

KIRSTY LILLICO  
FRONT BOX exhibition  
St Paul St Gallery, June 2016

Symonds St Flats were designed by Fred Newman (born Friedrich Hugo Neumann) and built 1945-1947. This opened on the same day as the (Lower) Grey Ave Flats, and was one of six medium- and high-density blocks of state rental flats built by New Zealand's Labour Government during its 1935 to 1949 term. These schemes were part of the governments response to a post-depression housing shortage, particularly in Wellington and Auckland.

Both sets of flats were built as the first stage of a larger scheme but subsequent stages did not proceed. The Grays Ave flats required the clearance of 'slums' (poorly maintained workers cottages).

New Zealand's state housing is characterised by its low density, compared with other countries. One of the reasons for this is that local politicians (since Seddon) have believed flats to be unsuitable places to raise children. There was also a stigma attached to blocks of flats, as they were associated with dark, overcrowded and unsanitary British and European tenement housing.

However, there was also a recognition that some people 'must' (for economic reasons) live in the city and that not everyone is interested in 'babies and gardens'. Urbanism was pushed by the intellectual left-wing. Newman and his colleague at the Department of Housing Construction, Ernst Plischke, were Austrian emigres, urbanists "...who wanted New Zealand cities to develop some of the vibrancy and colour of urban Europe" - (Gatley, J. p.106).

Symonds St Flats are an example of international modernism, constructed in reinforced concrete. The International Style was associated with the political left in Europe (though would eventually become the architecture of the corporate mainstream). Reinforced concrete was an ideal construction material due to shortages of labour and materials (timber). It could also be argued that it served a political agenda - "Concrete is political in many senses, but it has been particularly identified with the politics of the left, an alignment traceable from the beginning of the twentieth century." - (Forty, A. p. 145)

Labour lost the 1949 election and the National Government promoted private home ownership (made possible by post-war affluence). The suburbs continued to sprawl.

The building is currently empty - "Overall, the building is rundown and in need of a maintenance and repair programme. Water pipe bursts and failures are a problem. Buried in the concrete walls, the water pipes are difficult to access and fix and therefore water continues to leak into units and cause damage to concrete and plasterwork. At the time of writing, its seismic rating was not known" (Speer, L. 2014). It has a category A heritage listing.

I am not only interested in the architectural history of the building, but also in the changing nature of our cities, and the process of gentrification. Living in the city has many advantages and worldwide we are reaching a point where only the wealthy get to enjoy this privilege. Symonds St Flats were built by a government who acknowledged the advantages of city-living for low-income people.

There is an excellent report on the history and significance of the Symonds St Flats at: [http://www.docomomo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Symonds\\_Street\\_Flats\\_DOCOMOMO-full\\_fiche\\_2015.pdf](http://www.docomomo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Symonds_Street_Flats_DOCOMOMO-full_fiche_2015.pdf)

REFERENCES

Forty, Adrian. *Concrete and Culture*. London: Reaction Books, 2012.

Gatley, Julia. "Going Up Rather Than Out: State Rental Flats in New Zealand, 1935-1949", *At Home in New Zealand: Houses History People*. Ed. Barbara Brookes. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000, 140-54.

Morrison, Philip and Schrader, Ben. "Inner-city living - Early inner-city living and its decline", *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 13-Jul-12. Web. 4 April 2016.

Schrader, Ben. *We call it home: a history of state housing in New Zealand*. Auckland: Reed, 2005.

Speer, Lauren. "Fiche Report - Symonds Street Flats" *DOCOMOMO New Zealand*, January 2014. Web. 4 April 2016.