

## STATE HOUSING AND POST-WAR TRENDS

One of the most significant building programmes of the 1930s was the Labour government's state housing initiative. It commenced in 1936 with the establishment of the Department of Housing Construction, with John A Lee overseeing it as undersecretary of housing. Determined not to repeat the English workers' barracks-type terraced housing, Lee insisted that the majority of houses should be solidly constructed individual units on their own land, in attractive suburban locations. 'The most important reason for rejecting city flats was the by now near-universal acceptance that suburbia was the best place to pursue privatised family life', Ben Schrader has commented in his history of state housing. '... Labour focused its efforts on providing suburban state houses for families with children'.<sup>418</sup>

Specifications for the types of houses were drawn up and architects invited to prepare designs. Given the depressed state of the profession at the time, it was not surprising that there was a huge response from architects in private practice. In Remuera the government bought small blocks of affordable land and created new streets to service them — Lingarth, Hapua, Lillington, Wiles and Spencer streets. Over the next 10 years small clusters of state houses were built, scattered in among private dwellings in these areas. East of Remuera, by contrast, more extensive tracts of land were acquired and the whole new suburb of Meadowbank created. Farmland and market gardens were soon swallowed up by streets and rows of houses. Land was put aside for small reserves and a shopping area. Over the next 15 years, from 1940, over 300 state houses were built in the area.

Initially state houses in Remuera and Meadowbank, as elsewhere in New Zealand, were mostly in the English cottage style. They were compact and economical to build, with weatherboard cladding and clay or concrete tiles on the roof. However, very soon various other designs started to be introduced — semi-detached units which, while looking like one big house, could accommodate two to four families; houses with more modernistic designs, featuring flat roofs and plastered exteriors. Since the late 1950s, when it became possible for people to buy state houses, many have changed significantly and are no longer recognisable as having once been a state house.

Towards the end of the 1930s, some New Zealand architects were tentatively beginning to look at modernism, and in the late 1940s there was an explosion of modernist building, spearheaded by young New Zealand-born architects returning from Europe and the arrival of a number of refugee European architects fleeing European anti-Semitism.

Henry Kulka, who arrived in Auckland from Vienna in 1939, had worked closely in Vienna with Adolf Loos, whom Douglas Lloyd Jenkins has described as 'one of the primary architect-theorists of early European modernism'.<sup>419</sup> From 1939 to 1964



**Above**  
Lingarth Street in 1939. One of the modernist state houses designed in 1939 by Gordon Wilson in the Department of Housing Construction, Wellington.

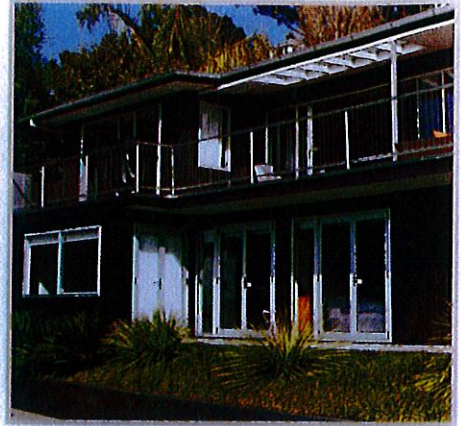
Kulka was the lead designer for Fletcher Building while at the same time designing houses for private clients, 12 of them in Remuera. Kulka's houses were noted for their simplicity, attention to detail, exterior wood cladding, built-in furniture, interior use of plywood and native timbers — and for designating the function of spaces through changes in height and floor modulation. They led the way in modernist design.

London-born Vernon Brown (1905–1965), also working in Auckland at this time, could have (as Peter Shaw put it) 'an enormous influence on a whole generation of architects' whom he taught at the Auckland School of Architecture from 1942.<sup>420</sup> Through all his teachings and practice he promoted the idea of a New Zealand vernacular architecture, using local materials and building to local conditions. The roofs of his houses were always flat and low pitched because, he famously said, 'there is no snow on Arney Road'.<sup>421</sup> His domestic work, including many houses built in Remuera in the 1940s and 1950s, was very recognisable by its 'informal, understated character, black-painted wood and double-hung sash windows stretching from floor to ceiling'.<sup>422</sup>

Brown designed many of his houses for friends in what cultural commentator Eric McCormick described as:

*that little group of Aucklanders presided over by Mr ARD Fairburn, whose bodily ailments are diagnosed by Mr Douglas Robb, whose literary productions are reprinted by Mr RW Lowry, whose habitations are designed by Mr Vernon Brown, whose legal affairs are disentangled by Mr FH Haigh, whose inner lives are portrayed in the fiction of Mr Frank Sargeson.*<sup>423</sup>

Many of Brown's domestic designs have now disappeared; however his own house, built in 1939, at 91 Arney Road has a Category I rating from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. (It won a New Zealand Institute of Architects Bronze Medal in 1940.) The 1942 home built for Frank and Honey Haigh (see page 123) in Bell Road has been restored and moved out to the Kaipara area, where it has become a bed and breakfast establishment. While still at university, seven of Brown's young architectural students formed the Architectural Group, which in 1950 became Group Architects. Their aim was to build affordable, attractive housing that was — as Brown had advocated — suited to local conditions, using local materials. Their first house (appropriately called the First House) was built in Takapuna and represented, Lloyd Jenkins has written,



**Above**

Henry Kulka designed this house in Darwin Lane in 1964 for the Birks family. The basement has since been filled in and extended but the top section of the house, with its flat roof and cedar walls, is typical of his work.