# The non-nonsense New Zealand houses; A modern paradigm in disguise

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## *Abstract*

**When the Nazi invaded Poland and then Czechoslovakia, the tiny county of New Zealand received a wave of professionals fleeing from the European conflict. Among these refuges there were a number of architects who end up greatly influencing the architectural landscape of the country. Their contribution is now celebrated by the architectural community, but most of these refugees were never allowed to practice as registered architects, ending up working as draftsmen for private firms or government agencies. The official version claims that these refugees' architects simply choose not to take a test in the New Zealand accreditation institute, NZIA. However, when looking on the life of many of these architects this simple claim does not seem to hold much water. Apart from being architects, coming from continental Europe, these professionals had another connexion; they were from Jewish heritage.**

**This research focuses on the life and work of one of these architects, Max Rosenfeld who for two decades was known as The Home Architect following the name of his popular magazine column. Rosenfeld was able to spread his architectural ideas talking directly to the architectural style of choice, but the ideal alternative for a country that was building with little resources. This paper also argues that even though Rosenfeld did not leave any remarkable building, he was able to decisively influence the way New Zealanders built their home in the formative decades of massive construction in New Zealand - from 1950's to 1970's.**

## *The beginning of the research*

I came across Max Rosenfeld from an indirect path while doing a wider research about the 1950s New Zealand house[1]. At the time I was collecting house plans from archives in Auckland and Christchurch in order to analyse the modernization of the house plan from hermetic construction to modular systems and then to open plan. Virtually none of the more than one thousand projects signed by any architect or engineer. The authors of the great majority of the plans were builders or small building companies. With that data, the obvious conclusion was that the NZ builders were the responsible for the modernization of the entire country residential production and they were able to achieve this in less than two years, quite a feat. However, the real story may be slightly more complicated, though no less interesting.

[1] Abreu e Lima, 'Modernism in Peripheral Countries: A Study of the Brazilian and New Zealand Houses'.

As it happened, there was a national publication called *The Weekly News*, the weekend issue of the most popular newspaper in the country that included a column named ***The Home Architect*** where plans, drawings and details were published[2]. The author of this column, **Max Rosenfeld**, also published plan books which were extremely popular in New Zealand[3]. This paper proposes to shed light on the work of this architect focusing on his earlier participation in The Weekly News publication and it is part of a wider research that now has been directed to map out and bring to light Max Rosenfeld's contribution to the country's architecture.

## The New Zealand house rapid change in house planning

While consulting the housing plans from archives in Auckland and Christchurch, it became obvious an impressive shift between the houses built during the 1940s compared to those built after 1951. While in the first two years of the decade most houses had plans which clearly derived from the traditional Villa of the 1800s, quite suddenly the majority of houses appeared fairly modern. Externally, there was not much difference between houses built in 1950s, but internally they were quite distinct in their procurement.

It is important to mention that while the 1940s homes were built by the government, the 1950s homes, though still financed by the government, were all privately built therefore the discernible similarities cannot be simply justified as a result of rigid construction codes or patterns[4]. More importantly, though similar, the houses built in these two decades present two major differences related to construction methods and architectural planning which could, in themselves, be the reasons of disparity in the house appearance and its discontinuance of a typology.

In the 1940s, the house plan offered a traditional reinterpretation of the Villa plan without much consideration for functional grouping and privacy issues. In the Villas, the main entrance is traditionally located in the middle of the façade and it leads to a social parlour placed to one side of the plan. In the 1940s reinterpretation, the parlour became the main bedroom, and thus a private area. In such an arrangement, to reach the social areas of the house the guest would necessarily have to pass the most private areas of the home—the bedrooms—while also having a clear view of the service areas such as the kitchen and bathroom. Indeed, this was a very common arrangement in many NZ homes built before the 1950s.

The NZ adapted Villa plan is arranged in a way that each room of the house was designed as an enclosed box, without the modernist idea of functional separation and with no real distinction between private, social or service spaces[5]. All the rooms were connected to the corridor without any hierarchical differentiation between a door that might lead to a bedroom and another door that might lead to the main living room or even a bathroom. However, a sudden change occurred in the 1950s, when many houses had a completely different plan

[2] Barnett, *Those Were the Days*.
[3] Rosenfeld, *The New Zealand House*.
[4] Mccarthy, *From Over-Sweet Cake to Wholemeal Bread*.
[5] Stewart, *The New Zealand Villa*.

organization, even though outwardly they looked very much the same.

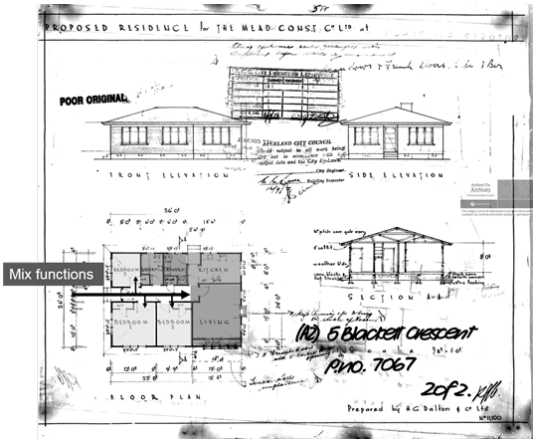


FIG. 1 Example of house plan from 1950s.
Christchurch City Council Archives, photo by author, July, 2010.

This raised a very important question: **Who or what was responsible for such well-planned houses?** Officially, according to the signatures on the plans, ordinary builders and small building companies, not architects or engineers. But, then the research showed another puzzling data; all these changes happened simultaneously all around the country in both North and South island without any major government legislation or change in construction regulations. No books or history about New Zealand architecture accounted for this dramatic and mysterious shift.

## *The media is the 'modern' message*

Towards the end of the 1940s, precisely on 26th of October of 1949, modernist plans and modern ways of designing houses began to be featured on a weekly basis through a column in the most popular magazine of the time, *'The Weekly News.'* The column was signed by a Czech architect Max Rosenfeld and it was entitled *"The Home Architect Page"*.


FIG. 2 *The Weekly News,* Cover page and *The Home Architect* Column on 26th of October of 1949

This column became an instant hit with the New Zealand readership, indeed, Max Rosenfeld continued writing *"The Home Architect Page"* for the next eighteen years. The popularization and acceptance of his column led him to publish his first book of house plans in 1952[6], followed by another thirteen revised and enlarged versions in the following decades. On top of that, he also sold his plans privately for the very affordable fee of £11 pounds per set of drawings which the family would then deliver to the master builder who was responsible to register them in the respective City Council. Therefore, during the 1950s and in the following two decades there were not a single house registered by the name of Max Rosenfeld as architect anywhere in New Zealand, but that does not mean he was not the author of many, many projects.

[6] Rosenfeld, *The New Zealand House*.


FIG. 3 Covers of some of the 13 editions of the *New Zealand Home* by Max Rosenfeld.

By the time Max Rosenfeld started writing for the Weekly News, the publication was already one of the most important and known magazine in the country. It became a key element in the unification of New Zealand society as it targeted not only the urban areas but also the scattered rural communities[7].

## *The Home Architect*

And that is when Max Rosenfeld's column became relevant. For eighteen years (from 1949 to 1967), Max Rosenfeld was seen as a household name among readers of The Weekly News publication. During this period, he was the magazine's architectural correspondent publishing a weekly page and signing it as The Home Architect. His first article was published in the 26th of October, 1949's edition and it corresponded to a half page text about planning a compact family home. Shortly thereafter, with the success of his column, he became responsible for the whole page and, in the following years, he would have to fill in two full pages each week.


FIG. 4 *The Home Architect*, from half to a full page in last than one year.

His articles were usually devised in the form of advices, always to the point, very practical and written in simple terms in which any layman could readily understand. He usually included graphic information such as sketches, plans, construction details, which helped the most complex information to be passed on clearly.

He was also among the most popular correspondents in the magazine, receiving and answering up to sixty letters a week. That put him in touch with hundreds of home builders and gave him a close insight into what New Zealanders wanted theirs homes to be like - a wealth of information which became the bases not only for his articles, but also for his ever popular books.

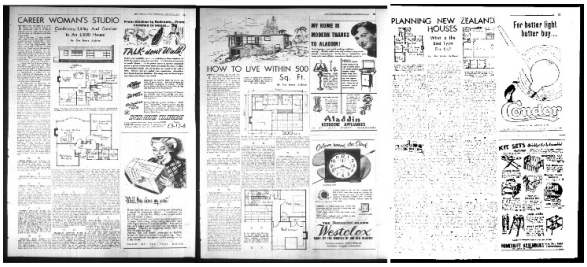


FIG. 5 *The Home Architect*, projects developed for readers.

[7] Barnett, *Those Were the Days*.

## *The no-nonsense modernism*

The subject matter in Rosenfeld's articles aimed primarily at the simplification of design and considerations in house construction. Though his approach is ultimately justified by economical aspects, it is nonetheless noticeable its relation to key principles of the modern movements in architecture. During 1949 and 1950 for instance, his articles can be divided into four major themes, namely: **1. house planning**; **2. rationalization of the construction**; **3. do-it-yourself - using pre-fabricated material**s; and **4. environmental considerations**.

Each of these themes, as indeed the articles individually, can be directly linked to modern ideas. Even Mies Van der Rohe´s famous functionalist slogan "Less is more" was essentially re-baptised by Rosenfeld as "Enough is Sufficient" (Rosenfeld, 1954); or "Simple Form, Good Taste" (Rosenfeld, 1954); the sectorization of the plan "Plan Your Areas Separately" (Rosenfeld, 1955); the open plan was presented by Rosenfeld as the most logical alternative to an economical house, which he emphasised, should avoid any decoration and excess in the name of good sense (Rosenfeld, 1954).


FIG. 6 *The Home Architect*, setorization presented as a no-nonsense advice.

## *A MODERN ARCHITECT IN DISGUISE*

His first article for the Weekly News was entitled ***"Planning the Compact Family Home. Design it for Convenience and Years of Comfort"*** was published in October, 1949, it was written using a fluent and simple style and it contained a plan drawing, with orientation comments, and a perspective of a proposed house (Rosenfeld 1949). The article occupied only half a page, but its drawings and even the chosen type font, settled the modern tone of his column.

The plan and the perspective presented in his first article are both modern in design and appearance. The perspective, a flat roof modular house, became the logo for his column and it is printed in every other article in the following years, but just to respond to its public, Rosenfeld included a traditional roof in the following year. The plan is clearly divided in blocks according to their function. The first one composed of the social area (living and dining), and the service (kitchen and laundry). The second block is thinner and longer and has three dormitories and a bathroom. The two blocks are connected by a well resolved circulation that allows a good flow from one block to the other and which, at the same time, preserves the privacy of the bedroom quarters.

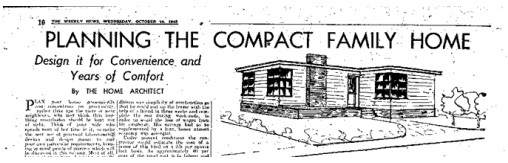


FIG. 7 First publication of *The Home Architect*, drawings with flat roof.

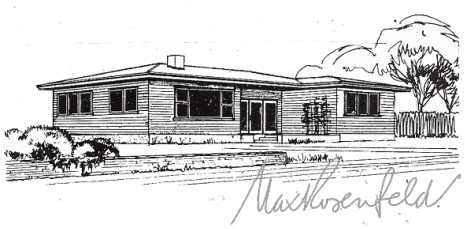

FIG. 8 One year later, Rosenfeld sign the column *The Home Architect*, and the logo house has a roof.

Rosenfeld offered in this project an early version of the open-plan scheme that is now commonly used in New Zealand domestic architecture. He suggested that the rigid walls between bedrooms should be replaced by wardrobes, creating in this way, storage areas and effectively buffering the sound between the rooms. The idea was quite revolutionary at the time and in the following publications it was even further developed offering plans that are quite similar to today's living-kitchen arrangements. He was undoubtedly the pioneer in promoting the advantages of the open-plan for the average New Zealand house, and he was certainly quite successful in this regard. In an interview for the New Zealand Herald in 1976, he commented on his defence of the open-plan scheme: "I tried to persuade them that there were better ways of living than by making a box divided into cubicles" (Max Rosenfeld The Home Architect, 1976).

He also argued for a clear separation between private and social areas discussing this premise in many of his articles. He emphasised the distinct qualities and characteristics of each one of these areas and the need to keep them in different sides of the house. The period of occupation, diurnal for the social and nocturnal for the private, and the adequate light and heat are also pointed out as a justification for the need to segregate these two areas.

One of Rosenfeld's main aims was to encourage people to partake in the actual construction of their homes. For that end he gave numerous tips on the different phases of house construction; from how to design and read specifications (Rosenfeld, 1950), or on how to do the excavations and other tasks to help the builder (Rosenfeld, 1949), to finishing materials and furniture design (Idem).

In a very didactical way he explained important elements in the construction of a house always presenting sketches and visual references to clarify his suggestions. He would show types of brick chimneys (Rosenfeld, 1954), dimensions of the concrete blocks for the foundations (Rosenfeld, 1954), types of floor joist, (Idem) techniques for laying the brick rows or mixing cement and aggregate for concrete (Rosenfeld, 1949), roof construction alternatives, (Rosenfeld, 1950) suggestions of plaster surfaces and finishing material (Rosenfeld, 1953). His instructions tended to be so clear as to encourage any layman to become a building expert.

He was a pioneer in the dissemination of many construction ideas in the country that became common knowledge and practice for builders, engineers and architects thereafter. One of these ideas was the adoption of concrete slabs rather than building on a raised timber floor (Rosenfeld, 1950). When he first advocated this, many people thought that a house on a concrete slab would be colder, but Rosenfeld dispelled such misbelieve by explaining the thickness of concrete as insulant and suggesting simple materials to be added afterward to help insulate the house. He also played an important role in convincing New Zealanders that they indeed needed a

washbasin next to every toilet, not separated in a different room. A small sick should always be added to the toilet chamber for convenience and hygiene, (Rosenfeld, 1949).

In the 1950s, specifically in 1958 when he returned from a long trip, Rosenfeld started to instruct the builders about a new technique he had been witness to in America. It was the use of prefabricated lightweight trusses for roofs instead of using the long-establish New Zealand practice of building roof frames (Rosenfeld, 1956). That technique freed the roof element from the interior partitions which facilitated the construction and maintenance of the house. Today it is a well-established practice throughout the country.

Rosenfeld's name has been frequently associated to do-it-yourself publications, which actually is a fair acknowledgement of his work. He would highly praise the New Zealand educational system for incorporating in the secondary and high school education, basic training of old professions such as carpentry. He used to say that New Zealand was a country full of skilful handymen and frequently included in his column small projects for furniture and house addition that could easily be built by one's own hands (Rosenfeld, 1958).

Largely through Rosenfeld's influence, kiwi home builders have gradually become conscious of the need for designing their homes to optimise sun light, rather than setting them with the intention of presenting impressive fronts to those passing in the street. He educated the public on how to create and use simple Sun diagrams to trace the light through the day and help to design rooms with proper sunlight comfort (Rosenfeld, 1952), and called attention to the right proportions of windows which can not only serve as aesthetic elements of a house, but is also a determined factor of how much light reaches the room at the same time as the amount of heat which can be lost by the glassing surfaces during winter time (Rosenfeld, 1953). Every week Rosenfeld dealt with these telling topics, though some of them needed a certain amount of complex information, they were nonetheless merely questions of common sense that everyone needed to consider when building a duelling. After all, "one does not have to be an architect to be familiar with such things any more than one has to be a poet to appreciate Shakespeare" (Rosenfeld, 1949).

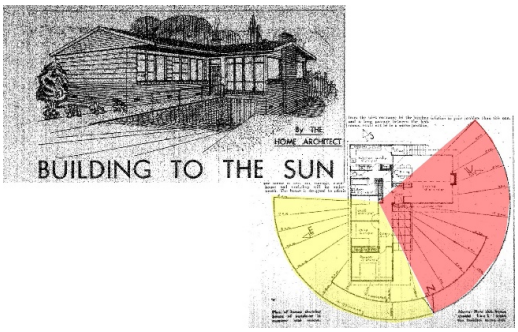


FIG. 9 Rosenfeld explaining we should design the house following the sun for warms and hygiene. *The Home Architect*

## *FINAL CONSIDERATIONS*

In the introverted and unassuming country of New Zealand, usually misplaced and even forgotten in world maps, modernism was equally shyly embraced.

Rosenfeld was most likely aware of the fact that modernism had a notoriously negative connotation for the general public of being related to a foreign sterile aesthetic. So he presented it as practical knowledge and made revolutionary ideas sound like common sense alternatives. Instead of advocating the use of flat roofs,

he offered more efficient ways of building, of using materials and orienting the houses to capture sun light. Instead of offering a different aesthetic, he focused in improving the core of the New Zealand house: its plan.

A Czech immigrant who never received any credit for thousands of projects. Max Rosenfeld was the friendly neighbourhood home architect, always ready to offer advices in the name of common sense. He thought that there was beauty in simplicity and that architectural knowledge could indeed be reached by ordinary folks. His plan books and his articles were more than just an extra income; they truly contributed to the development of the national identity of of what came to be seen as the New Zealand home.