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## GOLDEN BAY TO GOLDEN AGE: COOPERATIVE ARCHITECTURE IN NEW ZEALAND OF THE 1940S

*In October 1950, William L. Robertson posted a 162-page essay to his friends, antagonists, and the coroner's court in Wellington. Titled Final Statement, the document chronicled Robertson's efforts to create a socialist community planned on cooperative principles and utopian ideals in the isolated industrial settlement on Onekaka (Golden Bay) and the State housing suburb of Naenae (Lower Hutt). Robertson then walked to the nearby Melling Rail Station to end his life under a commuter train. Final Statement is, it would seem, nothing less than an extended suicide note describing a project Robertson considered a personal and social failure.*

*This paper provides a sketch of Robertson's attempts to realise a cooperative housing community in New Zealand. It begins in 1938 with the decision of New Zealand's first Labour Government to expand a steel works in the small settlement town Onekaka, Golden Bay, which presented a requirement to house approximately 1500 workers. Plans for the community at this time seemed promising, with the government agreeing to fund the work. However the outbreak of World War II forced the project into an indefinite hibernation well before any significant implementation was achieved.*

*The post-war state housing crisis of the 1940s presented Robertson with a second opportunity to realise his social ambitions, this time in the new Hutt Valley suburb of Naenae. Unlike Onekaka, this settlement came to fruition with the political will of the Government, and the popular support of the new residents of Naenae. However, for Robertson, Naenae represented a highly compromised version of his vision with his ideal of complete cooperative independence (including schools, shops, recreation facilities and other social infrastructure) ultimately either abandoned or acted on only partially. Yet, although Robertson viewed this as a grand failure, Naenae nonetheless holds the architectural imprint of its utopian ambitions. In its Garden City planning, emigre influenced modernism and bungalow paradise aesthetic, Naenae represents a Golden Age of suburb building in New Zealand that owes much to Robertson's social ambitions. Moreover, it provides a compelling case study on the relationship between ideological aspirations, political will, and long term architectural outcomes. To demonstrate this argument the paper concludes with an analysis of the architectural residue that can still be found in Naenae today, illustrating the disjunction between socialist cooperative idealism and the politically responsive housing programme of 1940s New Zealand.*

## Introduction

The *Final Statement* document outlined the difficulties William L. Robertson had encountered, predominantly focusing on the failure (in his view) of the socialist Labour government of the day to extend full political and financial support to the endeavour. Later that day Robertson walked to the nearby Melling Rail Station to end his life under a commuter train. *Final Statement* is, it would seem, nothing less than an extended suicide note describing a project Robertson considered a personal and social failure.

Today Robertson's vision for a cooperative state suburb is largely forgotten, both in social terms and the thread of building that remains. We could take Robertson's suicide as a sign that he viewed his efforts at establishing a self-sufficient cooperative community in Naenae as nothing short of catastrophic. At the same time Robertson remains a pioneering figure for his efforts to bring any kind of large-scale socialist cooperative community to fruition within New Zealand. Robertson's ambitions for Onekaka and Naenae contained a utopian architectural vision that is largely unrecognised. In the former case this invisibility is a pragmatic outcome of a project that was never realised. However, with Naenae, it is our view that the opposite occurred with the large scale and political and social success of the development all but eliminating Robertson's influence. Nonetheless his ambition provided tangible architectural elements that continue to operate today albeit in easily overlooked ways.

The 1930s in New Zealand was a period of progressive left-wing thinking with influence arriving via new social philosophy being discussed in England and America.<sup>1</sup> However much of the effort in this regard was limited to specialist left-wing cultural activities, in particular poetry, drama and the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless cooperative ideals were integrated into New Zealand society, probably due to their popularity and success overseas, and the realisation of a broad left-wing commitment in this period to principles of political obligation, a concern for the collective, and an aesthetic of socialist realism.<sup>3</sup> Social practices of this kind were in no way novel, with agricultural business cooperatives having been a feature of New Zealand farming since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> With the pressures of the Depression, a particularly socio-political dimension emerged through the 1930s that led to the establishment across New Zealand of cooperative organisations generally committed to creating a prosperous democratic society.<sup>5</sup> In this movement William Robertson was a prominent figure as a member of the New Zealand Cooperative Wholesalers Society (the national body for Cooperative Society groups) where he was a vocal advocate for the social and economic benefits of cooperative values when applied at a sufficiently large scale and in a community setting.<sup>6</sup>

## Robertson's history

Robertson's personal history is obscure. He rose to prominence in New Zealand with the Cooperative Wholesalers Society. He was associated with their interest in the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, specifically the manner in which their operating principles could serve as an economic framework if applied in a community setting. He originated from Ottawa and had served with the fledgling Canadian Air Force in WWI. As the son of a medical practitioner, Robertson grew up in a household sufficiently affluent, and his father was able to commission their family home from noted Canadian architect Colborne Meredith. His activities between 1918 and his arrival in New Zealand in the late 1920s are not recorded, but we must assume that during this period he became exposed to cooperative principles, possibly through the Co-operative Union of Canada, which had been created in 1909 to promote a 'Rochdale-style,' primary consumer operation.<sup>7</sup> What can be stated with some confidence is that through his association with the New Zealand Cooperative Bookshop, and his employment by the National Library of New Zealand, Robertson was well placed to stay abreast of publications addressing cooperative socialism. By 1943, in his capacity as editor of the newsletter of Co-op Books, Robertson recognised a tradition of cooperative activity originating with the Rochdale pioneers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> As part of the Co-operative Book Movement, Robertson declared that their broader purpose was "the extending of the co-operative ideal to every walk of life. That is a great undertaking, and in accepting it we see ourselves as heirs of a mighty co-operative tradition."<sup>9</sup> During 1943, Robertson is between the two schemes discussed here: Onekaka in 1938 and Naenae in 1946. This moment aligned his thinking toward the Second World II, when victory became certain, if not imminent, and political attention began turning toward post-war considerations.

If Naenae was to later prove Robertson's undoing, his idealism going into this endeavour was fuelled by his earlier utopian exploration of Onekaka. In 1935 the election of New Zealand's first Labour Government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, provided political favourability for experimental social reformation, especially housing. It was a period focused on stimulating the post-Depression economy, with a landslide of progressive and social economic legislation enacted, which identified housing construction as a strategy for addressing unemployment.<sup>10</sup> Consequentially the government assumed the commitment to provide low cost housing within New Zealand, with the planned erection of 5,000 state houses in 1936.<sup>11</sup> For New Zealand this period is considered the Golden Age of social reform, an era of radical thinking combined with a readiness for social and economic change, with the support of both government and the citizens of New Zealand.<sup>12</sup> Under the direction of Robertson, the Cooperative Wholesalers Society took this as an opportunity to test the Rochdale principles with the expansion of the steelworks in the small isolated town of Onekaka, Golden Bay. As proposed, the Onekaka development was expected to increase the town by approximately 1500 workers, as well bring the development of shops and amenities necessary to support the increased population.<sup>13</sup> As the town would be virtually new in every respect, with minimal vested interest, holdings, or displacements, it offered particularly favourable conditions for a utopian realisation, and under the Labour government's direction it provided Robertson the opportunity to negotiate government financing.

### Robertson's Plans

In 1938 Robertson moved to Onekaka in an effort to promote his vision to the new residents of the town. He immediately set about producing a weekly paper titled *The Call*, issued under the local Labour party banner.<sup>14</sup> It was here Robertson met C. F. Skinner, an Influential Labour candidate for the Motueka electorate. In Skinner's view, Robertson's co-operative concept was not only feasible but completely aligned with the Labour Party principles.<sup>15</sup> With Skinner's support, and after some discussion with his colleagues in the Parliamentary Labour party, the Labour Government agreed to fund the project as a co-operative settlement.<sup>16</sup>

Plans for the community at this time seemed promising with John Mawson, a principle city planner of the era and acting Town Planning Officer for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, formulating a draft scheme of the town plan.<sup>17</sup> It was not until the passing of the *Town and Country Planning Act 1953* did planning become compulsory; the designs of New Zealand towns were inconsistent in both conception and execution. While the Town-planning Act of 1926 demanded that plans be written for populations over 2,000 occupants, these provisions were easily ignored by local authorities facing the exigencies of the Depression.<sup>18</sup> In the interests of a more robust planning approach the Government set about establishing a planning education course with John Mawson arriving in 1928 to take up an appointment as New Zealand's second Director of Town Planning, taking over from Reginald Hammond (1926-1928).<sup>19</sup> Mawson's suitability for this role was grounded in his training at the University of Liverpool, and through the influence of his father Thomas Hayton Mawson, a prominent garden designer and proponent of the City Beautiful movement.

Mawson's Onekaka scheme called for a radial arrangement of the main streets, with eight main arterial thoroughfares stretching outwards from the centre of the community. The central focus was reserved for the commercial and social life of the town, with a proposed circular-shaped cooperative shopping mall at the heart of the community.<sup>20</sup> Cooperative taverns, restaurants, hotels and tearooms were to be arranged around this central shopping mall further strengthening the idea of creating a thriving social atmosphere at the centre.<sup>21</sup>

Robertson's utopian ambitions and Mawson's City Beautiful inclinations aligned perfectly. The reason for this may be found in Robertson's hometown. In 1915 Ottawa had participated in *Report of the Federal Plan Commission on a General Plan for the Cities of Ottawa and Hull*.<sup>22</sup> The Report was principally the work of Edward Bennett, one of the most prominent City Beautiful architects of the day, and while it quickly and quietly disappeared without implementation it nonetheless highlights the extent to which City Beautiful ambitions reached well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Moreover, particular reception for City Beautiful principles in Ottawa were maintained by visiting English exponents including Raymond Unwin and Thomas Hayton Mawson. Indeed, Mawson campaigned for three years to obtain the Ottawa commission.<sup>23</sup> If the descriptions for the Onekaka plan have a pedigree, it is in the radial and axial preferences of the Beaux Arts influenced City Beautiful proponents found in the centralised principles of Ladd's Addition, Portland Oregon by engineers Arthur Hedley and Richard Greenleaf William S. Ladd, in 1891, which had anticipated Ebenezer Howard's English Garden City diagramme.<sup>24</sup>

Although Onekaka never developed beyond a rudimentary industrial town, nonetheless Robertson did make a detailed description of it, with the city centre dominated by a shopping precinct. He believed the cooperative shopping mall was crucial to the economic viability of the cooperative scheme; if the cooperative shop functioned smoothly, it was an indication that the planned associated cooperative industries, as well as the community, would function as well. He described this shopping centre as a great circular building, where attractiveness of architecture and design would “find plenty of scope.”<sup>25</sup> The building itself was to be at least three storeys high with retail services situated on the ground floor. At the pedestrian level, windows allowed customers to examine the various displays while walking the circle of the exterior of the building.<sup>26</sup> Inside the shops, the retail services opened onto a large central atrium at the heart of the building. This was to function as a large communal store room and work room for each of the cooperative stores. The second floor of the shopping mall was allocated to the administrative service needed to run the cooperative community, while the third floor was allocated for government officials, dentists, lawyers and other services which Robertson, at the time, believed did not fit into the cooperative model but nonetheless held social significance for community functioning.<sup>27</sup>

The architectural floor plan for the shopping mall illustrated an idealistic view of how the Onekaka cooperative community was going to function. For Robertson, the centralisation could be seen to symbolize a community ‘heart’ socially, economically and logistically. It was a place where the community could grow and develop over time, as well as expand into other industries in order to fulfil his vision of creating a thriving, independent cooperative community. In plan, the shopping mall also displayed a tendency towards horizontal and vertical hierarchies which draw a comparison with the Soviet formalism of Erich Mendelsohn’s Red Flag Textile Factory in Leningrad, 1926-37.<sup>28</sup>

Through his association with the National Library of New Zealand, and as the manager of the left-wing Cooperative Bookshop in Wellington, Robertson was exposed to much of the utopian literature of the time. In this regard, two other important influences can be drawn. As an employee at the National Library of New Zealand, Robertson was well placed to review the titles held which included figures such as Isa Nicholson<sup>29</sup> and Douglas Millard.<sup>30</sup> Robertson would have also been exposed to the views of Alice Constance Austin and her design for the Llano del Rio desert commune presented in her 1935 book *The Next Step*.<sup>31</sup> Austin offered a centralized plan for the community base, influenced by the Garden City movement but inserted a distinctly socialist ideology in the hierarchy of circular streets that owed more to the particular American interpretation of the City Beautiful principles found in Ladd’s Addition.

With hindsight, Robertson’s ambitions for Onekaka were at best pragmatically naive. The outbreak of World War II forced the Onekaka project into an indefinite hibernation well before it could be implemented; a disheartening end to a project that showed so much promise. Moreover it signalled a loss of political favour for Robertson. His most important ally in this regard was C. F. Skinner, who had reassured Robertson of his commitment to keeping the Onekaka scheme alive once the war was over.<sup>32</sup> However following his active military service, Skinner returned to take up a new role as Minister of Rehabilitation, after which his interest in post-war cooperatives seemed to have significantly dissipated.<sup>33</sup>

While New Zealand’s state housing programme began before the war as an approach to addressing unemployment, the end of the war presented a new crisis of housing the returned servicemen and their families.<sup>34</sup> The lower Hutt suburb of Naenae emerged as the exemplar of the Government’s commitment to that task, and it provided Robertson with a second opportunity to realise his social ambitions.

The circumstances of Robertson’s initial involvement are not well known. In his *Final Statement*, he described leading many community discussions where he focused on promoting the cooperative community proposal with 90% – by his account – of the existing residents of the Naenae agreeing to support a cooperative petition.<sup>35</sup> This petition was not directly successful, but as a degree of recognition the government agreed to conditionally fund the project, and established a position for Robertson within its internal marketing division to allow him to further develop his Naenae cooperative community proposal. Robertson’s official role was to develop community projects as a representative of the Department of Marketing, one he had been seconded into by Prime Minister Peter Fraser.<sup>36</sup> At the same time it was understood that the most significant architectural element of the Hutt Valley State housing programme, the town centre for Naenae, was the work of Austrian émigré architect Ernst Plischke. Both Robertson and Plischke have been described as experiencing indifference to their idealism for Naenae.<sup>37</sup> For the latter, this resulted in a diluted architectural realisation of the community amenities. Perhaps to quiet his agitation, Robertson was granted a block in the Naenae town plan to erect cooperative community shops.<sup>38</sup> Known as the ‘Waddington Block,’ this depressed suburban enclave contained the most tangible remains of Robertson’s vision in the form of the Seddon Street shops. Reflecting the low socio economic standing of the area, today this exceedingly small commercial strip suffers for being

neglected and altered for crass consumerism. But in a photograph taken during the shop's final days of construction, a far more optimistic scene can be discerned. The building itself, while modest in scale, shows a distinct commitment to modernist architectural principles, and in examining closely the windows show stacked displays of produce (although the canned goods suggest that local production was yet to stock the shelves). Reviewing the scheme in 1948, Ian Reynolds described it somewhat cynically as “. . . a good looking building – in spite of its context.”<sup>39</sup> However he did emphasise the decision to not back the street windows, thus allowing the interior of the shops to become the 'show window.'<sup>40</sup> [Fig. 1]



FIGURE 1 Co-operative stores at Seddon Street, Naenae, Lower Hutt, New Zealand, July 1946. Source: ATL: PAColl-6301-84 Published in the *Evening Post* newspaper, 15 July 1946.

But this legacy is an appendix to the scale of the cooperative vision Robertson had for Naenae, which included a healthcare system, community centre – both cooperative and radical ideas at the time.<sup>41</sup> The fact that so little was implemented points to the ideological differences between Robertson's uncompromising commitment to social idealism, and the Labour government's increasing refusal to consider a full cooperative vision as a viable, or even desirable, outcome. However, some aspects of Robertson's town plan were realised. Along with the Seddon Street Cooperative store, another cooperative store was established at nearby Taita. A town playground was built, as was a compromised version of the community centre. What we do not see is the kind of symbolic radial centralisation Robertson and Mawson had imagined for Onekaka, and it remains impossible to say if Robertson exercised any influence in terms of the architectural realisation of Naenae as a whole.

## Conclusion

Some parallels might be drawn between Onekaka and Naenae, with both showcasing features heavily influenced by Ebenezer Howard's Garden City planning aesthetic in the concentric plan, sweeping curved streets, ample reserves, an industrial zone and green corridors. Front fences were also banned, creating a notion of shared space and encouraging social interaction between neighbours.<sup>42</sup> However John Mawson had no involvement, instead serving on the Town Planning Board at this time.<sup>43</sup> In his place, Plischke was charged with the planning and development of the common amenities, including the commercial centre. In opposition to the Onekaka plan, the focal point of the Naenae plan was a public square that contained retail, social and cultural activities.<sup>44</sup> This difference suggests that Robertson did not play a significant role in the decision making, especially considering that Plischke based his organisational concept for Naenae on St Mark's Square in Venice, Italy.<sup>45</sup> Like St Mark's, Naenae features two pedestrian squares surrounded by public buildings. A large water tower provided the vertical element within the largely horizontal lines of

the buildings.<sup>46</sup> Plischke had hoped to replicate a European central square that would bring the community together by separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic.<sup>47</sup> All of the surrounding shops were designed to open out onto the square in order to give space for foot traffic, al fresco dining, civic functions; amenities designed to encourage a thriving community life.<sup>48</sup> By contrast the Seddon Street shops, a five minute walk away, had remarkably little differentiation between pedestrian and vehicular requirements (Reynolds criticised the lack of parking and cluttered bus signage.<sup>49</sup>) And yet the attached housing unit suggests a model for integrated suburban economic and social living absent from in Plischke's model.

Perhaps the differences between these two approaches provides a stark contrast of post-war values. While the Onekaka scheme showed a Labour Government willing to invest in a utopian architectural vision based on communal values, after 1945, the pragmatic responsibilities of meeting a housing shortage significantly diminished an appreciation for social idealism. Indeed, in the Naenae planning there is a commitment to centralised infrastructure, including a railway link to Wellington, that foresaw Naenae's place as a satellite community removed from key economic activities of work and production, thereby committing it to predominantly culturally and socially defined communal activities.

The architecture of Naenae is remarkably consistent at hiding these different approaches under a common modernist architectural language. The modernist sensibility of the Naenae town center was immediately apparent, particularly by its association to Plischke. But throughout Naenae, a flirtation with international modernism is detectable in examples of progressive formalism; the international style aesthetic in many of the houses, and the experimentation in the housing types, which include duplex, quadplex and other medium density housing types scattered amongst the typical state housing bungalows. An irony wasted on Robertson, but not Plischke, is that, in parts, Naenae resembles a disassembled werkbundsiedlung housing estate.<sup>50</sup>

Even in its current desolation the shape of International Style ambition can still be discerned in the lines of the Seddon Street shops. It may be that Robertson was not so ignorant of this association. Read today, his model for Onekaka's cooperative heart withstands a striking parallel to Ernst May's 'Rundling' centrepiece in his New Frankfurt (1925-1930). With this in mind, we can extend a final pathos to Robertson's suicide, for the Melling railway station still stands as an elegant modernist monument to the utopian socialist urgency evident in architecture before 1939.

Robertson's decision to distribute his 'suicide note' so broadly suggests yet another possibility. In the detailed description for a cooperative society, *Final Statement* also reads as a directive for a future community that might supersede Onekaka and Naenae. Robertson's death can, in this light, be read as an architectural martyrdom designed to add mortal emphasis to the cause. But if there is any truth in that speculation, it was not understood in Ottawa, where *The Evening Citizen* recorded his death as a 'railway accident.'<sup>51</sup> [Fig. 2]



FIGURE 2 Melling Railway Station, Wellington, New Zealand, circa 1950. Source: ATL: 1/2-209695-F photographed by K.E. Niven and Co. of Wellington.

(Endnotes)

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