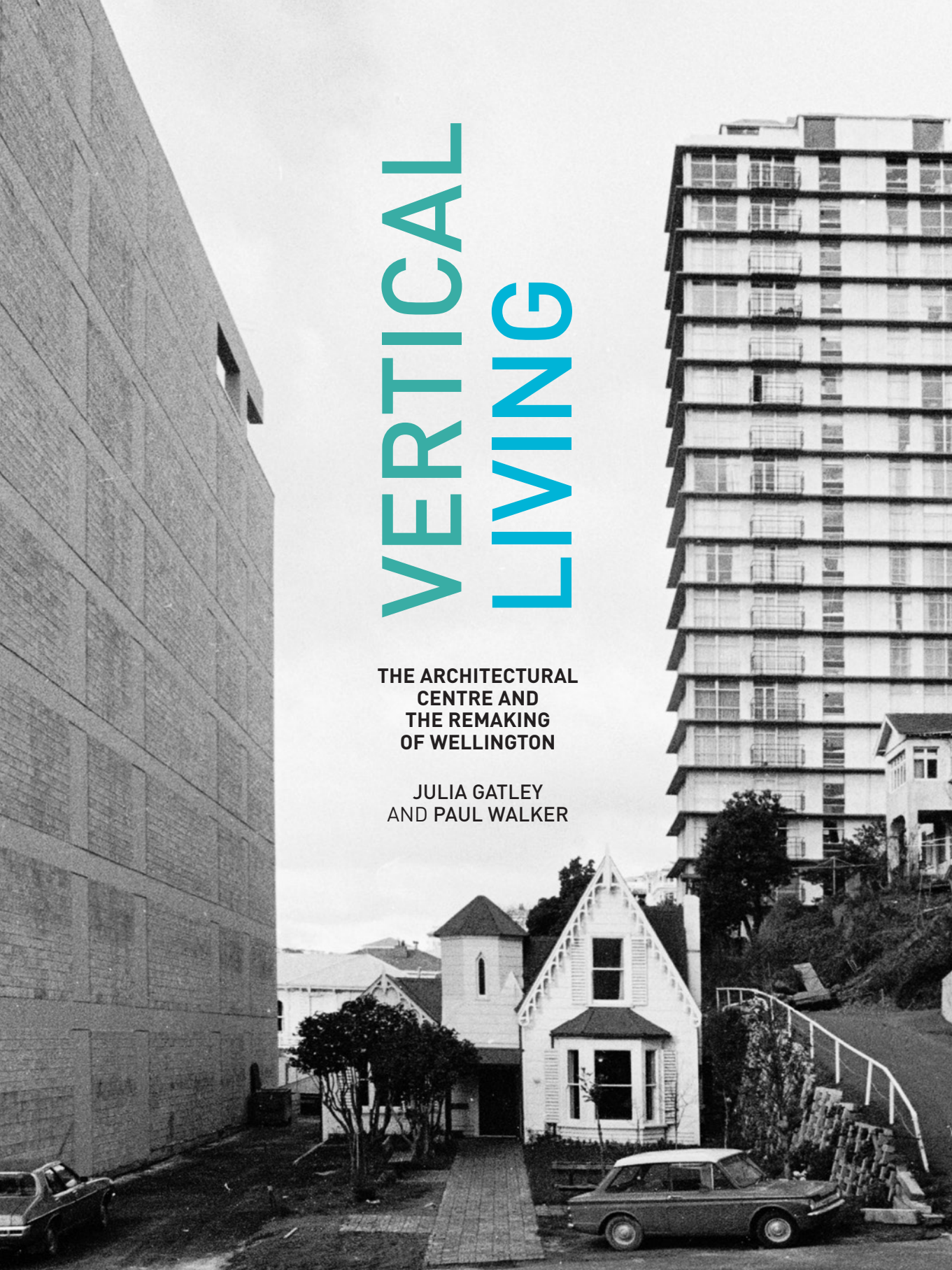


VERTICAL LIVING

THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE AND THE REMAKING OF WELLINGTON

JULIA GATLEY
AND PAUL WALKER

Design Review

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1950 ✷ ONE SHILLING

We of this Architectural Centre in Wellington are a group of architects and draughtsmen and wood engravers and other people whose greatest claim to affiliation is an overriding enthusiasm for good design – *Design Review*, 1948

The Architectural Centre was set up in Wellington in 1946 by a group of young students and idealists – to realise their visions for a modern city.

More than just an association of architects, the Centre wrote manifestos, furthered education, published a magazine – the *Design Review* – hosted modernist exhibitions in its gallery, staged an audacious campaign for political influence called 'the Project' and fought in general for better planning, better design, better built environments in Wellington. Its members also built a demonstration house – but 'planning was the battle-cry'.

Charting this opinionated organisation and its projects over the years, Julia Gatley and Paul Walker in *Vertical Living* offer a history of urban Wellington from the 1940s to the 1990s and beyond. The book reminds us that in modernist ideology, architecture and urban planning went hand-in-hand with visual and craft arts, graphic and industrial design to create the modern possibility. In recovering the powerful history, politics and planning of the Architectural Centre, Gatley and Walker begin writing the city back into the history of architecture in this country.

Julia Gatley is a senior lecturer in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Auckland. A graduate of Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Melbourne, she is author of *Athfield Architects* (2012) and editor of *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture* (2010) and *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904–1984* (2008).
Paul Walker is a professor of architecture at the University of Melbourne. Educated at the University of Auckland, he is co-author with Justine Clark of *Looking for the Local: Architecture and the New Zealand Modern* (2000).

Vertical Living also includes contributions from curator and art historian **Damian Skinner** and from **Justine Clark**, an independent architectural editor, writer and critic.

THE FORTIES


NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT
STATE FIRE INSURANCE
RE INSURANCE
POST OFFICE

Context: **A Burgeoning Modernism**

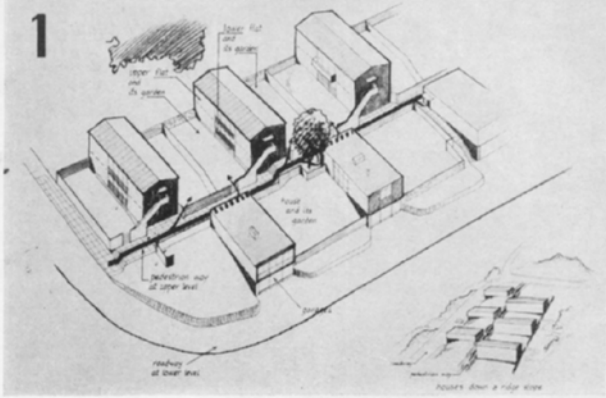
The Architectural Centre was founded in the bleak cultural climate of post-World War II Wellington. The capital then was a small provincial city, drab from years of depression then by the strictures brought by wartime. Contemporary art and literature, theatre and music – even good coffee – were missing from the city's public life. Among the buildings along its main street, Lambton Quay, there were those with architectural aspirations, but even the newest of these looked dated. Other structures would have been more at home in a country town. Many parts of the inner city were very shabby. Peace, however, brought with it hope, even optimism; people believed things would change – or at least, those who set up the Architectural Centre believed they could. One of the founding members, George Porter, described the moment as euphoric and optimistic: 'It was all part of the post-war euphoria. People expected a brave new world . . . and there was a strong feeling in most of the community that this time we were going to get it right.'[1]

The founding of the Architectural Centre was not an isolated initiative, but one that was consistent with New Zealand's 'awakening imagination'.[2] This nascent arts culture was apparent at the country's Centennial Exhibition of 1940, in a

THE FIFTIES & SIXTIES

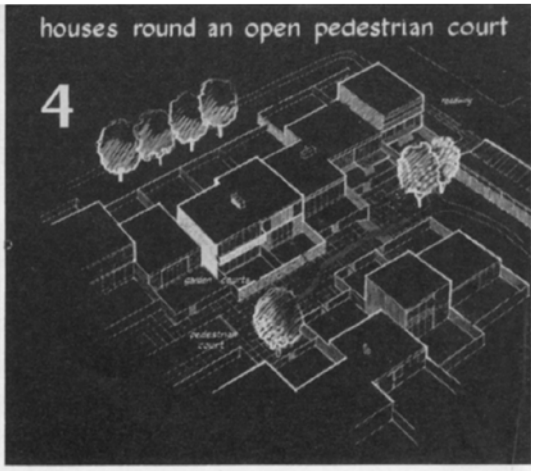
houses along a pedestrian way

1



houses round an open pedestrian court

4



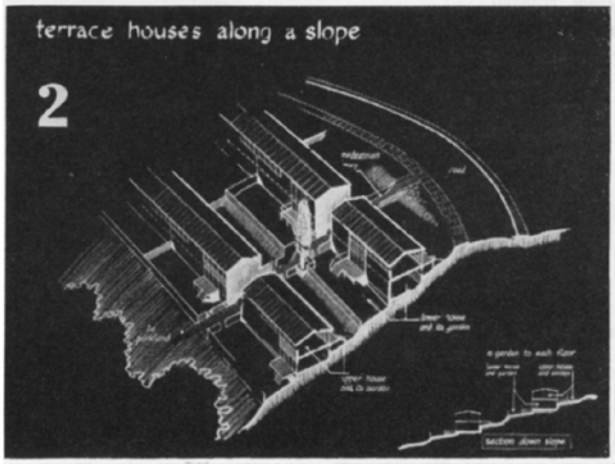
Homes without sprawl

AN EXHIBITION ABOUT HOUSES AND GARDENS PREPARED BY THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE, WELLINGTON, AND SHOWN IN VARIOUS CENTRES — THE AUCKLAND BRANCH OF THE N.Z.I.A. WILL SHOW "HOMES WITHOUT SPRAWL" — AUCKLAND LIBRARY, MID SEPTEMBER

The Architectural Centre is a group of Wellingtonians who do this sort of thing voluntarily — many of them architects but there are also painters, teachers, town planners, musicians and housewives.

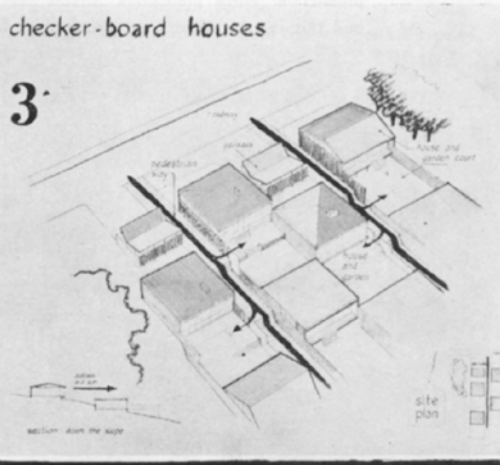
terrace houses along a slope

2



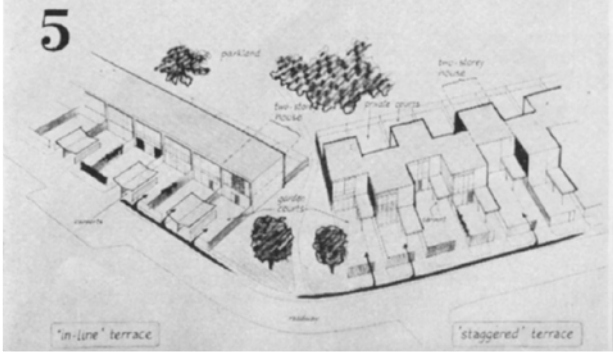
checker-board houses

3



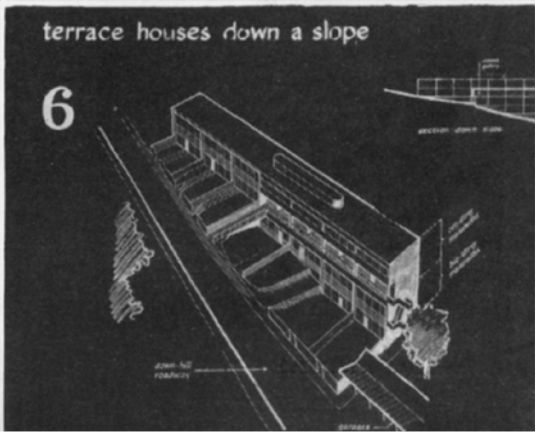
terrace houses

5



terrace houses down a slope

6



The Battle for Town Planning

Te Aro Replanned had demonstrated the level of attention that could be generated through the Architectural Centre's own exhibitions. Consequently, the Centre soon used its newly opened gallery for exhibitions that addressed both architectural and urban issues. These exhibitions involved the production of photographs, drawings, models, posters and publications to critique a variety of perceived urban problems and promote the Centre's solutions to them.[1] Suburban sprawl was an ongoing focus of attention, soon joined by increasing concern about the congestion of inner-city streets by the mushrooming number of cars and a corresponding shortage of car-parking. The architecture exhibitions were intended to serve a propaganda or advocacy function and, to maximise exposure, entry to them was free.[2]

The first was *Living in Cities*, held in March 1954.[3] It promoted high-density, inner-city living as an alternative to the detached house and garden and, consequently, as an alternative to suburban sprawl. It gave particular attention to housing for people other than families with children – 'the Forgotten People' – the 40 per cent of households that comprised only one or two people such as

THE SEVENTIES & EIGHTIES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TAXI
THE BARRE
Tasman Bar
FX 6374

Context: **Commercial City**

By 1980, Wellington's cityscape of great pre-war civic and national monuments – Parliament, the Railway Station, the Dominion Museum, the Town Hall, Victoria University's Hunter Building – had been supplemented by a new generation of institutional buildings that demonstrated the city's revived urban ambitions. The fragile affluence of the 1950s and sixties faltered and spluttered through the 1970s. Miles Warren, in conjunction with the opening of an exhibition of New Zealand architecture in the United States to coincide with the completion of his New Zealand Chancellery building in Washington, quipped that sitting behind 'the corrugated iron curtain of the south pacific' [*sic*], New Zealand looked headed to be the first country to 'de-develop'.[1] But he turned out to be wrong(ish). The country's and the city's modest economy could, after all, afford the Freyberg Pool (1963); the Hannah Playhouse (1973); the Michael Fowler Centre (1983); Parliament's Executive annex, colloquially known as the Beehive (1982); and the Structon and KRTA buildings for Victoria University along the brow of the Kelburn ridge. The National Library was underway. A new national art gallery was envisaged. And more civic ornaments were to come in the 1990s: Civic Square; the City Library; the conversion of the old civic library to


COLLINS

THE NINETIES & BEYOND

Context: **Leisure City**

In the 1990s there was major investment in central Wellington's urban spaces and its cultural infrastructure: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), the institutions around the Wellington Civic Centre and facilities scattered around the developing waterfront.

The story of each of these projects is complicated, bound up in politics and shifting ambitions and visions for the city from competing imperatives and interest groups. The initiative for Te Papa developed out of an earlier project, a proposal for a new National Art Gallery that was to be a part of the government centre at the northern end of Wellington's CBD. The design for this project was by the fine Dunedin practice of McCoy & Wixon, selected from six New Zealand firms invited to produce outline schemes.[1] There were difficulties over the site – that allocated on Molesworth Street, directly opposite Parliament, was found to have been already designated for the High Court (mind you, in 1927!); and the change of government in 1984 led to the proposal being scrapped in favour of a very different institution: that which was to become known as Te Papa.[2]

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