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## Between Werkbund and Wartime Sobriety: Ernst Plischke's Multi-Units for Orakei

The first project that Ernst Plischke was entrusted with in the Department of Housing Construction after his arrival in Wellington in 1939 was a series of multi-unit buildings in Orakei, Auckland. He based their design directly on the pair of small semi-detached houses he had been able to contribute to the Werkbund settlement in Vienna in 1932 - one of the last public attempts in Vienna to promote modernist architecture before the war. Plischke's houses in their Werkbund exhibition context in Vienna offer themselves for comparison: 32 architects had taken part in this "Manifesto of the new dwelling", as a recent publication of the Wien Museum calls it.

These houses form the best possible starting point of investigating issues of translation in Plischke's work between Austria and New Zealand. Although the Werkbund exhibition in Vienna had already been situated in a climate of sobriety, and Plischke's houses had not covered more than 67 sqm per dwelling, his designs in Auckland were reduced even further before realization, particularly in terms of fittings and furnishings. Having been asked by Gordon Wilson to design the Orakei units in the shortest possible time, it was clear that he would rely on previous designs and would thus transfer his design ideas directly from Vienna into his new field of activity.

This paper investigates the historiographic aspects of this design transfer against Plischke's own architectural convictions, making use of archival material alongside secondary sources from Austria and New Zealand. The paper further investigates the reasons for the changes, suggesting that the project confronted him with the different situation regarding building methods, planning tradition and wartime austerity, and thus framed the way in which Plischke directed the adaptation of his architecture to the New Zealand conditions.

## The Setting: Plischke's Project for Orakei

Austrian architect Ernst Plischke (1903-92) emigrated to New Zealand in 1939. He and his wife Anna arrived in Wellington on the 15th of May. Very soon after he started working for the Department of Housing Construction under Gordon Wilson, and a potentially fulfilling design opportunity presented itself: Wilson asked him to design state houses for the suburb of Orakei in Auckland.

The political complications of this site are manifold. The original residents, the Ngati Whatua, have been maltreated throughout the 20th century and the site's history can only be sketched here in order to form the setting of Plischke's design inventions.<sup>1</sup> Arthur Myers, former Mayor of Auckland, had suggested in 1911 that a large area of land in Orakei, east of the Auckland city centre, be turned into a model garden suburb.<sup>2</sup> By the end of 1914, the Crown had acquired "significant areas of both leasehold and freehold land on the peninsula [...], with the notable exception of the 40 acre No 1 reserve on the foreshore of Okahu Bay which continued to be occupied by Maori."<sup>3</sup> These had already suffered significantly from a number of untenable decisions by the Auckland City Council, including the laying of a sewage pipe from the city to the suburbs east of Okahu Bay past Ngati Whatua's houses, but not connecting their houses to the pipe. The sewage pipe also blocked Ngati Whatua's access to the bay and turned their productive land at the bay into mud.<sup>4</sup>

In 1925, Reginald Hammond, who would become the Town Planner in the Department of Housing Construction in 1937, won the Garden Suburb competition for Orakei with a scheme based on the ideas of Raymond Unwin.<sup>5</sup> However, for various reasons, including the 1930s depression, Hammond's scheme was not put into place until the mid-1930s. And even then the execution was significantly changed from Hammond's original plan. Very shortly after winning the 1936 election, the Labour Party announced their commitment to develop Orakei. In the same year, John A. Lee, under-secretary in the new government, "personally sought to remove Maori 'squatters' who were obstructing the development of the state housing suburb."<sup>6</sup> The site was developed and state houses were erected on the so-called blocks A, B, and C of what now turned into "Auckland's first state housing suburb."<sup>7</sup>

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1 "Today, the people of Orakei number about 250. They are grouped in thirty-five state rental homes and units: twenty-seven are isolated in a hillside street [Kupe Street] overlooking Okahu Bay [...]. [...] The original marae and village in Okahu Bay was the last foothold Ngati Whatua had in Tamaki, the isthmus conquered by them and the isthmus on which the City of Auckland now stands." I. H. Kawharu, "Urban Immigrants and Tangata Whenua", in: *The Maori People in the Nineteen-Sixties. A Symposium*, ed. Erik Schwimmer (Longman Paul: Milford, Auckland, 1968), 174-186.

2 Tony van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei and the Model Suburb Experiment in New Zealand 1900-1940," (MA thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007), 123.

3 van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei," 124.

4 Kawharu, Orakei, *A Ngati Whatua Community*, privately published Auckland 1975.

5 van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei," 128.

6 van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei," 203.

7 van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei," 145.

In 1940, the western part of the altered Hammond plan, had been developed. Kupe Street, the site of Plischke's designs, was not yet laid out. Tony van Raat points out an important discrepancy between the theory and reality of this development: "the Labour Party set out to 'solve' the housing problem and to construct as much accommodation as it could, but at the same time remained tied to the deep-seated New Zealand conviction that people should live in houses, not in the considerably cheaper apartments for which, by the mid-1930s, there were numerous overseas examples."<sup>8</sup> This changed in the development of the Kupe Street ridge: "The government agreed to purchase land from the Maori owners in return for providing a number of houses for this hapu. [...] A higher density of housing was built than originally envisaged, largely due to the preference of Maori to be situated closer to their ancestral land."<sup>9</sup> Plischke's designs would provide a rich variety of housing at this higher density, but it remains completely unclear to what degree Plischke was aware of the political background of his scheme.

Apart from the overall political situation, the task, as rewarding as it first seemed to Plischke, must have presented various difficulties, manifesting themselves in endless alterations to his house designs. In the end, only rump versions of his plans were actually built - in two versions between 1940 and 1942. Taking into account new archival evidence, this paper seeks to illuminate Plischke's ideas and intentions in his first New Zealand project. His Vienna architectural training would have gone directly and largely unaltered into his first design suggestions. How did the transfer between the two parts of the world, from Austria to New Zealand, play out in the design and fabrication of the houses in Auckland?

One of the most useful sources of information on Plischke's thoughts in these New Zealand years are the letters to his friend, Lucie Rie. Plischke had met Rie at an exhibition of her work at the "Kunstgewerbeschule" in Vienna - the School of Applied Arts - in 1927. Rie had recently graduated, having studied pottery under Otto Niedermoser. Plischke received one of his first commissions from Lucie Rie and her husband Hans in 1928-29, for the interior design of their apartment at Wollzeile, Vienna. The Rie's emigrated to London in late 1938. Plischke carefully dismantled the Rie apartment interior/built-in furniture and assisted in shipping it to London, where Ernst Freud, son of the psychoanalyst Freud and a close friend of Lucie Rie, helped her reassemble and adapt it to the new conditions. Hans and Lucie Rie were instrumental in helping Anna and Ernst Plischke in their attempt to leave Vienna, throughout the latter part of 1938 and early 1939. "My clients turned to friends", Plischke later remembered.<sup>10</sup> This is a big understatement for probably the single most important friendship of his life. From the day of the Rie's departure to England, Plischke exchanged letters with Lucie Rie (and they continued their correspondence until very late in their lives). In many ways, Rie became Plischke's confidante, someone who he was able to share some of his deepest thoughts with, both personal and professional. Their correspondence provides the historian with a rich source of facts and insights.

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8 van Raat, "State Housing at Orakei," 162.

9 Greg Bowron, "Kupe Street Housing Scheme," in *Long Live the Modern*, ed. Julia Gatley (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), 43.

10 Ernst Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur* (Vienna: Löcker, 1989), 103. Transl. by author.

## The Model: Werkbund Houses in Vienna

Plischke's pair of semi-detached houses at the 1932 Werkbund exhibition in Vienna may have acted as precedents for his Orakei designs. Here, Plischke had been part of a group of more than 70 architects involved in designing a medium density settlement of small houses in Lainz, at the outskirts of Vienna. Adolf Loos, Heinrich Kulka, Hugo Häring, or André Lurçat are some of the better-known names amongst the otherwise mainly Viennese architects who provided visions of modest contemporary housing at a time when modernism had already passed its first peak. Different from the Werkbund exhibition in Stuttgart 1927, where new concepts of dwelling had been tested alongside radically new designs and materials, the Viennese exhibition was less ambitious, rather attempting to define model architecture for a minimum standard at a sufficient level of comfort. As designer of the master plan for the exhibition, architect Josef Frank made a distinction that can be read as programmatic: "German modernist architecture may be objective [sachlich], practical, correct in principle, often even attractive but it remains lifeless."<sup>11</sup> And he could have added that Austrian architecture, in all its modernity, had a tendency towards what one might call homeliness: a stronger emphasis on aspects of comfortable interior design as opposed to the often clinically clean spaces of German (or Swiss, Dutch, or Czech) modernist architecture.

In Vienna, it was the Austrian Association for Settlements and Allotments (Österreichischer Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen) that stood behind the 1932 exhibition. Therefore, the aim of the exhibition was to develop small dwellings, close to the much researched 'existence minimum':

"The Vienna settlement movement championed the combination of fruit and vegetable gardens with economic, standardized small houses in autonomous settlements, securing the livelihood of their inhabitants. This combination aimed at newly defining the relationship between living and working, nature and architecture [...], analogous to the older English and German garden city movements."<sup>12</sup>

Hence, this exhibition was distinctively different from Stuttgart 1927 or from the recent building exhibition in Berlin, 1931, for which Mies van der Rohe had designed the section "The dwelling of our times" (*Die Wohnung unserer Zeit*). There, Mies strove to show the exemplary and the radically new for an ideally conceived 'New Man'.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Josef Frank and the participating architects in Vienna showed a model that, as important as it was in its realistic nature, in fact was already out-dated when implemented. Critic Otto Kapfinger states: in order to successfully influence the development of new housing models, it would have been needed ten years earlier.<sup>14</sup>

The exhibition mainly consisted of two-storey semi-detached houses - in some places connected to, in others detached from the neighbouring double units, interspersed with a few three-storey

11 Josef Frank, *Architektur als Symbol*, Vienna 1931, 135, quoted after Andreas Nierhaus and Eva-Maria Orosz, ed., *Werkbundsiedlung Wien 1932. Ein Manifest des neuen Bauens* (Salzburg: Mury Salzmann, 2012), 14. Transl. by author.

12 Otto Kapfinger, "Anspruch und Ausgang," in *Werkbundsiedlung*, ed. Nierhaus and Orosz, 37. Transl. by author.

13 Andreas Nierhaus, "Bauten, die eine bessere Welt abbilden", in *Werkbundsiedlung*, ed. Nierhaus and Orosz, 33. Transl. by author.

14 Kapfinger, "Anspruch und Ausgang," 55.

buildings. Plischke's houses did not differ much from the solutions of his colleagues: they could not, because there was very little scope for design experiments. Nevertheless, it can be said that Plischke's houses, although amongst the smallest in the exhibition (as small as 58sqm per dwelling)<sup>15</sup>, were well designed to provide rooms of sufficient size: differing from other participating architects, Plischke designed rooms that allowed for cross-ventilation. This slightly compromised the sizes of the other rooms but gave the impression of having used the available space well enough, and gave the small houses the tiniest element of generosity. They were two-storied semi-detached houses. The ground floor included a kitchen plus chamber of 12,5 sqm and a living room of 15 sqm. The cross-ventilated room on the first floor of 15 sqm was a bedroom, and there was space left for a chamber of a mere 4,4 sqm and a bathroom, plus a balcony of about 4 sqm: this was pure existence minimum. Nevertheless, the covered space on the ground floor and the balcony together gave the building a plasticity that reflects Plischke's attempts at sculpturally shaping building volumes.

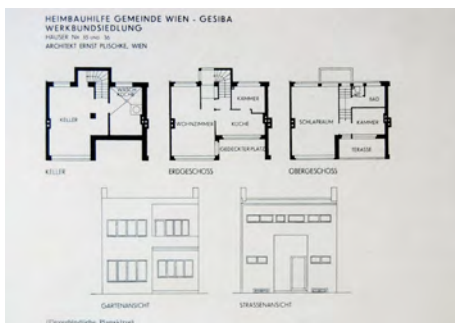


Fig.1 Ernst Plischke. Werkbund Houses, Vienna 1932.  
Source: Andreas Nierhaus and Eva-Maria Orosz, ed.,  
*Werkbundsiedlung Wien 1932. Ein Manifest des neuen Bauens*  
(Salzburg: Mury Salzmann, 2012).

Plischke's designs in Vienna were not radical. And they were similar to the 'homeliness' of Austrian modernist interiors: although Plischke was - to use the term again - probably the most radical modernist architect in Austria at his time, he did not strive for a clinically clean and sober aesthetic as other European modernists did. His houses, both in Austria and later in New Zealand, would always have finely crafted interiors with inbuilt wooden furniture that made them feel less distant or reserved than other contemporary homes. And he was content to have achieved, with few means, a certain plastic, sculptural articulation in their appearance. Also, he was strongly aware of the need of designing a "good and humble house."<sup>16</sup> He recalls having lived, at that time, under "high voltage", so to speak, expecting that modes of dwelling would radically be revised.<sup>17</sup> Had a path shown itself from the "representative-decorative bourgeoisie" towards a "new transcendental spirituality", he was certain that his generation would have been prepared for even more sparseness and minimalism.<sup>18</sup>

15 *Werkbundsiedlung*, ed. Nierhaus and Orosz, 170.

16 Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, 160. Transl. by author.

17 Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, 160. Transl. by author.

18 Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, 160. Transl. by author.



Fig. 2. Ernst Plischke. Werkbund Houses, Vienna 1932.  
Source: Andreas Nierhaus and Eva-Maria Orosz, eds.,  
*Werkbundsiedlung Wien 1932. Ein Manifest des neuen Bauens*  
(Salzburg: Mury Salzmann, 2012).

## Plischke's Designs for Orakei: Enthusiastic Beginnings

When thinking of Plischke's first years in New Zealand, we need to be aware of the strange concurrence of the everyday with one of the single most life-changing dates in the 20th century, the beginning of the Second World War. On the morning of the 1st of September, 1939, Hitler's troops started the war in Poland. New Zealand declared war on Germany on the 3rd of September. In the face of the commencement of unspeakable horrors in Europe, it may have felt almost absurd for Plischke and his family that life in their new home New Zealand just continued. And Plischke, adjusting to his new work routine, began to draw up designs for small houses in Orakei, Auckland.

Having arrived in Wellington just in May, Plischke quickly settled into working for the Housing Department under Gordon Wilson and for an American architect named Nelson for the Centennial exhibition in Wellington. Being busy and restless, he wrote to his friend Lucie Rie in mid-August:

"Here, days and weeks fly past, without being able to collect my thoughts and Saturdays and Sundays I sit and lie at home, reflecting on the work in peace and quiet and develop little sketches in my mind and imagine how to do the perspectives [...] it is my first high and the relapse will come anyway and one will see later - but that doesn't matter - I am going strong - the first time in two years since the Ortmann project in 1937."<sup>19</sup>

But his verdict about his new colleagues was, at the same time, less than flattering. In a draft letter to Lucie Rie in London, he described how he felt coerced by Wilson to sit in the big drafting studio, in order to study the Department's standard details. And although he thought the draughtsmen and their foremen were "sufficiently harmless", he felt that

"taken as crowd they feel terribly oppressive and unsettling when one sits in their midst as small draughtsman and doesn't yet master their dreadful routine as well as they do, and so one can't imagine at all how to get out of this again and to be commissioned to do interesting work."<sup>20</sup>

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19 EAP, letter to Lucie Rie, 21 August 1939, private archive, Vienna. Transl. by author.

20 EAP, draft letter to Lucie Rie, ca. 25 August 1939, private archive, Vienna. Transl. by author.

Similarly critical was his judgement of the State houses and their production:

"This department is a fully mechanized factory for house plans for the local housing programme, with a staff of 60 people. An architect from Vienna, one from Poland and one from Berlin are working here. The houses that result from this work unfortunately are really hideous and ordinary. And I can't see yet if and how one can tackle the problem. In any case, under these circumstances one develops into a marked reactionary and appreciates the really nice and good tradition of the local colonial as opposed to this modernist utilitarianism."<sup>21</sup>

Plischke would repeat this criticism of the New Zealand "utilitarianism" many times during his years in Wellington, but the reader's surprise may lie in his praise of the "local colonial". It would be interesting to know whether this covered the Victorian colonial or just the Georgian which he would include in his *Design and Living* of 1947. But the Orakei schemes did give him the opportunity to "tackle the problem" as he hoped for. In the same draft letter to Lucie Rie, Plischke recalls in detail the event that changed his drawing-room routine into challenging new work.

"Last Friday [18 August 1939?] Wilson called me into his office and presented me with a site for 25 houses in a marvellous area of Auckland with wonderful views. Normally, for such a site [...] the most suitable [...] out of ca. 300 house types are chosen; then the sheets of paper are stapled together and sent to the respective city to the builders. In this case I have been asked to design all house types myself. Of course in such a design, one can only work with standardized windows, doors, roofs etc. [...]

Over the weekend I have - in secret - again worked with intensity on the design for the first type and since [?] the houses here are thought out at great speed, without losing much sleep over them, this week was pretty arduous: I had to rack my brains so that I could advance the houses at an appropriate speed."<sup>22</sup>

In a mixture of pleasant surprise and disbelief, Plischke reports that "Wilson really liked the design; and he was already going to build it somewhere else although it isn't finished yet." It seems that, for Plischke, things were done too hastily in the Housing Department because he adds, not concealing his surprise and scepticism: "This haste is something new to me that I am afraid of and can only hope that one can convince people that it is advantageous to think things through better and more thoroughly."<sup>23</sup>

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21 EAP, Undated draft letter to Lucie Rie, mid-August 1939, private archive, Vienna. Transl. by author.

22 EAP, undated draft letter to Lucie Rie, ca. 25 August, 1939, private archive, Vienna. Transl. by author.

23 EAP, undated draft letter to Lucie Rie, ca. 25 August, 1939, private archive, Vienna. Transl. by author.



## Orakei: The Setback is Unavoidable

His enthusiasm, however, would be severely curtailed by the cancellation of these schemes (called "Orakei I" by Plischke in his time sheets). On 16 October 1940, one Mr Lennet [?] sent a letter to Mr Albertson, outlining how, in light of material shortage, the designs would need to be changed.

"There are a number of features connected with this group that, owing to shortage of materials, high costs of materials and wages increases and Cabinet appeals to economise on all matters as a War Effort, should in my opinion be eliminated."<sup>24</sup>

These were: French doors that should be substituted with sash-hung windows. Two toilets per unit were too much, one was sufficient. The pergolas were to be eliminated, as well as flower boxes, and concrete steps leading to French doors. One of the special features, the concrete and trellis fence of eight metres length, had to be substituted by a standard trellis fence. The number of built-in wardrobes should be reduced, as well as the number of electric light points (two were indicated in each room). This enumeration ended with the comment: "The units generally throughout the contract have larger perimeters than usual, adding to the cost. Balconies on first floors are costly. Living courts with trellis are costly."<sup>25</sup>

As understandable as these savings were, they must have been shattering for Plischke. And with all these savings in mind, it made no sense to further consider the construction of these Type 1 units. Hence Plischke noted in his time sheet, on 21 October: "Letter concerning Orakei I. With Mr Wilson and Dawson. Orakei I cancelled."<sup>26</sup> A few days later, on the 28th, Plischke reported to Lucie Rie:

"To write about us seems to me rather ridiculous and silly in these days. I have already written that with our outside conditions nothing has changed - everybody is just as nice as ever. Only in the office we got a new general director (not a new chief architect). The result together with the necessity to save expenses during the war is - that my housing scheme in Auckland will not be built altogether and all these months of straining work are useless. The size of the houses planned for Auckland will not be used anymore but only our smallest standard types. But not only the size of the houses is changed in our office but the whole spirit altogether. All this is of no importance of course in comparison with the events happening in the world but in spite of this it is of some importance for the own life. But with the few things that are important to me - there is not much left if I am forced to change the work on architecture for the most boring routine job; at least for the duration of the war - I wrote you already once how uninterested everybody is on questions of aesthetics."<sup>27</sup>

Plischke was painfully aware how small his own problems were compared with what was happening on the world stage - but his initial enthusiasm of having been asked to develop what might have

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24 Letter Orakei contracts, from EAP archives, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, n.p.

25 Letter Orakei contracts, from EAP archives, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, n.p.

26 Time sheet VII, from EAP archives, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, n.p.

27 Letter EAP to Lucie Rie, 28 October 1940, private archive, Vienna. Letter written in English.

become a new type of medium density state housing was severely affected by these decisions. However, a Type 2 of the Orakei houses was built on Kupe Street - and these houses are still occupied and in reasonable shape. In Plischke's (private) time sheets of 1939-41 there is a gap between April and September 1940 - but it seems that Plischke only started work on "ORAKEI 2" on the 9th of September, 1940. On the 9th, he notes: "Sketches for new 4 unit block" and on the 13th: "With Mr. Wilson. Design of 4 unit accepted".<sup>28</sup> On the 12th of December, 1940, he writes: "Finish of Orakei II." On the 6th of January 1941, design on the Orakei 3 Type was begun. But Plischke did not continue his time sheets any longer than February 1941 so that no further dates can be established through these most useful documents.

### Orakei: Types 1 to 3, Built and Unbuilt

There are three types of Orakei multi-units. Type 1, the first type developed by Plischke, had as many as eleven sub-versions. He drew them between August 1939 and October 1940. A portfolio of drawings preserved in the Albertina Museum in Vienna contains plans, elevations and details of these Type 1 units, together with a site plan of Kupe Street. They are all dated May 1940, designed "E.A.P" and traced "R.M.Y.", by Martin Yeoman. In addition, a large-scale plan is preserved on which a sequence of these types has been tried, in plan and - coloured - elevation.

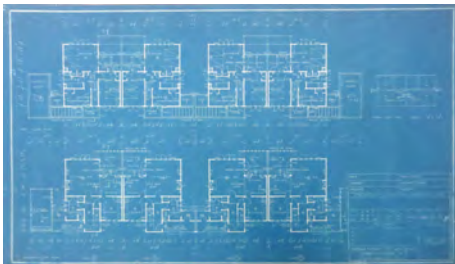


Fig. 3. Ernst Plischke. Design for Orakei, Type 1. May 1940. Plischke Archives Academy of Fine Arts, at the Albertina Museum, Vienna].

All of them were two- or three-bedroom units. Plischke experimented with what he called 'vertical' and 'horizontal' types - narrow versions and deep versions for different types of sites. Many of these types were combinations of two-storey and single-storey buildings. (This schematic was continued into the realized Type 2.) He developed more traditionally European apartment-type buildings with four units, in which each unit was just situated on one floor. But his best units (the ones that were displayed in Wellington at the Centennial exhibition) are two combined blocks of two units with each unit occupying ground and first floor: they should be called row houses rather than 'units'. Each of the row houses had a "living court" on the ground floor and a balcony above. The perspective that has been preserved shows a pergola-like structure above the balcony with Mediterranean-type cloth/sails. This is a motif Plischke would further develop later in his career, in houses like Giles at

<sup>28</sup> Time sheet VI, from EAP archives, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, n.p.

Raumati, and as late as in the 1970s in his Frey House in Graz, Austria: in the Orakei designs he honed his domestic vocabulary for the decades to come. These Type 1 row-houses are indeed beautiful and have a lightness to them that many of his private houses would also obtain. Plischke developed a trellis for visual and wind protection towards the back. On the street side of the buildings, each entry had a porch, covered with a pergola. These pergolas also had the task to tie together the two volumes of two units each. These design tools turned the otherwise simple cubes into well-modelled plastically articulated shapes, and they helped achieve the sense of a European street with a continuous line of buildings along the street. Another issue, of course, is the question of suitability for the prospective tenants: it is almost certain that the units were not the right models for the Maori families intended to move into these units - neither Type 1, nor 2 or 3. But one is relatively safe to assume that Plischke was not, at any stage of the design process, informed about any such cultural issues.



Fig. 4. Ernst Plischke. Design for Orakei, Type 1. May 1940. Plischke Archives Academy of Fine Arts, at the Albertina Museum, Vienna.

Plischke did not keep any copies of drawings for Orakei 2, which makes a comparison with Type 1 difficult. But some of the obvious changes are the abandonment of the trellises and pergolas, and the flat roof was replaced by a low-hipped roof. As Plischke recalled late in his life, what remained of the first type were - not immediately visible - the careful arrangement of the water pipes inside the masonry, and the porches.<sup>29</sup> These were carried out in masonry, jutting out from the main body of the building by a metre and set behind a glass screen of 16 square window elements, vaguely reminiscent of the subdivision of the trellises designed for the first version. Of Type 2, about 8 units were built. Type 3 was only built twice but it marked a slight return to the more cubic design language of the first type.

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<sup>29</sup> Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, 243. Transl. by author.



Fig. 5. Ernst Plischke: Orakei, Type 2, as built.  
Photograph by Christoph Schnoor, 2014.

## Utilitarianism Instead of Culture

Plischke had shown himself content with his Werkbund design although it was not radical and just the smallest hint at “Bauplastik”, built sculpture. But he achieved, with modest means, a “good and humble home”. Given the story of their development, it is remarkable, even ironic that the houses as built (Orakei II) bear more resemblance with his Werkbund schemes than the first Orakei type.

As Orakei I was developed in up to eleven sub-versions, seven of which are documented in the Albertina Museum in Vienna, one may think of the Orakei houses as an equivalent to the housing exhibition in Vienna 1932. It almost seems as if Plischke wanted to simulate the Vienna experience with the variety of models, with the significant difference that they were all from his hand. His own comment is only partially helpful in that he recalled: “In order to avoid monotony, I attempted to combine different house types in each unit.”<sup>30</sup>

In some senses, the conditions under which Orakei was developed, were confusing. On the one hand, Plischke was given free reign to develop housing models for 2- and 3-bedroom units with relatively generous floor plans. The most beautiful of his 1939-40 design for a 3-bedroom unit sits at approximately 140 sqm. This is not big by any means but much less modest than the tiny houses he and his colleagues were able to design in Vienna in 1932. And these are the ones that were exhibited in the Centennial exhibition. Did Wilson hope to develop, with Plischke’s help, a new standard type of multi-unit housing? It seems that at least for a while, until October 1940, this was the case. The seven versions of Type I in the blueprint folio of May 1940 bear witness of a complex design that was advanced as far as ready for building specification. What then, was the decisive event that changed the Department of Housing Construction’s (Wilson’s?) attitude? The letter signed by a Mr. Lennet of 16 October 1940, is the only visible trace of this change of mind.

This is the other side of the confusing facts: New Zealand had to save on building costs and needed to be modest, more so than before the war, and in this New Zealand was quite similar to Vienna 1932: so much so that Plischke should not have been surprised or even disappointed by the development

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<sup>30</sup> Plischke, *Ein Leben mit Architektur*, 243. Transl. by author.

of his project in Wellington. But he clearly was. He must have felt that he had been led down a different path, he had been led to believe that he was able to design a new model for the Housing Department - maybe very much comparable to Frederick Newman's Star Flat blocks. Newman's designs also suffered changes but they became a prototype for many of such Star Flats in the country (also around Kupe Street). But in Plischke's case the design was altered so heavily that it was more or less reduced to the standards of the Department of Housing Construction anyway. Hardly any innovation was possible, maybe apart from the porch and the interior fitting of the pipes. And his Orakei units did not become a model for the whole country.

Or was there more? More innovation and more resentment? More resentment for sure. As explained, Plischke might not have minded if he had found himself in the development of an innovation that coupled modesty with the movement towards a new building culture. But since what he saw developed and built was more of the same, more of the utilitarian, dull, uninspired architecture that he had been scolding in one of his 1939 letters, he could only feel that his ability to innovate was unwanted. This must have been the biggest setback for him.