

A prominent marker of an alternative vision: the Gordon Wilson Flats

In this edition of the News, ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand Member **Elizabeth Cox** has permitted us to republish an article by the late **Ben Schrader** which first appeared on her [Bay Heritage blog](#) in 2017.

Elizabeth notes that Ben, an urban historian, was vocal in his support for Wellington's Gordon Wilson Flats. His research into the social history of the building supported the Architectural Centre's appeal against removing the heritage status of the Gordon Wilson Flats from the Wellington District Plan, which would have facilitated the building's demolition. His work showed that the heritage value of the building has been previously misunderstood and underestimated, and he helped (with other heritage and architectural experts) to convince the

Environment Court that it was of such significance that it must remain on the heritage list.

To read Ben's argument for the building's place in New Zealand's social history – particularly for the way it documents the fluctuating way in which New Zealanders have envisioned our cities – go to page 9. 🌍

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President's report



Stacy Vallis, ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand President

The second quarterly Board Meeting took place online on Saturday 18 May, in keeping with our combined format of physical and digital meetings. Informing the Board's discussion is our ongoing collaboration with Australia ICOMOS. I had the privilege of attending the Australia ICOMOS Executive Meeting and Strategic Workshop in Melbourne from 15-17 March with the generous support of ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand.

It was a valuable chance to connect with the Australia ICOMOS Executive Committee and continue the discussions we began with President **Tracy Ireland** and International Vice-President **Sue McIntyre-Tamwoy** in Auckland. A number of organisational and strategic priorities were raised and discussed during these sessions, including governance, climate resilience, along with skills and development initiatives. We plan to sustain these strategic discussions and regularly catch up across our neighbour Committees in our global region. The Australia ICOMOS 2024 National Symposium and AGM is scheduled for 25-26 October in Perth, and ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand members are warmly invited to attend.

Our National Committee also continues to engage with partner organisations, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Historic Places Aotearoa, and the New Zealand Archaeological Association. A significant topic of discussion has been the national submissions on the Fast Track Approvals Bill. ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand appeared before Parliament's Environment Select Committee in May 2024, to provide feedback on the Bill, focusing on the

potential impacts on our shared cultural heritage. Of approximately 27,000 submitters, 2,900 requested to appear before the Select Committee and 1,100 groups and individuals were offered the opportunity to present their submissions. The [full written submission](#) from ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand is available on our website.

Many thanks to **Paola Boarin**, along with presenters Dr **Luciano Cardellicchio** and Dr **Paolo Stracchi**, and the team at the Future Cities Research Centre at the University of Auckland, for a great webinar on 'Building the Sydney Opera House' that took place on 10th May! ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand is proud to support [this series](#) and we are seeking suggestions for the next event.

As always, there are many opportunities to get involved with the work of ICOMOS nationally and globally! Please keep an eye out and we will be circulating calls for participation in the coming weeks and months.

Kia Kaha Aotearoa. 🌍

From the Board

Website refresh

The Board has kicked off a project to refresh the www.icomos.org.nz website in 2024.

Our website runs on Wordpress and a 'theme' called Avada which is not easy to use. We have been keeping it up to date with news, submissions and updated policies but there some overarching issues remain. Over recent years, we have documented these issues and developed a proposed structure for a new site.

At our February 2024 meeting, the Executive Board agreed to fund redevelopment of the website. The Advocacy and Communications Committee (chaired by **Amanda Mulligan**) has developed a brief and has chosen a provider to assist with developing a new website. This would likely still be a WordPress site, but with a new custom theme that provides the functionality we need, while still being very easy to use and update.

Want to help? Email news@icomos.org.nz 🌍

Travel scholarship and education fund

Travel Scholarship

ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand has a travel scholarship to encourage and assist heritage professionals and students to undertake further education or professional development in subjects relevant to the conservation and management of New Zealand's heritage. You do not need to be an ICOMOS member to apply.

ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand Executive Board member **Alex Vakhrousheva** and member **Laura McKeown** were awarded travel scholarships in 2023, which allowed them to attend the Longford Academy in Tasmania. Alex says:

The Academy is a week-long intensive course which is held on site at the Brickendon and Woolmers Estates which are a UNESCO World Heritage site. The focus of the course is a theoretical understanding of basic conservation principles and guidance backed up by practical demonstrations involving the historic buildings on site. Without the support of ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand, we would not have been able to source the funds to attend this prestigious opportunity. Laura and I both departed the workshop with a wealth of new knowledge, a new circle of international connections with heritage professionals, and a renewed passion for the conservation of our precious cultural heritage. We are incredibly grateful to ICOMOS, and to the individual sponsors who support the programme, for supporting us to attend this fantastic educational opportunity. We strongly encourage others who might be interested in participating in specialist courses to get in touch with ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand to find out more about the travel scholarship programme.

Read Alex and Laura's full report in the [December 2023 newsletter](#). To find out more about the travel scholarship, download the application form [here](#).

Education Fund

ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand also has an education fund to which ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand members may apply. The fund is to assist with costs associated with attending workshops and courses which further advances knowledge of New

Zealand heritage conservation and management. [More information and application form.](#) 🌐

Follow us on social media

In a world where we are increasingly operating in online circles, the ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand Executive Board has decided to refresh and expand our social media channels to make sure members have access to all of the information they need across a choice of online platforms. This work has been led by Board member **Alex Vakhrousheva**.

The existing [Facebook](#) page has had an increased focus, especially through introductions of our 2023-2024 board members. This has resulted in an influx of new followers and engagement with posted content. A new [Instagram](#) page has been established which has been streamlined to mirror the content posted to Facebook, and has also seen a significant increase in subscribers. Finally, a new [LinkedIn](#) account has been established which allows users to engage with ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand in a professional capacity for the first time.

Please share these pages with your friends and colleagues if they are part of ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand and are not yet subscribed, or if you have friends and colleagues that you think would be interested in keeping up to date with the valuable work that ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand does. 🌐

Charter Working Group

The Charter Working Group is about to commence a really important and interesting piece of work: creating 'practice notes' to expand on our Charter and illustrate aspects of its interpretation. The first one off the rank is 'The Charter – an overview'.

The Working Group would really appreciate some more members to participate in this work. The draft practice note will of course be sent out to all members and to stakeholders for comment and thoughts, but a good team to help devise it would be a great start.

If you're interested in joining, please get in touch with **Mary O'Keeffe** at mary@heritagesolutions.net.nz 🌐

Fast Track Approval Bill

On 17 May 2024, four members of our Legislation and Policy Committee made an oral submission to Parliament's Environment Select Committee on the Bill.

The Bill has seen a record number of individuals and organisations having their say, with at least 27,000 submissions received. Of these, about 2,900 have requested to appear before the select committee. Unfortunately, oral submissions have been restricted to just 1,100 groups and individuals. The committee allowed for appearances from 550 organisations, including ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand.

Like so many other organisations, we remain concerned about the potential effect of the proposed Fast Track Approvals Bill on our shared heritage. Watch our oral submission [here](#) at 3:20:00 and [read our written submission](#) 🌍

Our members

Remembering Ben Schrader

Elizabeth Cox reports that the historical and heritage community are mourning the loss of Wellington historian and heritage advocate **Ben Schrader**, who died in April 2024. His memorial service was attended by hundreds of people, showing how much he was loved in so many different communities.



Ben leading an ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand tour of Naenae in 2016

As a historian he wrote for Te Ara Encyclopedia and the *New Zealand Historical Atlas*, and published a history of state housing *We Call it Home: A History of State Housing in New Zealand* (2005), and his magnum opus, *The Big Smoke: New Zealand Cities 1849 – 1920* (BWB, 2016). When he died, he was also working on a history of heritage preservation in New Zealand, with his friend Michael Kelly. He was proud to be a public historian, working outside academia, and was one of the founders of PHANZA (Professional Historians' Association of New Zealand Aotearoa).

But Ben was a doer, not just a thinker and writer. He was a life-long advocate for heritage, and despite his long illness, put huge amounts of energy into advocating for better cities, good density and urban planning. He wrote submissions on district plans, think pieces, articles and regularly presented to community groups, and was a long-time branch member of Historic Places Wellington. He resisted the idea that heritage protection was the natural enemy of better housing and of providing people with safe, warm homes. He was very proud of the work he did with the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities in this regard, and in the midst of the recent heated arguments about heritage and urban planning in Wellington he stood strong in the belief that heritage was a vital part of a healthy and happy city.

Ben was a member of ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand for more than 20 years, and I'm sure all those who were there will remember a great bus tour he led in 2016 for members where he took us around the suburb Naenae to show us the state housing and Plischke's buildings and urban planning there. His 30-year relationship with Naenae, advocating for its preservation, taught him that: 'the public historian has an important role in informing the public, but then has no say over the moment when the public decides that information is useful to them. I like that'. I'm sure many people were won over by Ben's gentle, kind, intelligent advocacy.

I'm sure all members will join us in sending our thoughts to his partner Lis, their two sons, and his many friends. 🌍

Members clean up at the Architecture Awards

ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand members have contributed to award-winning projects in the 2024 New Zealand Architecture Awards and the Local Architecture Awards.

Auckland heritage category

Salmond Reed Architects Limited for [Auckland Domain Wintergarden Restoration and Seismic Upgrade](#)

Wellington heritage category

archifact-architecture & conservation limited for [Erskine Chapel](#)

WSP Architecture for [Te Horo Kilns: Station Building Restoration and Site Works](#)

Southern heritage category

Salmond Reed Architects Limited for [Dunedin Railway Station Restoration](#)

Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects President's Awards

This year one of the recipients of the prestigious president's award was our very own past president, **Ian Bowman**.



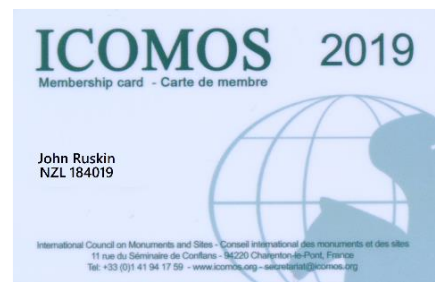
Ian's citation reads: Ian Bowman, FNZIA, is a distinguished historian, architect and architectural conservator. His dedication to safeguarding Aotearoa New Zealand's architectural legacy has

made an enduring impact on heritage conservation and architectural preservation.

Ian is renowned for his expertise in advisory roles, his research and documentation, strategic planning for heritage sites, and knowledge of seismic building preservation. Ian's dedication to his profession and the best outcomes for this country deserve to be recognised and celebrated. 🌍

Membership cards

Paid-up members for 2024 should have received their cards in the post. Visit www.icomos.org to download your digital card. 🌍



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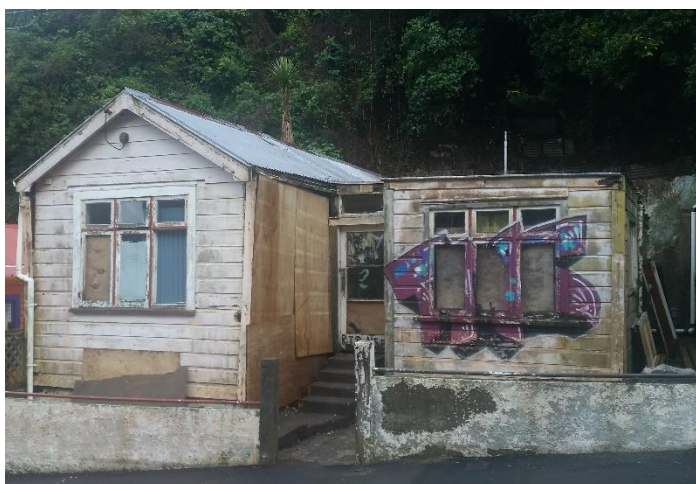
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Heritage Studies at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka

Nigel Isaacs reports on the current range of heritage activities at the VUW School of Architecture Te Kura Waihangā.

Historical research and knowledge is visible in all of the disciplines taught at the VUW School of Architecture Te Kura Waihangā. As well as a core 1st year paper, in the 2nd year each discipline – architecture, landscape architecture, interior architecture, and building science – has its own specialist history course.

Heritage architecture courses offers students opportunities to extend their knowledge in the following years. Elective papers are available to students in 2nd and, 3rd years of the Bachelor of Architectural Studies (3-year course), and the 1st year of the Master of Architecture (1-year taught, 1-year thesis) degrees.

SARC 252 'Building Heritage Conservation' provides an introduction to building conservation, while the co-taught 3rd/4th year paper SARC 354/454 'Heritage Conservation' explores historic and contemporary approaches to heritage conservation.

Both courses make extensive use of strong connections with local and central Government agencies, as well as specialist architectural and archaeological practices. The School's central city location provides easy access to a wide range of heritage buildings and places, including an ever-

changing vista of the built environment undergoing seismic and/or adaptive reuse activities.

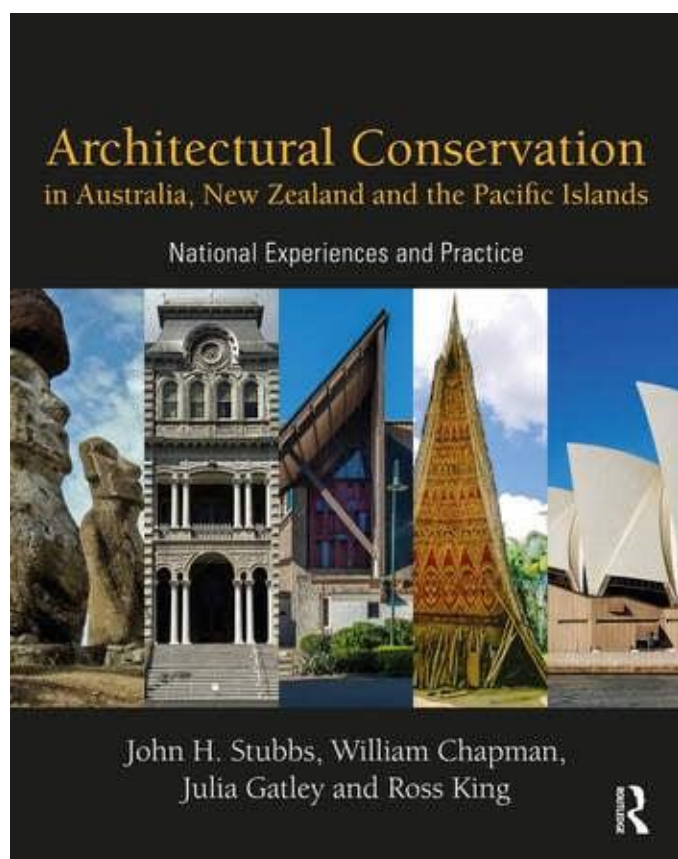
Building science plays a key role in not only the taught courses, but also in the wide range of research topics at both masters and doctoral levels. Thermal simulation, Life-Cycle Analysis (LCA), creation of digital models for virtual and assisted reality, analysis of import and export statistics, as well as the more traditional drawing and documentation activities support the understanding of current and potential futures uses of heritage.

There are currently nine doctoral candidates studying heritage topics, studying (in no particular order):

- the early use of exterior paint and the use of interior wallpaper in New Zealand Aotearoa
- the evolution of architectural practices in Aotearoa from 1840 to 1940
- the impact of seismic strengthening on the sustainability of small New Zealand towns
- the Czech emigree architect Max Rosenfield
- the role of magic lantern slides in communicating architecture
- industrial heritage in China
- heritage in Sri Lanka
- Aotearoa's heritage plants. 🌍

Book review

Architectural Conservation in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands



Ann McEwan reviews the fourth in a series of volumes concerning architectural conservation around the world.

This new publication (by **John H Stubbs, William Chapman, Julia Gatley, Ross King** et al, published by Routledge, New York and London, 2024) is a large and densely written tome, which will undoubtedly prove to be an essential resource for the academic study of heritage conservation in future.

While all of the principal authors are architects by training, other contributors share insights from a wide range of disciplines, both within and outside of the academy. After an introductory contextual chapter, the book is arranged along geographical lines, starting with Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and then moving on to the islands of the Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands in the north to the Ross Sea

region of Antarctica in the south. Within each section topics such as historic development, legislation, and education are addressed against the acknowledged backdrop of a post-colonial world in which 'heritage' is both a contested term and a threatened 'species', to borrow the language of the environmental movement.

As one would expect, the New Zealand section pays attention to the impact of past and future earthquakes and, more optimistically, the role of Māori-led conservation practice in safeguarding Aotearoa's unique indigenous building forms and traditions.

A minor niggle is that very few photographs in the book show their subjects as functional environments built by and for human beings. In 'our' section there are two images that show people at work making and repairing tukutuku panels. For the most part, however, the illustrations throughout give one the impression that the architectural heritage being described and discussed is devoid of the very life that gives it meaning and value.

Nitpicking a little further, it's a pity that the University of Canterbury's architectural history programme is not mentioned in the education section within the Aotearoa chapter, given that the South Island in particular has long benefitted from the work of Canterbury's art history graduates. As the sole statutory mechanism for the protection of architectural heritage, the Resource Management Act 1991 deserves far more attention in my view, as does the role of the Department of Conservation in heritage identification and site management.

The book opens with a brief overview in which the following statement stands out: 'In response to local needs, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands have developed some of the most important and influential techniques, legislation, doctrine and theories in cultural heritage management in the world'. While that may be true, it's hard to know where to look in Aotearoa for proof that such innovative thinking has led to widespread success in conservation beyond a handful of iconic saves like the Christchurch Town Hall and, hopefully, Ihumātāo.

To end on a positive note, the ability to be able to compare conservation approaches across the Pacific and reflect on ways in which indigenous values and voices are creating a new way of appreciating our built environment offers much to both the casual and diligent reader. 🌍

Training and events

Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology annual conference

The conference will be held at the New Zealand Maritime Museum in Auckland between 26 and 27 September 2024. The conference theme is 'Collectively navigating ocean horizons'. The organisers welcome ICOMOS members to present on aspects relating to maritime heritage and ocean sciences.

The call for papers is now open for the 2024 AIMA conference. The sessions will cover a diverse range of topics and themes. These include:

- searching for WWII missing in action
- capacity building
- avocational archaeology and citizen science
- submerged landscapes
- museums and maritime collections
- preserving underwater cultural heritage
- watercraft
- one ocean - cross-disciplinary marine science (UNESCO Decade of Ocean Science)
- general session
- poster session.

See the [AIMA website](#) for more details.

Future Cities Research Hub webinars

The Future Cities Research Hub brings together researchers from across the Faculty of Creative Arts and Industries and the University of Auckland to pursue, develop and disseminate transdisciplinary research focussing on climate change and social, cultural and spatial urban well-being.

Find the webinars at the [Future Cities Research Hub](#).

ICOMOS Aotearoa New Zealand AGM

Save the date! Our 2024 AGM and conference will be held in Dunedin on Friday 18 – Sunday 20 October 2024. Detailed info and programme to follow soon.

Webinars on the Policy for Government Management of Cultural Heritage Places

Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga has delivered a series of webinars to support government agencies to implement the policy.

Find them on their [YouTube channel](#).

National Community Heritage Conference



This conference is for historical societies, heritage groups and institutions, museums, iwi, hapū, marae committees, genealogists, and individuals from across New Zealand and is to be held at the Napier War Memorial Conference Centre 8-10 November 2024.

Topics will include protection, conservation, interpretation, fundraising, advocacy, risks, and solutions. Stories and experiences from local groups and people are wanted.

Early bird registrations at <https://www.historichawkesbay.org.nz/conference> close on 31 August 2024.

Anyone who would like to give a five-minute presentation – “a heritage bite” – please email info@historicplacesaotearoa.org.nz 

Ben Schrader article from page 1:

A prominent marker of an alternative vision: the Gordon Wilson Flats

Much of what we think of in New Zealand as 'state housing' is rows of individual houses, similar but different, set within sprawling suburbs, (as pictured below; in this case in Naenae). But with the Gordon Wilson Flats, and other buildings between 1938 and 1959, the government tried a new approach in the inner cities. The Gordon Wilson Flats were an essential element in a radical scheme that challenged the suburban pattern of New Zealand's cities and sought to house those who preferred to live in town. It increases our knowledge of not only mid-twentieth social housing but also the contemporaneous debate about shaping New Zealand's cities. It shows that current issues like urban sprawl and consolidation have a long lineage. The building therefore offers invaluable historical perspectives into present concerns.



Naenae, 1945, both from the John Dobrée Pascoe Collection (PAColl-0783), Reference: 1/4-001179; F and 1/4-001168-F, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

There were a range of factors that led the First Labour government to erect blocks of flats as part of its radical state housing programme, begun in 1936. These included a desire to replace dilapidated central city housing with modern stock; a belief that higher-density housing made more efficient use of expensive city land, and a recognition that not all townspeople wanted to live in the suburbs, preferring instead to be close to their workplaces and city amenities. It was thought this group mainly comprised single people and couples without children; few doubted that families with children would want to live anywhere other than the suburbs. While the emphasis of state housing remained suburban provision for nuclear families, the government saw it had a moral responsibility to provide for other family groups as well. Inner city flats would meet this need.

Planning for the Terrace Flats (later called the Gordon Wilson Flats) began in 1943. But, due to the government's determination to provide suburban family homes after World War Two, the project was delayed until the mid-1950s when the National government resurrected it.

Elected in 1949, National had continued its predecessor's state housing programme, but sought to cut its cost through using more economical building materials. It also wanted to reduce urban sprawl by making more intensive use of urban land. This became a pressing issue in the late-1950s as public concern over the loss of prime agricultural land to suburban housing as well as the high cost of servicing these new communities grew.

By late 1954 the Ministry of Works had modified the building's original design to reflect advances in architecture and engineering. The building comprised 75 two-bedroom maisonette (two storey) flats and 12 bedsitting (single floor) flats. The maisonette plan was very modern and highly unusual in the New Zealand context. It had the advantage of being both architecturally modern and economical. This was because the floor within each maisonette was of timber rather than concrete, reducing the weight of the building and making its construction cheaper. Each flat had its own bathroom – a novelty for many people who were living in shared housing at this time – but the laundry was shared amongst all the residents, and was on the rooftop.



The flats under construction, 1958 . Ref: EP/1955/2193-F and EP-Industry-Housing-State-02. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

As with other state housing, rentals for the building were set on a cost-recovery basis (they weren't subsidised). Due to the higher construction costs of the flats compared to houses, the rents were steeper than for other state housing. However, as the State Advances Corporation (SAC) explained, this would be offset by lower transport costs and travel times to work. By the end of 1958 the flats were nearing completion. The Evening Post expected there would be a rush of applications for the accommodation and asserted the building's modern construction made it 'one of the safest in any earthquake region in the world.'



AMONG THE FIRST TENANTS OF THE NEW block of State flats on The Terrace were Mr. and Mrs. W. Shaw and Nicholas, 15 months. The first furnishings will be in today and they expect to be living in their flat this week.

A newspaper image of some the first tenants to move into the Gordon Wilson Flats in June 1959: Mr and Mrs W. Shaw and their son Nicholas (Evening Post, 9 Jun 1959, p. 14)



One of the special features of Gordon Wilson flats is the maisonette design (each flat has two floors, one with living and kitchen spaces, and the other with bedrooms). The only other example of this was the Upper Grey's Avenue flats, in Auckland, here deliberately contrasted against the old Victorian housing it has replaced. [New Zealand Herald](#). Reference: 120810NZHFLATS.JPG

The building also provides a rare and fascinating perspective on how a socially diverse mix of tenants lived alongside each other and negotiated social relations in a high-density environment – or 'vertical community'.

On 18 March 1959, the Minister of Housing, William Fox, inspected the now completed flats, a few hundred toured the building and 500 applications were made to live in the flats.

In June tenants began moving in. All the bedsitting units had been allocated to working women in their forties or fifties who had previously been living in rooming houses. Most of the maisonettes went to couples from their early twenties and up to the mid-fifties. Many had one or two children. A few single parents with children were also accommodated. All the families had been living in shared or congested housing and having their own place was a boon. The occupational profile of tenants was diverse and included: milkmen, bakers, plumber, clerks and civil servants.

The Evening Post reported the upper-storey flats were the most popular because they had the best views. One woman declared: 'I LOVE the bathroom' and pledged to sleep in it. Previously she'd only known 'share-bathrooms' (in rooming houses). The newspaper thought demand was high enough to justify further blocks. It noted numerous single men

had applied for the bedsitter flats even though they were ineligible and many couples had applied for the maisonettes in the view of marrying after finding suitable accommodation.

A fulsome history of the Gordon Wilson Flats following their opening is not presently possible, but fragments of the story can be constructed from official files. These suggest that during the early years most tenants appeared satisfied with their accommodation. At the end of 1959 the SAC reported that it was finding no difficulty in finding suitable tenants and it had a waiting list of interested applicants. There were, however, a few complaints about noise, people taking car parking spaces and boisterous children. In 1973 the local MP, David Shand, wrote to the SAC Minister, Robert Tizard, saying tenants had complained to him about the noise generated by the large number of children living there. The Minister replied by saying the SAC had placed families with children in the flats due to the lack of family houses elsewhere. He said there was high demand for tenancies in the complex and that there were few requests from sitting tenants for transfers. He also noted that 'where there are healthy children there must be an element of noise.'

Despite the unmet demand for inner city flats, the National government scuttled plans for further such blocks. The precise reasons for this need further research; it could be it saw them as an affront to New Zealand's suburban housing tradition. Henceforth, the state refocused its efforts on suburban housing provision, addressing issues of urban sprawl by building more medium-density housing. Central city social housing initiatives were largely left to local councils, albeit often funded or subsidised by the state. Wellington continued to erect high-rise blocks of flats through to the 1970s, but other councils preferred to concentrate on constructing low-rise developments instead.

The structure is also important in the history of building science. It was almost certainly the first high-rise residential New Zealand building to have earthquake monitoring equipment installed in it and have scientific tests carried out on it.

Knowledge that the building was being engineered to better withstand earthquakes had led the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) in 1955 to enquire about putting seismic monitoring equipment in the building. The institution was installing accelerographs throughout New Zealand to record seismic ground motions and thought it prudent to put instruments in suitable

buildings to measure building movements and stresses during earthquakes. The Ministry of Works supported the idea. As it explained: 'The multi-storey flat building is an ideal type for this purpose as it is tall, slender and symmetrical and is located in an active seismic area.' The SAC agreed and strong motion accelerators and strain gauges were installed during the building's construction.

The DSIR asked that one of its officers be allocated a flat in the building to monitor the equipment, saying the officer was akin to building custodian who was given a flat so he could do his job properly and that 'There is no question of the value of the results that can accrue from this very long-term undertaking. The loss to New Zealand from a large earthquake is gigantic. We are using the Terrace flats not to find how the Terrace flats would behave for their own sake but to find how to make all future buildings in New Zealand safe against earthquakes'.

Eventually the Laboratory's officer succeeded in gaining a flat in the building. Seismic tests were subsequently carried out in the building and several scientific papers published as a result. It seems almost certain that these were the first carried out on a residential high-rise building in New Zealand.



A newspaper image of the machine used by seismologists for earthquake reaction tests on the Gordon Wilson Flats in 1964.

The building is also significant because it is a powerful symbol of New Zealand's mid-twentieth century mixed economy, where government interventions encouraged and supported private enterprise. The building promoted a housing model for private builders to copy and, through the installation of a gas energy supply, buttressed the private gas industry. During the 1950s consumption of electricity in New Zealand increased significantly as the economy grew and households bought more

domestic appliances. Sometimes supply could not meet demand, causing blackouts. The government therefore decided to install gas heating in Gordon Wilson 'to assist the gas industry and lighten the load on the electrical supply', even though it was more expensive. The decision highlighted the interventionist disposition of mid-20th century New Zealand governments, where intervention in one economic sector (the housing market) was used to manage another (the energy market).

Finally, the building is significant as it was named for one of New Zealand's most gifted and influential architects: Government Architect Francis Gordon Wilson, the building's chief designer who had recently died. It remains an important and fitting memorial to him. In a press release, the Minister of Housing, William Fox, stated that he 'has done as much or more than any other individual to raise the standard of domestic architecture throughout New Zealand' and that 'every fine building the Government has erected in recent years bears the imprint of his vision and skill'.

In my opinion the Gordon Wilson Flats has high heritage value, foremost because it is a tangible expression of the 1950s debate over the future shape of modern New Zealand cities. At stake was whether the low-density suburban pattern of the past would continue unchecked or if a new high-density mode of living would arise to redefine cities. Even though the suburban model emerged the winner, the building continued to be a prominent marker of an alternative vision.

Further Reading

Architectural Centre, '[150 bedrooms – recycling the flats](#)', Scoop 2024

Breese, Alison and Hayden Cawte, '[Historic Heritage Evaluation: Gordon Wilson Flats](#)', Wellington City Council, 2021

docomomo, '[Gordon Wilson Flats](#)', 2003

Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, '[McLean Flats and Gordon Wilson Flats](#)'

Schrader, Ben, '[Housing and Government – Council Housing](#)', Te Ara

Schrader, Ben, We Call it Home: A History of State Housing in New Zealand, Auckland, 2005

Theodore, Joanna, '[The \(carbon\) elephant in the room](#)', Architecture Now, 2024 🌱

Thank you for your continued support for ICOMOS New Zealand

If you wish to publicise your work through the newsletter and/or our social media, please forward the details to news@icomos.org.nz.

The deadline for content for the next issue of the newsletter is **23 August 2024**.