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Translating Habitat: Revisiting Pitarua Court & Thorndon Mews

In early 1973 Peter Beaven was at the height of his career. New Zealand had been through a period of steady economic growth and his Christchurch based practice Beaven Hunt and Associates was well established. It was undertaking a wave of projects as the 1974 Commonwealth games in Christchurch approached, and Beaven's advocacy for higher density housing was bringing new clients. His work in progress included commissions for over 300 townhouses in projects located throughout New Zealand. Most of these never came to fruition after the 1973 oil shock and the economic recession that followed, however several projects, including Habitat Townhouses at Pitarua Street in Wellington, were fully committed. The project's first stage was complete and following stages were continuing under the management of Burwell Hunt. Habitat is an important built exemplar of the practice's vision and legacy and remains highly relevant today. Medium Density Housing is once again a focus in New Zealand, however architects are struggling to achieve medium density living environments that even approach the quality of Habitat Townhouses. This paper revisits the project to determine the contexts of its production, document the project key characteristics for reference, and to distill its enduring contemporary relevance.

In early 1973 Peter Beaven was at the height of his career. New Zealand had been through a period of steady economic growth and his Christchurch based practice Beaven Hunt and Associates was well established. It was working on multiple projects as the 1974 Commonwealth games in Christchurch approached, and Peters entrepreneurial advocacy for urban renewal and higher density housing was bringing new clients. The Christchurch office had 16 staff and a Wellington office had 10 staff. Their work in progress included commissions for over 300 Townhouses in projects located all over New Zealand.¹ The townhouses now known as Thorndon Mews and Pitarua Court in Thorndon, Wellington, were originally named Habitat. The project and its contemporaneous sister Habitat development in Christchurch now known as Tonbridge Mews led a brief flourishing of humane high density low rise townhouse developments in New Zealand. Habitat remains an important built exemplar of the practices urbane vision and legacy that is highly relevant today.



Fig. 1 Pitarua Court from Thorndon Mews.
Photograph by Mark Southcombe, 23 August 2011.

Project History

Peter Beaven understood a continuity of history and exchanges between British and New Zealand architecture and culture through his reading, his family history in Christchurch,² and his earlier travels. In 1967-68 after completion of the Manchester Unity office tower in Christchurch he formed a partnership with architect Burwell Hunt before he moved with his wife and family to London. He had an interest in the urban renewal of inner city areas³ and attended a postgraduate course in Urban Design at the Architectural Association School.⁴ Over this time, Beaven was exposed to the history and contemporary urban scholarship of theorists such as Jane Jacobs⁵ and Gordon Cullen.

1 "Interview with Burwell Hunt," 27 January 2014.

2 Peter Beaven, "South Island Architecture," *RIBA Journal* (September 1961): 375.

3 Peter Beaven, "An Urban Renewal," *NZIA Journal* 20 (September 1966): 273.

4 Ian Lochhead, introduction to *Peter Beaven Architect: Buildings and Projects*, ed. Ian Lochhead (School of Fine Arts Gallery, University of Canterbury, 15 August-1 September 1995), 2.

5 Peter Beaven "Urban Renewal; Methods relevant to New Zealand," *NZIA Journal* (March 1970): 75.

He visited a range of modernist public housing and was critical of what he saw.⁶ He was also familiar with historic urban centres such as Oxford and Cambridge, and was immersed in historic Hampstead where he lived in Mews Housing, converted from outbuildings for a larger house. He described Hampstead housing: "The elegance of white, sweetly-moulded, incredibly simple houses, with the same irregular windows and tilted walls, all with polished brass knockers and black ironwork, is overwhelming."⁷ This experience was clearly influential. The same description of Hampstead housing could later be used to describe the Habitat Housing he was to design on his return to New Zealand. While in England, he published a series of articles reflecting on his experiences and refining his planning ideals for a New Zealand context. Beaven favoured continuity with history over time, infill, diverse, picturesque, community focussed housing. He also advocated housing development through co-ownership housing groups, following the English Housing Association model.⁸ After his study he travelled through Europe in a van with his family experiencing places he studied directly.

Beaven returned to New Zealand in mid-1968, intending to introduce a European model of higher density urban housing. "In the late 60s we became convinced that a growing proportion of all future housing, even in New Zealand was going to be other than in the sprawling suburban or highrise setting."⁹ "Beaven enthusiastically set about encouraging family and friends to set up a development company to build townhouses."¹⁰ Two Habitat housing projects were conceived in Wellington and Christchurch. The first was initiated in Wellington because of housing demand, access to suitable land close to the government and business centre, and the availability of supportive investors. Investors included Beaven's cousin Christchurch builder J & W Jamison, his father who was Deputy Chairman of Air New Zealand at the time, business colleagues, and his wife Mary who invested a recent inheritance.¹¹ A company 'Habitat Houses limited' was established as client, and a concept design and estimates were developed.

Stage 1 Pitarua Court was designed as 11 houses to investor apprehension. "It is as well to remember that in the late 60s there was little precedent for this type of housing and no-one really knew what to build, or for whom. There seemed considerable risk in the gamble that there would be sufficient purchasers imaginative enough to understand the different lifestyle option."¹² The extra townhouse provided some financial tolerance, construction by J & W Jamison builders began, and was completed in June 1972. There were delays from logistical issues with land purchase agreements and an appeal against the planning consent. Issues with the hammer-head street end design delayed the second major Thorndon Mews stage from beginning. A smaller three-townhouse extension to the

6 Peter Beaven "Whose Housing," *Town Planning Quarterly* (10 December 1967): 11.

7 Peter Beaven "Detailing the Environment," *Town Planning Quarterly* (11 March 1968): 14.

8 Peter Beaven "Public Participation in Planning," *Town Planning Quarterly* (12 June 1968): 12.

9 "National Award 1977; Habitat Housing Thorndon Wellington," *NZIA Journal* (3 June 1977): 16.

10 "Habitat Townhouses; A 3-Stage development in Wellington," *Home and Building* 6 (1977): 20.

11 "Interview with Mary Beaven," 28 January 2014.

12 "Habitat Townhouses," 20.

east of Pitarua Court proceeded in the interim. The architects Wellington office was located within Pitarua Court in apartment 11 and moved to the larger middle apartment of the new work as it was completed.



Fig. 2. Early site plan for the project.
"National Award 1977; Habitat Housing Thorndon Wellington,"
NZIA Journal (3 June 1977): 17.

Beaven and Hunt had different roles within the practice with Peter mainly responsible for design and Burwell for design development, documentation, and running the office. In early 1973 Burwell Hunt agreed to relocate his family to Wellington to run the Wellington office, and from there Habitat and other Northern projects. Three months later the Christchurch office was under extreme pressure to complete the Queen Elizabeth II Park Stadium and Pool for the 1974 Christchurch Commonwealth Games which had a design documentation and build timeframe of 14 months from the date of approvals to proceed. Beaven asked Hunt and his family to relocate back to the Christchurch prompting the dissolution of the partnership Beaven Hunt & Associates. Hunt & Reynolds Architects was established in Wellington and took on the Habitat project, seeing it through to completion.

The final Thorndon Mews stage of the project traversed a steep hill and had a more varied design than the earlier stages. "It was thought that a degree of variation and elaboration was desirable to produce the quality of interest and excellence expected by the anticipated purchaser."¹³ The design was for Pied-a-terre, literally Town Houses; small self-contained houses in the city for part time occupation by wealthy clients who had a larger residence elsewhere; or by senior diplomats and managers from the nearby government and commercial centre. The Christchurch-based builder managed the project remotely through difficult economic times. As inflation soared construction was beset with delays and cost overruns. The houses had all been presold. The fixed purchase prices resulted in the eventual depletion of all investor capital before the project was finally completed in March 1976.

13 "Habitat Townhouses; A 3-Stage development in Wellington," *Home and Building* 6 (1977): 22.



Fig. 3 Pitarua Street
 "Habitat Townhouses; A 3-Stage development in Wellington,"
 Home and Building 6 (1977): 22.

The completed houses were a desirable high quality environment and an instant success. During the period of their construction they had directly resulted in a number of similar commissions. They were awarded an NZIA National Award in 1977, and were extensively published. *Designscape* described them as "quietly dignified" and noted "their straightforward elegant design and lack of gimmickry",¹⁴ an oblique reference to Roger Walker's Park Mews completed in 1974 and discussed in the same article. A lucid commentary on the project in relation to Beaven's work is included in David Mitchell's history of New Zealand Architecture since 1945, *The Elegant Shed*, which notes: "It was probably the best development of its kind in the country with the first stage finished in 1972."¹⁵ It is a mark of the original design and built quality that after 40 years the Townhouses and their surrounds remain substantially as originally designed and in remarkably good condition.

Project Description

Habitat consists of 29 Townhouses in an idyllic location close to the city. The site adjoins Premier House, the New Zealand Prime Ministers Wellington residence to the southwest, and the town belt reserve on Tinakori hill to the northwest. The site planning incorporates both sides of the end of Pitarua Street as an urban ensemble. The two sides of the design are structured as related groups of single attached small houses and gardens around two main courtyards. They are linked through their form, colour, landscape and design detail. They are also connected by common pathways and stairways that offer alternative pedestrian routes. In two places houses are raised and paths travel under them to give access to a minor courtyard and the common domain of the town belt 'forest' beyond.

The first stage of the design, Pitarua Court, shares a vehicle and access courtyard that structures the planning of the townhouses, which step and pinwheel around it. Car parks are varied. Some

14 "Houses for Cities; Habitat," *Designscape* 63 (1974): 22.

15 David Mitchell and Gillian Chapman, *The Elegant Shed; New Zealand Architecture since 1945* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), 57-58.

individual garages are located below the house they serve. Most are clustered in groups. Some are accessible from the street and others from the shared vehicle court. The design is based on repetition of a simple 72m² two-floor rectangular gabled row-house design, with living on the lower levels and two bedrooms and a bathroom on the upper level. Design variation is introduced through the creative manner of row-house connections. Houses are rotated and stepped horizontally and vertically in relation to each other to accommodate site contours and car parking. The individual identity of each house form is blunted and unified by overlapping connections between them. A big roof to the south joins several houses and creates a scale change. House 4 on the west corner of the ensemble is narrower to accommodate a public access way and has a long strip of clerestory windows to the north. House 10 on the east corner has an elevated belvedere looking up the harbour. The design variations create an intricacy and individual character to each house that enlivens the otherwise simple modular composition. Houses open onto private courtyard gardens, some of which are hidden or elevated above garaging. Two houses have large balconies in lieu of a garden. Two designs have larger floor areas and gardens, and single upstairs rooms. Townhouse 9a is a corner building over garages for adjacent townhouses and that introduces a sentry like character to the complex with mansard roof, turret room and a balcony to the northeast corner facing the street.



Fig. 4 Cross section through Thorndon Mews
Emily Batchelor, "Habitat Housing -
Thorndon, Cross section in Stepped-ness"
(M Arch(prof) thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013).

The final Thorndon Mews 15 townhouse stage is also structured around a shared vehicle courtyard with grouped car parking. All houses have a covered car park and some built in outside storage. Like Pitarua Court some townhouses have carports and some have garages. Four houses have internal access from the garage to the house. The toe of Tinakori Hill is part way through the site so houses step up the hill. Two different house types are slightly larger than for Pitarua Court, and have two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs over kitchen and living areas. Similar houses are clustered together and like Pitarua Court, some special variations occur to the main building types. A corner building to apartment 26 has a turret and balcony repeating a similar corner balcony element to Pitarua Court. The west corner of the site resolves the right angle clash between linear row houses with an overlap between forms and a change in level. Mansard roof forms link the row houses and reduce the height of the exterior walls. Dormer windows and balcony elements unify the design. Each house has a private garden, some of which are green roofs over garages.

At number 22 a 'big house' is introduced in the prime location within the site. A larger home with duplicated living, entertaining and outdoor areas and three bedrooms, it is vertical in nature

extending over four levels including a turret room. Design detail includes balconies and terraces on two levels, a large spiral stair with a glass pyramid over, and a high level of detailing include a wide pivot door with red cathedral glass. The house design was adapted for New Zealand Diplomat Merwyn Norrish and family. Norrish had been the secretary of the NZ Foreign Affairs Department and became the New Zealand Ambassador to Washington. He recalls entertaining important guests including Prime Minister David Lange at the house. The introduction of the idea of the 'big house' within the overall composition is noteworthy, and may hark back to the origins of Mews Housing in stables and lanes associated with a larger built ensemble. It also introduces a scale change and diversity to the built form and social occupation of the larger Habitat complex.

The townhouses utilize a simple, consistent palette of materials that reinterpret Beaven's experience of Hampstead. Exterior materials are: grey painted concrete foundations; white painted blockwork walls; blackbean timber windows; brown narrow profile Brownbuilt tray roofing with 'Canterbury prickles' at the ridges; Nuralite to dormer windows and flat roof areas; clay quarry tiles to entry floors; exterior common ways and suspended balcony slabs; and simple black wrought iron balustrades.



Fig. 5 Interior of number 22; the 'big house'.
Paul Hillier, 13 April 2012.

The interior material palette is; white painted blockwork and papered Gib board with timber framed interior walls, gloss white Seretone bathrooms, oregon beams and douglas fir 'mill' floors with clear finishes to ceilings below and carpet above. Standardised interior joinery and kitchen and bathroom layouts follow the main building types. Kitchens had Formica benches, rimu timber doors with bright painted particleboard inserts and purpose designed turned heart rimu knobs. Upper level ceilings used large format white painted 30mm low density particle board on blackbean stained rafter beams at 1.2m centres. Perspex skylights to the turrets and mansard bathrooms complete the picture. Significant attention to the needs of residents is reflected in the design of the architectural details. "Fittings such as rubbish disposal areas, letter boxes, name-plates, outdoor lights, and door shelters have all been designed or chosen to blend unobtrusively with the generally understated architectural style."¹⁶

16 "Houses for Cities; Habitat," *Designscape* 63 (1974): 22.

Architectural Context

Some of Beaven's influences in the design at Pitarua Street can be traced. The effect of his Hampstead experiences of high density living are clear, as is the influence of key writing of the period such as Jane Jacobs' *The Life and death of American Cities*, Christopher Alexander's *Community and Privacy; Towards a Architecture of Humanism*, and the Townscape movement advanced by AR magazine in the post-war years and from 1964 to -68. Gordon Cullen's 1961 book *Townscape* and its focus on the art of relationship was clearly an influence. Cullen's focus on the experience of place and lessons from history find an echo in Beaven's writing and work. At Pitarua Street we find studied offsets in pathways and levels combining with glancing movement patterns though the project, creating a series of unfolding vistas as exemplified in Cullen's serial vision casebook. Beaven even had the word "Townscape" pinned over his drawing desk for periods of his career.¹⁷

The influence of the local architectural context can also be read in the project. Beaven's love of Mountfort's work and its influence is probably evident in the Mansard roof within the Habitat design. The influence of exchange with Beaven's contemporaries may also be traced. Athfield and Walker were the exuberant architectural *enfants terribles* at the time and their work was attracting a lot of attention. They were designing clustered separate building forms with free ranging towers, circular windows, and perspex bubbles. The Habitat Townhouses project includes some similar elements including it seems a nod to Athfield and Walker with a circular window, and a glass roof pyramid much like the Britten House or Wellington Club, which in later years he described as "the wonderful Wellington Club, one of the greatest romantic structures ever built in New Zealand."¹⁸ Beaven's rivalry with fellow Christchurch Architect Miles Warren was legendary, yet he appreciated Warren's Broderick Townhouses which he described as "most elegant Warren and Mahoney at their best."¹⁹ Pitarua Court's picturesque elevation to the street harks back to Beaven's 1963 Askew House in Cashmere, but also resonates with the end elevation of the Broderick Townhouses and Warren's early 'Pixie Houses'. In the same period Beaven was designing Habitat, Athfield was designing the Pearce Apartments in Majoribanks Street, Wellington influenced by a client visit to the Moshe Safdie designed Habitat 67 model community high density housing project in Montreal.²⁰ It is likely that the Habitat Townhouses project name is also influenced by this source.

Contemporary Significance

The poor quality of much contemporary high density low rise housing despite ever increasing planning scrutiny and design guidelines suggests that Habitat Housing and the processes that

17 The Post Colonial World," *New Zealand Architect* 2 (1982): 14.

18 The New Romantics," *Architecture New Zealand* 2 (2012): 95.

19 The Post Colonial World," *New Zealand Architect* 2 (1982): 8.

20 Julia Gately, *Athfield Architects* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2012), 50.

delivered it are worthy of closer study for qualities and design tactics that have enduring relevance. The road turnaround design in a hammerhead configuration traversing public and private land was contentious and caused delays and a specified departure from the operative city plan.²¹ There is no dominant road with kerbs and a cul-de-sac turnaround here, yet it operates well. It has a significant effect, reducing the extent and impact of roads, and stitching together public and private realms. The continuity over the street is reinforced through landscape, introducing six large street trees in circular planters located along the street edges and within Thorndon Court's vehicle courtyard. The park-like context and common material and colour palette result in a village-like unified environment (fig. 1).

In a similar manner, grouping of car parking minimizes the extent and impact of vehicle circulation and garages. All townhouses have a single off-street car space despite the houses accommodating up to four people comfortably. Visitor car parks are accommodated on the street. This causes occasional issues with temporary parking in the vehicle courts, and visitors parking on adjacent streets, but the amenity trade off of a place not dominated by cars and traffic is noteworthy, suggesting that parking in an urban context is not as important as planners might argue. The design of garaging is varied, as well. Collective garages, common paths and courtyards also operate as mechanisms of social exchange. Vehicle courts also do double duty occasionally accommodating social occasions like backyard cricket. Urban common space and landscape design is high quality. All houses have direct access from living areas to private external garden areas or balcony areas. Most houses have access to light and exterior spaces from two sides of a house. Levels are split and stepped. Extra green roof site area is created over car parking. The entry level of most houses is raised to a new datum level with views, connected to gardens and free of cars. Picturesque vistas are curated from each house and common pathways. Greater adoption of this design strategy would mitigate the contemporary malaise of row houses with dead street edges of endless repeating garage doors and poky entries.

The limited high quality material palette is hardwearing and has maintained its appearance over time. The thermal performance of the walls is poor by contemporary standards, however they do not leak and unlike most noisy contemporary timber multiple housing a very high degree of privacy is achieved in these houses.²² The blockwork walls and concrete floors give acoustic privacy, and the careful spatial ensemble manages overlooking. Houses have fore-ground views to private gardens, mid-ground views to common courtyards, and long views from the houses to the borrowed landscape of the city. This high degree of personal privacy and connection to both individual garden and the city in a dense urban context is exemplary and worthy of replication.

21 Peter Beaven, "Interview with Peter Beaven," VUW, September 2006.

22 Michael Fowler, *The New Zealand House* (1983): 112.



Fig. 7 External courtyards and balcony to 'the big house.'
Photograph by Mark Southcombe, 23 August 2011.

House locations in relation to local paths and courtyards and changes in the scale of external common spaces create a sense of individual, local, and collective identity within the complex as a whole. This also operates at a macro scale with the subtly different character of the two sides of Pitarua Street. This hierarchy of social space balances individual and collective identity and breaks down the overall grain and scale of the project. This balance between standardisation, visual coherence and individual identity is significant. Mitchell notes: "The house units were interwoven with great complexity, yet they retained the sense of being discrete parts of a specific village."²³ At Habitat standard repeated row house designs have been considered as a series of individual houses. They are mirrored, stepped, have alternative windows introduced, or an individual stair, balcony or turret added. Special elements like common walkways under entry portals, a cranked stair at the end of the vehicle court, and the introduction of the big house within the composition give local identity within the larger whole.

The impetus for the project and the means of its realisation are also of note. The project was generated by critique of the existing suburban context as a visionary design for future medium density town-housing, based on lessons learnt from history and denser urban environments. Inspired by the Housing Association cooperative social housing model the architect formed a development company with family and friends to realise his vision. It is an example of an architect generating his own practice and leading change through design and realisation of visionary architecture. This process contains risk not associated with conventional architectural practice. The first stages of the project worked well financially and supported the second stage occurring. High inflation and the financial losses sustained by the partners in the final stage of the project prevented other projects by the Habitat Housing company.

²³ David Mitchell and Gillian Chapman, *The Elegant Shed; New Zealand Architecture since 1945* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), 57-58.

The following economic recession also caused architectural work to dry up. Burwell Hunt recalls projects for 200 townhouses being cancelled overnight. The Mount Albert Housing project was completed in 1974 and the 69 unit high-density Hiropi Street flats in Wellington continued with design development work by Hunt & Reynolds. The design was higher density and included studio and maisonettes with similar unit plans to Habitat, in a simplified stacked linear terracing like a hotel without the individual unit identity and village vernacular character evident in Habitat.

Habitat could not happen today in most parts of New Zealand and certainly not in Thorndon where the Thorndon Character Area design guidelines would prevent it. The prescriptive nature of New Zealand's contextual formula-driven urban planning system is not delivering outcomes of the quality they advocate.²⁴ The quality of Habitat design and environment proves Beaven's thesis that parallel planning processes led by locals and architects incrementally designing urban environments are required as alternative to centralised planning.²⁵ The precedents for this type of environment are not master planned environments created by design guidelines. They grew over time. Beaven's design of 30 townhouses at Habitat captures the qualities of such environments by focus on the individual house and the public realm.

By 1975 Peter Beaven's Christchurch practice had wound down, and he moved to England where he practiced from home as a sole practitioner working on alterations and urban housing. He realized two medium density projects including six townhouses in Tile Kiln Lane, Highgate, in 1980 that utilized similar material and formal tactics and a similar coordinated development process to that at Habitat in Wellington. His design was fresh yet contextual: "Each unit is designed as an separate entity, with contrasting interiors reflected in the exterior form, creating a picturesque outline that suggests the continuous development common in Victorian villages."²⁶ The separate treatment of each house within a continuous ensemble is something developers and their architects could learn from today balancing individuality and continuity. This was possible for Beaven in many of his projects because "Beaven had also organised the land, builders, engineers and prospective purchasers. This example "generated pleasure for English professionals who felt brutalised by local bureaucracy, planning legislation and bylaws."²⁷ In the Tile Kiln Lane project the high density vertically oriented Mews Housing influence in Beaven's New Zealand work was developed and translated back to its source, and this time a New Zealand influence was evident²⁸ "Beaven's design contrasted with the dreary

24 Joseph Sturm, "Plan Implementation and Medium Density Housing Outcomes" (M BSc thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2014).

25 Peter Beaven, "Urban Renewal: Methods relevant to New Zealand," *NZIA Journal* March (1970): 75.

26 Jane Collins, "Buildings and Projects in London," in *Peter Beaven Architect: Buildings and Projects*, ed. Ian Lochhead. (School of Fine Arts Gallery, University of Canterbury, 15 August-1 September 1995), 10.

27 Jane Collins, "Buildings and Projects in London," 10.

28 Highgate Down Under," *Architects Journal* (12 May 1982): 42.

sameness of much new high density building in Britain.”²⁹ The Kiln Tile Lane project returned to London the favour it delivered to Pitarua Street, Wellington, New Zealand through Beaven in the early 1970s. In 1982 Beaven designed an unrealized project for a timber housing village in the docklands, before returned to practice in New Zealand in 1984 where he continued to design leading award winning medium density housing projects such as Cleremont Terraces, Wellington (1987),³⁰ and Merivale Village in Christchurch (1990).³¹

29 Jane Collins, “Buildings and Projects in London,” 11.

30 “CHH Environmental Design Awards,” *Architecture New Zealand* (Nov-Dec 1988): 54-55.

31 Peter Beaven, “Village Vernacular,” *Architecture New Zealand* (Nov-Dec 1990): 57-61.