

Further Investigations into an Authorship: Reassessing the Dixon Street Flats Archive

Robin Skinner

I thank Bill Alington, Ken Davis, Julia Gatley, Monika Knofler, Andrew Leach, John Saker and Linda Tyler for their helpful advice and discussion.

1. Ernst Anton Plischke (1903-92). For biographical information, see Tyler (2000).

2. Francis Gordon Wilson (1900-59). For biographical information, see Gatley (2000). He was, and is, often referred to as 'Gordon F. Wilson'.

The identity of the principal designers of the Dixon Street State Flats in Wellington remains controversial. In some circles it is held that it was designed by the émigré Austrian, Ernst Plischke,¹ while others suggest that it is the work of the chief architect of the Department of Housing Construction (DHC), Gordon Wilson.² Without an explicit reference, certain attribution has not been possible. Reputed scholars have successively stated differing and at times controversial positions. This is not surprising because there is a lot at stake. Ascribing authorship brings focus upon significant issues relating to the introduction of modernism in New Zealand (Gatley, 1995); however, this is not the focus of this paper. Instead, I review the scholars' positions, re-examine the archival record and identify further evidence in order to argue that Plischke's involvement was highly significant.

Background to the Project

The DHC was established in late 1936 to provide rental housing for a population emerging from the throes of the Great Depression (Fig. 1). In addition to designing the detached state houses of the 1930s and 40s, the DHC designed thirteen large blocks of flats beginning with the Berhampore Flats, Wellington, designed by Gordon Wilson (Gatley, 1997: 89).



Fig. 1: Draughting staff at the DHC, Dominion Farmers Building, Wellington, 1940s. Photographer: W. Hall Raine. AALF 6112, 24/2/1, 830, Archives NZ/Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.

In May 1939, the Austrian architect Ernst Plischke, his Jewish wife, Anna, and her son Heinrich went to New Zealand as refugees. Plischke had trained under Oskar Strnad and Peter Behrens and had worked for Behrens and Josef Frank in Vienna and for Jacques Ely Kahn in New York. Plischke had designed several significant projects in Austria which had been published internationally. It is unsurprising, then, that once in New Zealand the architect was swiftly employed by Wilson at the DHC. However, in line with Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) policy, the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) did not recognize Plischke's architectural qualifications and he was employed as a draughtsman.

When Plischke arrived, work on the Berhampore Flats was underway. Design had commenced in 1938 and this scheme of 50 apartments was completed in 1940. As Gatley notes, these flats can be interpreted as a transitional development that bridges the existing Georgian detached tradition of the conventional state house with that of the International Style (Gatley, 1996: 54). While the flat-roof aesthetic was modern, the planning of the units was similar to the standard state house. Occupant density of the one- to three-storeyed scheme was between that of detached suburban housing and the later multi-storeyed blocks of the DHC.

With 116 apartments in a substantial multi-storeyed block, the Dixon Street Flats were a more ambitious scheme. Archival records indicate that:

- The site was acquired in February 1940.
- Drawings were being prepared by March 1940.
- Working drawings are dated September 1940.
- The contract was let on 30 December 1940.
- Construction commenced early the following year.
- With war slowing progress, the building was formally opened on 4 September 1943.
- The final completion certificate was issued on 26 June 1944.

As is well documented, relations between Plischke and Wilson were strained. Wilson was domineering and he freely amended the designs that his staff produced (Noonan, 1975: 223). While Plischke described being severely circumscribed and professionally suppressed in the office, the relationship between Wilson and Plischke was complex and there is evidence that Wilson took the émigré's suggestions into account (Plischke, 1969: 127; Tyler, 1986: 42-43). Wilson may have been somewhat threatened by the sophisticated, articulate and worldly architect, yet at times he showed him significant support. Wilson gave Plischke a copy of J. M. Richards' *Modern Architecture* (1940) when he found the Austrian mentioned in its pages (Plischke, 1989: 247). In the late 1940s, Wilson reputedly spoke to a branch meeting of the NZIA for Plischke's admission to the institute (Dawson, 1991b: 9). In early 1947, Wilson wrote, what appears to be, a glowing reference supporting Plischke's application for the position of professor at Auckland University College (AUC); although, arguably, this document can be seen to contain traces of ambivalence.³

3. It is a perplexing document. With statements such as, "I have the highest regard for his ability as an architect and town planner and for his manner of arousing enthusiasm in all those associated with him", Wilson's reference appears to be very supportive. However, he made no explicit recommendation for appointment. Instead, he advised that Plischke's application be given "very careful consideration" because he doubted that there was a more suitable person available (Wilson, 1947). Today, such comment would be read as a coded statement communicating concern and reservation. While Davis saw this reference indicating Wilson's "enormous respect" (Davis, 1987: 29), I think it may indicate ambivalence.

4. Heenan wrote, "Further to our recent correspondence regarding Plischke, I now find that in one regard I have done friend Wilson of State Housing an injustice. I was under the impression that Plischke had done the design of the Dixon Street Flats for which the Gold Medal was awarded. This is not right. He did the subsequent Terrace Flats [the McLean block], Wilson being a man responsible for Dixon Street" (Heenan, 1948b). Plischke's drawings of an early McLean Flats scheme are held in the Plischke-Archiv, Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna.

5. In 1945, 235 people enrolled to hear his ten lectures on Home Design and Decoration at the Wellington WEA (Shearer, 1947).

Competing Views on Authorship

For over 60 years the Dixon Street project has been attributed to Gordon Wilson, to Ernst Plischke or to the DHC architects collectively. One official account from September 1943 records:

The Architects of the Department of Housing Construction made many studies of the problem before the design was finalized. It has been their aim to develop a multi-unit block scheme that would provide the advantages that flat-planning makes possible, without the disadvantages. (DHC, 1943: 37)

Other publications made reference to either "architects", "the Department of Housing Construction", "Gordon Wilson for the New Zealand State Housing Department" or "Gordon F. Wilson, supervising architect" (One Hundred Homes, 1944: 20; Dixon Street Flats, 1943: 20; Archer, 1942: 55; Two Apartment Houses, 1946: 69). When the NZIA honoured the project with their Gold Medal for 1947, they awarded it to "G.F. Wilson as the Architect to Housing Branch (PWD)" (NZIA, 1948b: 12).

After this, Wilson's name was more strongly associated with the project; however, some outside the DHC held that Plischke was the designer. In the mid-1940s, the Under Secretary of the Department of Internal Affairs, Joe Heenan (who held Plischke in great respect), had the impression that the project was the work of the Austrian, although during 1948 he was corrected that it was Wilson's work. Writing to the Timaru architect, Percy Watts Rule, who had been campaigning to have Plischke admitted to the NZIA, Heenan noted this reattribution while stating that the McLean Flats on The Terrace, Wellington, were by Plischke.⁴ He did not name the source of this new information, although it was obviously one he judged reliable.

Some of Plischke's most fervent advocates were Wellington intellectuals, émigrés and students. In 1950s New Zealand, aesthetic sophisticates were easy to identify: they possessed copies of his 1947 publication, *Design and Living*. It was also eagerly read by young architects, many of whom attended his lectures.⁵ An advance excerpt was included in the first and only issue of *Planning: the magazine of the architectural group*, of 1946. Students in particular championed Plischke. They protested at AUC when he was not appointed professor in 1947 (Wild, 1991), and students at Victoria University College (VUC) campaigned to have him design a new student association building (Barrowman, 1999: 312; VUC Minutes, 1947: 121, 165). Many of these people continued to connect Plischke's name with the Dixon Street project.

In 1963, at the time of Plischke's departure for a professorship at the *Akademie der bildenden Künste* in Vienna, Wellington architect George Porter (who had worked with Plischke at the DHC in the mid-1940s) attempted to correct the supposed misperception that the Austrian had designed Dixon Street. He wrote:

Here [in the DHC] he worked under the late Gordon Wilson, a man of strong personality. It was perhaps unfortunate that a clash of personalities and the anonymity one assumes as a public servant caused his work during this period to be absorbed into the general mass of that done by the department.

But his influence was strong. It is believed that he [Plischke] was the original designer of the Dixon Street Flats, though the final design was not his. (Porter, 1963)

Writing ten years later, John Saker (who had grown up with a copy of *Design and Living* in his family home) also acknowledged the rivalry between Plischke and Wilson. He noted that sometimes Plischke's drawings "would be passed across a dozen other desks and altered at each before being considered complete." He added, "In this way, the design for Wellington's Dixon Street Flats, though basically Ernst Plischke's won a gold medal for Gordon Wilson" (Saker, 1985: 59-60).

In researching her 1986 MA dissertation on Plischke, Linda Tyler interviewed the architect, documenting his account of events. She referred to "Plischke's Dixon Street Flats", stating that it was:

... Plischke's only major Housing Department design to be built largely according to his conception; it was altered only slightly with flower-boxes being provided for each unit, and applied to the front façade of the block in a manner that seems apologetic for the severity of the form. (Tyler, 1986: 49)

She continued, "Dixon Street was a success for Plischke, although he received no credit personally for the design" (Tyler, 1986: 51). She footnoted that "The 'EAP' signature was removed from the designs after submission to the main draughting room. Plischke had copies of the original drawings made which are held in his archive, Vienna" (Tyler, 1986: 52). She accepted this alleged erasure, without considering standard government draughting practice.⁶ Title blocks listed the initials of those who produced the working drawing, traced the drawing onto film or linen, added amendments to the sheet at a later date and checked the drawing for errors. It was standard that the principal name would be that of the head of department. If drawings were copied from a preliminary sheet, the subsequent draughtsperson would include their own initials without reference to the author of the earlier study. It seems likely that this is what happened to early studies for the Dixon Street apartment block. In 1991, the architectural historian Peter Shaw repeated Tyler's assertions in his history of New Zealand architecture (Shaw, 1991c: 143).

Plischke did not include the Dixon Street project in his 1969 monograph, although he did in those of 1983 and 1989 (Piechl, 1983: 102; Plischke, 1989: 248-49). In this last work, Plischke commented, "In Dixon Street in Wellington baute mein Department den ersten kontinental-europäischen Block von Wohnungen. (In Dixon Street, Wellington my department built the first continental European block of dwellings)" (Plischke, 1989: 249). This magisterial reference to 'my department' has further fuelled doubts about the soundness of his claim for an involvement in the project.

The 1989 monograph prompted Shaw to write a substantial journal article in 1991, stating that "it was ironical that Plischke's Dixon Street Flats (1943) were to win Gordon Wilson, as head of department, an NZIA Gold Medal and that Plischke's design was further adapted when the Gordon Wilson Flats were built on The Terrace in 1952" (Shaw, 1991a: 64). Several retired architects responded with memories of Plischke and discussed why he was not admitted to the institute, although none commented on the Dixon Street apartment block issue (Dawson, 1991a; Dawson, 1991b; Reynolds, 1991; Wild, 1991).

6. Jim Dawson made this point. See E. V. Dawson (1996).



Fig. 2: Graham Dawson at the DHC, 1940s. Photographer: W. Hall Raine. AALF 6112, 24/2/1/21, 832, Archives NZ/Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.

Fig. 3: E. A. Plischke, Exterior perspective of the Dixon Street apartment block. Plischke-Archiv, Vienna, Nr 30.888.



7. The Austrian born Frederick Hugh Newman né Frederick Hugo Neumann (1900-64) also worked at the DHC. For information on Newman, see Leach (2003: 8-21).

8. These working drawings from September 1940 were not drawn by Plischke.

In his 1987 BArch research report on Gordon Wilson's work (where he sourced drawings, files, articles and interviews), Ken Davis included memories of a former DHC and Ministry of Works architect, Graham Dawson (Fig. 2). Dawson recounted:

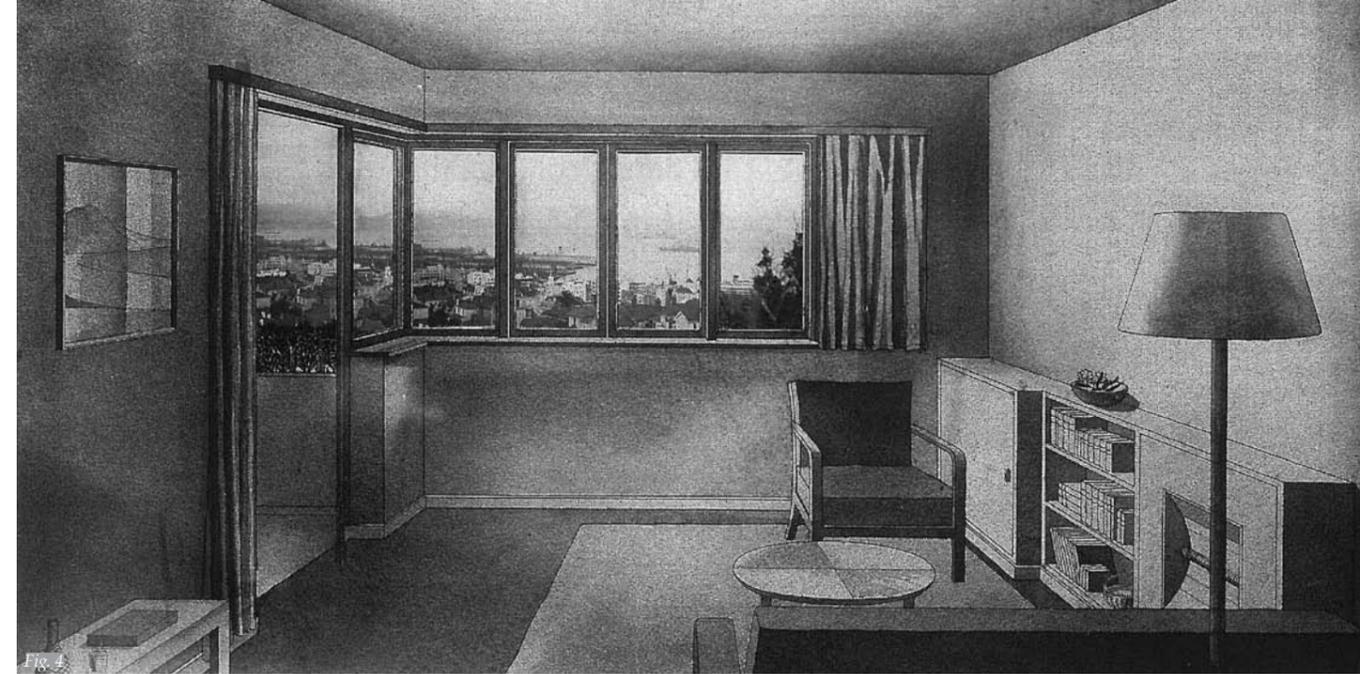
So far as I can recall Berhampore, Dixon St. and Grey's Ave were mainly Wilson's. Symonds St was mainly **Nieumann**⁷ (sic)... I do not think Plischke was involved much in Greys Av. Flats and I think Dixon St was designed before he joined the team. Plischke (with whom I shared a room in Dominion Farmers Bldg for a year or two) was engaged on new house types, 2 to 6 unit housing, shopping and community centres, site layouts imaginatively aimed at comfortable communities.... (G. F. Dawson, 1987: 3-4) [Dawson's underlining]

Dawson roundly added, "However, in discussions with the team and with Wilson, Plischke's influence must have been considerable." Davis interpreted this account with reservation. Delivering a very sound, thorough analysis of the composition of the Dixon Street complex, he drew a more even-tempered verdict on Plischke's involvement:

Since the working drawings were not completed until September 1940 and Plischke arrived in New Zealand in May 1939 ... it is probable therefore that he had some months to be involved in the sketch design. However the apparent lack of purity, a tendency uncharacteristic of Plischke, suggests the eclectic hand of Wilson.

Given Wilson's propensity to change design at will, it is likely that Plischke did the original design, with alterations made later... (Davis, 1987: 35-36)

In the mid-1990s, as part of research for her MArch dissertation on New Zealand state rental flats between 1935 and 1949, Julia Gatley investigated archival sources to establish Plischke's involvement (Gatley, 1995; Gatley, 1997: 121-2, 159-60). Researching government files and reports, newspapers, journals, architectural drawings and interviews, she could find no clear evidence for Plischke's involvement. She reported that, apart from an exterior perspective shown in Fig. 3 (which she dated at 1942, after the project's design) and some working drawings reproduced in Antony Matthews' sub-thesis (which he also dated at 1942), she found no Dixon Street drawings by **Plischke**⁸ (Matthews, 1986: Appendix



C; Gatley, 1997: 153-54, 157). Unable to locate his name on any files or in any contemporary publications, she suggested there was no conclusive evidence of his design input. She supported this view citing: architect, Jim Beard, who had heard Wilson claim the building as his own; Ester Einhorn, who was married to an architect employed by the government; and architect, Graham Dawson. Of these sources, only Dawson worked in the DHC office at the time of the design and his recounting of events is therefore crucial.

Writing on the Dixon Street project in his and Eva Ottillinger's monograph, August Sarnitz acknowledged the uncertainty over the authorship (Sarnitz & Ottillinger, 2004: 143, 148). He remained circumspect, writing that the designer's identity remains unclear, although he ascribed drawings and photographs of the project to "Ernst Plischke in the Department of Housing Construction" (Sarnitz & Ottillinger, 2004: 143-48). When the *Ernst Plischke Architect* exhibition was mounted at the Wellington City Gallery in 2004, locally supplied photographs of the building were shown although no drawings were **included**.⁹

In the entry Tyler wrote on Plischke for the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* and in an essay she wrote to accompany the 2004 exhibition, she made no explicit reference to the Dixon Street project (Tyler, 2000; Tyler, 2004b). However, she discussed the project in another essay that she wrote in the Building Research Association of New Zealand magazine, *Build*. With respect to his involvement in the design of the Dixon Street Flats, she stated that, while working for the government, he spearheaded the design of the government apartment blocks, and she further observed that his influence is evident in the Dixon Street interior and exterior working drawings of September 1940. She discussed his recently published interior perspective of a Dixon Street apartment (Fig. 4) (Sarnitz & Ottillinger, 2004: 144; Tyler, 2004a: 32).

Some New Evidence

In the early stages of the project, records of the design are limited although it appears that a scheme for the Dixon Street site was publicly displayed at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition which opened in November 1939. This monolithic slab with a symmetrically stepped parapet line (Fig. 5) appears awkward and ungainly and shows little of the project's later elegance. There appears to be a significant shift from this design to the project that was subsequently constructed. In March 1940, it was reported that drawings were being prepared;

Fig. 4: E. A. Plischke, Interior perspective of a Dixon Street apartment, ca. 1940. Plischke-Archiv, Nr 30.996.

9. The exhibition was presented by the NZIA and ran from 5 September-28 November 2004. I thank Gregory O'Brien for supplying caption lists from this exhibition.

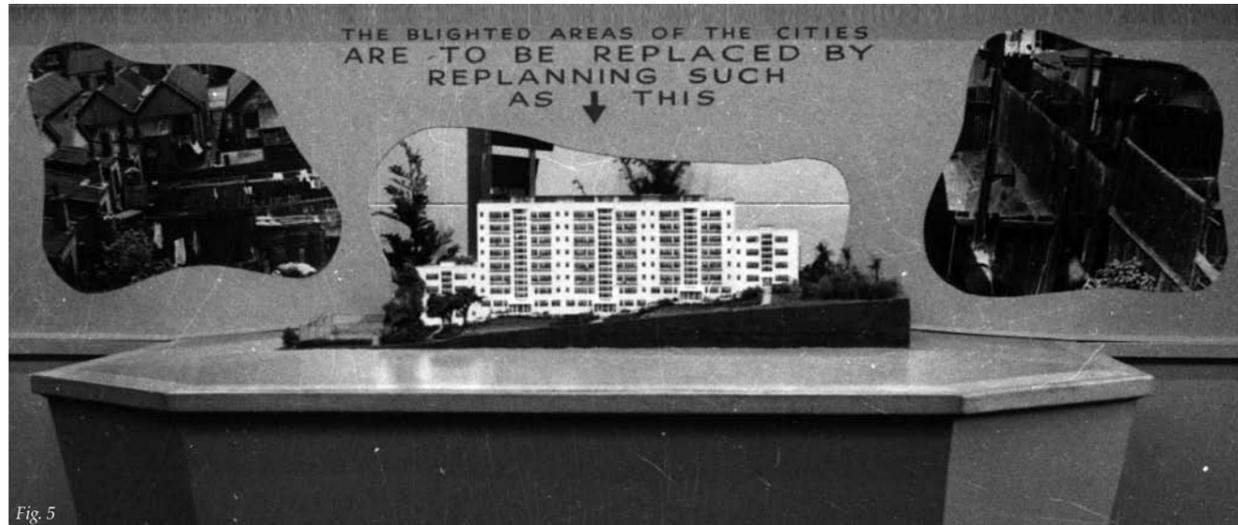


Fig. 5

Fig. 5: Dixon Street apartment model displayed at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition 1939-1940. Photographer: W. Hall Raine. AALF 6112, 24/3, 984, Archives NZ/Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington.

10. 'Dixon Street Flats', HD WI353 124/10/2 Pt 4, Archives NZ, Wellington.

11. Cf. 'McLean Block Flats', HD WI353 10/426/1, Archives NZ, Wellington. The SAC file 35/152/3 pt 1 begins with a memo of tender prices dated 20 December 1940.

12. Plischke's perspective was also published in the *Architectural Review* article of 1942 (Archer, 1942: 55).

13. The constructed curved entrance steps also seem inconsistent with the aesthetic spirit of the perspective.

14. The print also includes some vegetation, drawn onto it in pencil. It is signed at the lower right although this signature is not reproduced in publications (Knofler, 2008b).

15. These are working drawings dated September 1940, drawn by RAB (Bob Barton) and checked GFW (Gordon Wilson) (Knofler, 2008a).

however, none of these remains. The file record is not helpful. Because the first three parts have not survived, the extant record begins at June 1944 with the project completion *certificate*.¹⁰ Comparison with other DHC flat files suggests that if the earlier Dixon Street files had survived, it is unlikely that they would record the early sketch design phases of the *project*.¹¹

Plischke certainly worked on the project to some extent. Sometime in 1940, prior to the preparation of the working drawings, he produced the previously mentioned exterior perspective (Fig. 3). Although Plischke dated this project at 1942 (Piechl, 1983: 102; Plischke, 1989: 248), a Wellington newspaper published the image as "the architect's perspective" in October 1940 (*Block of Flats*, 1940: 9, 12).¹² Comparison of this perspective with the working drawings of September 1940, and with Plischke's account of events, helps in tracing the project's development. After the Centennial Exhibition model there must have been a monolithic scheme without balconies. The working drawings include two amendments to the scheme shown in the 1940 perspective which are reminiscent of the detailing on the Berhampore Flats: the small rectangular balconies on the south façade were reshaped to a semi-circular plan and the building's south-west corner appears right-angled in the perspective but was later curved. Although it is not certain, the entrance canopy also looks to be more rectilinear than that *constructed*.¹³

When Plischke returned to Vienna in 1963, he took a print of the perspective, signing it in *ink*.¹⁴ Coupled with his drawing of an apartment interior (Fig. 4), it seems likely that these were the drawings that he copied after his name was removed. The other Dixon Street drawings in the Plischke-Archiv are two working drawings of plans and sections of the entrance foyer, although neither bears his initials. That he retained them may indicate his involvement with this part of the *project*.¹⁵ Further research may be fruitful.

Regulating Lines

In his research report on Gordon Wilson, Ken Davis annotated the block's elevation with some 'regulating lines' showing how the composition can be interpreted as a system of proportional rectangles (Davis, 1987: 117; Davis, 2008).

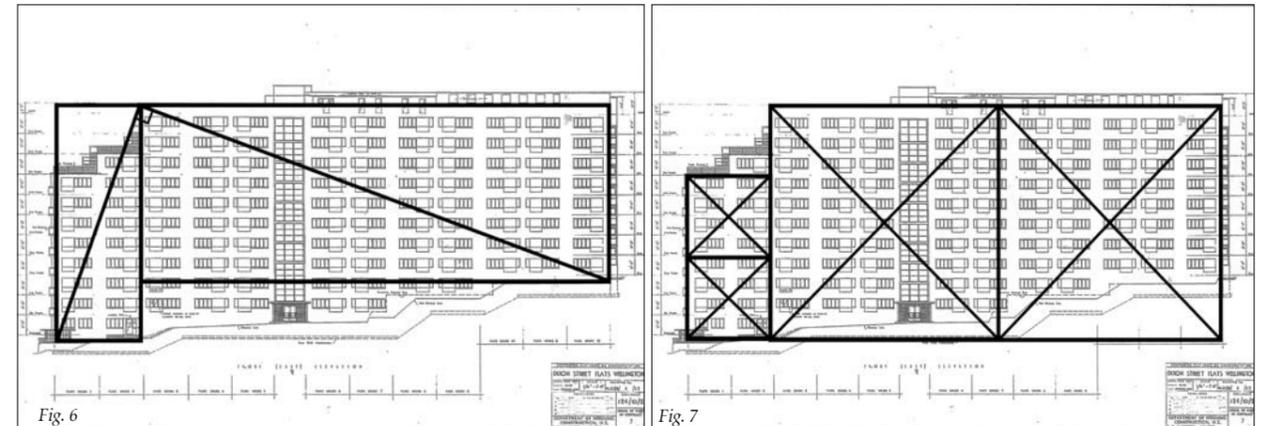


Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Davis appears to infer that the use of regulating lines on the east elevation of Dixon Street indicated Gordon Wilson's concern for the composition and proportion of the elevation. I have found little evidence of this proportion system in Wilson's other work at Berhampore and in his own house in Karori (1940).¹⁶ This system is in obvious accord with Le Corbusier's 'tracés régulateurs' presented in the fourth chapter of *Vers une Architecture* (1923). In 1984, Plischke told Tyler of the book's momentous impact on his work (Sarnitz & Ottillinger, 2004: 258).¹⁷

Regulating lines superimposed on the principal façade of the Dixon Street block show how similar rectangles may have been used to determine the step-down point in the parapet (Fig. 6). This analysis takes account of the sloping terrain of the site. Plischke also made use of a 2x1 proportion system,¹⁸ which determines the parapet drop (Fig. 7). Where the first analysis takes account of terrain, the other takes account of the void above the southern lower section. Both establish the consistent step-down point that acts as a fulcrum about which the proportional blocks, discernible within the building's elevation, maintain equilibrium.

Plischke appears to have used a combination of regulating lines and squares in other projects. For example, his elevation of the employment centre at Liesing (1930-31) reveals a set of similar proportional relationships that determine the composition of the façade (Fig. 8). He drew the parallel diagonals to emphasize and to communicate these relationships, noting that "The proportions of the elevation are controlled by a common diagonal" (Plischke, 1969: 12). The elevation outline corresponds to a 4x1 rectangle. Analysis of the plan further indicates that he used a system of regulating lines and squares to determine some of the spatial arrangement (Fig. 9). Similar proportional systems are also found in Plischke's other work, including the Henderson House at Alexandra in the South Island (1950) (Figs. 10 and 11).

Analysis of other DHC apartment blocks reveals that the facades of the Greys Avenue Flats were also determined by systems of regulating lines and squares (Fig. 12).¹⁹ The working drawings were mostly produced by the recent graduate George Porter in August-September 1944, while the concept drawings date from 1941 (Gatley, 1997: 213). There are differences of opinion about who designed the block in the initial stages.²⁰ The other large government apartment blocks do not show regulating lines. I have not found them with the Berhampore, McLean or Hansen Street Flats, or with F. H. Newman's Symonds Street block.²¹ While these analyses do not decisively identify Plischke as the designer, they support the

Fig. 6: Regulating lines superimposed on the east elevation of the Dixon Street Flats. Gatley, 1997: 153; regulating lines added by Robin Skinner.

Fig. 7: A 2x1 proportion system also determines the parapet drop. Gatley, 1997: 153; squares added by Robin Skinner.

16. I have found a somewhat inconclusive regulating line relationship between the living room and the meals area in Wilson's own Karori house plan (Designed to Catch the Sun, 1943). Wilson's later extension for the house does not show this kind of relationship at all (Family House, 1951).

17. On Plischke and Le Corbusier, see Sarnitz & Ottillinger (2004: 47-49).

18. According to Bill Alington, Frederick Newman also worked on a system of double squares (Alington, 2008). Josef Frank also used this system.

19. I thank Andrew Leach for suggesting this line of enquiry. This finding may not suggest that Plischke necessarily worked on the Greys Avenue Flats, but rather that the Dixon Street design strategy had impacted upon the Auckland project.

20. Dawson told Davis that they were mostly by Wilson (G. F. Dawson, 1987: 3). He told me that they were by Wilson and himself "to an extent". (G. F. Dawson, 1994a). Frederick (Fritz) Farrar could have been involved as well.

21. In a paper discussing, amongst other things, scale, rhythm and proportion, Newman mentioned the golden section but made no reference to regulating lines (1952: 72-73).

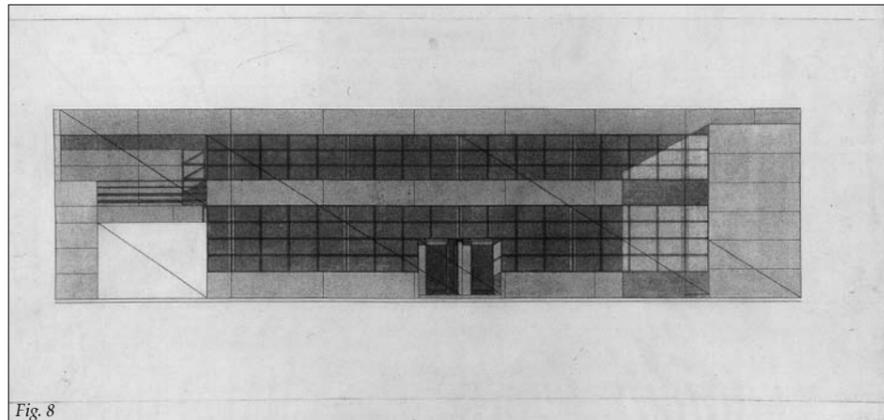


Fig. 8

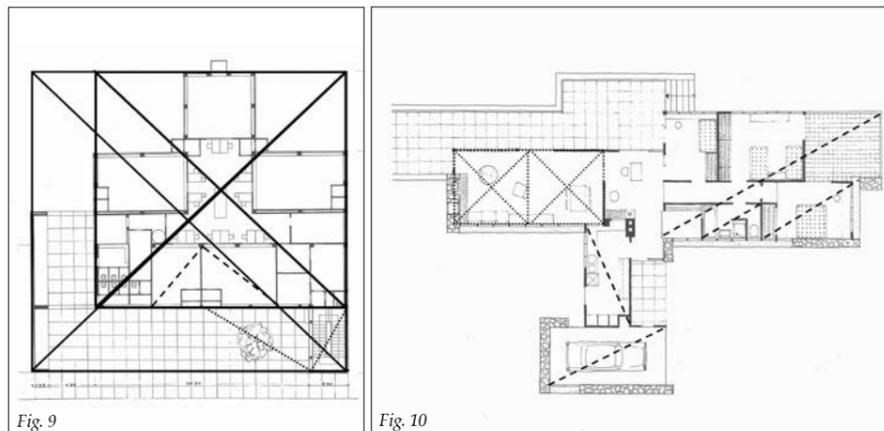


Fig. 9

Fig. 10

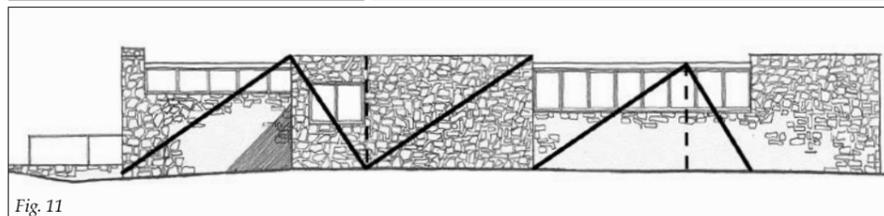


Fig. 11

Fig. 8: *Labour Exchange, Liesing (1930-31)*. Plischke-Archiv, Nr 30.419.

Fig. 9: *Regulating lines and square geometries determine the planning of the Labour Exchange*. Plischke, 1969: 71; regulating lines added by Robin Skinner.

Figs. 10 and 11: *Henderson House, Alexandra (1950)*. Plischke, 1969: 154; regulating lines added by Robin Skinner.

claim that he exerted significant involvement or influence in the Dixon Street and Greys Avenue scheme designs. This accords with Davis' earlier-stated verdict on Plischke's contribution to the Dixon Street design.

Plischke and the NZIA

Plischke's difficult relationship with the NZIA is also relevant in interpreting the various comments made by Graham Dawson. As is widely known, Plischke never joined the NZIA because he would not condescend to sit an examination that he deemed inferior to those he had sat in Austria. In 1939, the issue of refugee architects was discussed by the institute's Executive with the decision reached that only people who would qualify for membership of the RIBA could qualify in New Zealand (NZIA Minutes, 5 Jul. 1939). A year later, it was moved that refugee architects could not sit the institute's special examination until they became naturalized British citizens (NZIA Minutes, 6 Nov. 1940). In response to a request for clarification, the RIBA informed the NZIA that they did not recognize foreign certificates and instead asked that candidates provide evidence

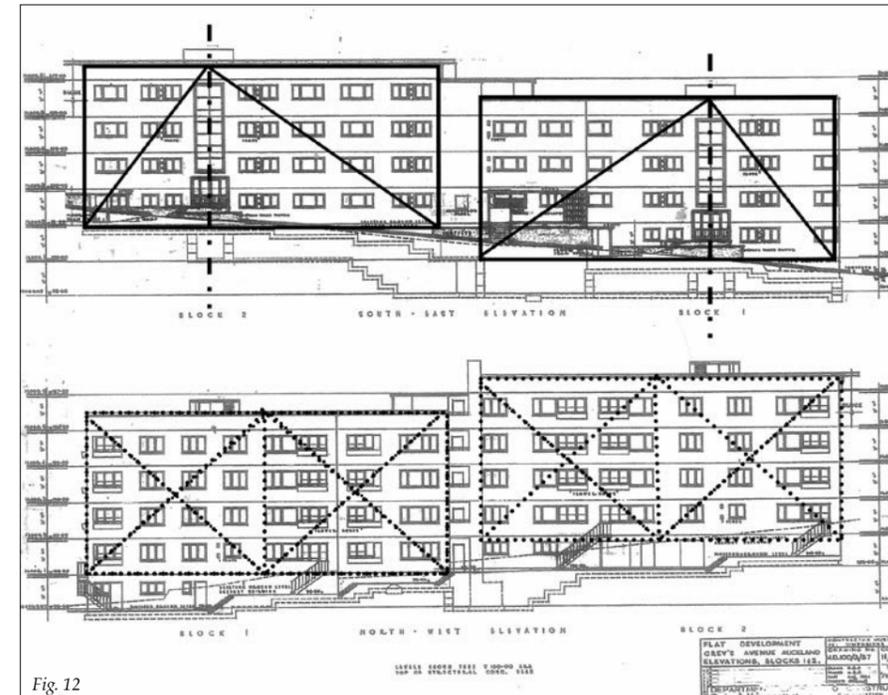


Fig. 12

Fig. 12: *The Greys Avenue Flats elevations appear to be determined by regulating lines and a 2x1 proportional geometry*. Gately, 1997: 214; regulating lines added by Robin Skinner.

of work, together with certificates and their respective syllabi. They added that complete exemption from all examinations had not been granted on the strength of a foreign diploma or certificate (NZIA Minutes, 17 Oct. 1946). In early 1947, the NZIA Education Committee passed a resolution that refugee architects should sit all papers in the institute's special examination (NZIA Minutes, 29 Jan. 1947).

Minutes from meetings of the NZIA Executive include several discussions specifically relating to the possibility of Plischke's admission to the institute in the 1940s. As noted earlier, in the late 1940s Percy Watts Rule lobbied for Plischke's admission to the institute "on account of his high qualifications" (NZIA Minutes, 17 Dec. 1947).²² The matter was turned over to the next Annual Meeting where it was moved that the nominee be advised to apply by the usual channels (NZIA, 1948a).²³ After that meeting, when Watts Rule wrote asking what steps should be taken to have Plischke admitted, he was instructed to apply in the usual way, citing the appropriate section of the institute's regulations (NZIA Minutes, 30 Jun. 1948). Watts Rule also wrote to Heenan asking him to exert his influence in Wellington (Rule, 1948). Heenan replied that the Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, was much taken aback that the institute insisted on Plischke sitting an examination (Heenan, 1948a). In reality, the institute could have admitted Plischke under a little-used regulation that awarded membership to a person who had "in the opinion of the [institute's] Council attained great eminence in the profession of architecture" (NZIA Act, 1913: Sec 8.1.i). In line with the RIBA lead, the Executive resisted doing so.²⁴

The institute hierarchy also considered other issues relating to Plischke. In February 1947, the Council discussed the professorial position at AUC which Plischke was applying for, although the nature of their discussion can only be speculated upon. The garbled minutes record:

22. The grounds for admission were recorded in the written minutes as "by virtue of a nominee holding a foreign diploma" (NZIA, 1948a). The matter was not reported in the written minutes (NZIA, 1948b).

23. Ironically this was the meeting where Wilson was awarded the institute's Gold Medal.

24. On Plischke and NZIA membership, see E. V. Dawson (1996).

25. In 1952, Gordon Wilson succeeded Patterson as Government Architect in the Ministry of Works.

26. Heenan informed Plischke of Watts Rule's "battling" at the 1948 AGM in Dunedin, for which Wilson wrote that Plischke was "deeply grateful" (Heenan, 1948b).

Mr Dawson mentioned the appointment of a Professor of Design to the Auckland University College. Mr Massey said that when the Institute had a member on the Faculty of Architecture he would be in touch with the School of Architecture and he would be able to submit to the Education Committee similar suggestions. The Institute could only advise the University on appointments. (NZIA, 1947: 51)

Later in 1948, possibly referring to Plischke's earlier work in the government service, the Canterbury Branch of the NZIA wrote complaining that community centres, which were being developed as war memorials, were being designed by unqualified men (NZIA Minutes, 25 Aug. 1948). The Executive responded, quoting a ministerial circular that indicated that these plans were merely for guidance and information, and that local councils should "engage experts" themselves (NZIA Minutes, 8 Sep. 1948) [their underlining]. This may partly explain why none of Plischke's community centres was built.

In 1949, when Plischke was asked to design a writing desk as the wedding present from the people of New Zealand for Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, the Executive complained to the Prime Minister that "it was regrettable that the Government entrusted the designing of such a token of loyalty to one who was not a natural born New Zealander of British origin" (NZIA Minutes, 6 Apr. 1949). The Prime Minister responded that the designer was a New Zealand citizen at the time of appointment (NZIA Minutes, 13 Jul. 1949).

That same year, following the earlier lobbying by the VUC students to have Plischke design their (now stalled) student union, the institute's Executive expressed concern to the college Registrar that an unregistered architect was being considered for the project, provoking doubts over the availability of government building subsidy, should he be appointed (NZIA Minutes, 29 Jun. 1949; VUC Minutes, 1949: 127, 1950: 90, 1952: 160). This alert was spurious, because in 1947 Plischke had left government service and gone into partnership with registered architect, Cedric Firth. In 1953, upon the advice of the retired Government Architect, R.A. Patterson,²⁵ the job was awarded to Structon Group Architects (Barrowman, 1999: 312).

It is not known if Plischke was aware of all of the NZIA discussions, although he almost certainly would have understood the institute's culture.²⁶ While the position regarding the wedding present was obviously xenophobic and was possibly personally motivated, the principal issue could have been easily resolved: if Plischke had sat the NZIA's special examination or the RIBA's examination, he would not have had such a troubled relationship with the institute. Other émigrés such as Porsolt and Newman sat examinations and worked as officially recognized architects. Plischke's pride did not help in these matters. As far as the institute members were concerned, they were simply upholding their rules. Here it is pertinent to recall that, in response to Shaw's 1991 article, retired architect Ian Reynolds wrote, "Smug and self-satisfied the local community might have appeared to be, but it was much too innocent to be devious" (Reynolds, 1991).

The Executive of the NZIA had about eight members. At most of its meetings of the late 1940s and at the Annual Meeting of 1948, Graham Dawson and L. E. Brooker (who was the chief architect at the State Advances Corporation – the government department that administered state housing) were present. There

is no indication in the minutes if they voted for or against Plischke. In later life, Dawson described Plischke as "a sensitive soul" and downplayed his involvement with the flats (G. F. Dawson, 1987; G. F. Dawson, 1994b).²⁷ My impression is that Plischke and Dawson's relationship was complex and problematic, and that this must be taken into account when considering his recollections.²⁸ To my knowledge this has not been explicitly identified by any earlier writer.

In conclusion, in this survey of the archival record, new evidence has been presented that supports the claim that Plischke had a significant involvement with the design of the Dixon Street block. The design process took a noticeable shift about the time that he joined the office and, significantly, the final project exhibits some of the particular compositional strategies that he rigorously employed in his other work. Rather than being taken as a snapshot of the final design, his exterior perspective has been re-dated from 1942 to 1940 and identified as a key document that helps trace the development of the project. Furthermore, I have presented evidence that complicates our understanding of his contemporaries' recollections, which has hitherto not been considered.

Plischke's part in the design of the Dixon Street Flats did not make the official record. While his early input is clearly discernible, from the working drawings onwards he appears to have been kept off the job. He was assigned no task where his name would be explicitly recorded. Given that Plischke's influence was fundamental, this absence becomes especially intriguing. Rather than interpret this as a sign of detachment, it may indicate that his participation was crucial. Acknowledgement of even a minor contribution by Plischke would have left a discernible trace of his input, which could have challenged the formally assigned authorship to the chief architect. This may be why his name was not recorded in the official record.

References

- Alington, W. H. (2008). Pers. comm. to R. Skinner (March 9).
- Archer, H. C. (1942). New Zealand Architecture. *Architectural Review*, 91(March), 52-58.
- Barrowman, R. (1999). *Victoria University of Wellington, 1899-1999: A History*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Block of Flats: State Housing Project in Dixon Street: Details Announced (1940, October 12). *Dominion*, p. 9, 12.
- Davis, K. J. (1987) *A Liberal Turn of Mind: The Architectural Work of F. Gordon Wilson, 1936-1959: A Cultural Analysis*. Unpublished BArch research report, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Davis, K. J. (2008). Pers. comm. to R. Skinner (March 9).
- Dawson, E. V. (1991a). Letters: Plischke PR. *Architecture New Zealand*, (July-August), 5.
- Dawson, E. V. (1991b). Letters: Plischke Recalled. *Architecture New Zealand*, (March-April), 9.
- Dawson, E. V. (1996). Pers. comm. to J. Gatley (February 24), as cited in Gatley, 1997: 151-52.
- Dawson, G. F. (1987). Letter to K. Davis (July 13), as cited in Davis, 1987: Appendix.
- Dawson, G. F. (1994a). Pers. comm. to R. Skinner (October 4).
- Dawson, G. F. (1994b). Pers. comm. to J. Gatley (December 10), as cited in Gatley 1997: 122.
- Department of Housing Construction (1943). *General Report on State Housing in New Zealand*. Wellington: Government Printer.

27. I telephoned Dawson once in 1994, principally to discuss the work of the Auckland City Council architect, T. K. Donner. Our conversation continued for some time. My notes indicate that he described Plischke as a "sensitive soul" and when I asked about the Dixon Street block, he said "Plischke worked on for a ...", before breaking off in mid-sentence (G. F. Dawson, 1994a).

28. In 1968, when the Wellington Branch of the NZIA learnt that Plischke, by then resident in Vienna, was visiting New Zealand the following year, they recommended unanimously that he should be made an Honorary Fellow of the Institute. As NZIA President, Graham Dawson hosted a luncheon in the Austrian's honour (NZIA, 1968).

- Designed to Catch the Sun and Dodge the Winds (1943). *Home and Building*, 7(1), 10-11.
- Dixon Street Flats (1943). *Home and Building*, 7(1), 20-21, 23, 47.
- Family House and Garden (1951). *Design Review*, 3(5), 112-15.
- Gatley, J. (1995). Privacy and Propaganda: The Politics of the Dixon Street Flats. *Interstices*, 4, 11pp.
- Gatley, J. (1996). For Modern Living: Government Blocks of Flats. In J. Wilson (Ed.), *Zeal and Crusade: The Modern Movement in Wellington* (pp. 53-68). Christchurch: Te Waihora Press.
- Gatley, J. (1997). *Labour Takes Command: A History and Analysis of State Rental Flats in New Zealand 1935-1949*. Unpublished MARCH thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Gatley, J. (2000). Wilson, Francis Gordon 1900-1959. In C. Orange (Ed.), *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Five 1941-1960* (pp. 566-67). Auckland and Wellington: Auckland University Press and Department of Internal Affairs.
- Heenan, J. W. (1948a). Letter to P. Watts Rule (March 24). Heenan Papers, MS Papers 1132-200, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- Heenan, J. W. (1948b). Letter to P. Watts Rule (April 2). Heenan Papers.
- Knofler, M. (2008a). Pers. comm. to R. Skinner (March 28).
- Knofler, M. (2008b). Pers. comm. to R. Skinner (July 4).
- Leach, A. (2003). *Frederick H. Newman: Lectures on Architecture*. Ghent, Belgium: A&S Books.
- Matthews, A. (1986). *E. A. Plischke – The Connection between Theory and Form*. Unpublished BArch research report, University of Auckland.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects (1947). *Year Book 1947: Including Proceedings of Annual Conference, 1947*. Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects (1948a). Minutes of the Thirty Second Annual Meeting, 3 March 1948. NZIA Papers. J. C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects (1948b). *Year Book 1948: Including Proceedings of Annual Conference, 1948*. Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects. Executive Minutes. NZIA Papers.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects (1968). *Wellington Branch Annual Report 1968*. Wellington Branch Minute Book 1965-69. NZIA Papers.
- New Zealand Institute of Architects Act* (1913).
- Newman, F. H. (1952). Social Factors in Architecture and their Implications for New Zealand. In Leach, 2003: 67-89.
- Noonan, R. J. (1975). *By Design: A Brief History of the Public Works Department, Ministry of Works, 1870-1970*. Wellington: Government Printer.
- One Hundred Homes in One (1944). *New Zealand Listener*, (January 14), 20-21.
- Piechl, G. (Ed.). (1983). *E. A. Plischke*. Vienna: Akademie der bildenden Künste.
- Plischke, E. A. (1969). *Vom Menschlichen im Neuen Bauen (On the Human Aspect in Modern Architecture)*. Vienna: K. Wedl.
- Plischke, E. A. (1989). *Ein Leben mit Architektur*. Vienna: Löcker.
- Plischke [sic], E. A. (1947). *Design and Living*. Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs.
- Porter, D. G. (1963, April 6). Exile Brought Fresh Vision to N.Z. Architecture. *Dominion*, p. 10.
- Reynolds, I. (1991). Letters: In context. *Architecture New Zealand*, (September-August), 5.
- Rule, P. W. (1948). Letter to J. W. Heenan (March 14). Heenan Papers.
- Saker, J. (1985). Rediscovering Ernst Plischke. *Wellington City Magazine*, (September), 58-61.
- Sarnitz, A. & Ottillinger, E. (2004). *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World: The Complete Works*. Munich: Prestel. Originally published as *Ernst Plischke: Das Neue Bauen und die Neue Welt: Das Gesamtwerk*. Munich: Prestel, 2003.
- Shaw, P. (1991a). Plischke in New Zealand. *Architecture New Zealand*, (January-February), 61-64.
- Shaw, P. (1991b). Letters: Plischke Sights. *Architecture New Zealand*, (May-June), 9.
- Shaw, P. (1991c). *New Zealand Architecture from Polynesian Beginnings to 1990*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Shearer, J. O. (1947). Letter to the Registrar, AUC (January 23). Heenan Papers.
- Two Apartment Houses in Wellington, N.Z. (1946). *Architectural Forum*, 85(August), 69-72.
- Tyler, L. (1986). *The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand, 1939-1962*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch.
- Tyler, L. (2000). Plischke, Ernst Anton 1903-1992. In C. Orange (Ed.), *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Five 1941-1960* (pp. 414-15). Auckland and Wellington: Auckland University Press and Department of Internal Affairs.
- Tyler, L. (2004a). Built to Last. *Build*, (August-September), 32-34.
- Tyler, L. (2004b). Ernst Plischke International Modernist. In *Ernst Plischke Architect*. Wellington: Wellington City Gallery.
- Victoria University College Council, Minute Books 1946-1952, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
- Wild, A. (1991). Letters: Twopence. *Architecture New Zealand*, (July-August), 5.
- Wilson, F. G. (1947). Letter to the Registrar, AUC (January 31). Heenan Papers.