongly Scandinavian character. Ivan Mercep, possibly JASMaD’s most prominent architect, has repeatedly declared his closeness to Finnish architect Alvar Aalto’s designs, even if the building in question has a strong Danish air about it, reminding the observer of Kay Fisker and C.F. Møller’s Aarhus University buildings, particularly because of the large roof slopes. These prominent roofs seem to be a trademark of early JASMaD’s designs. Not surprisingly therefore, the Auckland University Student Accommodation complex in Freeman’s Bay of 1976, situated in Collingwood Street, shows similar large and low roof surfaces. Here, a taut balance is kept between domestic and institutional architecture in a staggered composition that leads the complex organically down the slope from Collingwood Street into Freemans Bay. JASMaD used dark weatherboards, taking away any institutional severity and bringing the complex closer to the Waitakere bush. Also, Ralph Erskine’s Biker Wall in Newcastle-upon-Tyne appears as a direct relative of the Auckland Student

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<sup>13</sup> Manifesto of the Architectural Group, 1946, quoted after Julia Gatley (ed.), *Group Architects. Towards a New Zealand Architecture*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Accommodation in its breaking up of repetition and evocation of participatory architecture.

### ***Samoa elements of built culture in Auckland***

Last but not least, JASMaD's Samoa House of 1980 needs to be mentioned: situated between Karangahape Road with its rich history and the small Beresford Street in the heart of Auckland, Ivan Mercep brought together in one building two cultures that could hardly be any more different: the architecture of the Samoan Fale, the indigenous round house of the Samoans, was married with a three-storey urban office building into one complex setting.<sup>15</sup> This building can be considered as a serious attempt at transferring Samoan spatial notions and building traditions into the centre of Auckland, and more than that: to try to connect the Fale, a building type that categorically demands openness on all sides, directly with the perimeter block without completely compromising the Fale. Mercep only partly succeeded with this heroic attempt but the achievement of this project lies in the fact that the architecture of Samoa House has not slipped into folkloristic kitsch.

#### Ill. 6) Samoa House, seen from Beresford Street

A more recent contribution to Samoan architecture in Auckland is the small Fale on Unitec grounds, erected in 2003. Its role in terms of urban design is far less complex than Samoa House's since it sits like a folly, an independent pavilion, in the courtyard of the Department of Architecture. Another contribution is a Fale Tele – a Samoan long house – designed by JASMaD's successor, Jasmax, for Auckland University. It was situated next to a parking lot behind other University buildings, which avoided the problem of integration into the built context – but surrounding a Fale by car parks presents a rather poor solution.

### ***Maori architecture in Auckland***

The oldest architecture in Auckland – in New Zealand – and, in some respect also the youngest, is Maori architecture. The first built structures in Auckland were the Pahs, terraced fortifications on the slopes of extinct volcanoes. After the colonialization by the British and with growing urbanization, Maori architecture was largely suppressed. Only in recent years a revival has taken place. More and more Maori architects have received their degrees from one of the two architecture schools in town, Auckland University or Unitec, and more offices are practicing these days who see Maori culture as their own. Increasingly, buildings such as public libraries are designed that represent a cultural mixture of contemporary modernism and a Maori-based interpretation of culture, tradition and symbolism. At times when practices like Jasmax take up Maori motives in their architecture, the results can be quite tacky, or at least they need getting

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Christoph Schnoor and John Taliva'a, "Samoa Village Space in Transition", in Antony Moulis and Deborah van der Plaats (eds.): *Audience. Proceedings of the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand SAHANZ*, Brisbane, Australia (CD-ROM).

used to. But there is one contemporary example of a Maori house in which the attempt at joining elements of contemporary global culture with traditional Maori architecture has resulted in a fascinating building: Unitec's new *whare nui*, the meeting house on the campus by master carver Lyonel Grant.

### ***How do the cultures meet?***

In Auckland, circa 150 languages are spoken today. It is a truly multi-cultural city. The biggest sections of the population are Pakeha – European New Zealanders –, Maori, Pacific Islanders, Chinese and Indians, but also South Africans and Iranians. There are no real ghettos but numerous areas with a clear majority of an affiliation with one Nationality or one geographical region. Some of the residential areas close to the city are very “white”, other areas are mixed with Indians, Chinese and Europeans.

Ill. 7) The ‘Main Street type’ on Dominion Road: adapted by Chinese and Indians

This essay attempts to show in all brevity how different cultures – not just the British – have influenced the architecture of Auckland. The influence of the European architects who came to New Zealand, relative to the number of non-British European immigrants, is quite high. And although Maori represent the oldest culture in New Zealand, their influence on built culture is only just becoming visible. Slowly, architectural mainstream practices like Jasmac are incorporating Maori and Pacific features in their architecture, and Asian cultures are beginning to show an influence on the cityscape.

Nevertheless, there is virtually no ‘imported’ architecture in New Zealand. This is more than surprising since even small-town Wismar possesses an example of outstanding international architecture with Jean Nouvel’s technology park. However, in Auckland there is hardly any building that would not have been designed by a local architect. Thus, the architectural culture of New Zealand is strongly local, while being global in its cultural translations.

### ***What about Wismar? Conclusion***

How can these observations be transferred to Wismar? First of all, it should be clear that Wismar is not homogenous in its architectural culture even if it possesses one of the most complete medieval town centres in Germany. But in the context of studying cultural transfers and adaptations it may be useful to see the range of influences, from the Hanseatic culture, via Swedish imports and the Mecklenburg or Prussian aspects of built culture to important examples of GDR architecture and of post-Wende German architecture. Additionally, one can trace the development of a town from catholic to protestant to increasingly agnostic. On our colloquium day in Wismar we were able to begin this investigation. But it should have become clear that the students attempting to understand Wismar could continue this investigation in far more depth than we were able to achieve in one day.