THE ARCHITECT AND HIS SERVICES: A DISCUSSION ON THE COVER OF THE NEW
ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS PROMOTIONAL PAMPHLET OF 1933.

In 1933 the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) commissioned Alan Mulgan, a noted journalist, to write a small promotional booklet on the professional services offered by the Institute and its members. There is little written about this marriage of convenience between the NZIA and Mulgan, who has been described as a transitional figure in the development of New Zealand’s cultural independence. But one can assume that the Institute’s decision to approach Mulgan was influenced at least in part by his popular book, Home: A New Zealander’s Adventure (1927), in which his account of visiting Britain is loaded with romantic associations between New Zealanders and Mother England. In April 1934 the Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects announced a competition to design the cover for the “brochure for publicity purposes” that would bring to the attention of the “average man” the advantages to be gained through the employment of architects. In this call they identified a clear need for an image that would, whilst being architectural in character, also be of such visual nature that it would attract the eye of the casual purchaser. Duly the Institute announced a bucolic bungalow scene by a young architect, Ralph A. Pickmere, as the winner and the resulting publication, Building in New Zealand: The Architect and His Services, was published later that year. Generally, the booklet presents a very sedate case for the use of an architect at a time when building work in New Zealand was only just beginning to emerge out of the shadow of the depression. However, it does provide some insight into the NZIA at a crucial moment of redefining its professional responsibilities and identity if only through the representational ‘window’ of the booklet’s the cover. This paper makes a reading of the cover with reference to the other competition entries from which it was selected, and the differences between the competition and publication images produced by Pickmere. In concluding it is suggested that the selection of Pickmere’s entry as the winning image should be interpreted as an ultimately failed appeal by New Zealand’s architectural profession to claim a part in the design of mainstream housing in New Zealand.
In 1933 the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) commissioned Alan Mulgan, a noted journalist and writer, to write a small promotional booklet on the professional services offered by the Institute and its members. Titled *Building in New Zealand: The Architect and His Services*, it presents a fairly straightforward case for the use of an architect at a time when building work was only just beginning to emerge out of the shadow of the depression. There is little written about this marriage of convenience between the NZIA and Mulgan, who is described as a transitional figure in the development of New Zealand’s cultural independence, but one can assume that the Institute decision to approach Mulgan was influenced by his book, *Home: a New Zealander’s Adventure* (1927), in which his account of visiting Britain is loaded with conditional associations between New Zealanders and Mother England. This paper will critique the cover image of *Building in New Zealand*. The working hypothesis is that architects, as a visually literate profession, would not have entered into this decision lightly and that one might distil from the competition entries and eventual winner some insight into how the Institute of Architects wanted to be perceived by the New Zealand public at large.

In April, 1934, the Institute journal announced a competition for the design for a cover to a “Brochure for publicity purposes” that would “... make known to the public the advantages to be gained by the employment of architects”. In this they identified a clear need for an image that, whilst being architectural in character, “... should be of such a nature that it will attract the casual purchaser”. The brief, which spelled out the physical submission expectations, also specified that the competition was open only to members, students and probationers of the Institute. Finally, it asked that the design include the title of the brochure: *Building in New Zealand*.

In the preceding years the view that architects might advertise their services had been a subject of disapproval for the NZIA. Debate on this matter showed little variability from the view offered in 1919 by Reginald C. Ford, then NZIA President, that while advertising was an essential element in the modern world it was very much the decision of individuals to pursue according to the standards of ‘good taste’. However, he continued:

> . . . the purchase of space in the public press or otherwise to publish self-laudatory articles or to publish anything in fact beyond the ordinary professional card has a bearing upon the interests of the profession quite other than that of taste, and should be absolutely prohibited.

Ford preferred the notion of an ‘educational’ type of advertising that promoted the profession of architecture to a wider public and the brochure *Building in New Zealand* was the first major publication by the NZIA to formalise such an approach. The profession of architecture, like the professions of law and medicine, were to be understood as civic practices dedicated to the public good and whose integrity was not to be threatened by internal contest.

Of course, within the confines of its own members, competition was more openly embraced, and in June 1934, the NZIA announced Ralph A. Pickmere, of Auckland, as the winner of the cover design publication for *Building in New Zealand*. In all, twenty entries were received and Highly Commended awards were made to Basil B. Hooper (ARIBA) of Auckland, and G. Ferris of Wellington. Without offering specific detail the judging committee (who remained unidentified) considered Pickmere’s entry to be, after “certain minor modifications”, “both suitable and attractive” for the publication. Why ‘suitability’ should have featured so, and what they meant by ‘certain minor modifications’ are themes that will be explored. But the paper will begin with a wider look at the eight entries that were published by the Institute to show the ‘wide range of ideas’, which the competition produced. Together they offer a rare opportunity to look into a competition process, and the minds of those involved, and the values they were expected to reproduce in some visual manner. The paper will turn to Pickmere’s winning design in detail shortly but to begin, it is instructive to look first across the other eight published entries.
Broadly the eight entries display the kind of work an architect of the period might be proudest. However, these eight were in no way consistent in their view of what style the New Zealand house might take. Two were Georgian, one a stylised Art Deco, one Elizabethan, another shows the influence of the Arts and Crafts, and then there is a Spanish Mission entry to boot. Entry number eight can only be described as caricature. Of these the winner is notable for being the most modest in scale and least able in execution. (Figure 1 and Figure 2)

![Figure 1](image1.jpg) ![Figure 2](image2.jpg)

James T. Craig, of Invercargill, submitted two designs. The first is the Gothic-esque cartoon, previously mentioned, in which a hapless contractor and furious owner, view the apparition of bent chimneys and propped up walls that constitute his new home. ‘DON’T BE A SAP CONSULT AN ARCHITECT’ states the caption. This entry surely identified accurately the advertorial motivation behind the Institute’s publication initiative, but it makes the case too obvious. (Figure 1)

Only one of the published nine entries offers any indigenous references. Ivan M. Clarkson (Dunedin) presented an Arts and Crafts-influenced house as his focus but mounted it within a border composed of ornament derived from Maori carving. Together this ‘native’ frame, and the balloon-ish font of the title, display the image being influenced by tourist promotion material of the period, and suggest a certain nationalistic self-consciousness on the part of Clarkson. It is a most literal interpretation of ‘building’ inside indigenous motifs of ‘New Zealand’ and while the sentiment should not be dismissed nonetheless it is a matter of observation that nothing particularly ‘Maori’ makes it to the house behind. (Figure 2)

Other contenders used similar strategies. Basil B. Hooper’s Highly Commended entry consisted of a half-timbered Elizabethan house as viewed through a fine dressed timber frame (the distinctively rendered grain of which suggests that it is oak, the best of the English timbers). (Figure 2)
G. Ferris (Wellington) used not one but two framing devices. The first a narrow ornate scrollwork inside of which a second dark circle of foliage ‘pops’ the white Georgian house into contrasting focus. (Figure 2)

And in the entry of L. G. Williams (Napier) there is an incomplete clash of font and frame as he uses an upper left combination of vertical and horizontal alignment of the typography to counterpoint the diminutive Mission Revival style dwelling position in the lower left of the composition. (Figure 2)

A combination of the approaches taken by Ferris and Williams is evident in J. W. Standish’s submission, which juxtaposes a Georgian style house, in a frame of foliage, against a biased title in dominant type. (Figure 1)

The great exception amongst these is that of R. L. Thorpe whose highly stylised bungalow entry shows a competent appreciation of contemporary graphic arts in the Art Deco style (if not Art Deco architecture). However, it is likely that neither the tiny title, nor the lighting-like smoke emitting from an imaginary chimney - perhaps it is electricity? - did anything to endear it to the Committee. (Figure 1)

By contrast, Pickmere’s winning entry is beguilingly unsophisticated. A bungalow of moderate size is quite literally framed by a timber scaffold, upon which the title of the booklet and institutional origin are mounted in the manner of quasi-commercial signage. (Figure 3)

One should assume that the judges saw in this a number of resonant themes that other entries lacked. The bungalow certainly spoke to the ambitions of the ‘average man’ at which the booklet was aimed, and the frame, composed of nailed post and beam members, evokes both the standard building technique of New Zealand’s domestic construction industry while also providing a folksy elevation to the architectural ideal of the house beyond. But there are also some jarring inconsistencies. To start, the typeface is decidedly homespun in its clumsy irregularity. It looks rather like a child’s printing exercise in which the timber beams serve as guidelines for correct heights. This is reinforced by the

FIGURE 3 Competition for Cover
Design for Building in New Zealand.
First Prize awarded to No. 9, Ralph A. Pickmere, Auckland. NZIA Journal, 13, no.1 (1934).
way in which the beam underlying Alan Mulgan’s authorship is secured only at one end, and by one nail, indicating (it suggests) a structural role to Mulgan’s authorship? Likewise, the timber itself is rendered superficially and with some uncertainty about whether the line-work at the ends indicates a crosscut or if they represent a continuous member.

At a purely technical level it is somewhat surprising that the judges selected this entry at all. Of the other eight designs all display greater presentational skill in artistic, technical and compositional areas. The winner does not even display a competency of line commensurate with an architect of the period. One must assume then that it was the content rather than its execution that attracted the approval of the judges, and here two points of distinction are readily apparent; one concerning the subject, the other the representational approach.

Of the first of the ways in which Pickmere’s entry distinguished itself was in its treatment of the brochure’s title. Without exception the other published designs approached the title as an exercise in typography or composition. Pickmere, in a most literal way, made the title a piece of construction. Propped up in a crude frame, the booklet and its authorship assume an everyday affection whereby the inconsistencies in the proportion and execution of the type reinforce kinship with a DIY ethos. While the brochure was not directed to the self-builder, it was no doubt that the intention was to reach out to a potential clientele who might be considering that as an option (the so named ‘casual purchaser’). In this way the clumsiness is calculated in so much as it avoids alienating its audience with a perception of cultural elitism (in the figure of the sophisticated architect). Whether this was Pickmere’s intention is not conclusive. However, other elements are too direct to be considered accidental.

The most obvious of these is the inclusion of a garage (it was the only entry to make explicit reference to the automobile). The significance of this cannot be understated. In 1934 New Zealand was ranked third in the world for automobile ownership behind the USA and Hawaii (then still an annex to the United States). For the NZIA, - indeed, most New Zealanders - the automobile, more so than any other factor, represented the urbanisation of New Zealand society, and its architectural accommodation is a necessarily progressive inclusion for an organization looking forward rather than backward. It is also impossible to separate the garage from middle class aspiration. Only two months earlier The NZIA Journal had published the results of its first student competition: a design for a petrol station. By the mid-1930s, the freedom of mobility offered by the automobile had begun to compete with the stability of architecture for the attention of middle class values and Building in New Zealand, written for the ‘average man’, who wants nothing more than a house and a car, such is the architectural equality it is afforded.

Of the second difference in approach is Pickmere’s decision to adopt such a low eye level to construct his view. Of the other eight entries, six utilised two-point perspective with a conventional eye-line that portrays the house as though one were arriving by foot. And in five of those six the centre of attention is the front door. Pickmere’s view is quite different. Not only is the entry obscured by deep shadow the eye-line is at ground level and coincides with the top edge of one of the timber ‘beams’ that frames the page. The effect is to diminish the perspectival foreshortening so that the façade is flattened and appears more objective. The resulting illustration makes no attempt to create the pictorial scene of an actual house. The front lawn is a line; the entry prospect is missing; the eye-level is, frankly, impossible to confuse with ‘reality’. Coupled with the sketchiness, the image is distanced from the particular even as the particular is exactly what an architect offers to a project. It is a picture of an ‘average house’ for an ‘average man’ that does not risk alienating through style, location, cultural preferences or international references. This is why the alignment to the cross beam is not as naïve as it may appear. It is an appeal to aspiration rather than inspiration, and placed just so the house becomes a ‘shelf model’ easily selected and changed without prejudice.

The point here is to sell an egalitarian idea of new home ownership that includes an architect but the expression of which is not obviously authored by an architect. It is no accident that of the five entries that portrayed a realistically rendered house all are of two stories and all are in an identifiable style. They are anything but ‘average’ and this was to their detriment.

As mentioned, the announcement of Pickmere’s win was delivered with the conditional caveat that it be most suitable and attractive after “certain minor modifications”. As published these do appear to be the most minor of modifications with little by way of obvious difference. (Figure 4)
In order to appreciate the changes one needs to place the before and after images side by side, and even then they really do seem unnecessarily small. So one must ask, why were they thought important? In comparing the two images it is also apparent that the published one is different in too many subtle ways to be an alteration to an original, but a new drawing, most probably done using overlay drafting. Consequentially it is difficult to say with confidence what change was required, and what change was the result of redrawing. That said there are other assertions that can be more confidently made. The changes fall into two broad camps. The first are concerned with composition and the second with subject (although there is overlap here).

Of the former one might consider alteration to the lettering which clarified the uncomfortable and competing vertical alignment of the type with the compositional frame. This is particularly true of ‘NEW ZEALAND’ where, in the second version, the ‘E’ of New and the ‘N’ Zealand now neatly removes any confusion between post and typeface. The same point of competition is remedied in the ‘A’ of Mulgan and the ‘ED’ in ‘ISSUED’. This is probably an example of an editorial correction that occurs when an opportunity to improve is presented. In the same way the rendering of the timber second time round shows a greater attention to mimicking the grain of the wood, and additional nail holes have been added below the ‘A’ in Mulgan to correct, in a small way, the uncomfortable pin joint that existed before. Finally, the question of the termination of the timber is solved in publication by having it cropped slightly, thereby extending the posts and beams into infinity (At least to the top, bottom and right. The left hand margin reveals cut ends).

Two areas of alteration that are more architectural in nature are also present. The first concerns the entry to the house. In Pickmere’s original submission the internal fold of the house - the point where architectural sense would dictate a front door – is shrouded in deep shadow, casting a question over entry (and therefore welcome). Upon editing, a small porch emerges from the gloom, complete with a small roof that extends from the greater roof plane. Evident now is a
panelled front door with accompanying side screen. Generally, this area is treated more lightly by the author's hand and the result is a clear commitment to a point of focus on the entry to the house. Reinforcing what appears to be a patio has been increased in height so that it nudges the window sills and stating its role more fully. That Pickmere left the first version so unclear in this matter is perplexing. Perhaps it was an oversight, but the competition format requirement of 18 inches by 12 inches makes this a large oversight. Alternatively, could it have been a considered philosophical statement on Pickmere's part, perhaps about the 'blankness' of the New Zealand house, or might it just be evidence of Pickmere's inattention as a draughtsman?

The other 'obvious' architectural reconstruction sheds some light on such rhetoric. In Pickmere's first attempt the window facing the garage is drawn in a very timid manner, leaving great doubt about its architectural intentions. In the revision this feature emerges more clearly as a Georgian bay-window which adds considerable formality, as well as grandeur, to the design.

In combination it is argued that the feedback provided to Pickmere included a brief to make the house more 'architectural' in detail and delineation. But this, in itself, simply introduces more doubt over why this particular design was selected when so many of the others display much greater pictorial fluidity. However, the overall rustic charm of the piece remains substantially intact and one needs to turn to the compositional alterations that occur between the first and second version to appreciate the ideology behind the change that were made.

In Home: A New Zealander's Adventure, Mulgan wrote of his admiration for the English countryside and it's 'secret' charm in the farmhouse at one with the beauty of the landscape. By contrast, in New Zealand he found the country house to be a 'blot' on the landscape. This, he says, is the land of galvanised iron, "probably the ugliest building material ever invented". He continues:

Again and again you see a building that seems to be as much one with the scene as the trees about it. In fact, it looks to be growing out of the soil. To a colonial the mellow red of brick walls and the weathered richness of tiles are a delight whose freshness the Englishman can hardly conceive.

Mulgan's lament for absence of the beauty found in the English house and garden, and the NZIA torn between English privilege (particular the RIBA) and their own desire for a local building practice. Pickmere's entry provided a picture of resolution in his rustic dwelling but it is not simply the subject that compels. Pickmere integrated two unusual compositional elements into his winning design. One is the materiality of the dwelling, the other the woodland setting.

In the original design the firm horizontal delineation of the façade strongly suggests a lapped weatherboard cladding, which was a common enough technique for the period. However, the drawing technique used to grid the roofing material, while not particularly committed to tiling, certainly excludes the vertical stripping that would indicate corrugated iron. In the final cover there is a fine development in both cases. In its redrawn state the line-work hatching on the roof has become more purposeful, which makes it that much easier to read it as an intentional tiling system. The significance of this change is made apparent in the delineation of the cladding. The line clarity found in the first version is gone, replaced by a denser line that 'wobbles' across the facades. The effect is to replace the pure linearity of weatherboarding with the variegated effect of brick or shingle. This is particularly true of the wall surrounding the chimney where the double hung windows have been replaced with the smaller but more populous panes of a Georgian model found in the English country houses and its association to brick construction. A further connection to Mulgan's view is also detectable in both versions by the entropic attack of foliage advancing onto the cladding from the earth. Here too the second version demonstrates a subtle but distinctive emphasis with an additional smear of weathering high on the chimney fulfilling Mulgan's colonial lament: here, one might assume, is a house growing out of New Zealand soil.

Similarly, the woodland setting of the house satisfies Mulgan's colonial prejudice for making the countryside beautiful in an English manner. Evidence for the ideological significance of this point is found in the compositional difficulties it has presented. In most of the published entries a domestic subject is chosen to represent the key theme of building in New Zealand. In each case the central figure dominates the compositional organization of the portrait format, producing a centralised focus on the house. The winner differs considerably in this regard and the reason for this is due to the desire to include a forested context. This was not the only entry to consider the house in a garden city setting. Entry No. 5 (G. Ferris, Wellington) (Figure 2) and entry No. 7 (J. W. Standish, also of Wellington) (Figure 1) both show a two storied Georgian influenced house thoroughly nestled amongst mature trees and clipped lawns. But these are examples
of vertical planting in a format that makes horizontal landscape depiction difficult. Here Pickmere showed a radical disregard for conventional composition in making the architectural focus diminutive but to the advantage of gaining an implied horizon that situates the house in a woodland setting rather than a wooded section. The purposefulness of this gesture is found in the continuous wall that runs behind the house. This, it is suggested, is not simply a poorly drawn suburban fence but an attempt at making a calculated distinction between the realm of civilisation and that of wilderness. This reading is not one presented by Mulgan, whose experience of the English countryside was one of continuous domestication. What Pickmere’s design does well is to present a colonial condition where uncertainties between land and people are yet to be resolved.

To that end this image is not in a ‘woodland’ setting but that of the New Zealand ‘bush’, which is the preferred word used during colonial settlement to denote both the native rainforest and the hinterland occupied by the Maori. To go ‘bush’ remains a common descriptor in New Zealand, applied to someone who is considered to have rejected urban life. This distinction lends to the design an allegorical commentary that may well have suited the NZIA who would see themselves as a part of the cultural salvation of a new land. The wall is a line of demarcation between the civilised within and uncivilised world beyond. To this extent it is a reminder of the moral principles. By way of introduction, Mulgan writes that the ‘pioneering conditions’ of New Zealand discourage the appointment of an architect as practical skills dominate “in a frontier settlement like Eden.” “A well trained architect”, he adds with emphasis, “is a practical man”, but very fact that the Institute felt the need for this booklet suggests some uncertainty on that account.

Robin Boyd, writing in 1960, described the Australian suburban objective as one concerned with carving clearings in native bush in order to “transplant on to naked soil a postage stamp replica of the ruling idea in international highlife.”

It was an example of the sort of pioneering spirit Boyd condemned, and a shared colonial version of it can be seen in the cover of Building in New Zealand. Not integration but occupation is demonstrated by the stunted shrubs scattered across the front of the section. Behind stand the ‘natives’ waiting to be felled in the interests of suburban expansion as suburbia expands into the darkness beyond its back wall. This primary dichotomy between culture and nature allows for significant symbolic value to be attributed to the easily ignored break in the wall that occurs between the house and garage. More than provision for egress into the forest bush beyond this aperture is a portal between the known and the unknown, the controlled and the uncontrolled.

This may sound fanciful but of the two alterations between competition and publication that affected the house-bush relationship the first is the enlargement and centralisation of this aperture so that it acts as negative prospect element, leading the eye through and beyond the domestic realm into the ‘dark matter’ of the New Zealand bush. The other change that occurs here is related. From the first to second version the canopy foliage of the mature trees becomes much denser. A pictorial affectation perhaps, but it is one that replaces any suggestion of the open structure of the Australian gum tree with the primordial darkness noted of the New Zealand bush.

But the greatest oddity produced by the landscape scene is the empty sky in the middle of the page, interrupted only gently by a single plume of smoke. A still winter day? Perhaps, but it also hints at a certain unknowingness on the part of the NZIA. In the graphic emptiness between intention - ‘Building in New Zealand’ - and model - Georgian tinted bungalow – there is a significant gap of association. It presents a ‘nothingness’ full of architectural promise but with little by way of central point. “A trained architect”, Mulgan states with emphasis, “is a necessity of civilised life.” Again, perhaps, but here too doubt is present. What is it that one might mean by ‘civilised’ in a country still grappling with much denser. A pictorial affectation perhaps, but it is one that replaces any suggestion of the open structure of the Australian gum tree with the primordial darkness noted of the New Zealand bush.

Unfortunately for the NZIA it counted for little. From 1935 the newly elected Labour Government initiated its nationwide rental housing programme, and by 1939, five thousand state houses had been completed. Any claim the NZIA might have had for providing houses for the ‘average man’ had been neatly usurped by the newly elected government’s
commitment to providing housing en masse and without ownership. Even as *Building in New Zealand* was being printed the NZIA’s dalliance with ‘housing for the people’ was waning, and outside of a few isolated moments it has never sought to reclaim this ground. It is now an irony of history that Pickmere’s Georgian themed bungalow, meant to represent architects to the average man, so presciently captured the image of a New Zealand State House in cliché form.

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**Endnotes**


3 Jones, “Mulgan, Alan Edward”.

4 For example, Mulgan writes of his arrival to New Zealand in terms of sharper colours, brighter light, the new against the old, and so on. See Alan Mulgan, *Home: A New Zealander’s Adventure* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd. 1927).


9 Christine McCarthy has described the career of Edmund Anscombe through the 1920s as a period in which the architect would modestly publicise his travel experiences as an aid to making his architectural services known. While this cannot be genuinely considered an advertising strategy of the kind to which the NZIA objected, it can nonetheless be seen to be professionally self-serving. Christine McCarthy, “The Making of an Architect: Anscombe in America, 1902-1906”, *Fabrications*, 16, no.2 (2006): 60-82.


11 “Cover Design Competition”, 29.


16 Upon comments made by one reviewer on this paper, this author would add these valuable observations that can in no way claim as their own. Firstly, it was observed that the foreground framing can be interpreted as fence-like. It might be extrapolated from the possibility that one is to understand the scene as that which would be viewed by an opposing neighbour, thus inferring a community aspect otherwise missing. Secondly, it was pointed out that the careful placement of the lower text between the fence ‘rails’ strongly mimics the instrumental draughting practice of establishing lettering guidelines. In this detail one might entertain a conflation of drawing practice and drawing subject that furthers a claim by the New Zealand Institute of Architects that they should lead the housing programme. This author expresses gratitude for these generous insights.

17 Mulgan, *Home: A New Zealander’s Adventure*, 86.


19 That the two Georgian entries are both from Wellington suggests a possible influence from the work of Wellington architect, William Grey Young, whose house for Sir James Elliot (1914) still stands as a prominent domestic example in the Georgian Style.

21 Mulgan, Building in New Zealand, 4.

22 Mulgan, Building in New Zealand, 4.


24 Mulgan, Building in New Zealand, 4.