The perils of borrowing building styles and its consequences for the registration of architects in New Zealand

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Thank you for that welcome.

Could I begin by saying that I am not an architect. I am a humble functionary – a bureaucrat – the Chief Executive of the very small organisation in New Zealand that registers architects.

When I mean small I mean small. I have one full-time staff member who manages our operations and one part-time person who does our finances and a number of other administrative tasks. We register about 1600 architects.

Let me tell you a little about my homeland.

Rudyard Kipling, when he visited New Zealand in the 19th century, described New Zealand as "the last, the loneliest and the loveliest". I think he got it right.

Like the Philippines, New Zealand is a group of islands, but the New Zealand islands are fewer in number – three main ones – and they are all alone, way out in the South West Pacific, a huge distance from anywhere else. We are 2,250km or 1,400 miles from our closest neighbour, Australia.

The first people to live in New Zealand, Polynesian explorers from the north, arrived maybe a thousand years ago. They named the land Aotearoa, which means the Land of the Long White Cloud. It's a good name because the New Zealand archipelago is set on a north south axis. The predominate winds are westerlies. They race across the Indian Ocean and the Tasman Sea, picking up moisture which then comes down as rain on the west coat of our islands. So a lot of the time over New Zealand there is, indeed, a long white cloud from north to south.

If you get a chance to come to New Zealand, and I hope you do, what you will find strange is that most of it is empty – empty of people that is.

Our land mass is near on 268,000 square kilometres or slightly more than 103,000 sq. miles. That's just slightly smaller than the Philippines. But our population is only four million people, enough for just one reasonable city, compared to almost 92 million people in the Philippines.

This amazingly small population is because human habitation in New Zealand is so recent. Indeed, until about 1000 years ago not only were there no human beings in New Zealand but New Zealand had no land mammals living in it at all, apart from two kinds of bats which presumably were blown there from Australia. Bats apart, New Zealand was a land of birds and reptiles, utterly apart from the rest of the world. Indeed, our native forests are much the same as they were in the time of the dinosaurs.

By way of illustration one of our most interesting species is this little guy here.

Called the Tuatara, he's been on this earth for 225 million years so he is way older than the dinosaurs and the last of his kind in the world.

The fact that he still exists illustrates how New Zealand has been utterly cut off from the rest of the world for around 80 million years, since its separation from the ancient super-continent of Gondwana Land; that is until the first humans arrived by sailing canoe, as depicted here.

My ancestors came to New Zealand by the likes of the following.

In my grandparents' case, it was by sea, under steam not sail, in the early 1900s. Indeed, this shot is of my grandfather as a young farmer in New Zealand in 1909.

Note the chimney made of roofing iron, and outside the back door the pre-refrigeration safe for storing meat and other things that need to be kept cool. I'm not sure but I suspect the cladding is recycled panels from tea chests or some kind of similar material.

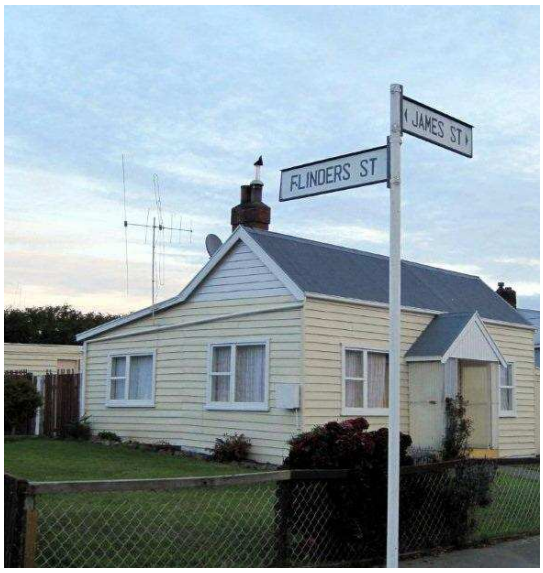
New Zealand's story of the 19th and 20th century has been one of building a new country, and trying to figure out how to live in it well. The following is a passage from one of our best writers, John Mulgan, summing up New Zealand. Writing in the 1940s in his war memoir "Report on Experience" he wrote:

I have had visions and dreamed dreams of another New Zealand that might grow into the future on the foundations of the old. This country would have more people to share it. They would be hard-working peasants from Europe that know good land, craftsmen that loving making things with their own hands, and all men who want the freedom that comes from an ordered, just community. There would be more children in the sands and sunshine, more small farms, gardens and cottages. Girls would wear bright dresses, men would talk quietly together. Few would be rich, none would be poor. They would fill the land and make it a nation."

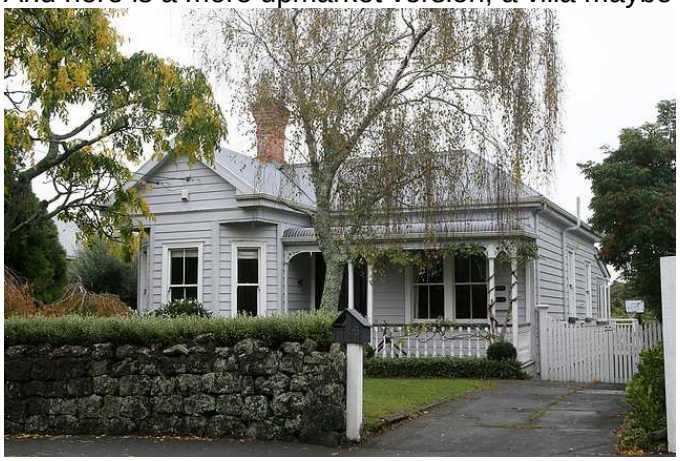
It's a lovely image. In reality, sometimes we have got it right and sometimes we have got it wrong, as you will see with some of the architecture to follow.

As I said, I am not an architect, but let me briefly critique my homeland's residential properties. An Englishman I met said to me "Your buildings look like you are a people that came to your country last week and you expect to leave next week."

My wife came to New Zealand as a teenager from Wales. She recalls that when she and her parents first saw suburban New Zealand they were astonished and asked "What a funny country – why do people here live in sheds." What she and her family were seeing was lightly-built suburban bungalows, which to a British sensibility seem most odd. Here's some examples of what my wife thought was a shed.



And here is a more upmarket version, a villa maybe from the 1920s.



And a modern take on the shed as home.

Of course what my wife's family was seeing were houses built in timber, with light iron roofs, as opposed to the heavier stone, brick and slate used in the UK. In this last slide the cladding is iron but almost certainly the framing is timber.

Indeed, New Zealand architectural tradition has been described as that of "The Elegant Shed". In New Zealand the most famous shed is the wool shed. Here are two examples.

And for what goes on inside, here's a shearer at work.

In traditional rural New Zealand the wool shed was also the place for having political meetings and dances.

Strangely, New Zealand's farming has changed in recent years so that now we have more cows than sheep, with sheds to match, such as this, as we call it, a milking shed.

For what goes on inside, here's a New Zealand dairy farmer at work.

New Zealanders return to the shed idea for the buildings they love the most. These are summer holiday homes by the sea or in the bush. In our North Island we call them batches and in the South Island we call them cribs.

Here’s some examples.

These little batches or cribs are the buildings that I think tell you more about the New Zealand soul than any other kind of building, including what John Mulgan was writing about. Certainly some of the happiest and best times of my life have been spent in places like these.

Indeed, when New Zealand architects design batches or cribs, often for themselves, at least to a New Zealand sensibility, a particular magic occurs.

The following are three examples.

Would that New Zealanders had remembered some of these virtues when designing their homes in town, where sometimes pride has cometh before the fall.

So why do New Zealanders so often build homes out of light timber fames, often with planked cladding?

Well, in New Zealand timber is cheap. Initially it was forests that had been there since time immemorial and latterly, planted pine forests – exotics as we call them.

Also timber framing flexes in an earthquake and we, like the Philippines, are on the Pacific Rim of Fire. Earthquakes are a regular part of our lives, sometimes very serious ones.

New Zealand's deadliest was in a small city called Napier in 1931, the results being over 250 people killed and this:

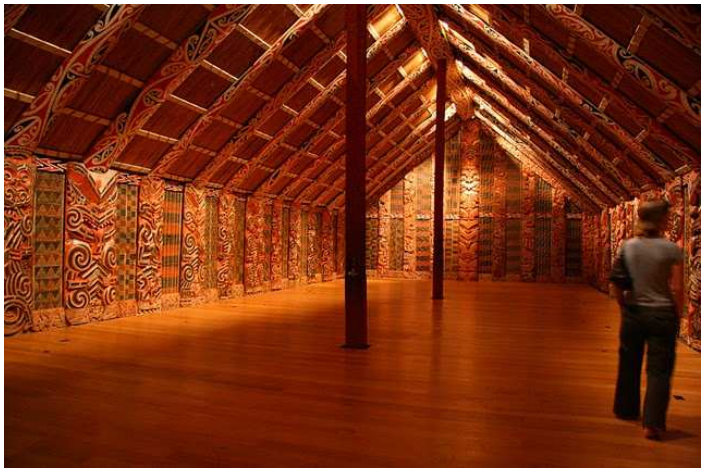
And, as some of you may have heard, on 4 September this year we had a severe earthquake in the South Island City of Christchurch, though thankfully this time no-one was killed mainly because the earthquake occurred at about four in the morning. Here are some images from that.

New Zealand architects also have to take account of wind, cold weather, and lots of rain. This photo captures New Zealand's climate rather well – brooding, wet, often cold, and windy.

When one looks at the styles of residential dwellings in New Zealand away from the beach the oddities of a settler society can be easily seen – we borrow building styles willy nilly.

This image is of a traditional Maori meeting house, Maori being the indigenous people that have lived in New Zealand since before the Europeans came.

And here are some interiors



These Maori meeting houses are stunning.

However, in his diaries the British Naval Captain James Cook, when he explored the New Zealand coastline in the 1770s, barely mentions them at all.

Partly these amazing buildings only became possible when Maori had steel tools for the first time. Also, until the introduction of the potato, the Maori were always limited in what they could do by the lack of an easy source of carbohydrates. So in many areas they didn't have the food surpluses needed for settled habitation.

There is also an argument among some scholars that these buildings were actually a Maori response to the chapels and churches that they had seen the European settlers building, such as this built in Auckland in 1847.

The European settlers in New Zealand have certainly been borrowers, as the fashions from the Northern Hemisphere have come and gone. Victorian villas, Arts and Crafts, Californian bungalows – all have had their day.

So for a quick history of homes in New Zealand and their borrowed styles, have a look at the following.

This is a miner's cottage, about 1900.

An arts and crafts house, maybe from the 1920s, favoured by the well-to-do in town.

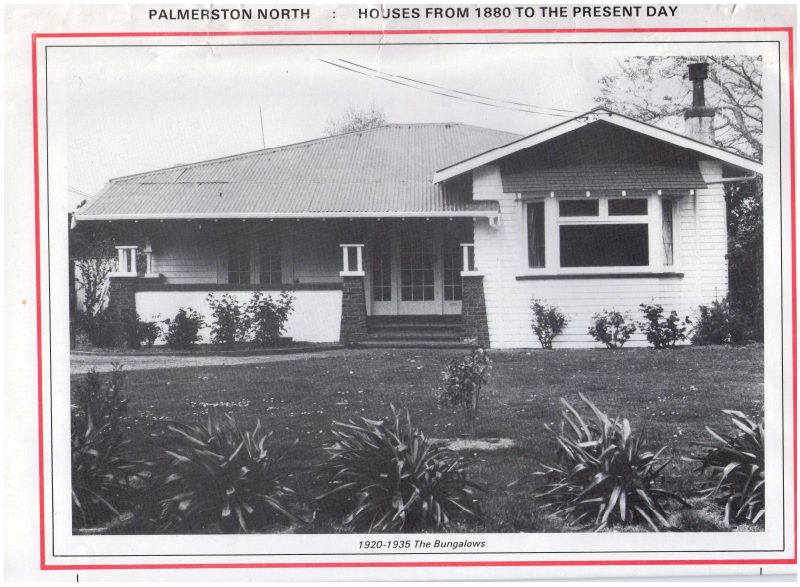
This is a painting of what we call a “Railways Cottage” built by our Railways Department for staff around the country, often in isolated places, much of it from 1900s to the 1920s.

In this 1937 photo the man holding the table was Prime Minister Micky Savage helping lift the furniture into the first house of a vast programme of state funded rental housing.

And here's the house that Savage lifted the table into today, still state owned and rented, with the people who live in it.

At the time these State Houses were sneered at as all looking the same and being visually old fashioned, but they were very well built, and home buyers appreciate that now. I'd have one.

This is a Californian Bungalow built in 1936. Perchance, this is the house I grew up in.



Now we are in the 1940s – art deco international style

This is from the 1970s and is the house I live in now.

And here's a home - with aspirational pretensions - probably from the 1990s – the cladding this time is imported cedar.

This house was built eight years ago. It's so-called brick and tile – a brick veneer on wooden frames.

And this too is a very recent build. Notice the different cladding – not weatherboards – more on that in a moment.

Sadly, one of those stylistic borrowings turned out to be a serious mistake. In the 1990s, New Zealanders developed a taste for a mock Mediterranean look in their houses. New Zealanders in their overseas travels had become fascinated with things like the following.

and this.

Here’s an example of what this led to in New Zealand.

This borrowed style has meant flat or sloping roofs with minimal eaves, and a plaster finish.

The result has been what in New Zealand we now call the “leaky building crisis”. Too many of New Zealand’s new houses of the 1990s are taking in water through the exterior finish which is called monolithic plaster. It's actually a synthetic material sprayed on the outside of the timber framing – not good when the house flexes.

Also this borrowed style required no eaves and no flashing on the windows, for that clean Mediterranean look, which has meant more leaks.

And that was just the beginning.

Some years back a decision was made in New Zealand that the interior framing could be of untreated timber, which previously was not permitted. Bad move.

After water penetrates the plaster, it soaks into the wooden structure of these houses. When that happens, untreated kiln-dried timber rots.

The New Zealand government estimates that at the moment there are about 42,000 New Zealand homes in this state. The cost to families has been terrible financially and in terms of ill health. One study has estimated the cost in the treatment of mental and physical illness at the moment is $26 million a year. The loss of value in the buildings study is about NZ$11.5 billion.

Let me read to you from one newspaper report from December 2004.

Bulldozer only remedy for leaky homes

A third of the 153-unit Sacramento housing complex in Botany Downs is so rotten it must be bulldozed and rebuilt.

The biggest leaky building lawsuit to be filed will return to court early next year.

Owners are claiming $19.2 million, of which $4.7 million is tagged to demolish and rebuild 51 units at the cost of $93,000 each.

Owners' lawyer Paul Grimshaw said a third of Sacramento was so rotten demolition was the only option.

"It's beyond repair," he said.

And as other examples, in the media in recent days, the Wellington City Council, the architect, the builder and the cladding firm are jointly liable for a $1 million repair bill for these two houses.

As you can imagine, this has been a huge political issue. Among other things, it led to the New Zealand Registered Architects Board being set up in 2005. New Zealand's architects had been required to be registered for many years, but the requirements for registration were made considerably tougher in 2005. This now includes a requirement that every five years all architects have to be rechecked in terms of whether they are still competent, whereas prior to that registration was for life.

New registration regimes for architectural designers and the trades in the building sector were also established or are being established.

Yet curiously, occupational licensing in the building sector and more generally continues to be contentious in New Zealand.

Despite the leaky building crisis, among the politicians and policy makers there is an ongoing tension – a tension between the desire to make sure that residential properties in particular are designed and built properly and on the other side a desire to get the costs of building as low as possible, including by as much as possible removing the dead hand of regulation. And of course, as you know, these two things can easily be at odds with each other.

The current government has resolved this in its own mind by saying that rigorous occupational licensing is justified if it can be used as an offset when reducing the currently expensive bureaucratic requirements for getting a building consent. But, nonetheless, that tension between quality and cost remains.

How does that impact on the registering of architects? The answer is that the Board that I work for has to navigate between these two competing imperatives.

A public servant said to me recently "You know, the problem with occupational licensing schemes when they are organised by the profession or trade being regulated is that they

are like a children's tree hut. Too often the children in the tree hut pull up the ladder, so no one else can get in."

Like this.

As you can see in this tree hut the ladder is gone. The question is, are there any architects inside and what have they done with the ladder?

In other words the concern is that architects, or the regulated trade or profession whatever it is, will arrange the requirements and costs for initial registration to their own advantage – so people wanting to enter to the regulated trade or profession will be excluded, despite that fact that they are qualified and competent. This is the children in the tree hut pulling up the ladder.

Once this is done, those who are already registered or licensed benefit from the labour shortages that result. Then they can overcharge or price gouge their customers and clients.

And this does happen?

Well, in New Zealand there has been an uproar in recent years about the way one particular trade has been licensed. I'm told that just recently, after some changes were made, the pass rate for those seeking to be licensed in that trade went from 30 to 70 per cent. The standard hadn't changed, so what happened? After many years, someone lowered the ladder again.

So, if occupational licensing risks being used by the lucky few who already have the ticket to enrich themselves, why have it? The answer is that the alternative is worse.

Imagine if everyone who flew to Manila for this conference on the day of the flight had to determine the competence of the individual person flying the plane before deciding whether or not to board the plane. It would be time consuming to say the least. Indeed, I doubt there would be much of an aviation industry at all. Potential passengers would be too terrified.

So anarchy – letting anyone do what they feel like - doesn't work.

In the jargon, the case for occupational licensing or registration is strongest when there is an asymmetry of knowledge between the person buying and the person providing the service. And of course the argument hangs on the consequences, severe or trivial, if the person providing the service is incompetent. No one would call the leaky building crisis trivial.

When New Zealand architects grumble to me about the registration fee that they have to pay annually, I reply to them “If anyone could be an architect, pretty soon anyone would. In the shambles that would follow, your brand value would fall away to zero, substantially diminishing your ability to earn your living.”

So I think it is a matter of getting the balance right. How do we do that? I think the following ideas are useful.

Firstly, the registration standard has to be publicly known so if it is being used as a protective trick people can see it and criticise. There can’t be any secrets in this.

Most critically, the standard for registration has to be set at the right level. This means high enough so that the public is protected from incompetence – but no higher, as otherwise closed-shop elitism creeps in.

Also the fees charged for the registration procedure should only recover the direct cost of the process and no more.

There should be some sort of appeal process, if a failed applicant thinks the process has not been applied correctly.

The registration entity’s governance arrangements should include the involvement of people who are not architects or the regulated trade, so the consumer and the public interest are represented.

The governance arrangements should also include some way that the government of the day can step in if things have gone seriously wrong.

None of this is perfect or risk free, but hopefully the result is a reasonable chance of getting the balance right.

Thank you.