TE ARO RE-PLANNED

A Study in Teamwork

Last summer sixty architectural and town-planning students gave up part of their vacation to re-plan the heart of Wellington. They analyzed its land usage and its traffic lines. They considered where it would be sunny and quiet for the people to live, where it would be convenient and safe for them to shop, where it would be most pleasant for them to stroll, go to the pictures and catch the homeward bus.

The result of 12 weeks slogging but most enjoyable work was the Te Aro Plan, which, visualized in popular wall charts and models, was put on show and pulled in 20,000 visitors. The summer school was the biggest thing the Architectural Centre has ever done, and the exhibition was the most popular show the Wellington Library has ever put on. Why was this? What facts were demonstrated and what hopes were fired?

In the first place, to take the achievement on its most negative level, the Te Aro Plan indicated a line of escape from the impasse in which Wellington finds itself. That some of the older cities of the world should choke themselves by too great a concentration of activity in a purely accidental centre we take for granted. But it seems absurd that completely new aggregations of humanity such as Auckland and Wellington should go the same way to frustration and paralysis.

The great cliché uttered by every visitor to New York is that it is a marvellous place for a holiday but that he couldn’t bear to live in it. And the perfect platitude for Wellington is that it looks as magnificent from its hills as it is mean and pinched in its streets and the placing of its
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...
but whether the kind we have now will work much longer. The test of a city, as of a philosophy or a political system is this—what kind of people does it tend to produce? The Te Aro project is based not on what makes a pretty plan, nor even on what public opinion is thought to want, but on what people really need for their own full, free functioning. Its aim is to chart the direction in which development must go if we are to have less exasperated, less lonely, less tired, less tubercular, less injured people, and more men, women and children living in close community but with their full share of privacy, not hurried by traffic nor shut off from sun and air, able to work and play and walk upright in a city where beauty constantly meets the eye.

That encouraging remark of Le Corbusier’s comes to mind: “What gives our dreams their daring is that they can be realized.”

—H.W.

BOOK REVIEW

By A. L. Gabites


The period of advancing techincs and incipient social disintegration sometimes known as the industrial revolution began in Britain. Hers, of the world’s cities, first felt the impact of the machine age; the resultant urban chaos has possibly been more complete there than elsewhere; certainly she has suffered the effects longer. But in her longer search for remedies she has progressed farther, and from the early escapism of William Morris she has turned to a solution first suggested by Patrick Geddes based on the rationalizing of the use of land in the best interests of the community. The growing national consciousness of the need for planning, stirred to action point by the recent attentions of Hitler, has at last brought about a means for achieving this. Comprehensive planning powers (“the envy of less happier lands”) vested in regional representatives of the people under the guidance of a central department of State (the Ministry of Town and Country Planning) have emerged.

Advice to these planning authorities when, with their now formidable powers, they come to tackling the task of urban redevelopment, is contained in the first handbook of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. In lucid, jargon-free English, the technical officers of the Ministry state the problems, and succeed largely in offering the solutions. New conceptions of use-surveys of accommodation and the distribution of proposed floor space, together with a fresh approach to control of building bulk for day-lighting, have introduced a third dimension to the paper planning of the last decade; a further dimension is added in the realistic approach to the programming of redevelopment projects. Central Areas contains the reply of the planning technician to the positive demands of a planning-conscious public.

One is tempted to glance at the New Zealand scene in the light of a simple statement contained in the handbook: “The aim of redevelopment is to secure that all the activities that take place within a central area do so under the best practicable conditions.” We see our cities, small in scale, unscarred by war, and but a hundred years old. But, viewed in terms of such a thesis, there is no doubt that we cannot afford to ignore the claims of redevelopment.

STUDENT NOTES

Modern life demands and is waiting for a new kind of plan, both for the house and for the city. . . . There exists a new spirit. . . .—Le Corbusier.

This new spirit has been busily occupied in the studio since the opening of the term. Testimony of Study programmes from Auckland University College were received, discussed, and disposed of within a fortnight, and design problems of “esquisses” were tackled over the next two weeks. Problems centring round the Te Aro project were done, and a variety of other subjects, including a study of window functions, a standardized bus shelter, a trade-mark for the New Zealand Federation of Co-ops, who are to use the winning design as their emblem. The two-week break did a great deal to lessen the eight-scale twitch (which generally develops after three weeks or so of juggling with sketch plans). At least it was hidden as students let their hair down on subjects where they could use a thick crayon and lots of colour. In fact, the freedom of design and presentation exhibited in the “esquisses” drawings proved that the brief change was a good idea.

As for Testaments of Study, it may be said that the inevitable closing date flap did not have quite the air of desperate pencil palsy that has been so common in previous years. The thought that you were able to call on your own studio instructor for advice was almost like a blood transfusion. It is evident, too, that the practice of designing with scale and tee-square has gone overboard. Studio work has encouraged much more freedom of design, the quick freehand sketch superseding the laboured drawing. The old problem of filling the vast white double elephant does not seem to matter so much. Let us hope that the higher standard is reflected in the number and grade of passes this year.
FAMILY IN A FOREST

by John Pascoe

The Ambition: Wellington is one of the few New Zealand cities where it is possible to live in the bush and to work in a building. My wife and I decided that a bush environment for a home would compensate us for the natural disadvantages of living away from mountains. We also wanted a harbour view, sun compatible with shelter, and privacy. We found a bush section of nearly one acre in Eastbourne, took bearings on the sun in mid-winter and summer, visited the place in a cloud-shroud, and were satisfied with everything.

The Problems: Patiently we felled trees and scrub, and drew stumps from the immediate site of the house. With the whiskers removed, the architect came and brooded on the site, the builder quoted on drainage, and I was told where to excavate. We built log retaining walls and took all excavation spoil away from the foundations' area. Excavating was slow, as we struck a rock outcrop, which, however, gave metal for bush tracks. A neighbour helped me re-grade a private road. We built a culvert bridge across a small creek, and a bush tramway and trolley. Over a long period, and often at night, we worked a hand winch to transport the forty-five-odd tons of building material for the house.

(Continued on page 7)
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A COLUMN
(of the Cambrian Order)

I indeed welcome, and joyfully accept, the invitation to
fill a column of your journal. But with what? Dammit, I
left you my valedictory New Zealand testament in the shape
of a bunch of recorded broadcasts that were, I suppose,
duly discharged after I had got safely away, and I haven’t
a notion what the reaction may have been. If in fact I failed
to provoke any come-back at all, it can only mean that
either I have lost my sting as a gadfly, or else that New
Zealand was too numb to notice my poor attempts to irritate
her into action. As either alternative would be just too
dismal to contemplate, I shall blandly assume that at least
some of what I said did actually register, and I shall now
further pursue one of the hares already started.

About your architects themselves. Why do none of them
seem to occupy the dominating positions in Dominion
affairs that they surely should if the best and most pro-
gressive of them are ever to exert the influence that is
necessary if New Zealand is to look, as well as be, a really
civilized country?

Simply to have a sufficiency of good architects, though
certainly necessary to salvation, can never of itself be
enough, however high their quality, however forcible their
personalities, however public-spirited their outlook.

They need enlightened outside lay support to help them
establish themselves as, potentially, the most useful of good
citizens, and to secure positions as the prophets and public
oracles that should be consulted by all the departments
of government whose activities in any way affect the face of
the land, and this, I realize, means most, if not all of them.

So assuming that you already have, or are assured of
enough technicians of such light and leading as to merit
public attention and governmental consultation, you are,
I say, unlikely to find them in the positions of control that
they unquestionably should hold, unless equally enlight-
ened citizens in other walks of life have made common
cause with them and formed a wide architectural and town
and country planning ‘Front.’ Its main concern (having of
course assured itself that it can in fact deliver the goods)
would be to foster as wide a demand as possible for
distinguished design in all things, from individual houses
to whole city lay-outs.

This primary purpose of ‘selling’ design underlay the
foundation of our English ‘Architectural Club,’ which, by
its rules, must admit to its select membership one Patron
and one Propagandist for every Practitioner. It holds
exhibitions, debates, and dinners, all devoted to a specific
theme or object; it takes part in controversies and makes
representations as a corporate body, and generally acts
as an ‘honest broker’ between the producers and consumers
of good design, the best architects and the public.

And because both enlightened big business and politicians
were well represented amongst our ‘Patrons’ (though none
were admitted who had not shown an active interest in good
design whether by giving commissions to good men or
otherwise), and because our ‘Propagandist’ members in-
cluded many of the most influential authors, journalists,
and art critics, the Architecture Club did attract notice,
not to itself, but to architecture and to the importance of
good design in general.

That was something, to our envy and admiration, had
already been done in the Scandinavian countries, most
notably in Sweden, where their leading architects, land-
scape architects, planners, sculptors, and artists of all kinds are
as well known and as popularly acclaimed as are your
outstandingly successful racehorses or football stars. I
myself have a high regard both for bloodstock and All-
Blacks—yet I should feel a good deal easier about my
admired New Zealand if she herself could widen her
admiration as I have suggested.

Which, I guess, must have just about filled my column
with nothing said beyond this:

Good architects, yes of course; but you will never
breed enough who are good enough without drumming
up an audience for them—creating a demand—a job
in which of course they must play their own intelligent
part but which they cannot do alone.

It is an essentially co-operative job of public enlight-
enment, and there are a hundred ways of setting about it.
One of the hundred will be best suited to New Zealand’s
special circumstances and, if pursued with vigour, could
certainly transfigure her.

So why not?

(Continued from page 5)

We made sunbathing terraces, which we use, and a fowl-
house site, which we don’t. We formed a garden, which
the poodles wreck.

The House: The living story is 340 square feet. The living
room, and the kids’ room, with bunk, get a harbour
view framed by bush spurs. A washing machine in the bath-
room does away with a laundry. An incinerator heats water
when power cuts apply. Every room has generous windows
that give views of bush. A basement of 330 square feet has
glass doors and windows, gives space for storage and
work quarters and future expansion for living. In fine
weather, there is the contentment of splitting firewood,
building rock steps and walls, and lying in the sun.

In wet weather, there is room for sewing, writing, and
for the children to leap around. The house is only five
minutes from shops and a bus stop, yet the sense of
privacy is complete. A creek cools the beer and gives
the kids a natural bar to their playground. Wireless
reception is unmarred by street cables. The lay-out of
the house makes for easy housework, and the whole is
an argument for getting a competent architect to plan
for space and comfort. The gently sloping roof, white
basement walls, and creosoted upper weather-boards are
in harmony with the surroundings. This is a place in
which to enjoy the multiplicity of activities that concern
a family that likes solitude, outdoor physical work, and
the prospect of creative work inside. The kids also re-
spond to the space and freedom, the sounds of bird life,
and the sunshine.
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