

Gardening the interior: Odo Strewe inside the 1980s

Kerry Francis

ABSTRACT: Odo Strewe arrived in New Zealand in 1938, a refugee from Nazi Germany. After release from internment on Matiu (Somes) Island as an Enemy Alien during World War Two, he married and moved to Auckland where he started a landscape design and construction business. Strewe had explored the idea of plants inside buildings in the very first house that he had made for his family in Glen Eden, Auckland in 1949. An Australian journalist writing about the house described the interior "with tropical paw paws almost coming indoors to join forces with the banana that is really growing and fruiting, right inside the house." Strewe continued to advocate for this disciplinary contest in subsequent years by writing about indoor gardening in *New Zealand Modern Homes and Gardens* and designing gardens that challenged the boundaries between landscape and the interior. This paper will explore the design strategies of two of Strewe's interior gardens in the 1960s as he developed this aspect of his landscape design practice.

Introduction

Friederich Georg Maria Theodor (Odo) Strewe was born in Shanghai, China in 1910 and spent the first ten years of his life in that city where his father was a German Trade Commissioner. The family moved back to Berlin, Germany where Strewe senior later became the editor of a daily newspaper and President of the Berlin Press Conference.¹ Young Odo himself studied journalism. He often referred to himself as having a background in agricultural journalism.² An undated document in the Strewe Family Archive records a claim for compensation for the 400-500 books seized in January 1937 when the Gestapo arrested Odo for

suspected anti-Nazi activities.³ He was interrogated for five days and nights, released reportedly as a result of his father's influence and fled Germany for the UK. In that compensation claim he described himself as the owner of an advertising agency. He arrived in New Zealand in June 1938 via Canada and the South Pacific with a contract to supply material to the Anglo Dutch American Press Service.

After internment as an Enemy Alien on Matiu (Somes) Island in Wellington harbour from 1940-45 he worked in Wellington where he met and later married Jocelyn Muir. The couple lived briefly at Riverside Community in Lower

Moutere then returned to Wellington where Odo worked as a gardener at the Canadian High High Commission. In 1948 they moved north to Auckland to a recently purchased property at 73 Great North Road, Glen Eden.

The first evidence of Strewe locating plant material inside a building occurs in this first house for the family at Great North Road.⁴ The house, designed by Dick Hobin of Structural Developments, was described thus in the subtitle of an article in *Australia Homemaker*, August 1954: "Economical building methods and materials give this New Zealand home low-cost beauty with an indoor-outdoor

¹ Strewe. Pers. Comm.

² "Learn from an Expert" p 59.

³ "[Application for resitution/compensation]"

⁴ Francis "Strewe's Houses or Housing Strewes" pp 145-150.

feeling."⁵ This spatial continuity was reinforced as the journalist describes the building "with tropical pawpaws almost coming indoors to join forces with the banana that is really growing and fruiting, right inside the house."⁶ The article also records the presence of plant motifs and colours in curtains, murals and a painting within the house. The house was the site of fruit and vegetable production for the family but was also a plant nursery and the base for Odo's landscape design and construction business.

Late in 1956 Strewe returned to Germany to visit his parents and to visit German Democratic Republic (GDR) also known as East Germany.⁷ He was a long time supporter of the GDR and was particularly interested in their mass housing projects and their relationship with supporting amenity provided by public open space.

Shortly after his return to New Zealand in 1958 he began a series of articles in *New Zealand Modern Homes and Gardens* to advertise that he was back, and back in business. The first in the Summer edition 1958 is titled "Indoor Gardening." His by-line covers all interests "to some ... a hobby ... a business ... a vocation, but to all an aesthetic pleasure."⁸ The six-page article contains descriptions of appropriate species, reference to the sculptural qualities of the plant material and frames indoor gardening as art through reference to the sculpture of Henry Moore and the publication *Kunstformen der Natur*. The article concludes with instructions for the "Care and Cultivation of Indoor Plants." Strewe was riffing off an interest that had been established locally, earlier in the 1950s. John Crichton was an English-trained interior designer who came to New Zealand via Burma (now Myanmar) and Malaysia.⁹ Crichton's 1952 article in *NZ Home and Building* magazine, "Introducing

Tropical Interiors for New Zealand Living,"¹⁰ and the Pacific-inspired shop-front displays at his Kitchener Street showroom, introduced a new stylistic and material palette to the local interior and provided an opportunity for Strewe to expand his landscape practice into the interiors of buildings.

Laidlaw Garden

Strewe continues to write for *NZ Modern Homes and Gardens* but it is not until the Spring edition 1962 that we find him specifically writing about an indoor garden. In an article titled "Contemporary Indoor Garden" and subtitled "Tall Bamboo ... A Sea of Pebbles" Strewe first emphasises his modernity with this primary title but follows it up by identifying the major formal elements of the scheme in the subtitle. These two oppositional design elements - the vertical line of the bamboo and the horizontal plane of the pebbles are poetically evoked in this subtitle. They communicate the

⁵ Neilsen "All this for 800 pounds" p 22.

⁶ Neilsen "All this for 800 pounds" p 22.

⁷ Bell "Odo's back in Town" p 12.

⁸ Strewe "Indoor Gardening" p 73.

⁹ Lloyd-Jenkins *At Home* p 140.

¹⁰ Crichton "Introducing Tropical interiors for New Zealand Living" p 37.



Figure 1: Laidlaw courtyard. Photographer Arne Loot

idea of the project so effectively that you almost do not need to read the following text.

However, the brief text on this first page is useful. It begins with an explanation of the difficulties of the existing 12 foot by 12 foot internal courtyard. Strewe articulates

both functional and aesthetic issues that have compromised the courtyard. Also on this first page of the article is a photograph of the bamboo down light hanging from the top frame of the page. The photograph communicates the idea of suspension from above but the outline of both bamboo and plant material is rough making the image difficult to read. Another photograph in the Strewe Archive provides the answer. Strewe has taken the Arne Loot original (Figure 1) which contains the dark background ceiling, stairs and walls of the space. Using typewriter correction fluid he has then provided a white mask around the bamboo and climber, isolating it to emphasize its suspended quality so that it can be inserted into the page as an idea. We see here evidence of Strewe's experience in the world of advertising and journalism. There are numerous examples in his archive of cropped and numbered photographs prepared for publication.

In contrast the image on the opposite page fills that frame and is a view down to the

plane of the floor. The vertical elements are suppressed by the view angle, privileging the detail of the floor plane and revealing a pathway of long, rectangular, lamp-black, concrete stepping stones. This pathway skilfully wraps around a rectangle of white pebbles (from Gillespies Beach not far from Fox Glacier) that increase in size as they move away from the pathway. Three tall, narrow, hand-thrown, earthenware planters sit in this white bed. Greenish pebbles (from the Arahura River outside of Hokitika) complete the composition of the ground plane.

The third page containing a drawing titled "PENULTIMATE SKETCH" gives a key to plants and a text key to the drawing that identifies the plant material and hard landscape material. It is from this key that I have extracted the more explicit origins of the two types of pebbles. But this drawing is not the drawing of the *in situ* project. That project is far more sophisticated than the drawing and the text key of the drawing is sometimes

propositional rather than definitive suggesting that it is an early version. There are three suspended bamboo in the drawing but only one in the completed project. The configuration of the white pebbles and the stepping stones are different. In his text description on the opposite and final page Strewe appears to be referring to the *in situ* project. There is a conscious Pacific narrative in the text connecting all these elements. "We see the urns on the crest of a foaming wave of white pebbles stretching their masts, the young plants up, leading the eye to the tall thick bamboo."¹¹ Despite its small size, the courtyard talks to the wider expanse of the Pacific and to the experience of sailing.

There is also significant Japanese landscape influence here. The interior garden space, the pebble patterning, the use of several species of bamboo and the rustic earthenware are all identifiable elements of traditional Japanese landscape. Additionally, there are the

three screens that hang inside one glazed wall of the courtyard. Strewe identifies them as "Japanese screens with plants and butterflies impressed to give a backdrop."¹² This idea of patterns, colours, motifs of plant material (plant representations) migrating to other areas of the built project is something that was evident way back in the original Strewe house at Great North Road. Betty Neilsen, the journalist, constantly refers to the presence of these representations throughout the house.

This courtyard is a sophisticated piece of design. It is presented in this *NZ Modern Homes and Gardens* publication in a way that indicates that the author is in control of the design. The design has changed in detail between the sketch shown on page 50 and the final *in situ* project. There is no evidence to my knowledge that records this process of change. We can ask some questions and we can make some guesses. The client was the Laidlaw family. The husband, Lincoln Laidlaw, was described

¹¹ Strewe "Contemporary Indoor Garden" p 51.

¹² Strewe "Contemporary Indoor Garden" p 51.

by Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins as entrepreneurial. He was the founder of Lincoln Industries who produced the eponymous range of die cast metal Lincoln toys from 1948 until the early 1980s. In 1951 he opened the first Jon Jansen shop in Queens Arcade bringing imported furniture from Scandinavia, Australia, England and the United States.¹³ Importantly, his sister Lillian Chrystall (nee Laidlaw) was an architect and is likely the designer of the home we are discussing. It is equally likely that, as the architect and as a family member, she participated in design discussions about the treatment of the courtyard.

Palmers Garden Centre

Strewe's advertorial activities were not restricted to *New Zealand Modern Homes and Gardens*. He had developed a strong business relationship with Palmers Garden Centre who opened their Great North Road shop in 1958 and later expanded these premises, opening in 1966, following a 1965 trip by Stanley J

¹³ Lloyd-Jenkins *At Home* p 146.

Palmer to view garden centre retail developments in the United States.¹⁴ The Palmers' *Winter Planting Guide* of post 1962,¹⁵ contains a four-page fold-out by Strewe that features plans and plant keys for three of his garden designs and an introductory text that makes the distinction between the practical side of landscaping and modernist design theory that he introduces through a series of quotes by notable artists, architects and landscape architects. The most potent in the context of the indoor garden is that from Joseph Hudnut, at the time the Dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University:

The new vision has dissolved the ancient boundary between architecture and landscape architecture. The garden flows into and over the house; through loggias and courts and wide areas of clear glass, and over roofs and sunrooms and canopied terraces. The house reaches out into the garden with walls and terraced enclosures that continue its rhythms and share its grace. The

¹⁴ Nursery and Garden Industry Association *A Celebration of 100 years* p 104.

¹⁵ The guide is not dated but the opening sentence in side the front cover "During 1962 our company celebrated its Golden Jubilee" indicates an approximate time frame.

concordant factor is the new quality of space.¹⁶

Subritsky Garden

Perhaps the Strewe garden most evocative of this new dissolution of boundary is the garden design for the Subritsky family on a 15 acre property with "a glorious view of the Manukau"¹⁷ that is the cover story of the January 1964 issue of *NZ Home and Building*. Strewe made landscape development plans for the whole of the property but the focus for this paper is on the "garden flows into and over the house."¹⁸ The ranch style house by architects McLachlan and Stemson and interior designer Phyllis D McLachlan is an articulated series of private zones connected by family space and "paved and planted courts."¹⁹ Strewe is recorded in the article as the Landscape Architect. The cover of the magazine shows the pool, as does Douglas Lloyd Jenkins in his

¹⁶ Joseph Hudnut quoted, Strewe "Landscaping" fold out back. Strewe took this quote and several others in this introduction from Eckbo *Landscape for Living* p 61.

¹⁷ "House with a Related Pool" p 34.

¹⁸ Hudnut quoted, Strewe "Landscaping" fold out back

¹⁹ "House with a Related Pool" p 34.

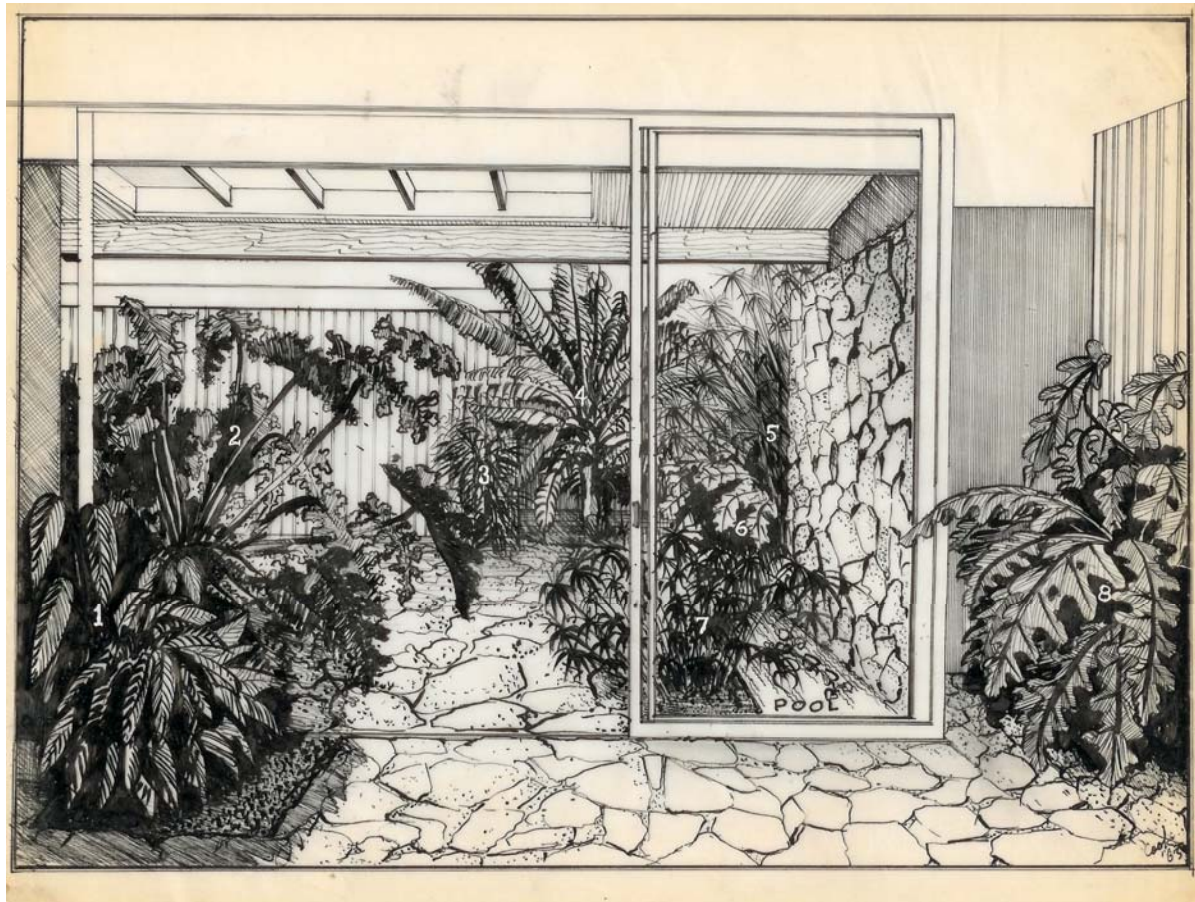


Figure 2: Subritsky. View east from foyer into the courtyard. Drawing Marshall Cook.

article on Strewe in the February/March 2003 *Home and Entertaining*.²⁰ While this

²⁰ Lloyd-Jenkins "Alfresco Doyen" p 51.

image does evoke a Pacific rim atmosphere I am interested in the more contained spaces of entry, foyer and courtyard.

The visitor approaches the home from the sweep of the driveway, parks and moving closer is confronted by a massive *Tetrapanax* that provides a pivot on the corner of the study. This pivot allows the visitor to make a choice of entry location depending on their relationship with the family. Those visiting for the first time or formally are led by the continuous crazy paving surface under the extended roof of the portico/carport and then into the slightly recessed front door. The (private) bedroom wing of the house to the left is pulled back from this sweep of driveway but the (public) portico ahead extends forward and over it. This cueing is supported, initially, by the curvature of the *Tetrapanax* leaf mass but as this massing recedes, as we move under the portico, a stone veneer wall rises above a bed of low, broad-leafed plants. We are introduced to a constructed vertical surface on our left as a prelude to formal entry. Another surface of stone is immediately in front of us; the back wall of the guest bedroom suite. These hard constructed cues us to prepare for the

formal entry through the front door. The paved floor surface is continuous through this threshold and into a long rectangular foyer that opens to the right, to the west, through aluminium sliding doors to the swimming pool. Directly ahead, to the south, are two steps down into the living room. A broad, serrated-leafed *Monstera* covers the end of the room divider almost to ceiling and a low planter slides alongside the steps into the living room repeating the gesture of plant material softening the point of choice followed by exposure of the constructed space definer, as at the entry. To the right, but outside the sliding doors that lead to the pool is a bed of broad-leafed *Alocasia*. In the foreground, to our left just past the door into the study, plants complete a vegetated edge to the left hand side as it transitions to the east courtyard. The image of this space that appears in the article demonstrates superbly the transparency and spatial fluidity so beloved of modernist architectural theory. However, this spatial formulation is the work of the architects (and the interior

designer?). What role has Strewe played in this?

The Strewe Archive contains a drawing of the exit from the foyer (Figure 2). Equally it could be described as the entry to courtyard on the left or east. The drawing bears a signature; "Cook 63" and is the work of Marshall (Marsh) Cook who as a young graduate was working for Strewe at this time.²¹ The drawing is, to a large degree, a tracing of the the photograph that appears in the *Home and Building* article. Why would Strewe commission a drawing when he already had the photograph? The drawing contains reference numbers that match an accompanying list titled "Plants in Subritsky Courtyard." A similar type of annotated drawing appears in the *Hardware Journal* interview of 1966.²² It is likely that the drawing removed some condition of client ownership of the image and allowed Odo to use it for advertising purposes. But then again the actual

²¹ Cook. Pers. Comm.

²² "Learn from an Expert" p 46.

photograph appears in another publication, *The Tourist Court Monthly* March 1966,²³ which would seem to undermine my previous argument.

The plant material framing the left hand side of the photographic image and the drawing, mentioned above, softens the right angle turn left to the doorway. The planter box is angled to assist this transition and terminates at the threshold in a low *Stromanthe sanguinea* that allows a soft transition across this threshold of the glass slider to a large *Philodendron* that masks the court from the foyer but performs as a pivot if moving from the other direction. This time the constructed element, the stone veneer wall, is on the other side of the threshold space and again exposed above a linear pool with low sparse planting. The stone wall always leads you into or out of these spaces and the plant material is selected and located to prepare us, cue us and guide us through.

²³ Strewe "What is Your Image" p 6.

We note these same design strategies occurring if we are known to the Subritsky family. A less formal entry to the home, through the courtyard is cued by isolated paving stones set in grass to the left of the *Tetrapanax*. The courtyard is contained at the left by a slatted timber screen, more rustic and softer than the hard stone by the formal entry. Once inside, you can cross the courtyard and enter directly into the domestic heart of the house, the kitchen, through aluminium sliding doors. This entry is framed on the left hand side by a large-leaved Abyssinian banana and on the right by a spindly but headed papyrus with *Gunnera* below. The broad leaves of the banana also shelter the children's sand pit located directly outside and easily surveilled from the kitchen.

There is always a process of compression and relief in these design strategies at points of spatial transition whether it is part of a linear sequence or coincident at the threshold. Plants taking up space, *Tetrapanax*, *Philodendron* and Abyssinian

Banana, give way to lower or more spindly plants and reveal the architecture. While the architects and interior designers may have constructed the stage and choreographed opportunities to fluidly occupy these spaces, Strewe has enhanced them. He has worked with the architecture to alternatively obscure and reveal its material and spatial condition. He has organised the texture, massing and locations of this plant material to guide and enrich the circulation through these spaces. This is just the beginning of a bigger exploration of the role of the plant material design in these spaces. I have not even touched on the more particular characteristics of each plant – their colour, their texture, their smell and their flowering performance.

Conclusion

In one way these two courtyards from the 1960s, Laidlaw and Subritsky, are similar. Both are important informal circulation spaces with problematic access from three sides. But there are significant differences. Laidlaw is a small in plan (3.6 x 3.6

metres), double-height space contained by a ceiling. It already existed and the project was a refurbishment intended to mitigate the circulation issues and turn it into a space of character. Subritsky is larger in plan, single storey and open to the sky. We can presume that Strewe was invited into the design team for this project some time before the project was built. The ranch-style architecture of the completed building has a formal and material palette consistent with similar work from the West Coast region of the United States where it originated. We do not know if Strewe contributed materially to the architectural project. But we do know that his vegetal contribution was significant.

These two projects demonstrate Strewe working in different modes. In the Laidlaw courtyard there is narrative at play. The plant material is minimal and is selected to serve the idea of this conceptual device. The strong vertical and horizontal elements make this a very oppositional composition. It is the tension between them that activates this space.

These oppositional elements never physically connect. The singular bamboo reaches down. The "erect growing plants" reach up out of their "hand thrown earthenware" cylinders sitting on the dynamic plane white pebbles.²⁴ There is a kind of spatial electricity that connects them - but by implication only. The ground plane/ocean plane of the floor is given greater depth by vertical extension below this surface to the Arahura River and Gillespies Beach to the South Island where these pebbles were formed. Similarly, you might step lightly across this surface to Japan. Strewe takes a small internal space and imbues it with a sense of active, three-dimensional spaciousness.

The contained Subritsky spaces are part of a much larger 15-acre landscape development. If there is a narrative it is about not moving. It is about rest and relaxation in the outdoors but that is a subtext already driven by the architecture. Strewe's contribution is a spatial and textural dance with the architecture,

sometimes revealing, sometimes obscuring it, using it to greet and guide us to support an ease of occupation. There is no big idea here, as there was at Laidlaw, but rather a demonstration of the craft of landscape architecture.

In the end we come back to the beginning. Strewe trained as a journalist, he owned an advertising agency in Berlin. He was aware of the power of the print media to communicate ideas and he used it actively to advertise his professional presence throughout his landscape career in New Zealand.

²⁴ Strewe "Contemporary Garden" p 50.

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