



QUALITY STREET

In the 1930s, an enlightened Labour government in New Zealand had a utopian dream of state housing. And so Savage Crescent was built – a workers' garden city, which defied contemporary ideas of modernist tenement blocks and instead strived to be an ideal of suburban nirvana

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Walking down Savage Crescent in Palmerston North, New Zealand, it's hard to imagine how this quiet street could have elicited such emotion. Desperate New Zealanders wrote letters begging to live in the area, one woman threatened to camp outside the then Minister of Works' home until she was permitted entry to the suburb, architects fought over designing the buildings and one bureaucrat threw himself under a train when he realised his personal ideal of Savage Crescent would not be achieved. The cause of such a frenzy? The utopian dream of state housing that the first New Zealand Labour government formulated in the mid-1930s. It was to be a socialist and suburban nirvana, a model of modern living that would cure the country's cultural and economic ills.

When the Labour government came to power in 1935, there was widespread unemployment, economic depression and a housing shortage, with many of the working class residing in what were considered inner-city slums. As the new government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, transformed the small South Pacific country into a welfare state, it also decided that a miraculous state housing project would resuscitate the depressed building sector, stimulate the economy and house the nation. To do this, the government drew on the 'garden city'

philosophy popularised by Sir Ebenezer Howard in the late 1890s, which said that inhabitants of cities should move away from grim urban centres and into more pleasant living environments in the rural outskirts. The state also held dear the idea that mean streets make mean men. Their ideal was a nuclear family living happily in suburbia. 'I'm still struck by the idealism behind it,' says Dr Ben Schrader, lecturer in urban history at Victoria University, Wellington. 'It was after the First World War and many of the Labour Party were British immigrants. So there was this real sense of a brave new world, a feeling that they wanted to create something better.'

New Zealand's state housing differed from other developments around the world. For one thing, the government opposed apartment or tenement blocks, such as those found in the UK or Australia. Instead they wanted self-contained houses in keeping with their suburban dream. Nor did they want a grid street plan; the town planning was to be circular in design. Also, unlike most other 'worker housing' in the world at the time, these buildings had to be well designed and constructed from quality materials, preferably sourced from within the country. And the buildings were not just meant for lower socio-economic groups; they would be for everyone. 'New

house proud: one of architect Ernst A Plischke's designs for the crescent



Zealand state housing was different in terms of scale and quality. In other parts of the world, the garden city idea never took in quite that way because it was seen as too utopian,' Schrader says. 'As a result, for a long time New Zealand had some of the best housing in the world.'

Savage Crescent, named after the then prime minister, was to become one of the first – and probably the only fully realised – of these developments. 'It was a milestone in town planning and architecture,' enthuses Di Stewart, an architectural historian working for the Auckland City Council. 'And it's still completely intact. Very little has been altered – it's a bit like being in a time warp.'

Various architects worked on houses in Savage Crescent; perhaps the most notable was Ernst A Plischke, an Austrian immigrant who, fleeing the Nazis, arrived in New Zealand in 1939. Plischke already had an international reputation and was fully versed in the principles of modernism. He found work with the Housing Department as an architectural draughtsman, but, unfortunately, he clashed with his superior, chief architect Gordon Wilson, and for some time the renowned architect was set to work designing back porches and bathrooms. Besides eventually being responsible for the town planning of various small towns and state housing precincts, Plischke also designed the Greys Avenue apartments in Auckland and the Dixon Street apartments (both also state housing) in Wellington. Based on similar buildings in Europe, these are now considered archetypal examples of modernist apartment blocks in the country. Hilariously, Wilson apparently annoyed Plischke even further by insisting that flower boxes be placed on the otherwise austere façade of the Dixon Street block.

Today, Savage Crescent is somewhat of an architectural diary. The precinct was built between 1939 and 1946 and the first houses are best described as 'neo-Georgian' cottages, while later buildings bear the hallmark of European architects, such as Plischke. In these, the living, dining and kitchen areas are more open-plan, the roofs are flatter and the interiors have an easier feeling than earlier, more structured cottages. The precinct was designed so that children could walk to school without ever having to cross a main street. There was even a communal garage and set of tools for all car owners. And when new residents moved in, they were given a tree and a shrub and encouraged to start a vegetable garden. One of the homes near Savage Crescent – at 5 Mansford Place – was even used as a showcase, with pictures of a contented family in and around the house being sent to Britain to tempt emigrants from the motherland to this socialist paradise.

The houses were all based around a curved road and a central park that was supposed to be a community



gathering place. This concept of a community centre drove another immigrant involved with state housing to his death. WL Robertson was a Canadian bureaucrat who believed strongly in the concept – he was involved in planning the communities and instrumental in setting up public health centres and a consumer's co-operative in the Hutt Valley state housing areas, near Wellington. 'But he got too many people's backs up,' says Schrader, 'and in the end, his vision of happy families and communities didn't work out as he had hoped.' This affected Robertson so deeply, he threw himself under a train. But not before writing a 250-page tract outlining his vision for the future, which he sent to relevant parties.

Unfortunately for Robertson, it was all to no avail. In the mid-1950s, there was a change of government and, therefore, of state housing policy. State houses started to be sold off or become home to the homeless and unemployed, rather than shiny, happy nuclear families 'For some time, particularly in the inter-war period, I do think they achieved their utopian vision,' says Schrader. 'But essentially their vision was flawed because people didn't necessarily want to live the way they were told to.' ★

neighbourhood watch: clockwise from top left, amenities were built into the plans; the crescent was named after the then prime minister; socialist housing meets traditional cottages; the show house, which was used to lure prospective tenants to the crescent