

HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF TECHNOLOGY & ARCHITECTURE

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Cox, Elizabeth. "‘Their Presence Could Work a Revolution’: Women Architects and Homes in New Zealand in the 1900s-1930s." In *Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand: 35, Historiographies of Technology and Architecture*, edited by Michael Dudding, Christopher McDonald, and Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, 47-57. Wellington, New Zealand: SAHANZ, 2018.

Historiographies of Technology and Architecture
Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference of the Society of
Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand.
4-7 July 2018 at the Faculty of Architecture and Design,
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Edited by Michael Dudding, Christopher McDonald,
and Joanna Merwood-Salisbury.
Published in Wellington, New Zealand by SAHANZ, 2018.
ISBN: 978-0-473-45713-6

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“Their Presence Could Work a Revolution”: Women Architects and Homes in New Zealand in the 1900s-1930s

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Abstract

In 1917 a journalist at the Auckland Star wrote: “Up to the present men have built our houses, and the average woman who walks round and inspects them sighs heavily”. The journalist thought the presence of women in the architectural profession “could work a revolution... In no profession is the woman intellect so much needed”. The never-ending and back-breaking drudgery of housework, the advent of the ‘servantless household’ and the continuing provision of “old uncomfortable labour-creating” houses in New Zealand were of increasing concern to women in the first half of the twentieth century. Doubt was cast on the abilities of men to design good houses, and from this concern grew support for women to move into the architectural profession. This paper examines the call from many in the community for women to join the profession, and concludes with an examination of the work and writings of a small number of female New Zealand architects designing houses intended to improve the lives of women.

Introduction

In 1917 a journalist at the *Auckland Star* wrote: “Up to the present men have built our houses, and the average woman who walks round and inspects them sighs heavily. Years of silence have made her inarticulate, and economic pressure has deprived her of power ... But things are moving.” The journalist thought the addition of women to the architectural profession would “work a revolution. In no profession is the woman intellect so much needed.”¹ This paper examines both the reasons behind the call for women to become architects in the period 1900s-1930s, particularly to design houses, and whether that call was answered in these decades, the time in which women began to emerge, gradually, into the profession.

“Naturally a capable woman architect should prove invaluable”

There was an increasing perception in this period that the house was a piece of technology which was radically failing women. The extremely physical burden of

housework was a serious issue for both middle and working class women at this time. Working-class New Zealand women's enduring lack of enthusiasm for a career in domestic service, and reducing family sizes, meant women were increasingly labouring in their homes alone. Middle-class women's groups and governments suggested and tried numerous solutions to the "servant problem" over the years, such as assisted immigration for women prepared to be servants, and domestic education for both young colonial-born and Maori women. Despite these measures, Charlotte Macdonald has argued that the trend in New Zealand, beginning in the 1890s, while following the general pattern of other Western countries, was more marked here – leading to the "early and widespread phenomenon of the 'servantless household' ", for all but a very small elite. The burden of managing the home therefore fell almost exclusively on the woman of the house.²

Not only this, but bad house design made housework harder, surfaces difficult to keep hygienic, and workspaces, especially kitchens, sculleries and laundries, were unpleasant, gloomy and unsafe for women.³ As a result, women's groups became involved in critiquing house plans and campaigning for women, as consumers of architecture, to have better homes and towns. For example, a Women's Committee of the Town-Planning Association was established directly after the famous 1919 Town-Planning conference, chaired by Dr Daisy Platts-Mills. One of its first actions was to draw up an 'Emergency Report on Housing', which set out minimum required standards for all government-funded housing, including railway houses. The organisation were alarmed by those it had already seen, which were, it said, in the "old uncomfortable labour-creating style" which would both give rise to ill-health among mothers, and to distaste for home life among daughters. They rejected the idea that all women wanted from their house was "outside show", instead, they said, what women wanted was a house designed "for convenience, for labour-saving and for home comfort". Its five page report itemised the needs for the "average family" where the mother was doing her own housework and bringing up her children, and set out the need for proper light, warmth and ventilation in spaces like laundries and kitchens where women worked, cookers and sinks set at comfortable heights for women, fixed cupboards, hot and cold water, and a combined living and kitchen space.⁴

From this disquiet about the inadequacy of New Zealand houses arose a desire for women to become architects themselves. Women's groups, MPs and others asserted that women architects could make a significant difference to the lives of their fellow women, both middle- and working-class, and the wider community, through better use of new technology and design.⁵

Doubt was cast, in particular, on male architect's abilities to design sensible houses. The *Woman's World* column of the *Wairarapa Age* said in 1919:

The trouble is that, up to the present, men have designed our houses for us, and women architects are only just coming into their own. Surely there is no more suitable field for women than that of designing homes; and I hope ere long to see domestic architecture almost entirely taken over by women. Then, and then only, shall we have really sensible, comfortable homes to work in as well as to play in. How can a man who has his business to attend to, possibly understand the needs of a woman who spends most of her time in the kitchen? He doesn't stop to think how she does her many and varied tasks, because they are usually all done by the time he comes home.⁶

Likewise, the *Ashburton Guardian* asked "how many houses have been bungled in their construction and the daily lives of the occupiers made uncomfortable by faulty planning?" and concluded "If architects did the house work – well there would be different houses in which to do the work".⁷ David McLaren, the first Labour mayor of Wellington, gave a speech in 1913 to the Society for the Protection of Women and Children predicting the rise of women architects, which would result in "cupboards and stairs in their proper places, instead of having houses which require double the amount of women's work as should be necessary".⁸

A rare insight into the views of individual woman looking for better homes comes from interviews with two women in New Plymouth by a journalist in 1920. One, a woman who was interested in modern homes who had closely supervised the building of more than one home for herself told the journalist "there are a hundred and one little things that a woman will think of that will not readily occur to a man". While she personally wasn't sure a woman architect would be a success, she didn't think it was a problem because "you can be your own architect in collaboration with your real architect can't you?". In contrast, the second woman interviewed stated that she thought architectural firms could in fact employ women "to considerable advantage", and the firms who did so would receive a great deal of work as a result. The enterprising New Plymouth journalist then went out to ask a number of local architects how they felt about the idea of employing women as architects, based on their experience of working with female clients. The male architects agreed women were indeed more imaginative than men in planning a home, and conceded men had a lot to learn from women about "elaborating" a home. They felt

women were particularly good at “deleting the out-of-date arrangements that only make for unnecessary work and drudgery”, and acknowledged that women of limited means inevitably preferred a small home that was “elaborately appointed and conveniently arranged” rather than a large home that wasn’t.⁹

During debate in parliament about the proposed New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) Act in 1913, Liberal MP Thomas Wilford expressed concern about the draft form of the legislation, worried the Institute was deliberately shutting off architecture as an avenue for women’s employment. “Many women would make good architects”, he told the House. He argued women would do an excellent job designing workingmen’s houses, which would reduce the work of working class women. He added, for good measure, that no woman would have been foolish enough to put the cookhouse in the Wellington Town Hall where it currently was. His parliamentary colleague G M Thomson of Dunedin North agreed, telling a tale of attending an opening of a Post Office near Dunedin – while he walked around “admiring everything”, he said, the woman who was to take charge of the office pointed out there wasn’t a single cupboard in the building.¹⁰ Wilford returned to this theme ten years later, when Leader of the Opposition, saying that a “clever woman architect would bring about the building of a better class of house” which was more serviceable, economical and with labour-saving devices.¹¹ It is notable that both Wilford and Thomson referred to the possibility of women working on public buildings, not only houses.

Wilford’s 1913 speech also talked of women’s abilities to design for beauty. He gave the example of a house, one of the biggest in Wellington, which had been designed by a woman; she had not only designed the house and arranged the rooms, he said, but carved the staircase – “a marvellous example of what a woman can do”.¹² This theme, of women’s abilities in the field of domestic interior design, was one some commentators presented as possible second string to their bow for women architects – a way in which they could be even more valuable in the architectural space. When the University of Auckland began offering a full-time architectural degree course in 1926, its newly appointed head, Professor Cyril Knight, emphasised the career was suited to women: “So far as I can see, there is no reason why women should not take up architecture as a profession ... There is plenty of scope for them in the designing of houses, and the interior decoration of these homes, when built, is peculiarly their work.”¹³ Journalist Marjorie Hutton-Whitelaw likewise encouraged her female readers to take up the architectural career: since “a woman has to spend a great deal of her life in the house, so it would seem that women are more fitted for domestic architecture than a man”. She

advised women to also do extra study into fabrics, the history of furniture, and the retail prices of furnishings, in order to be able to advise their clients on the entire decoration of a house. She thought this should not be difficult, “for here her natural feminine capabilities will shine ... there is scope for much imagination and application of feminine ingenuity.”¹⁴

“Naturally a capable woman architect should prove invaluable”

Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna’s detailed study of women architects in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century has highlighted the careers of around 140 women significantly involved in the profession there.¹⁵ And yet, as Julia Gatley’s 2014 literature review about New Zealand’s female architects has shown, the presence of women architects here has been almost completely overlooked, particularly in this early period. With very few exceptions, the careers of women working in New Zealand at this time have not been discussed in any detail before.¹⁶

After Wilford made his claim in parliament in 1913 that the NZIA was trying to exclude women from the profession, *Progress* responded by saying he might like to know there was already a qualified female architect in New Zealand. The magazine was presumably referring to Lucy Greenish. Lucy Greenish was taken on at the age of 20 in 1909 by the Wellington architectural firm Atkins and Bacon. Her brother Frank was also a Wellington architect.



Figure 1. Lucy Greenish, later Symes (1888-1976)
New Zealand’s first female registered architect. Family collection.

On the strength of her training at Atkins and Bacon, when the NZIA was registering all the established architects under their new legislation in 1914, she became the first female

registered architect in New Zealand; the only woman out of the 315 architects to be registered as part of that process (and three years prior to the first woman registered by an Institute of Architects in Australia).¹⁷ She later worked for another Wellington firm, Robb and Page and possibly for Dunedin architect Henry Mandeno. In 1927, a year after having a illegitimate baby in Australia in her late 30s, she took the extraordinary step of setting up her own sole practice in Lower Hutt, advertising in the *Hutt News*. She only advertised her new firm briefly, and further work is needed to find more about her career.¹⁸

In 1919 the *Star* reported that there were a number of other “girls” in New Zealand architect’s offices studying to make architecture their profession, particularly in Christchurch, and concluded “naturally a capable woman architect should prove invaluable”.¹⁹ In my wider study of early female architects in New Zealand, of which this paper is a part, I have found almost 30 women training or working as architects and architectural assistants in New Zealand in the 1900s-1930s, completing their articles, sitting NZIA exams, working with their fellow students in ateliers, studying at university, working in architectural offices and government departments, and in similar professions such as town planning, and a number who travelled overseas to further their study. Further evidence can be found in the New Zealand census: in 1916 there was one woman listed as an architect, plus one classed as an apprentice (presumably carrying out her articles), five architectural assistants and two architectural draftswomen, separate from the 25 other women working as clerks and typists in architectural offices. In 1921 there were three women classified as architects, and in 1926 there were eight, plus one apprentice. In 1936 this had gone down to four architects, with no apprentices; the Depression had hit the entire profession hard, so this decrease is not surprising. In 1945 there were eight women classified as architects, of which one appears to have been working on her own account.²⁰ Not all these women became NZIA registered architects, however; after Lucy Greenish’s registration by the NZIA in 1913, it took until 1936 for the next woman to register as an architect with the NZIA. This was Dorothy Wills (later Coulthard), who had been the second woman to graduate from the University of Auckland with a BArch in 1933.²¹ Likewise, after Greenish set up her sole practice in 1927, it is possible the next woman to do the same was not for a number of decades.²²

Why it took so long for other women to replicate Lucy Greenish’s achievements is one of the many puzzles which will have to be teased out in my project. Nevertheless, it remains striking just how many women in this period there were training and working in architectural offices. Space in this paper unfortunately excludes the detailed examination

of the careers of these women, but it will conclude with an examination of the work of a few which helps to further illuminate the issue of women designing better homes for women, with which the paper began.

A “work-room pure and simple”

Although architectural plans drawn by women, and statements by women working during this era are difficult to find, we do have some remaining examples, in which the emphasis is squarely on labour-saving homes. One of these is the work of Florence Field, who gives us a rare insight into her domestic architectural work. She was the daughter of Thomas Andrew Hemming Field, MP for Nelson, and sister of journalist and infamous anti-semitic Arthur Nelson Field. Florence trained in a series of architectural practices, beginning in around 1915 - two years with Nelson architect Arthur Griffin, two with notable ecclesiastical architect Frederick de Jersey Clere, and then more training with a third as yet unidentified architect. She was excused from sitting some of her NZIA exams, on the strength of her prior training with these architects, and passed others, but for unknown reasons she did not become a registered architect. Florence never married and lived most of her life with her family in Nelson.²³

During her time with Clere, she entered at least three architectural house design competitions, set by *Progress* magazine. One of these competitions was judged by Clere himself; as her employer, he couldn't place her in the competition but he provided commentary: “for a seaside cottage it seems to me to be admirable. The treatment is original and the planning practical.”²⁴

Unfortunately the plans for these competition houses weren't reproduced but we have more details about the house which she designed for her father, extolled in a lengthy *Ladies Mirror* article of 1923 titled “A Kitchen Planned by a Woman”.²⁵ The article says Field both designed the house and supervised its construction. A feature of the house is the arrangement of the kitchen and other spaces designed “with a view to reduce the drudgery of housework to a minimum”. Field's kitchen, she told the journalist, was intended to be a labour-saving “one-woman kitchen”, and a “work-room pure and simple”. It is designed for the woman of the house to work in, not a servant, although Field mentions that the plan could easily be altered to suit a home with a servant if desired.

The functionality, scale of spaces and ergonomics, as well as hygiene and ease of cleaning, have all been carefully considered. Helen Leach's history of the New Zealand kitchen has documented gradual changes in the 1920s and 1930s in kitchen layouts in

modern new houses, towards more compact designs.²⁶ Field's design accords with these trends, including the removal of the old model of three separate rooms – kitchen, scullery and pantry – in preference for a single room, and the separation of the laundry function from the rest of the house. Surfaces are designed for easy cleaning, and the kitchen fitted with a gas stove and a 'fireless cooker', with no coal range, further reducing grime in the kitchen. The "ever recurring task of dish washing still has to be done, but it is robbed of much of its drudgery and unpleasantness in this kitchen", thought the journalist, with a clever use of technology.

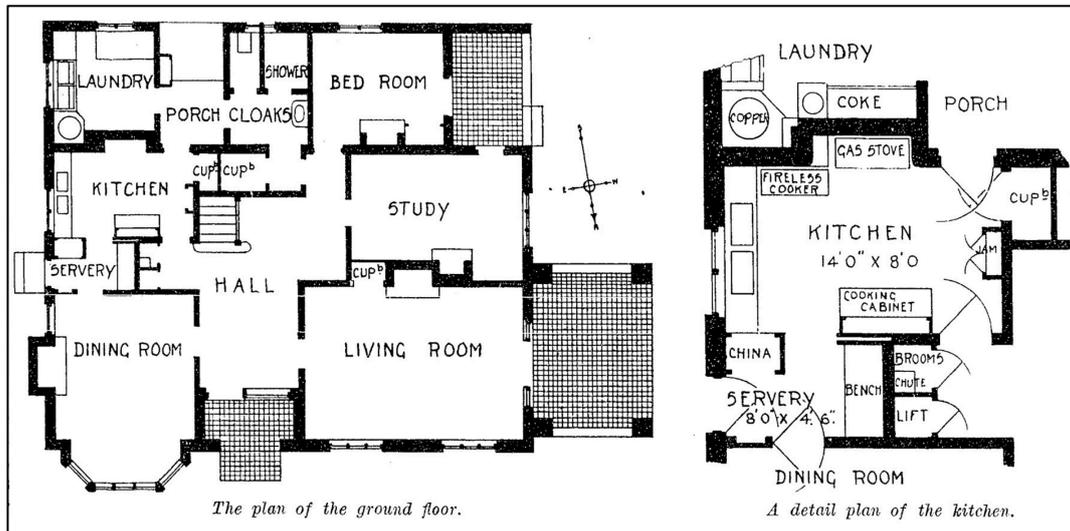


Figure 2. The ground floor plan (left) of the Nelson house designed by Florence Field and a detail plan of the kitchen (*Ladies Mirror*, 1 Nov 1923)

Work surfaces, sinks and cookers were designed with the height of women in mind; even the toes and knees of those standing or sitting while working were considered. The space is designed to reduce the amount of walking required within the workspaces, and has a lift for carrying food upstairs.

Esther James, who worked in the office of Auckland architect William Cumming while studying architecture papers at Auckland University in the late 1920s or early 1930s, told a group of feminists in Australia in 1933 that the work of designing houses should fall entirely to women.²⁷ In her autobiography she specifically wrote of her efforts to make more comfortable houses for women while she worked for Cumming:

Bungalows were fashionable as homes at the time and as the demand grew Mr Cumming came to leave more and more of the planning of them to me. "Here", he would say, tossing a rough sketch of a job on my table, "another client wanting a new-fangled bungalow. You design one." This aspect of architecture was thrilling to me. After having watched my mother

walk miles in big, old-fashioned houses and exhaust herself with the sheer physical effort of making meals and doing simple housework, I was delighted to be able to design compact, labour-saving homes. Working on such a job I would become engrossed.²⁸

She described drawing elevations, perspectives, and scale plans for details, as well as completing specifications, calculating quantities, taking levels and contour surveys on site. She worked not only on houses but shops, office buildings, flats, schools and dairy factories. She later had a very varied career outside architecture, and also designed her own homes.²⁹

A few other examples exist where we know women were designing homes in New Zealand. Possibly the first woman to complete her architectural training in New Zealand was Katherine (Kate) Beath, later McDougall, the niece of Kate Sheppard, who completed her articles with Samuel Hurst Seager, training in his Christchurch office from 1905 before going overseas in 1908. Further work is needed on her career, but art historian Ann Calhoun writes that house and furniture plans by Beath survive, in the Art and Crafts style.³⁰ Another is Margaret Hamilton, later Munro, who began work in architect Cecil Wood's Christchurch office during the 1930s. While working full time she also studied towards her NZIA qualifications, taking part in an atelier set up to support Christchurch architecture students. She learned her trade in Wood's office typing specifications, colouring and tracing plans, as well as general typing and office work, and by the end of her time in his office she was executing working drawings, meeting with clients, and carrying out supervision. She recalled to her biographer that while working for Wood in the 1930s clients would be referred to her specifically for the planning of their kitchens. (Later, outside the period of this study, she also designed a number of homes in her partnership with her husband, architect Bob Munro, and then in her own practice).³¹ Furthermore, it appears that at least one woman was employed by the government to work on state housing: Merle Greenwood, who had been the first woman to graduate with a BArch in New Zealand in 1933, was described in 1940 as being 'engaged on the Government housing scheme'.³²

Conclusion

This paper opened with the bold statement from the *Auckland Star* that women could 'work a revolution' in the architectural profession, particularly in the design of houses. Similar studies of United Kingdom and Australian female architects working in this era have also found that women were designing houses specifically for women. Kirsty Volz,

for example, surveying early female architects in Queensland, also noted the emphasis on domestic architecture within the writings about and by women architects in the same era and suggested that while the compartmentalizing of women into the domestic sphere could perhaps have had the effect of limiting their practice, it may also have allowed them to create for themselves a specialized niche in which they could excel.³³

One of the inherent problems of studying architectural history is that the collaborative nature of the profession means the work of almost all architects, both male and female, who don't have their name on the door, is lost. This is magnified for women of this period, because they often did not continue a life-long career in the profession, and because their work is likely to be attributed to male colleagues. There are some tantalising hints as to their role and their design interests, such as the plans by Florence Field, and the memories of Esther James, who was so clear in her desire to design Auckland bungalows which would better the lives of their inhabitants. With each of the women referred to here and others found as part of this project, it goes without saying that more work is required to better understand their work and their contribution to the profession.

¹ "Women in Architecture", *Auckland Star*, Jan 20, 1917, 16.

² Charlotte Macdonald, "Strangers at the Hearth: the Eclipse of Domestic Service in New Zealand Homes, c1830s-1940s", in *At Home in New Zealand: Houses, History, People*, ed. Barbara Brookes, (Wellington: BWB, 2000): 41-56. Her review also contains comparisons with similar trends in other countries.

³ Helen Leach, *Kitchens: The New Zealand Kitchen in the 20th Century*, (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2014).

⁴ "Emergency Report on Housing by the Women's Committee of the Town Planning Association", 24 Sept 1920, R3 Box 154, 1914/2913/1 Pt 1, R20480108, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

⁵ This survey focuses on articles written for and by New Zealanders, rather than overseas articles reprinted in our papers.

⁶ *Wairarapa Age*, Nov 21, 1919, 2; *Progress*, Dec 1, 1919, 14.

⁷ *Ashburton Guardian*, November 14, 1913, 6

⁸ *The Colonist*, 25 October 1913, p3

⁹ "The Ideal Home", *Taranaki Daily News*, Aug 28, 1920, 6.

¹⁰ *Hansard*, 18 July 1913, 647, *Evening Post*, July 19, 1913, 9.

¹¹ *New Zealand Herald*, (July 18, 1923), 10.

¹² The woman he is referring to here will require more research.

¹³ *New Zealand Herald*, March 30, 1926, 12.

¹⁴ "Women as Architects", *New Zealand Herald*, 11 Aug 1928 supplement, 6.

¹⁵ Julie Willis & Bronwyn Hanna, *Women Architects in Australia, 1900-1950*, (Red Hill: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2001).

¹⁶ Julia Gatley, "Women in New Zealand Architecture: A Literature Review" in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation*, ed Christoph Schnoor (Auckland: SAHANZ, 2014), 249–262. The two important exceptions are Julia Gatley, 'Alison Shepherd (née Sleight), ARIBA "Success of New Zealand Lady Student" Revisited', *Fabrications*, 2007, 17:1, 20-45 and Mary-Jane Duffy, "Margaret S. Munro, Architect", MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1993. The organisation Architecture+Women <http://www.architecturewomen.org.nz> have been active in creating new resources. Other existing material is acknowledged where specific women are mentioned below, and in Gatley's 2014 paper.

¹⁷ The first was Beatrice Hutton, admitted to the Queensland Institute of Architects in 1916. Florence Taylor was the first woman to qualify professionally as an architect in Australia but her application to join the Institute of Architects of New South Wales was rejected in 1907 as a result of her gender, before finally being accepted in 1920. Kirsty Volz, 'Claiming domestic space: Queensland's interwar women architects and their labour saving devices', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, vol 23, (2017), 105-117.

¹⁸ NZIA Applications for Registration, AEBC18486 W2429/1, Box1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington; Geoff Mew and Adrian Humphries, *Raupo to Deco: Wellington Styles and Architects 1840-1940*, (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2014), 181-2, 327; *Hutt News*, August 26, 1927, 1.

¹⁹ "Women as Architects", *Star*, May 27, 1919, 7.

²⁰ *Census of New Zealand*, 1911, 1916, 1921, 1926, 1936 and 1945, ATL. (The 1931 and 1941 censuses were cancelled as a result of depression and war). Census data should be used with care, as definitions change over time and may not always accord with industry definitions.

²¹ NZIA Applications for Registration, AEBC 18486 W2429/1, Box 4, Archives New Zealand, Wellington; information from Dorothy's family to the author, 2018.

²² One suggestion for the next woman to set up a sole practice in New Zealand may be Muriel Sanders (later Lamb), in the 1950s.

²³ NZIA Register of Examinations and Register of Students, J C Beaglehole Room, VUW.

²⁴ *Progress*, October 1, 1916, 751-2; October 1, 1916, 545; Dec 1, 1916, 826-7.

²⁵ "A Kitchen Planned by A Woman", *Ladies Mirror*, Nov 1, 1923, 20-21.

²⁶ Leach, *Kitchens*, 73-77.

²⁷ *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), April 2, 1933, 16.

²⁸ James, *Jobbing Along*, (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, c1965), 43-44.

²⁹ James, *Jobbing Along*; John Barton, "James, Esther Marion Pretoria", Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4j2/james-esther-marion-pretoria>.

³⁰ Ian J Lohead, "An Architectural Tour on the Continent: Samuel Hurst Seager's Visit to Belgium in 1884", *Bulletin of Art History*, Vol 17, 1996; Ann Calhoun, *Arts & Crafts Design: "like yet not like" nature – sources for a New Zealand Story*, Wellington 2015, <http://www.artsandcraftsnz.co.nz>, 13, 230-2, 317.

³¹ Duffy, "Margaret S. Munro, Architect".

³² *Evening Post*, April 22, 1940, 12.

³³ Kirsty Volz, 'Claiming domestic space'; Mark Llewellyn, 'Designed by women and designing women: gender, planning and the geographies of the kitchen in Britain 1917-1946', *Cultural Geographies*, 2004, 10, 42-60