

Privacy & Propaganda: The Politics of the Dixon Street Flats

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The official opening of the State block of 116 flats in Dixon Street, Wellington, was performed by the Minister of Works, Mr Semple, on Saturday afternoon. The weather was the worst possible for the ceremony, which took place in the vestibule of the building ... The mayor, Mr Hislop, said there was plenty of water available for christening the latest child of the State, and it appeared to be well and sturdily built.

“Multi-Unit Block: New Wellington State Flats; Building Officially Opened,”
Dominion (September 6 1943), p. 4.

INTRODUCTION

The *Dixon Street Flats* are a block of state rental flats designed by the Labour Government’s Department of Housing Construction in 1940 and built 1941-1944 in inner-city Wellington. A ten storey monolith, this block was of a magnitude unprecedented in the history of domestic architecture in New Zealand and may be described as the archetypal example of the modernist apartment block in this country. As such, it is a building of national significance.

During construction, progress was followed in the local press. The media attention and public interest provided fertile ground on which the Labour Government was to capitalise and, in doing so, use the building for the purpose of political propaganda. The *Dixon Street Flats* were publicly opened six months before completion in order that the opening ceremony would coincide with Labour’s election campaign of September 1943.

This paper will consider the use of nascent modernism for political propaganda in New Zealand and, more specifically, the issue of authorship within that realm.

The authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats* is torn between Gordon Wilson (1900-1959), a New Zealand educated architect, who was the chief architect of the Department of Housing Construction, and Ernst Plischke (1903-1992), an Austrian architect, an esteemed modernist and a refugee in New Zealand. Both Wilson and Plischke made significant contributions to modern architecture in New Zealand.

A tension between the two was established with their first meeting in 1939. At this time Wilson

produced a copy of Alberto Sartoris’ *Gli Elementi dell’ Architettura Funzionale*.¹ This is a substantial book addressing modern architecture by country. Its chapter on Austria opens with Plischke’s work signifying the esteem in which he was held internationally. Hence Wilson knew of Plischke’s work before his arrival in New Zealand but proceeded to employ him not as an architect but as a draughtsman. Disharmony between the two was compounded by their personalities, Wilson being described as “arrogant, over-bearing, often rude and insensitive to other peoples’ feelings” and Plischke as a “sensitive soul.”² The tension did not subside and has been embodied in the controversy which continues to surround the authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats*.

On the completion of the *Dixon Street Flats* in 1944, all accolade was accepted by Wilson. Over the years since its completion, Wilson’s name has been increasingly disassociated from the design of the building and replaced with that of Plischke. Popular opinion would now have it that Plischke designed the building and that Wilson had Plischke’s name removed from the drawings in order that he, Wilson, could claim the building as his own.

It is interesting to note that the archetypal modernist apartment block and this esteemed modernist architect appeared in New Zealand about the same time and it is understandable, even a little romantic, that a relationship has emerged between the two.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND STATE HOUSING

As the depression eased in the mid-1930s, a severe housing shortage became apparent throughout New Zealand. In an effort to overcome the shortage, the recently elected Labour Government built thousands

of state rental houses throughout the country from 1937 (figs 1, 2).³ A new government department, the Department of Housing Construction, was set up to facilitate the construction of the state rental houses. These houses tended to follow English models and exhibit Georgian imagery. At the time of their construction they were a visible expression of the realisation of Labour's policy to provide the working classes with affordable accommodation of a reasonable standard. Indeed they testified not only to Labour's housing programme but to the totality of its social programme. Photographs of a "family," complete with a borrowed baby, outside a state house in Palmerston North were used to promote immigration to New Zealand from Britain in 1939.⁴ Street names such as Savage Crescent within the schemes of detached houses ensured that the association with Labour was readily apparent and enduring, Michael Joseph Savage being the Labour Prime Minister 1935-1940.

In addition to the state rental houses, the Labour Government also built thirteen blocks of flats in reinforced concrete. The blocks of flats were limited to Wellington and Auckland, two cities which together laid claim to 80% of the nation's housing shortage. The inaugural multi-unit scheme, known today as the *Centennial Flats* (1939-1940), is situated in the Wellington suburb of Berhampore (figs 3, 4). It provides evidence that domestic architecture in New Zealand had progressed beyond the villa, the bungalow, and the English cottage exemplified by the detached state rental house. The modern aesthetic, and more particularly the "international style" commonly associated with 1920s Europe, had infiltrated New Zealand architecture.

In planning, however, the *Berhampore Flats* remain little more than a series of row or terrace houses and this scheme can be interpreted as transitional. Its occupant density lies between that of the detached housing schemes and the multi-storey blocks which were to follow it: the *Dixon Street Flats*, Wellington 1941-1944 (figs 5-9); *McLean Flats*, The Terrace, Wellington 1943-1944 (figs 10, 11); *Hanson Street Flats*, Newtown, Wellington 1943-1944 (figs 12, 13); *Symonds Street Flats*, Auckland 1945-1947 (figs 14, 15); and *Greys Avenue Flats*, Auckland 1945-1947 (figs 16, 17).⁵ Whereas the state rental houses had followed English models, the multi-storey blocks of state rental flats followed European precedents and are decidedly modern in their aesthetic.

This stylistic anomaly is not simply explained by the low occupant density of the state rental houses as compared with the high occupant density of the state rental flats. Why did the government decide to introduce the modern aesthetic for the blocks of flats instead of following the English models used for the state rental houses? Both building types were, after all, being built under the one housing programme.

The detached houses were built to standardised designs which had been produced under the auspices of the New Zealand Institute of Architects.⁶ The same designs were used repeatedly and required little in the way of ongoing design input from the Department of Housing Construction. The blocks of flats, on the other hand, were designed by the department itself. The architects of the department were not confined to English models but instead were given a blank slate. Responsibility ultimately lay with the department's chief architect, Gordon Wilson. The modernist imagery of the blocks of flats provides evidence that Wilson was interested in, and knowledgeable of, contemporary European architecture.

THE DIXON STREET FLATS

The *Dixon Street Flats* were constructed 1941-1944. This block of flats was of a magnitude unprecedented in the history of domestic architecture in New Zealand. During construction, progress was followed in the local press.⁷ The press focused on the magnitude of the block and the job developed a high public profile. The media attention and public interest provided fertile ground on which the government was to capitalise and, in doing so, cement its association with the building.

In September 1943 when the *Dixon Street Flats* were nearing completion a general election was imminent. The building was opened six months before it was completed in order that the opening would coincide with the Labour Party's election campaign.⁸ The opening ceremony attracted the attentions of the local media and in this way the government was able to propagandise the realisation of its policy to provide state rental housing. With this premature opening the government was using the *Dixon Street Flats* for the purpose of political propaganda.

The detached housing schemes had already been used for this purpose but the *Dixon Street Flats* provided a richer opportunity in that they employed a progressive architectural language. This

architectural language was that of modernist Europe of the 1920s and early 1930s and was associated with the political left. It was condemned by Nazi Germany in the 1930s but had yet to establish itself in New Zealand. With their unprecedented magnitude and their modern aesthetic, the *Dixon Street Flats* were used to market the 'progressive' nature not only of the Department of Housing Construction, but of the Labour Government itself.

Fred Newman, another of the department's refugee architects, would later write to Gordon Wilson: "Though the erection of the individual houses is the most important part of the NZ Housing scheme, it must be borne in mind that the large blocks already built and planned for 1947 and 1948, in view of their much greater architectural possibilities, are an excellent propaganda to show the efficiency and the success of the NZ's (*sic*) Government's housing activities both in this country and also overseas."⁹ Newman personally favoured the construction of multi-unit blocks to avoid urban sprawl and his statement may have been intended as a play on the government's desire for propaganda in order that he and the department could continue to build multi-unit blocks within the state housing programme.¹⁰

Regardless of Newman's intention, the *Dixon Street Flats* must be considered within the agenda of the Labour Government under which they were built.

THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE *DIXON STREET FLATS*

On the completion of the *Dixon Street Flats*, all accolade was accepted by Gordon Wilson. Wilson was Australian born but, importantly, was New Zealand educated. He served articles under William M Page from 1916 and commenced study at the School of Architecture at Auckland University College in 1920.¹¹ About the same time he entered the office of Hoggard, Prouse and Gummer. This partnership was dissolved in 1921. William Henry Gummer and Charles Reginald Ford then entered partnership in 1922 and Wilson continued to be employed by the new partnership in Auckland. Wilson was elected an associate of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1928 and became a junior partner of Gummer and Ford the same year.¹² He remained in this position until 1936 when he was appointed chief architect within the Department of Housing Construction.

While Gummer and Ford are remembered for their pioneering domestic architecture, their public buildings tended to rely on a stripping of classical

forms to allude to a modernist imagery. Ian Lochhead refers to their "allegiance to classicism."¹³ Ford had a particular interest in seismic design, however, and in terms of structure and construction their works were advanced.¹⁴ With fourteen years in the office of Gummer and Ford, Wilson's grounding in reinforced concrete construction would have been thorough. In his role as the Department of Housing Construction's chief architect, Wilson was ultimately responsible for all buildings built by the department.

Plischke, on the other hand, had trained under Peter Behrens at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts (1923-1926), had spent five months working in Behrens' office in 1926 and had worked in the office of Jacques Ely Kahn in New York in 1929.¹⁵ Returning to Austria in 1930 he contributed a design for the Vienna *Werkbundsiedlung*, the Vienna State Council's experimental housing research project which had been inspired by the *Weissenhofsiedlung* (1927). A much praised and widely published example of Plischke's work is the *Government Employment Office* building at Liesing, Vienna (1930-1931), which was defaced after the annexation of Austria in 1938 as it was thought to epitomise modernist philosophies. Plischke, with his Jewish wife and her children, fled Austria and sought refuge in New Zealand. Arriving in May 1939 Plischke found work as a draughtsman within the Department of Housing Construction. He remained in the department until 31 December 1947 and then entered private practice with Cedric Firth. He left New Zealand in 1963 to return to Austria and head the prestigious *Akademie der Bildenden Künste* in Vienna.

Plischke was one of about a thousand people with Jewish connections to flee Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Poland in the mid-to-late 1930s and to find refuge in New Zealand.¹⁶ Of the 657 in full-time employment by 1945, fourteen are said to have been working as architects.¹⁷ This number includes the handful employed by Wilson within the Department of Housing Construction, of which Plischke was one. Others were Fred Newman, Ernst Gerson, Fritz Farrar and Richard Fuchs.¹⁸

An account of the reception faced by European refugees upon their arrival in New Zealand is given by Ann Beaglehole in *A Small Price to Pay; Refugees From Hitler in New Zealand 1936-46*. The refugees were known as 'enemy aliens.' This nomenclature is in itself derogatory and Beaglehole provides evidence

that in many cases the Europeans were treated with suspicion by New Zealanders. One explanation is that New Zealanders had difficulty making the distinction between German and Jew and all German speaking immigrants were thought of as potential spies. Another explanation, and one of relevance to the refugee architects, is that of professional jealousy.¹⁹

While in many cases their qualifications were recognised in New Zealand, the European architects were nevertheless required to sit examinations before they could register with the New Zealand Institute of Architects. This can be interpreted as an attempt to keep them out of the profession in the light that the European qualifications and training were likely to have been superior to local apprenticeships and the course offered by the School of Architecture at Auckland University College, the curriculum of which still included the meticulous rendering of drawings of the classical orders, an exercise of questionable relevance in the twentieth century.²⁰ Germany, in particular, home to the *Bauhaus* and the *Deutscher Werkbund*, was at the forefront of progressive architecture while New Zealand in the 1930s was a somewhat belated follower of international developments.²¹

The institute's requirement for the refugee architects to sit examinations should not be interpreted solely as an attempt to keep them out of the profession. The institute would not have been familiar with all the institutions the refugee architects had attended, with all the qualifications they held or with the standard of those qualifications. In addition, none of the refugee architects would have been familiar with the building industry or with the running of contracts in New Zealand. The examinations were a simple procedure by which the institute could ensure professional standards were maintained and in its requirement the institute appears to have acted with conservative prudence. Some of the refugee architects chose to sit the examinations, others chose not to. Plischke refused.

In her thesis on the architecture of Plischke in New Zealand, Linda Tyler provides evidence that Plischke was given little responsibility during his first couple of years in the Department of Housing Construction.²² She nevertheless credits him with the design of *Dixon Street Flats*. This was not the first instance in which such credit was given. In a newspaper article as early as 1963 architect George Porter stated that: "It is believed that he (Plischke)

was the original designer of the *Dixon Street Flats*, though the final design was not his."²³

Indeed popular opinion would now have it that Wilson had Plischke's name removed from the drawings in order that he, Wilson, could claim the building as his own.²⁴ To my knowledge, the only surviving copies of the drawings of the *Dixon Street Flats* in New Zealand are those reproduced on micro-fiche (*fig 18, fig 19, fig 20*). These drawings carry Wilson's signature. The drawings also carry the initials of a number of other architects and draughtsmen who worked on the project.²⁵ The earliest drawings do not carry Plischke's distinctive E. A. P. initials. Nor do the archived files which cover the construction of the building.²⁶ That the micro-fiche and archived files do not carry Plischke's initials neither proves nor disproves the theory that Wilson had Plischke's name removed from the drawings. The documentation sheds no light on the extent of Plischke's involvement. It does shed light on the number of people, at least 15, who contributed to the drawings and it has to be asked whether we are justified in attempting to pin the authorship to a particular individual.

One drawing of the building which does carry Plischke's initials is a perspective drawn in 1942. It is reproduced in his autobiography and carries the caption: "*Wohnanlage Dixon Street, Wellington, 1942; Perspektive E. A. P.*"²⁷ While Plischke may well have drawn this perspective of the building in 1942, Department of Housing Construction records show that the building had been designed in 1940²⁸ and that by 1942 construction was well underway. This drawing does not in itself provide evidence that Plischke designed the building and in the text which accompanies this drawing, he attributes the design of the building to "my department."²⁹

From the documentary evidence which is available, it is possible to compile a chronology of events. Plischke arrived in New Zealand in May 1939. He found work within the Department of Housing Construction a short time later but was given little responsibility for the first couple of years. The site on which the *Dixon Street Flats* would be built was purchased in February 1940. By the end of March drawings were being prepared for a block of 116 flats³⁰ and in June that year it was reported that the *Dixon Street Flats* would be "the biggest block of flats in the Dominion."³¹ Contract drawings are dated September 1940. The design of the building and the preparation of the contract drawings overlap with

the period in which Plischke was given little responsibility within the department.

Wilson supervised the construction,³² and it was certainly Wilson who was acknowledged at the opening of the building in September 1943.³³ In addition, he was awarded a gold medal by the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1947 as head of the team responsible for its design.³⁴

The documentary evidence and chronology of events point to Wilson as the architect ultimately responsible for the design of the *Dixon Street Flats*.³⁵ Popular opinion, however, continues to credit Plischke and to label Wilson as an 'accessory after the fact.' What popular opinion overlooks in its labelling of Wilson is the agenda of the Labour Government. To have attributed the building to Plischke would have been to attribute an expression of the progressive nature of the New Zealand government to a German speaking refugee who was a potential spy and an 'enemy alien' - not very patriotic, particularly during war-time. There was more at stake in attributing the building to Wilson than Wilson's reputation.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The *Dixon Street Flats* is the archetypal modernist apartment block in this country and, consequently, a building of national significance. Plischke has been constructed as the author and to now remove the *Dixon Street Flats* from the works attributed to him in New Zealand, to remove a building of national significance from his oeuvre, would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the name Plischke functions.³⁶ The name Plischke signifies not only an Austrian architect, an esteemed modernist and a refugee in New Zealand, but also a subject who was humiliated by not being recognised by the New Zealand Institute of Architects and who was humiliated by being employed as a draughtsman with little responsibility in the Department of Housing Construction. In short, the name Plischke describes a subject who was victimised.

Professional jealousy may have been a factor in Wilson's decision to employ Plischke as a draughtsman rather than as an architect but it should also be considered that Plischke had no experience of building in New Zealand, and that in choosing not to sit the institute's examinations, he could not call himself an architect in this country. I have noted that the institute was prudent in requiring all refugee architects to sit examinations

before they could be registered. Why should Plischke have been accorded special treatment? He chose not to sit the examinations of his own volition and the institute did not relax its requirement.³⁷ To say that he was victimised in this respect is arguable.

The myth that Wilson had Plischke's name removed from the drawings in order that he, Wilson, could claim the building as his own is consistent with the view that Plischke was victimised during his time in New Zealand. Within this myth, the recognition of Plischke's authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats* serves as a form of retribution in that it compensates for one aspect of the humiliation he suffered in this country. Without this myth, where is the evidence that Plischke was humiliated?³⁸ Even though he did not register as an architect he nevertheless succeeded in exercising his profession in New Zealand, and over a period of 24 years he produced a significant body of work and enhanced the reputation he had previously developed before returning to a privileged position in Austria.³⁹

It can be argued that works of a particular author have an inaugurative value precisely because they are the works of that author,⁴⁰ that is to say a value which is intrinsic to the works of that author and recognised *per se*. Works which possess the name of a particular author will not be consumed and forgotten - their status and their manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which they circulate. To attribute the *Dixon Street Flats* to Plischke is to provide this building with an inaugurative value. That it is typical for those aboard the Plischke bandwagon to express a particular liking for the *Dixon Street Flats* is evidence of this. There is more at stake than Plischke's reputation, however, with popular opinion recognising and serving to compensate for humiliation, victimisation and even prejudice.

The authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats* affects not only the manner in which the names Plischke and Wilson function, but also that in which the name of the building functions. Attributed to Plischke, the *Dixon Street Flats* are the archetypal modernist apartment block *in New Zealand*; a modernist apartment block displaced from Austria. Returned to Wilson, however, the *Dixon Street Flats* become the archetypal *New Zealand* modernist apartment block. This would constitute a significant change in the manner in which the building is perceived and would add considerable weight to Wilson's reputation as a modernist architect. The authorship of the building, therefore, has ramifications

concerning the establishment of a New Zealand modernism.

THE ISSUE OF AUTHOR-GENIUS

It can be argued that the name of the author groups together a number of works and thus differentiates these works from others. To attach a single name to the group implies “relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilisation” amongst them, a stylistic uniformity.⁴¹ Attributing the *Dixon Street Flats* to Plischke serves to isolate it from the Department of Housing Construction buildings attributed to Wilson such as the *Berhampore Flats*, Wellington (1939-1940), and the *Greys Avenue Flats*, Auckland (1945-1947). Indeed it serves to include the *Dixon Street Flats* within Plischke’s repertoire and implies a relationship with his other works including the *Government Employment Office* building at Liesing, Vienna (1930-1931), the community centre at Naenae (1943) and the community centre at Mount Roskill (1946).⁴²

The *Dixon Street Flats* are distinguished from the oeuvres of both Wilson and Plischke, however, in that they constitute an upright slab. It is difficult to find homogeneity between this slab apartment block and other works by either Wilson or Plischke. To uncover a trace of the individual author, one might look for continuities between the detailing of the *Dixon Street Flats* and other works by that individual.⁴³ The Department of Housing Construction, however, used standardised details. The timber joinery for both state rental houses and state rental flats, for example, was prefabricated in state owned joinery factories at Kaiwharawhara and Penrose. A study of the detailing of the *Dixon Street Flats* would show traces of the Department of Housing Construction but not of either individual. The employment of standardisation is readily apparent when the *Dixon Street Flats* are considered alongside the two state rental blocks which followed it: the *McLean Flats*, The Terrace, Wellington (1943-1944), and *Hanson Street Flats*, Newtown, Wellington (1943-1944). Not only the details but even the plans and elevations have become standard. Of a smaller scale than the *Dixon Street Flats*, the *McLean Flats* and the *Hanson Street Flats* are little more than a segment of it. The relationship is one of imitation as opposed to filiation.

Other than the standard details they employ and the imitations they inspired, therefore, the *Dixon Street*

Flats have little in the way of stylistic uniformity with other buildings attributed to either Wilson or Plischke. As an example of the slab apartment block, the *Dixon Street Flats* are more closely related to other examples of their genre: Gropius’ *Siemensstadt scheme*, Berlin (1929); his project for eleven storeyed apartment blocks exhibited at the Berlin Building Exhibition, 1931; and van Tijen, Brinckman and van der Vlugt’s *Bergpolder block*, Rotterdam (1933-1934).

Sigfried Giedion credits Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer with first conceiving and developing the slab apartment block in the mid-1920s.⁴⁴ Gropius and Breuer did not simply design a few blocks but they also made possible this genre.⁴⁵ To refer to Gropius and Breuer with respect to the *Dixon Street Flats* is to refer to them not as historical individuals but as culturally constructed authors. Other than the *Siemensstadt scheme*, which is better described as a walk-up apartment block than a slab, Gropius and Breuer’s development of the slab apartment block in the late 1920s was limited to unbuilt projects. Giedion credits the *Bergpolder block* as being the first realisation of this genre,⁴⁶ and it is interesting to note that the *Dixon Street Flats* were completed within ten years of this Dutch prototype.

The complexity regarding authorship might be discussed in terms of a chain comprising: treatise - go-betweens - author - work.⁴⁷ The chain to the *Dixon Street Flats* might read: Gropius and Breuer - reproduction in books and periodicals - development of the slab apartment block and the realisation of the *Bergpolder block* - further reproduction in books and periodicals - author (Wilson and/or Plischke) - *Dixon Street Flats*.⁴⁸ All of these factors contribute towards the production of the work and as a link in a chain the role of the author might be described as mediate.⁴⁹

Nowhere in this process has there been any mention of the author-genius. We can admire the bringing together of chains but in doing so, we are not proclaiming the author as genius.⁵⁰ In the *Dixon Street Flats* we can admire the bringing together of such works as Gropius’ *Siemensstadt scheme*, Berlin (1929), his eleven storeyed apartment blocks (exhibited 1931), and the *Bergpolder block*, Rotterdam (1933-1934). We can admire the interest in and knowledge of contemporary European architecture whether the mediate author is Wilson or Plischke.

Wilson had yet to visit Europe when the *Dixon Street Flats* were designed but he knew of such works

through imported books and periodicals. Plischke might have visited these or other examples before arriving in New Zealand and/or known of them through books and periodicals.

Beatriz Colomina argues that modern architecture only became modern with its engagement with the media, and that, as a result of reproduction in the media, the location of a particular building is no longer exclusive to its construction site but is displaced into such sites as architectural publications, journals and exhibitions.⁵¹ Reproduced as a subject within the media, an architectural object becomes accessible to the architect in Berlin, in London, and indeed in Wellington. Architecture is more accessible as the subject than it is as the object.⁵² This is certainly the case when considering the accessibility of European architecture to New Zealand architects: the object is 12,000 miles away whereas the subject is within arm's reach. Thus modern architecture in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States was accessible to New Zealand architects as a result of mass *re*-production.

I have noted that Wilson was in possession of Alberto Sartoris' *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Funzionale* (1935). Other books to which he might have access include Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* (1927), Bruno Taut's *Modern Architecture* (1929) and Hitchcock and Johnson's *The International Style; Architecture Since 1922* (1932). Of the periodicals being imported in the 1930s and 1940s, *The Architectural Review* was treated "as the gospel" by young architects in New Zealand.⁵³ By the late 1920s modern architects working in both Europe and the United Kingdom were featured regularly in *The Architectural Review* and their work was accompanied by numerous essays on the subject of modernism.⁵⁴

Regarding the infiltration of the modern aesthetic into New Zealand architecture, New Zealand architects were influenced not only by the imported books and periodicals to which they had access, but also by their own experiences overseas and by the presence of European, British and American architects in New Zealand. The refugee architects, in particular, would have provided stimulus within the Department of Housing Construction and their influence on Wilson must have been considerable. It is possible that Wilson would have been threatened by the presence of an architect of the calibre of Plischke in his office but it is equally possible that he would have been challenged and even inspired by it.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF THE *DIXON STREET FLATS*

The purpose of this paper has not been to determine whether the *Dixon Street Flats* should be attributed to Gordon Wilson or to Ernst Plischke but rather to look at what is at stake in attributing the building to either of them. Popular opinion continues to attribute the building to Plischke. To remove the building from Plischke's oeuvre and return its authorship to Wilson would constitute a significant change and would affect the manner in which both their names, and the name of the building itself, function.

That Plischke was victimised in New Zealand is partly dependent on the myth surrounding the authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats*. The current recognition of his authorship serves to compensate for the humiliation, victimisation and prejudice that he suffered in New Zealand. This recognition is based on retribution rather than on rationale.

The *Dixon Street Flats* were completed within ten years of the prototypical slab apartment block. Attributed to Plischke, the *Dixon Street Flats* are the archetypal modernist apartment block in New Zealand - a modernist apartment block displaced from Austria. Attributed to Wilson, however, the *Dixon Street Flats* become the archetypal New Zealand modernist apartment block. To have authored a building of such significance would add considerable weight to Wilson's reputation as a modernist architect. There is more at stake than reputation, however: the authorship of the *Dixon Street Flats* has ramifications concerning the establishment of a New Zealand modernism. Was this a New Zealand building or was it a building displaced from Europe?

Not only does the authorship of this building have ramifications concerning the establishment of a New Zealand modernism, but concerning the nature of the Labour Government's propaganda machine. Was this "child of the State," this expression of the progressive nature of the Labour Government, the work of a New Zealand architect or was it the work of a German speaking refugee who was a potential spy and an 'enemy alien'?

The surviving documentation does not provide the answers to these questions and if indeed Plischke was ultimately responsible for the design of the *Dixon Street Flats*, then the Labour Government was *politically* in its decision to credit Wilson with the design. Wilson was, after all, chief architect of the

Department of Housing Construction and as such was ultimately responsible for all buildings built by the department.

NOTES

- 1 It is not known if it was a copy of the 1931 edition or the 1935 edition. See E. A., Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur* (Wien: Löcker Verlag, 1989), p. 233.
- 2 Graham Dawson, to Julia Gatley, (10 December 1994).
- 3 See Department of Housing Construction, *General Report on State Housing in New Zealand* (Wellington: Ministry of Works, 1943).
- 4 See Di Stewart, and Associates, "Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct, Palmerston North: An Historical and Architectural Overview," (Palmerston North, Palmerston North City Council, undated c.1993-94).
- 5 Of the thirteen multi-unit schemes built in Wellington and Auckland, the remaining seven comprised little more than a series of double storeyed row or terrace houses with skillion roofs and overhanging eaves. They are the *Victory Flats*, Adelaide Road, Wellington; *Jackson Street Flats*, Petone; *Petone Flats*, Adelaide Street, Petone; *Tennyson Street Flats*, Petone; *Randwick Road Flats*, Lower Hutt; *Wakefield Street Flats*, Lower Hutt; and *Parnell Flats*, Parnell, Auckland.
- 6 H. T. Armstrong, Minister of Housing, "Statement Showing Progress of Government Housing Scheme From Inception," (June 1 1939), National Archives, Wellington, NASH 217/0720.
- 7 See "Random Notes," *Building Progress* (April 1940), v. 5, n. 4, p. 21; "Large Block of Flats," *Building Progress* (June 1940), v. 5, n. 6, p. 7; "Tenders," *Building Progress* (September 1940), v. 5, n. 9, p. 19; "State Housing: Scheme Said to be Uneconomic," *Dominion* (September 9 1940), p. 12; "Tenders: Housing Construction Department," *Dominion* (November 9 1940), p. 18; "Random Notes," *Building Progress* (December 1940), v. 5, n. 12, p. 24; "State Housing," *Building Progress* (March 1941), v. 6, n. 3, p. 24; "Random Notes," *Building Progress* (June 1941), v. 6, n. 6, p. 8; "Building News From All Quarters," *Building Progress* (April 1942), v. 7, n. 4, p. 23; "News in Brief: Dixon Street Flats," *Dominion* (August 18 1943), p. 6; "Dixon Street Flats: Opening on Saturday," *Dominion* (September 2 1943), p. 7; "Multi-Unit Block: New Wellington State Flats; Building Officially Opened," *Dominion* (September 6 1943), p. 4; "New Flats Opened: Block in Dixon Street," *Evening Post* (September 6 1943), p. 6; "Housing in Wartime," *Dominion* (September 9 1943), p. 6; "Dixon Street Flats: Advertisement Criticised by Mr Semple," *Dominion* (September 22 1943), p. 8; "State Housing Policy: Labour's Case Stated; Mr Semple's Address," *Dominion* (September 23 1943), p. 8; "Gigantic Building Programme: Mr Jacobson's Outline," *Dominion* (September 24 1943), p. 9; "Government's Majority Reduced, Gain by National Party at Expense of Labour," *Dominion* (September 27 1943), p. 7; "Dixon Street Flats," *New Zealand Home and Building* (Summer 1944), v. 7, n. 1, pp. 20-23, 47.
- 8 The building was opened on 4 September 1943. See "Multi-Unit Block: New Wellington State Flats; Building Officially Opened," *Dominion* (September 6 1943), p. 4; "New Flats Opened: Block in Dixon Street," *Evening Post* (September 6 1943), p. 6. The certificate of completion was not issued until 1 March 1944. Director of the Department of Housing Construction, correspondence to the Manager of State Advances Corporation, (July 20 1944), National Archives, Wellington, File SAC Series 1, 35/152/3, Part 1.
- 9 Newman, correspondence to Wilson, (January 16 1947), National Archives, Wellington, File HD 3/1/12 Part 1,
- 10 Maria Newman, personal communication (February 1995).
- 11 K. J. Davis, "A Liberal Turn of Mind: The Architectural Work of F Gordon Wilson, 1936-1959, A Cultural Analysis," (BArch research report, Victoria University of Wellington, 1987); *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* ed. A. H. McLintock, (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1966), v. 3, p. 667; Bruce Petry, "The Public Architecture of Gummer and Ford," (MArch thesis, University of Auckland, 1992); "Obituary: Francis Gordon Wilson," *Journal of the N. Z. I. A.* (March 1959), v. 26, n. 2, p. 56-59.
- 12 Gummer and Ford buildings from this period with which Wilson is likely to have been involved include the *Dilworth Trust Building* (1925), the *Remuera Library* (1925), the *Auckland Railway Station* (1927) and the *Dingwell Orphanage* (1929) in Auckland and the *National War Memorial Carillon* (1930-31), the *National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum* (1931-36), the *New Zealand Insurance Company Building* (1936) and the public library in Wellington (1936). According to Gummer's son John, Wilson was the principal designer of the *Wellington Public Library*. John Gummer, correspondence to Ken Davis, (July 7 1987), Davis, "A Liberal Turn of Mind," appendix. Their pioneering domestic works include *Taurua* (1916) and *Craggy Range* (1918), both in Hawkes Bay.

- 13 Ian Lochhead, "New Zealand Architecture in the Thirties: The Impact of Modernism," *Landfall* 152 (December 1984), v. 38, n. 4, p. 468.
- 14 Ford published a book *Earthquakes and Building Construction* in 1925 and it has been suggested that this was the first book dealing with seismic performance of building structures to appear in English. Paul Walker, "Shaky Ground," *Interstices* (1992), n. 2, p. 31. Walker refers to Robert Park, "Development of Structural Design Procedures for Earthquake Resistance in New Zealand," *Transactions of the Institute of Professional Engineers of New Zealand* (1987), v. 14, n. 1, p. 23.
- 15 Linda Tyler, "The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand, 1939-1962," (MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1986), pp. 1-33. See also E. A. Plischke, *On the Human Aspect in Modern Architecture* (Wien, München: Verlag Kurt Wedl, 1969), pp. 15-31.
- 16 "Immigration of Refugees to New Zealand," cited, Ann Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay: Refugees From Hitler in New Zealand 1936-46* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin, and the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1988), p. 146. According to this reference, 1043 refugees had arrived in New Zealand from 1933 to 1939 inclusive.
- 17 These figures are from Lochore, *From Europe to New Zealand*, pp. 77-78, and Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, p. 147.
- 18 Dawson, letter to Ken Davis, (July 13 1987), Davis, "A Liberal Turn of Mind," appendix, and Beard, personal correspondence, (November 30 1994). In his letter to Ken Davis, Dawson also credits Helmut Einhorn with having worked in the Department but this is not the case for Einhorn was actually employed by Crichton McKay and Haughton from the time of his arrival in New Zealand until he joined the airforce in 1944, Ester Einhorn, personal communication (December 2 1994).
- 19 Ester Einhorn, personal communication (December 2 1994) and Helmut Einhorn cited, Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, p. 81.
- 20 The European qualifications and training were certainly viewed as superior by the European architects themselves. Helmut Einhorn cited, Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, p. 82.
- 21 Lochhead, "New Zealand Architecture in the Thirties," pp. 466-481. He states: "But while Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and their contemporaries were re-writing the language of modern architecture, New Zealand architects continued to use the traditional vocabulary of the past inflected, more often than not, with a recognisable colonial accent."
- 22 Tyler, "The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand," pp. 42-43. This scenario is echoed in the case of Fritz/Fred Farrar, another fully qualified European architect to be employed as a draughtsman by the department, Dr Tom Farrar, personal communication (December 8 1994).
- 23 D. G. Porter, "Exile Brought Fresh Vision to NZ Architecture," *Dominion* (April 6 1963), p. 10.
- 24 "The 'E. A. P.' 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, "The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand," p. 52.
- 25 Contract drawings HD 124/10/2 carry the initials K.R.R., T.L.M., A.M.G., R.H.S., O.A.J., W.J.B., T.M.C., C.J.K., E.M.C., L.T.H., E.S., G.C., and V.J.. The largest number were drawn by K.R.R. (Ken Rowe). Micro-fiche copies of drawings held by Housing New Zealand Ltd, Lower Hutt. Photographic reproductions of the micro-fiche held by the author.
- 26 National Archives, Wellington, SAC Series 1, 35/152/3, Parts 1 and 2, and HD Acc W1353, 124/10/2, Part 4.
- 27 Plischke, *On the Human Aspect in Modern Architecture* p. 248.
- 28 Contract drawings HD 124/10/2 are dated September 1940.
- 29 Tyler, "The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand," p. 52, refers to the "original drawings" of the *Dixon Street Flats*, signed by Plischke and held in his archive in Vienna. She states that Plischke was engaged on this project in 1943 (p. 47). She does not take account of the fact that the contract drawings are dated 1940. If Plischke was prepared to claim the original design as his own in his letter-tapes to Tyler, why did he fail to mention this in his autobiography and instead credit the design to the department? Further, Antony Matthews, "E. A. Plischke - The Connection Between Theory and Form," (BArch sub-thesis, University of Auckland, 1986), appendix C, includes photocopies of drawings of the *Dixon Street Flats* which carry Plischke's initials. The drawings are dated 1942. Again, they do not support the claim that Plischke was ultimately responsible for the design of the building, only that he worked on the drawings once construction was underway. My thanks to Linda Tyler for drawing this sub-thesis to my attention.

- 30 "State Advances Corporation of New Zealand," *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives of New Zealand* (1940) B-13, p. 13.
- 31 "Large Block of Flats," *Building Progress* (June 1940), v. 5, n. 6, p. 7.
- 32 National Archives, Wellington, SAC Series 1, 35/152/3 Parts 1 and 2, and HD Acc W1353, 124/10/2, Part 4.
- 33 "Multi-Unit Block: New Wellington State Flats; Building Officially Opened," *Dominion* (September 6 1943), p. 4.
- 34 "National Loss - Death of Mr F. Gordon Wilson, Government Architect," *New Zealand Home and Building* (April 1 1959), v. XXI, n. 11, p. 21.
- 35 Wilson's authorship is confirmed by:
 (1) Jim Beard, a former employee of Wilson in the Ministry of Works, who remembers hearing Wilson claim the *Dixon Street Flats* as his own. Jim Beard, personal communication (December 9 1994). Beard was employed in the Architectural Division of the Ministry of Works from c.1950;
 (2) Ester Einhorn who refers to it as: "His [Wilson's] baby," Ester Einhorn, personal communication (December 2 1994). Ester is Helmut Einhorn's widow. She and Helmut had been in Wellington since July 1939;
 (3) Graham Dawson, an architect in the Department of Housing Construction from 1939 who recalls that the *Berhampore*, *Dixon Street* and *Greys Avenue Flats* were "mainly Wilson's" designs. Dawson remembers Plischke being engaged on new house types, site layouts, and shopping and community centres rather than on multi-unit blocks. He does, however, admit that Plischke's influence on Wilson must have been considerable and that discussions and criticisms could well have resulted in alterations to Wilson's design. Dawson, correspondence to Davis, (July 13 1987), Davis, "A Liberal Turn of Mind," appendix.
- 36 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" trans. Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* ed. Donald F Bouchard, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 122.
- 37 It was not until 1969, six years after his return to Austria, that the New Zealand Institute of Architects relaxed its requirement and awarded Plischke with honorary membership. Tyler, "The Architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand," p. 180.
- 38 That Plischke was not successful in his application to head the School of Architecture, University of Auckland might be cited as further evidence that he was victimised, humiliated and prejudiced in New Zealand. The reasons for this decision are beyond the scope of this paper but, as with the attribution of the *Dixon Street Flats*, I would suggest that there was more at stake than prejudice alone.
- 39 It can be argued that it was benign of Wilson to employ Plischke in any capacity for the reason that Plischke was German speaking, he was a potential spy, and he was labelled an 'enemy alien.'
- 40 Foucault, "What is an Author?" p. 122.
- 41 Foucault, "What is an Author?" p. 123.
- 42 I would be hesitant in looking for this relationship between the *Dixon Street Flats* and *Massey House*, Wellington (1952), as the latter is attributed to both Plischke and Cedric Firth.
- 43 The Morelli method of attribution abandoned the convention of concentrating on the most obvious characteristics and instead concentrates on minor details. Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians* (Spring 1980), n. 9, pp. 5-36.
- 44 Sigfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork* (London: The Architectural Press, 1954), p. 79.
- 45 Foucault provides the example of a novelist who is responsible for more than his/her own text and cites Ann Radcliffe as one such novelist. She did not simply write *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and other novels but also made possible the appearance of the Gothic Romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Foucault, "What is an Author?" p. 132.
- 46 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture; The Growth of a New Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 834
- 47 Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* (1991), v. LXXIII, n. 2, p. 183.
- 48 In giving examples of buildings attributed to Wilson I chose not to mention two later examples of the slab apartment block which were designed by the department, by that time the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works, under Gordon Wilson, by that time Government Architect. They are the *Gordon Wilson Flats*, The Terrace, Wellington (1955-59), and the *Upper Greys Avenue Flats*, Auckland (1957-59). I chose not to mention them earlier because, with their two storeyed maisonettes, these blocks are linked to a particular building which followed the *Dixon Street Flats*: Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseille (1946-52), completed during the interim years. The latter has been described by Bill Risebero as "perhaps the single most influential architectural work of the post-war years." Bill Risebero, *The Story*

of Western Architecture (London: The Herbert Press, 1985), p. 245.

- 49 Foucault distinguishes between mediate authors and fundamental authors, the latter term being reserved for the initiators of discursive practice. Foucault, "What is an Author?" pp. 133-136.
- 50 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* ed. Stephen Heath, trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), pp. 142-148.
- 51 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 14-15.
- 52 Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* p. 204.
- 53 Bill Alington, Jim Beard, George Porter, Bill Toomath, and Tony Treadwell interviewed by Philippa Hoeta, (15 December 1994).
- 54 P Morton Shand, for example, wrote a series of essays titled "Scenario for a Human Drama," *The Architectural Review* (July, Aug, Sep, Oct 1934), v. 76, and (Jan, Feb, Mar 1935), v. 77.