

# **Poles apart; Modernism in Brazil and in New Zealand.**

**Daniele Abreu e Lima**  
Victoria University of Wellington

**Nigel Isaacs**  
Victoria University of Wellington

## ***Abstract***

This paper offers an appreciation of modern New Zealand architecture by comparing it to Brazilian Modern architecture. One may ask what such a comparison brings to the plate and on top of that one may wonder still why the choice of these two countries? The answer to these two pertinent questions are derived from geographic and cultural circumstance and theoretical logic. For this researcher it may be said that it all began some fifteen years ago with a life changing move from Brazil to New Zealand, on this journey there was a sizable number of collected data that was brought along concerning the middle class Brazilian modern house from the 1950s and 1960s. Such data was the result of the first two years of doctoral course research done at the University of Sao Paulo (USP), which had to be interrupted by the migration to New Zealand and the beginning of a new Phd course now at the University of Auckland.

Originally, the intention was to develop a comparative analysis of domestic modernism practiced in peripheral countries after WW2, presenting side by side examples of the two main European colonization forces: Latin Vs Anglo, catholic Vs protestant colonies. The focus

if it was used as a vehicle for the production of an architecture with national uniqueness similar to what was done in most countries in Latin America such as in Brazil.

## ***Brazil and NZ Modern Homes***

Soon after the NZ research started, there was a decision to change stride and narrow the focus to only one decade, the 1950s, this made sense as coincidentally during this period, both the Brazilian and the New Zealand governments changed their housing funding regime from state housing programs to prioritize private building finance<sup>12</sup>. Both governments encouraged private ownership financing loans so the population could build their own houses instead of renting them from the government housing programs. The aesthetic style, the materials and the architect or builder, were no longer chosen by the state, but by the individual citizen.

Therefore, where in the past, Modern Architecture may once have been an government imposition from state planners and architects, it was during this ten year period that the population was given the chance to accept or reject modernist architectural ideas as a matter of choice in the building of their homes.

<sup>1</sup> Bonduki, and & Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, *Origens da habitação*

*social no Brasil: arquitetura moderna, lei do inquilinato e difusão da casa própria.*

<sup>2</sup> McKay, *Beyond the State.*

The resulting production shows some interesting choices and cultural/historical tendencies.



FIG. 1  
The cover of a 1951 New Zealand government booklet, which was issued to state tenants to persuade them of the benefits of home-ownership.



FIG. 2  
"Not finding a good rent? The Government will help you build your own house..."

To match the material previously collected in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife, a number of house projects built in Auckland and Christchurch were selected for this study following a set of defined criteria; **1.** Dwellings built during the 1950s (1950 to 1959), **2.** Dwellings built in a street where most of the houses were built during the same period; **3.** Houses within the size limitations that offered most government incentive (what was considered middle-class standards: 100-200m<sup>2</sup>); **4.** Houses that showed some modernist ideas, whether expressed in the facades or in the plans, and that had clear separation of the different functional areas: private (sleeping spaces); social (living and dining); services (kitchen, laundry).

Though the fourth criteria may seem arbitrary for those who do not know New Zealand residential scenario, a quick visit to any city in the country, or to any NZ archive, will testify that a single modern element will not pass unnoticed if applied to a house built in any era. Modernism, as it became clear in the first part of the research in New Zealand, was not a desirable trend or aesthetics, even with

builds involving short budget and material restrictions.

Another clear difference between the two sets of data also became undeniable; while in Brazil most of the plans are signed by architects or engineers, in New Zealand during an entire decade of massive private construction there were very few projects signed by architects. And among these, only a small percentage offered projects with any modernist input; be it on the facades or in plans. The majority of architect designed houses found in Auckland and Christchurch archives obeyed a specific eclectic style or a mix of different elements; Tudor, New Gothic or English Villa, offered no clear separation of rooms per functions, or obeyed a clear modular construction method. It seems that though still part of what is considered middle-class construction in terms of building size and government funding, the majority of architect designed houses in New Zealand in the period were far more expensive considering the amount of detailing and the lack of construction efficiency.

Then, there were the examples of architect designed with a clear modern characteristic. Those examples could be easily divide in two major groups: the first attributed to non-New Zealander architects; WW2 refugees usually from Central Europe. The second group, to New Zealander architects which on the 1950s constituted the first generation of native modernist.

The houses designed by the first group were not registered under the architects' names as the vast majority were not recognized by the New Zealand Accreditation Institute. In the official plans, the architects are usually credited as draftsmen and the full registration rely

on builders, building companies or on fellow New Zealand architects that lend their names to the project.

The houses designed by the second group of modern architects have no problem in signing the projects, but the major production of this group really started on the following decade which is beyond the parameters of this research.

The comparative research was also divided into two spheres of study. Firstly, there was the study of the basic characteristics that define the Brazilian House and the New Zealand one. Then, the research is followed by the discussion of pragmatic design aspects, such as adequacy of the modern architecture to the climate and the local conditions in the availability of materials and building techniques, as well as social-cultural aspects that define the way and the usage of residential spaces.

Certain elements determined the different approach to modernism in the architecture of these countries. Pragmatic aspects, such as climate, availability of materials for construction, and in the case of New Zealand; seismic activity, are often not taken into account by architectural historians or sometimes used by them to argue for a palliative modern production.

### ***Modern Aesthetics***

The most noticeable, and common evaluation criteria of the 'modern condition' in an architectural project is its appearance. In the Brazilian case, it is undeniable the appeal of modernism

<sup>3</sup> Costa, *Lucio Costa: registro de uma vivencia, Empresa das Artes.*

during the 1950s and even more so in the following decade after the inauguration of the national capital, Brasilia. A great part of the Brazilian residential buildings - at least on the major capitals, were multi-storey buildings and the modern aesthetic offered not only an economical alternative, but an appeal to nationalism that bridged political diversions among the Brazilian middle class. When Lucio Costa used the roof tiles and *muxarabis* in the Park Hotel in 1944, <sup>3</sup>, the colonial reference was not to the imposing palaces of the Brazil Colony, but what Gilberto Freyre defined as 'bastardised versions' of European origins, altered by the Brazilian culture and climate <sup>4</sup>.



FIG.3  
Park Hotel / Lucio Costa, 1944  
Arquivo SIPHAN.

This mix between modernism and element of climate adaptation was particularly fructuous in the Northeast of Brazil which started with the work of Mario Russo and his group that included the young Burle Marx in the 1920s, and spread around the region during the following decades with the work of Delfim Amorim, Acacio Gil Borsoi, Carlos Alberto Carneiro da Cunha, Rafael Grimaldi, Hélio de Queiroz Duarte, among many others<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande & Senzala) A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization.*

<sup>5</sup> Cavalcanti, *When Brazil Was Modern.*

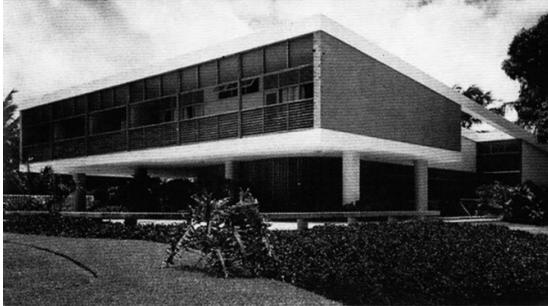


Fig. 4  
Cassiano Ribeiro Coutinho House, by Acacio Gil Borsoi, 1950  
Arquivo UFPE

There were also the incalculable work of anonymous builders, qualified or not, that built popular versions of modernism emulating the construction of the more affluent part of the society. These buildings, usually built in instalments - the so called 'puchadinhos', are testimony to the trend of the times and the merging of vernacular motifs with the more erudite modernism<sup>6</sup>. Also there are the shacks and 'almost building' built from scrap materials from the wealthier building waste site, with impressive and, usually, unsafe structures among the mangroves and river banks in Brazilian capitals.<sup>7</sup>

These informal, basic and as Freyre called; 'mongrel' works also contributed to the vision of the modern Brazilian cities, the acceptance of the modern aesthetic by the society and the success, to some extent, of the many housing projects built after the WW2. The impact of the modernism in the Brazilian 'favelas' and lower class neighbourhoods are a rich field that unfortunately is beyond the universe of this research, but worth mention as a possible contributor to the acceptance of the modernism aesthetic in the country.

<sup>6</sup> Fortin, *Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa: The Politics of Squatter Settlement*.



Fig. 5  
Brasília Teimosa, Recife Brasil  
Arquivo Jornal do Commercio

In New Zealand, things were quite different. Even though the country suffered from building restrictions due to the lack of materials available for construction, the modernist aesthetic was not a popular alternative. During the 1950s, when there were fewer government housing projects built, the modern aesthetic was an alternative for the educated or high-middle class<sup>8</sup>. The vast majority of the houses built on the period followed an English-inspired detached single-floor alternative that spread all around the country.



Fig. 6  
Keeping house and garden neat and tidy, Auckland, c.1950s. Sparrow Industrial Pictures Limited, Ref: Sparrow 2189a, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira

<sup>7</sup> Fortin.

<sup>8</sup> McKay, *Beyond the State*.

Curiously, this alternative was used in the previous decades to build social-housing founded by the government. In the 1950s, though basically all privately founded, New Zealand house design choose to follow a tradition with a English allure instead of something different and more suitable to the countries climate condition or even that distinguished the new production of coming from a more affluent class. This choice can be easily explained by the way the society saw themselves at the time; as still part and representatives of the British Empire <sup>9</sup>.



Fig. 7  
A family pose outside their house in the Lower Hutt state-housing suburb of Taitā in 1949. Ben Schrader, 'Housing and government - State loans and state houses', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/photograph/32425/state-houses-1940s-state-house-family> (accessed 1 July 2020)

Modernist aesthetics, as it appears to New Zealand society, was foreign, strange, European, in sum; not British. The modern aesthetics was considered extremely unconventional, unpractical and untrustworthy. One of the most amusing tales of modernism in New Zealand is the trial of the famous Austrian architect Ernst Plischke, who immigrated to New Zealand just before WW2. Plischke was accused of espionage by the neighbours of one of his designed houses; the Kahn House built in 1941, in Wellington. According to the neighbours the glass façade of the house was a deliberate act of surveillance of the Wellington harbour by Kahn family, the

<sup>9</sup> Firth, *State Housing in New Zealand*.

<sup>10</sup> Tyler, *Ernst Plischke, Architect*.

architect and many immigrates that frequented the house till wee hours of the morning <sup>10</sup>. The idea of having such wide glassing window in the front of the house taking all privacy without ulterior motive was preposterous and absolutely unjustified. The case was ultimately dismissed <sup>11</sup>.



Fig 8.  
Kahn House, Wellington, by Ernst Plischke, 1941

Chris Maclean, 'Wellington region - New growth and attitudes: 1940-1975', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/photograph/13270/kahn-house> (accessed 1 July 2020)

### ***The House; the plan of a culture***

Although mostly every modern house have quite similar types of spaces - bedrooms, living room, dining/kitchen as open plan, bathroom and service as a block, and even the same domestic appliances and type of furniture, it is in the way that a people use these spaces that gives the identity of the house belonging to a specific region and culture. These ways of occupying spaces are, in themselves, a mirror of the family that resides in that house.

The way in which the family of a country is composed of and the relationships between its members are perfectly noticeable by observing the configuration of the residential spaces. The location of the bedrooms of the house, for instance,

<sup>11</sup> Gatley and Lima, *Long Live the Modern*.



for social gathering and sausage barbecue. The master bedroom can be found at the entrance or next to the kitchen without any estrangement from the inhabitants or architects. But the most curious room in the kiwi house is undoubtedly the bathroom which is divided into two separate rooms: one containing the shower and/or bathtub and sink, and another containing only the toilet. In the most sensible houses the two rooms are placed next to the other, but in more examples than expected, the two rooms are placed quite separately making an ordeal to wash hands after visiting the toilet.

In terms of materials, there is little difference between what was used in a modern house as opposed to a traditional English-theme project. In New Zealand, traditionally the houses are timber framed with weatherboard cladding or brick veneer. That tradition still stands to this day and surpasses any architectural style implemented. Add to the two main external claddings; weatherboard and brick veneer, in the previous decade was the introduction of asbestos-cement cladding which became popular due to its easy installation and low cost. In some regions of NZ there was also the use of stucco cladding – which basically was a plaster mix with cement over galvanised wire netting which was fixed on the timber façade<sup>13</sup>. The two new materials, asbestos and stucco, gave the houses a more sophisticated and “Mediterranean” flare, which was desirable at the time, but due to the constant seismic movement of the country it required endless maintenance<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> McCarthy, *From Over-Sweet Cake to Wholemeal Bread*.

But New Zealand already had another cladding alternative that is probably the most authentic element of the country's architecture; corrugated iron. The love affair of New Zealand and this material has been celebrated in many urban sculptures and buildings all around the country today, but its use in the 1950s was always related to rural areas and/or to lower income houses. It was acceptable to have a beach or mountain house made of corrugated-iron; from the roof to the bottom, inside-out, but not in the city; at least not in a ‘good’ neighbourhood. When modernist architects such as Ernst Plischke and Cedric Firth – who joined in an office where Plischke could design but not sign the projects, the material became an instant success among modernists.



Fig11.  
House designed by E.A. Plischke for H.G. Lang, Helton Street, Karori, Wellington, Ashton, John Hammond, 1917-2010. Negatives.  
Ref: 1/2-199941-F, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. records/23151692

But, different from Plischke and Firth who used the material as a cheap and efficient alternative for cladding, in the following decades when the New Zealand modernists started brewing its version of regionalism, corrugated iron became a symbol of New Zealand residential construction which till today is largely used.

<sup>14</sup> Brookes, *At Home in New Zealand*.

## ***FINAL CONSIDERATIONS***

When modernism spread worldwide it started to morph into versions of modernity representatives of regional values, cultures, different climates and materials. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre's *Critical Regionalism*, openly divulged by Kenneth Frampton and others helped understand Modern Architecture not as a style nor even as a cause as proposed by Anatole Kopp, but a set of paradigms to help us all build and live better.

While in Brazil modernism received its most fluid and 'baroque' expression that throughout the years it has been equally celebrated, admired, hated, contested, antagonized only to be re-evaluated again, it is undeniable that it became a symbol of a once progressive country.

In the introverted and unassuming country of New Zealand, usually misplaced and even left forgotten in world maps, modernism was equally shyly embraced. The contribution of European émigrés certainly busted the Modern Movement in architecture and the residential construction in the country. In its unbelievable uniformity and no-nonsense elements, New Zealand residential production hides an enormous modern heritage that though considered 'dull and uninteresting' - by unreferenced propaganda attributed to the Australians, it has managed to stand on its own two feet as a testimony of a simple and rather beautiful way of life.