

# What's in a Name?

## The First House in New Zealand architectural discourse<sup>1</sup>

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In the writing on new New Zealand houses of the 1990s and the opening years of the twenty-first century, frequent reference was made to “the Group”, taking in the Architectural Group (1946), Group Construction Company (1949-51), Group Architects (1951-64) and sometimes Wilson & Juriss (1964-68). Architects of award-winning houses acknowledged the influence of the Group on their work, and comparisons to Group houses became an accepted practice among critics. Meanwhile, historians of New Zealand architecture focused particular attention on one Group house: their first, designed and built by the Group Construction Company in the North Shore, Auckland, suburb of Takapuna and known as the First House. In this later historicising literature, the 1948 assertion by the acknowledged Group leader, Bill Wilson, that “there is no architecture in New Zealand. NONE!” was framed as anticipating the 1949-50 design and completion of the First House. Justine Clark recognised that the First House “is now understood ... as the moment that modernism came to New Zealand” (2004: 51). In the 1990s and early 2000s, then, the Group in general, and the First House in particular, were entangled in a discourse about the origins of New Zealand architecture.

This paper considers the two bodies of literature: that on award-winning houses and origins; and that of history and the First House. It shows that in the case of the houses, recourse was to the notion of the Group rather than to specific Group houses. That is, the Group were cited as an origin, but an actual house was not. Unlike Rykwert’s origins, however, which were “memor[ies] of something which cannot but be lost” (1972: 14), there really was a First House – it existed; it still does. For a time in 1992-93, there was even a second version of it, a partial recreation within the walls of the Auckland City Art Gallery.

In considering the house’s privileged place in architectural history, this paper gives particular attention to its name. As Clark observed, using Juan Pablo Bonta’s ideas about canon formation, “The First House is embedded in the New Zealand canon partly because of the rhetorical potential contained in its name.” (2004: 50)

This paper, in following one of Bonta’s suggested approaches of arranging texts in chronological order to identify changes over time (1979: 131), shows that the Group were not the ones to elevate their first house with the capitalised and categorical name, First House. It identifies the original name, Experimental House, as well as two subsequent name changes, showing that the capitalised name only came into use in 1991-92. This is important because the name has captured architectural imaginations and has had subsequent effects. In particular, the assumed link between Wilson’s claim about the country’s lack of architecture and the completion of its “first house” a short time later, hinges upon the name. To question the purposefulness or intentionality of the name, is to destabilise the house’s primacy.

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## The “Jesus Christ of New Zealand Architecture”

In the mid-to-late 1990s, three award-winning New Zealand houses were interpreted and discussed in terms of reference to and influence of the Group: the Clifford House, Auckland, 1991-95, designed by Architectus: Bowes Clifford Thompson for Architectus director Patrick Clifford; the Livingstone Street Townhouses, Auckland, 1996, by Felicity Wallace; and the Heatley House in the Bay of Islands, 1997, by Pete Bossley Architects. The three were *Home and Building's* Home of the Year for 1996, 1997 and 1998 respectively and the Clifford House was also the winner of an NZIA-Resene National Award for Architecture for 1997.

Of the Clifford House, Debra Millar wrote: “There are strong, and acknowledged, links to the Group Architects’ houses from the 1950s; houses with a humble, make-do quality and directness of purpose.” (1995: 56) Kevin Brewer interpreted the house solely in terms of references to the Group, quoting Bill Wilson at length, referring to the Group’s “rationalisation”, “structural honesty” and “clear articulation of the post and beam structure”, and concluding that “[t]he development of these techniques is the (real) beauty of the Clifford House” (1997: 92).

Pete Bossley himself acknowledged the Group’s influence on his Heatley House: “House and sleepout are concerned with modernism’s investigations of transparency, combined with a critical use of timber construction which develops some of the explorations of New Zealand architects from the 1950s onwards, especially the Group.” (1999: 103)

The references to Wallace’s Livingstone Street Townhouses being in the tradition of the Group are more subtly worded: “Firmly rooted in the New Zealand tradition [of “the 1960s and 1970s”], it is a home that makes use of materials – concrete block, rough-sawn timber and corrugated iron – that are commonly associated with a ‘Kiwi’ vernacular.” (*Home of the Year*: 61). However, Wallace was soon to be more heavily entwined in the discourse by Giles Reid, who suggested that in every lecture he had ever heard her give, she had cited the Group as an influence on her work (1999: 70). In response, she made a plea for the continual comparisons to end: “The difficulty I have with the Group is that they – ‘it’ – has become the Jesus Christ of New Zealand architecture. All our architecture has become referenced to this period ... And for Christ’s sake, do we need to be compared to them?” (1999: 6)

Wallace’s plea was to no avail. Indeed, such comparisons were not limited to award-winning houses but were *de rigueur* for reviews of houses more generally in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. For example, in 1997 Ken Davis suggested that Gerald Parsonson’s Gibbs House “appears to owe a debt to ... the extruded form of the houses by the Group Architects.” (61) Jasper van der Lingen, Chris Kelly and Amanda Hyde de Kretser, writing of Architecture+’s Wairarapa fishing cabin, stated that “[r]elevant precedents are well understood and interpreted, from Le Corbusier’s Petite Maison through to Glenn Murcutt, with an awareness of the typical New Zealand 1950s Group home.” (*AHI Roofing 2000*: 62) Architecture Workshop’s Andrews House, Blenheim, was a winner because: “In the spirit of the Group houses of the 1950’s this building is stunningly clear in its thinking and immaculately detailed.” (*Nelson/Marlborough 2002*: 60)

More generally, Amanda Reynolds referred to the Group in a comment on origins: “I’d particularly like to see some reference to the origins of New Zealand architecture, post-50s housing architecture and that’s Vernon Brown, the Group,

and ... baches." (Everybody's Talking, 1998: 115) The G4 Exhibiting Unit, under the title *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene*, combined an exhibition of 23 mostly recent houses designed by Auckland architects including Bossley, Clifford and Wallace, with a catalogue celebrating the 1950s houses of the Group, Wilson & Juriss and others, reiterating the lineage of the 1990s houses in 1950s and '60s houses in general and Group houses in particular. In 2001, the NZIA awarded its Gold Medal to the Architectural Group.

The 1990s houses attracting these comparisons were predominantly by graduates of the Auckland School of Architecture in the 1970s or early '80s, when former Group member, Allan Wild, was Dean, and influential commentator on the Group, David Mitchell, was teaching at the School. Mitchell wrote about the Group in the *AAA Bulletin* in 1977, his article published alongside an interview with Wild. The six-part television series and book, *The Elegant Shed*, followed. Perceptive and engaging, the TV series reached a general audience while the 1984 book remains that decade's "watershed" publication on New Zealand architecture (Wood 2005: 72-79). Within its geographic structure, Mitchell and Chaplin identified the Group as Auckland's leading architects after World War II. At the School, Mitchell taught a course on New Zealand architecture with content including the Group. This is not to suggest that he was solely responsible for teaching this generation about the Group, but to acknowledge that he in particular was liked, admired and had influence. The AAA's symposium "in honour of the Group" was also held in this period (Extracts, 1982). Speakers included Wild and Mitchell, as well as former Group members Jim Hackshaw and Ivan Juriss. Students and members of the AAA attended.

Notable through the "Group Guru" (Wallace 1999: 6) articles of the 1990s and early 2000s is the extent to which the comparisons were to the Group in general rather than to particular buildings, and certainly not to the First House. And clearly, there was expectation that New Zealand architects (Auckland-trained ones, at least) had some sense of what a Group building looked like. First and foremost, it was assumed to be a house, even though the 1950s architects did produce other building types. The imagined Group house was usually of timber, but sometimes it was of brick or concrete block. When built of timber, it might have had a post and beam construction. The imagined house often had a wide gabled roof, but on other occasions it had an extruded plan and a skillion roof. A range of other attributes was often cited: structural and aesthetic economies; minimum materials and maximum spans; open plans; efficient plans; modular plans; and an overall simplicity, directness, clarity or honesty.<sup>2</sup>

This reading of the Group as an origin for 1990s and early 2000s practice casts them as what Rykwert has termed "hero-inventors" and "primitive builders" (1972: 16), appropriate in that the Group were not only the designers but also the builders of the first couple of houses. Photographs record and celebrate the act of building (Fig. 1). This reading might also seem to imply the location of their 1950s and '60s houses – suburbia – as some kind of paradise. But this was not the case. The Group themselves had railed against the suburb in their 1946 manifesto: "We New Zealanders live in a chaos of unplanned speculative building under an unthinking, self-seeking system of land-subdivision. Our suburbias spread their tentacles along all city traffic routes." (Architectural Group 1946: 2) Suburbia has been the subject of much criticism since this time, yet the detached house has remained Auckland's desired norm. If there is paradise in here, then it is in the idealised New Zealand dream of the detached house and garden rather than the reality of the location of such houses in suburbs.

2. Setting them apart from the 1950s precedents, the 1990s renditions were often for wealthier clients, with the Group's moral imperative, the egalitarianism and the unpretentiousness articulated by Wilson (1957: 28), often overlooked or forgotten, recalling the loss of early modernism's social underpinning as it was taken up by the corporate world, particularly in the United States.



Fig. 1: The First House under construction in 1950. Source: Architecture Archive, The University of Auckland.

### From Experimental House to First House

If *The Elegant Shed* was one of the key moments in the mythologising of the Group, the Auckland City Art Gallery's *1950s Show* (September 1992-March 1993) was among those that focused explicitly on the First House, including as it did a partial recreation of it inside the gallery walls: a building within a building. Clark describes it as the "most public manifestation" of the house's canonisation (2004: 49). Exhibition-goers walked through the recreated house to experience other parts of the show. To reflect upon the complexities of this rebuilding, it is useful to first step back to 1949-50 when the house was designed and built, and to trace its changing name.

The Group Construction Company were not the ones to capitalise the name, First House. The original 1949 drawings were labelled "house at ... Northboro Rd Takapuna" (Shaw 1992: 25). In 1950, when the young designers and builders pursued the publication of the house, they clearly gave some thought to giving it a catchy name. As it was built speculatively, it could not follow the established practice of taking the name of the client. Instead the name Experimental House was used (Group Construction 1950: 27; Fairburn 1950: 6). The selection of this name followed the precedent set by Wellington's Architectural Centre Inc., in naming its 1948-49 student-designed and -built house, the Demonstration House. The *Architects' Journal* described the Wellington and Auckland houses together as "experimental houses" (House Built: 362).

The name Experimental House continued to be used in the 1950s. In the exhibition, *Home Building 1814-1954*, for example, recent graduate James Garrett labelled it "Experimental house, Takapuna, 1950" (1954: 22). In 1966, in his entry on architecture in the *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, Garrett made reference to the Group's "two experimental houses in Northboro' Road, Takapuna" (1966: 69).

Two years later, Graham Pitts, in his B.Arch. building report on the Group, did not use the name Experimental House, but instead referred to the building as their "first house" (1968: 10, 36, 53). Though an undergraduate assignment, Pitts' report nonetheless signalled important changes in the writing on the Group. Garrett had been their near contemporary and had written about them with currency, whereas Pitts' report acknowledged Wilson's death that year and provided a survey of their work. More than 40 years later, it remains the most substantial source on the Group. It has been repeatedly consulted by subsequent writers and has had much greater influence than an undergraduate report would normally enjoy.

Indeed, from this time on, the name Experimental House was largely replaced by the name, “first house”. This occurred in a wave of published references that were increasingly retrospective. They begin in 1977 with Mitchell’s article, “Group Architects: Hot and Cool,” and the associated interview with Wild; and continue with Miles Warren’s 1978 article, “Style in New Zealand Architecture”; and Mitchell and Chaplin’s 1984 book, *The Elegant Shed*. Mitchell’s 1977 article does not mention the house by name, even though it is the subject of all four photographs used to illustrate the article and interview. Wild referred to “the first house we put up” (Wild 1977: 9). Warren (1978: 2) and Mitchell and Chaplin (1984: 32) referred more explicitly to the “first house”.

Responsibility for the third wave of publication on both the Group in general and their first house in particular lies with curator and writer, Peter Shaw, whose *Metro* article, “The Group Architects and the Auckland House”, appeared in mid-1991 and whose extensive survey of New Zealand architecture was launched later that year. The following year, Shaw curated the architecture section of the *1950s Show* at the Auckland City Art Gallery – designed by McKay Pearson Architects – and wrote the accompanying essay on architecture in the special issue of *Home and Building* that served as the exhibition catalogue.

It is in Shaw’s work of this period that the capitalised name, First House, first occurs. In the *Metro* article and in the first edition of his history of New Zealand architecture, the capitalised name was used only in the captions to photographs (1991a: 121, 122; 1991b: 155). A year later, in the *1950s Show* catalogue, it featured in the main body of the text – not once but three times – along with its sibling, the now also capitalised Second House (1992: 26-27).

Shaw (2009) acknowledges that the capitalisation was a conscious decision on his part. On the one hand, in print publication, it made these (the first and second) houses typographically consistent with the many houses named after their clients. The name “First Group House” would have served this function adequately and accurately, but Shaw also recognised that dropping “Group” left behind two words with the potential to capture the public imagination, a particular consideration for someone conscious that he was taking architecture beyond the profession to general audiences: readers of *Metro* and of an accessible survey text on New Zealand architecture; and, particularly, visitors to the Auckland City Art Gallery.

The capitalised name adorned the recreated house. Photographs capture it in the foreground with quotations from Wilson’s 1948 essay printed on the wall behind, ensuring that the link was made between his claim regarding the country’s then lack of architecture and the subsequent completion of its “First House” (Figs. 2 and 3).

This dominant exhibit attracted attention and etched itself on the memories of exhibition goers, including reviewers. Tim Nees concluded that: “As this house was the seminal local modern work it was the appropriate choice for such treatment.” (1993: 9) Seminal is a potent word. Its use was not supported by evidence or rationale, implying that readers were expected both to know and appreciate why it was the appropriate choice. Yet other authors have found primacy in other houses. For example, in 1942, H. Courtenay Archer identified the Robin Simpson House, Auckland (1938-39), as “one of the most uncompromisingly con-



Fig. 2: The photograph of the recreated First House that illustrated reviews of the 1950s Show. Source: Auckland City Art Gallery.

temporary buildings in New Zealand, yet built in timber” (55), the “yet built in timber” implying local difference from international models. Simpson’s house was of course too early to have been included in the *1950s Show*, but even other authors representing the Group with just one building have used a range of different houses: Garrett (1958: 42) chose the All-Pine Prefab; Nikolaus Pevsner (1959: 213) chose the Mallitte House; John Stacpoole and Peter Beaven (1972: 91) chose the Robertson House (too late to have been a candidate for the *1950s Show*); Martin Hill (1976: 37) chose the Catley House; Terence Hodgson (1990: 83), like Pevsner, chose the Mallitte House; and Jennifer Taylor (1996: 1665) chose the Rotherham House.

From recent (2009) conversations with Shaw and McKay, it is clear that the name of the house and its link to Wilson’s 1948 claim was just one factor governing the decision to recreate the First House. Another was that, with its Group-designed and -made furniture, and Anthony Treadwell mural, this house best demonstrated modern architecture’s dialogue with art and other design disciplines, and this relationship was therefore reflected in the one exhibit. Pragmatics were also a factor: a portion of the First House would fit within the gallery space whereas some of the other houses, such as the two-storeyed Rotherham House, would not.

During and after the *1950s Show*, individuals writing about the First House adopted the capitalised name (Packer 1992: 9; Nees 1993: 9). Philip Thomas, in his B.Arch. research report on the house, recognised Shaw’s capitalisation and its effect in raising the house to “an exalted position” (1993: 20, 39). Paraphrasing Wilson (1948), he suggested that “NZ goes from architecture NONE to architecture ONE” (1993: 30). He chose not to follow Shaw’s lead, referring to the “first Group house” except when quoting Shaw’s “First House”. This clarity of attribution was lost from the article he contributed to *Modern New Zealand* two years later, where the capitalised version of the name appeared without specific mention of Shaw (1995: 20, 25).

By the late 1990s, the capitalised name, First House, was entrenched and widely used (Shaw 1997 [1991]: 200; McKay 1998: 260; McKay 1999: 211; Clark & Walker 2000: 30-33, 70-74, 87; Lloyd Jenkins 2003: 22-23; Lloyd Jenkins 2004: 118-19, 309; Clark 2004: 48-52; Lloyd Jenkins 2006: 47). Creative interpretation had made a seamless transition into the canon as a result of iteration. More than this, the capitalised name was assumed to have been used intentionally:

The Group’s first house, built without client at ... Northboro Rd, Belmont, had been given the emphatic name First House. The house was their first but the name also signalled that this was the first house of a new New Zealand approach to architecture. The claim was bold. (Lloyd Jenkins 2003: 22)



Fig. 3: A visitor to the 1950s Show gazes at a state house and Bill Wilson's 1948 words: "there is no architecture in New Zealand. NONE!" Photograph courtesy of Rick Pearson.

Indeed it was bold: boldly made in the 1990s. And it was not adopted universally. A smaller number of commentators, particularly those of the Group's generation, continued to refer to the building as the "first Group house" or the "Group's first house" (Petry 1993: 51; Lasenby 2001: 93; Beard 2004: 12; Rotherham 2004: 16). Peter Bartlett, who as a student had worked on the 1954 *Home Building* exhibition, resurrected the name Experimental House (1998: 15). Allan Wild, one of the builders of the house, has been consistent in using lower case letters for both the "first" and "second" houses (Wild n.d.: 6; Wild 1999a: 17-18; Wild 1999b: 7-8). Indeed, he commented on this very matter thus: "What did we call them? Our first house, and our second house; no capital initials, no implications of 'negating the past.'" (2004: 2) He also commented that the Group quite often called themselves "group architects". Similarly, their manifesto and their magazine were both published with titles written in lower case letters: *on the necessity for architecture* and *planning* 1. This consistent use of the lower case followed developments in typography, a particular interest of Group member, Bruce Rotherham, who did their graphics. As the editor of *Long Live the Modern*, I hereby admit to capitalising Wild's "first house" and "second house" for the publication in that volume (Wild 2008: 57). Typographic consistency was my priority.

## Conclusions

The first part of this paper has suggested that for architects who trained at the Auckland School in the 1970s and early '80s and rose to profile in the 1990s, Group-designed houses operated as an origin. The return to origins was part of a renewal in New Zealand architecture, combining the rejection of the decadence of post-modern architecture with the rediscovery of the modern (see Clifford 1995: 2-5). The particular modernism rekindled was that which had been admired, discussed and taught to them by an earlier generation. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the influence was interpreted and communicated in terms of general attributes rather than specific references to one or more particular houses.

Yet there really was a First House. Or was there? The second part of this paper has questioned the privileged status of the first Group house by showing that it was only given its current name comparatively recently. The change from Experimental House to "first house" followed Wilson's death and marked the beginning of the Group as an historical phenomenon; that from "first house" to "First House" confirmed their fate as historical fact.<sup>3</sup>

Having traced the changing name of the house, a later comment by Wilson takes on new and perhaps greater importance than the famous lines of 1948 regarding New Zealand's lack of architecture:

3. Meanwhile, Wellington's Demonstration House retains its original name. This house is not embedded in the New Zealand canon in the way the First House is. Rather, it was largely forgotten until the mid-1990s when it was recovered through archival research conducted in conjunction with the Architectural Centre's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. For information on this house, see Gatley (1996).

Fig. 4: The international modern room within the 1950s Show, a counterpoint to the regional modernism of the First House. Source: Auckland City Art Gallery.



4. “Shaky foundations” are Bonta’s words. He concludes that “the canonical interpretation of Barcelona [i.e. Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion] was based on somewhat shaky foundations” (1979: 203).

This sort of question [about firsts] belongs after the event, to be answered by critics and historians, not by the practising architect. He cannot properly say, ‘Now I shall build a New Zealand house’ any more than the writer can say, ‘Now I shall write the great New Zealand novel.’ (1961: 11)

As theorised by Wilson, it had indeed been left to critics, historians and commentators to decide which house would be recognised as the first house of the New Zealand modern. They – we – have read and written this significance into the house, its changing name both reflecting and reinforcing its evolving place in the historical record. To recognise the introduction and then increasingly collective and consensual use of the capitalised name, First House, is not to pin down the canonisation of this one building, but rather to confirm the “shaky foundations”<sup>4</sup> on which the current interpretation rests.

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