State Housing in Auckland

State house tenants can do anything. After growing up in a state house in Christchurch, John Key became an investment banker and then Prime Minister. The official Prime Ministerial residence, Vogel House in Lower Hutt, is one of the nation’s flashiest state houses. In between these two poles, New Zealand’s state house designs span diverse types produced over more than 100 years. This history starts with workers’ cottages built from 1906, and includes semi-detached houses (duplexes), one and two storey row houses, and blocks of flats, some medium-density and others high-rise.

Yet amid this diversity, the image of the standard ‘brick and tile’ state house endures. Some would go so far as to call these houses icons of New Zealand architecture. The reason they are recognisable to all of us is because the country’s first Labour government built so many of them – about 30,000 up and down the country – during its 1935-49 term. A survey conducted in 1935 had concluded that about a quarter of the country’s housing stock was substandard and worthy not of repair but of demolition. The state housing programme was conceptualised both to re-house the New Zealanders living in such conditions, and to stimulate our manufacturing and building industries after the Great Depression. The early state house designs were produced through the NZIA and Fletcher Construction. In planning and appearance, they were far removed from the house type that had dominated 1920s New Zealand: the Californian bungalow. In contrast to bungalows, which developed a low-cost stigma and maintained American connotations, the comparatively conservative English cottage aesthetic of most of Labour’s state houses remained popular in architectural circles in the 1930s and early ’40s.

Concurrently, the burgeoning modern movement introduced open-plan living areas, flat roofs and large expanses of glass. Labour’s medium- and high-density housing schemes, such as the Greys Avenue and Symonds Street Flats (both 1945-47), provided the Department of Housing Construction’s own staff architects, working under chief architect F. Gordon Wilson, with the opportunity to explore these innovations and both blocks were key buildings in the development of New Zealand’s modern architecture.

Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) continues to produce interesting new buildings today. The most striking attribute of the more recent schemes is the emphasis on medium-density arrangements. This is the case for both new schemes erected on fresh sites, and for the redevelopment of older schemes, when densification is often one of the aims.

Since the 1980s, our state housing schemes have mostly been produced by architects in private practice rather than by government employees. Public housing provides particular design challenges, including tight budgets, efficient the use of space, and the need for hardwearing structures and surfaces capable of withstanding a few knocks. Taking good design to the ‘man in the street’ was one of the aims of the modern movement, demonstrated particularly in the work of German modernists such as Gropius and Hilberseimer. Thus it is appropriate that in our neo-modern times, award-winning architects continue to work in this vein. Julia Gatley & Andrew Barrie

The Facts:
The Liberal government passed New Zealand’s first Workers Dwellings Act in 1905, building 650 houses in small groups. Between 1919 and 1935, public support for worker housing was largely in the form of low-interest loans rather than house construction. Better known than these early twentieth-century initiatives is the extensive housing programme of the country’s first Labour government, comprising 30,000 houses nationwide and twelve blocks of medium- and high-density flats in Auckland and Wellington. Later governments continued to build state houses and flats, joined in the 1950s, 60s and 70s by the larger, wealthier city councils, notably Auckland and Wellington, which focused on the provision of medium- and high-density rental flats in urban rather than suburban locations. Muldoon’s National government celebrated the completion of New Zealand’s 100,000th state house in 1978. Construction of state housing continues today, although in recent years the sales of state houses on expensive sites seem to make bigger headlines than the openings of new housing schemes.
Ben Schrader has identified the Liberal government (1890-1912) as 'the first central government in the Western world to build public housing for its citizens.' While Wellington and Christchurch houses from this period are well documented, little has been written on the Auckland ones until recently, with Michael Roche identifying Woburn Temple as the designer of many of those built in the 1910s, such as in Ellerslie's Lawry Settlement. They are small, simple cottages, generally with a central front door on the street facade and a window on either side.

In 1941, with financial support from Auckland City, the Labour government embarked upon a scheme of 'slum clearance' in Greys Avenue. The initial scheme comprised 468 units on both sides of the street. Construction was delayed because of the Second World War. From 1945 four blocks were completed to this original design. The architectural language was a continuation of that used at Dixon Street and Symonds Street. Of the 50 flats, five were one bedroom, 42 were two bedroom and three were three bedroom.

The first Labour government's state houses can be seen in many parts of Auckland. Sandringham is representative of the pattern of development from speculative bungalows of the 1910s and '20s (north of Mt Albert Road) to state houses (south of Mt Albert Rd). The state houses are compact with standardised footprint and a subtle curve in the street façade, which echoes the shape and size, using both one- and two-storey semi-detached buildings and four-house units within individual housing schemes.

These are an example of the single-storey four-house units built by the first Labour government. They become like short versions of row or terrace housing. This group also demonstrates the enthusiasm for the cul-de-sac that is recurrent in the street layouts of Labour's state housing schemes. The cul-de-sac had been popularised by the planning of Radburn, New Jersey, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright's community for the motor age. The aim was to reduce the amount of traffic on residential streets, thus making them safe for pedestrians.

While state houses were generally aimed at nuclear families, the Housing Division and the State Advances Corporation recognised that other types of applicants such as childless couples and single people could be more efficiently accommodated in flats. The design of the Symonds Street Flats followed that of Wellington's Dixon Street Flats (1940-1944), while also introducing a T-shaped footprint and a subtle curve in the street façade, which echoes a bend in the road. Of the 45 flats, 26 were one bedroom, 18 were two bedroom and one was three bedroom.

Construction to the south of the Upper Greys Avenue Flats was delayed because construction costs were disproportionately high in the wake of World War II. By the mid 1950s when the decision was made to proceed, the 1940s design was no longer considered appropriate and the Upper Greys Avenue Flats were redesigned to reflect technological developments. The later block is taller, slimmer and, with reduced mass and more extensive glazing, lighter, in both senses of the word. It comprised 70 two-bedroom maisonettes and 16 bed-sits.

Much of the Kupe Street ridge had been occupied by Ngati Whata o Orakei. The government erected houses in Kitimoana Street to rehouse these Maori owners and then developed Kupe Street. The usual government policy of 'pepper-potting' was not followed here. Rather, medium-density housing was used to situate a greater proportion of Maori residents closer to their ancestral land at the north end of the street. Kupe Street became a testing site for the Housing Division to trial new designs for medium-density housing, the latter encouraged by government policy of the 1950s.

Star flats are believed to have been designed by English immigrant architect Neville Burren during the time that Fred Newman was head of the Housing Division. Each block is three storeys, with a dozen one- and two-bedroom units. The name derives from the combination of cruciform plan and butterfly roofs. In Freemans Bay, the same design was utilised for Auckland City Council housing. Too often blocks of star flats have suffered from the replacement of their butterfly roofs with a giant hipped roof, making them look like oversized houses.
Tamaki was controversial in the early 1940s because it was so big. It was conceptualised to accommodate 30,000 people and was therefore like a whole new town. The south end includes Reginald Hammond’s garden city-type arrangement of concentric crescents, including Coates Crescent. In 1944, Ernst Pischke drew up the housing complex and community centre. His design included a series of reserves and walkways for pedestrians. The layout was built to Pischke’s design, but the buildings were not, with the government selecting new designs for imported houses, multi-units, duplexes and designs for imported houses, to Plischke’s design, but the included a series of reserves of concentric crescents, includes Reginald Hammond’s new town. The south end and was therefore like a whole big: it was conceptualised to accommodate 30,000 people. See Architecture NZ July/Aug 1989.

William John Tait was mayor of Avondale Borough in the 1920s, and this village of pensioner houses sits on land transferred to the Housing Corporation by his widow. His homestead has been retained in the development, serving as community room. The decorative, Sure-to-rise colours have been painted over with muted tones, but the articulated volumes of the houses, the low fences, and especially the now-established trees give the estate a pleasant village-like ambiance. Rewi Thompson’s state housing scheme in nearby Laurelia Place, completed around the same time, has been removed. See Architecture NZ July/Aug 1991 and May/June 1992.

This project reconfigured an existing ‘quarter acre’ suburb to allow the insertion of medium-density housing. The streets were reorganized to create lanes and slip roads. A mixture of housing typologies and unit configurations provide for a range of occupants, including large families and the elderly. The most striking buildings are several blocks of brightly coloured townhouses that create a continuous and lively street frontage. Their garages are accessed from rear lanes, defining private garden areas in the zone between houses and garages.

Sources:
All photographs are by Andrew Barrie or Julia Gatley.

Housing New Zealand Corporation has long recognised the significance of the country’s history of state housing, supporting the publication of two books on the subject: Gael Ferguson, Building the New Zealand Dream (Dunmore Press and Dept of Internal Affairs, 1994) and Ben Schrader, We Call It Home: A History of State Housing in New Zealand (Reed, 2005). HNZC also employed the late Greg Bowron from 2003 to 2006 to compile a national inventory of state housing and to assess the heritage significance of the individual schemes. Greg’s work remains unpublished at the present time but we are optimistic that HNZC will pursue publication in the future.

Julia Gatley has written on the flats built by the first Labour government, for example in Barbara Brookes (ed.), At Home in New Zealand (Bridget Williams Books, 2000). Michael Roche is currently doing research on the houses built under the Workers’ Dwellings Acts. See, for example, his paper in Green Fields, Brown Fields, the proceedings of the 2010 Australasian urban history / planning history conference.