

Max Rosenfeld

Max Rosenfeld (1905-1989), born in Czechoslovakia, was a registered architect and, in later years, a member of the N.Z. Institute of Architects. In 1939, he and his wife and young child managed to procure exit papers and a New Zealand visa, and they left Europe just before the war broke out. They settled in Auckland, and he later published several books, among them *Mere Twenty Years*, *The Story of the Czech Republic* and *The New Zealand House*, which ran into 13 editions.

When Chamberlain agreed to cede the Sudetenland to Hitler, Rosenfeld was called up for military service in the Czech Army. However, the German war machine was all powerful and in less than three weeks the Czech government was forced to demilitarise. Max demobilised, returned to Prague and its fear-ridden civilian life. He was aware of the danger to the Jewish people and wrote to Clement Attlee, whose name in Czechoslovakia was synonymous with a guardian angel, seeking help. He received an immediate brief answer on House of Commons paper "I will see what I can do for you" signed Attlee. Fourteen days later a letter arrived from Bill Jordan, New Zealand High Commissioner in London, with a permit to migrate to New Zealand. Obtaining an exit visa from Czechoslovakia was very difficult. Authorisation by the Czech police, then much influenced by the occupying Gestapo, was mandatory. His wife had a brain wave that facilitated exit. She remembered as a schoolgirl having given lessons to a young Czech boy anxious to learn German. He was at this critical time Deputy Chief of Police with no love for the Gestapo. He remembered Mrs Rosenfeld with gratitude and was glad to be of assistance. Although his powers were much curbed he retained sufficient influence to authorise the exit permit.

The Rosenfelds often wondered if their benefactor survived. Nazi brutality was such Max did not dare risk travelling from Prague to Slovakia to farewell his parents, twin brothers and sister, none of whom survived the war. In April 1939 Max, his wife and daughter, left Czechoslovakia taking few possessions and they arrived in Wellington in August 1939 shortly before the outbreak of war.

He began working for Fletchers in Auckland. Accommodation was difficult not really because of shortage but as a result of reluctance of householders to rent to a family with a small child. The family walked the streets until exhausted. Finally, while resting on a bench in Karangahape Road, they were approached by a total stranger interested in the plight of three rather pathetic looking foreigners. He turned out to be the janitor of Epsom Girls' Grammar School and he took them flat hunting in his car. Finally he suggested the Public Trust Office and that led to the offer of a three bed-roomed home at a rental of three pounds fifteen shillings a week. The Rosenfelds rented that place even though his salary was then but six pounds a week. He sublet almost immediately to a Maori lady with a baby, identifying her housing difficulties with his own. The house was badly designed. Access to kitchen and toilet were through the living room, and privacy was nearly non-existent. That house, with its faults, was to determine Max's contribution to the development of New Zealand domestic architecture. Max had been a professional architect in Czechoslovakia and had no problem adapting to conditions in New Zealand.

Before long he was employed in design work at Papakura Military Camp. On one occasion he photographed a reinforced concrete water tank he had designed. On returning to his office he found a police officer waiting. He confiscated the camera, and demanded to know who had authorised a foreigner to take photographs. An army engineer, Colonel Parsons, soon cleared that matter up. Max had a similar experience at his rented house. He developed a small vegetable garden, a novel exciting experience for him. He could not understand why

his lettuce plants disappeared until a neighbour suggested slugs. He went out by night with a torch to solve that problem. A complaint was made he was signalling German planes. Even the policeman who interviewed him was amused.

Throughout the war years Max was involved in non-domestic architecture. Eventually Colonel Parsons got him an introduction to the Ministry of Works, Auckland. The only position then available was that of structural draughtsman. It was suggested Max accept that and wait for a vacancy for an architect to eventuate. He stayed with that department for 23 years.

Max was soon asked to design houses. The first was for an Auckland Member of Parliament, the second for a senior officer of Hellabys, the third for a senior officer of his own department who was about to retire. Before long and to his surprise Max was asked to visit the editor of *The Weekly News*, and to introduce in that paper 'The Home Architects' column. Readers would be asked to submit their housing problems and Max would discuss and answer them in his column.

Returning servicemen needed homes, and mortgage money was readily and cheaply available. There was a developing building boom. The project, begun with one column, rapidly expanded into three columns and then to a feature consisting of two full pages that lasted 22 years, until *The Weekly News* ceased circulation. *The Weekly News* had wide circulation and Max received problems from New Zealanders in Australia and even in the Middle East.

Max was a public servant and generally public servants are forbidden to undertake work outside their departments. However, the Public Service Commissioner ruled it was in the public interest that Max continue his journalistic architecture provided it was done outside office hours. That ruling dampened the jealousy of colleagues, and allowed Max's name to be identified with the column. Max quoted Bernard Shaw "Happy is the man who makes a living from his hobby".

He was already puzzled by the fact so many New Zealand houses faced the wrong way. Living quarters, even bedrooms faced the street irrespective of orientation to the sun. Large floor to ceiling windows served no purpose other than for viewing passers by. Max decided he would design houses with living space facing the sun, overlooking a landscaped area with fruit trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables. Kitchens, utility rooms, laundries could face the shadows. He felt quarter acre sections were often too large. At that time 300 people dwelt on one acre in Czechoslovakia, as against 30 people in New Zealand. Many homes in New Zealand were too large for the inhabitants. Max was enthusiastic about the planning of home units. He believed the density of New Zealand housing could be increased up to four families per half acre without loss of privacy or comfortable living, provided housing conformed to principles of sound design. When he began his writing in 1951 45,500 people were waiting to be allocated state rental units together with many more hoping to achieve private ownership. Loan money was available at reasonable interest. Max urged home builders to make the best use of space. Adequate attention to that could substantially reduce building costs. His starting point was that nothing compared with the pleasure of a residence designed to suit personal needs. Most people who attempted to build their own home were inexperienced, involved in their first such exercise.

The complexities of domestic architecture must be simplified to give the client understanding of all the issues involved from the first to the final stages of building. Yet he never had the intention of making architects out of laymen.

Many homes were uninteresting because too many were built for selling as opposed to living. Max had observed if a house was adequately designed the owner was often reluctant to sell as the profit failed to compensate for loss of a satisfactory lifestyle. Even though utilitarian rooms might face the street the façade need not be unattractive. Max believed the influence of the sun on total health was insufficiently appreciated. House design must be tailored to the sun. The most important thing was to determine exposure of each potential room to sun both in summer and winter.

Max admired the competence of so many New Zealanders with tools and believed the average householder could reduce building costs by contributing his own skills. It took little knowledge to clear or level a section, to remove top soil, to excavate for foundations, footings, to stack timber and materials, all of which would add to costs if left to a contractor. Yet he said there was a limit to economy and unless rooms are designed to maximally fulfil their purposes they were impractical and even useless. Every square foot of space must justify its usefulness in terms of cost and function.

His practical house and flat plans were in great demand. The Weekly News introduced a service to readers whereby copies of plans published could be obtained free of charge as long as demand did not exceed supply. About 1200 copies of the 13 editions of his books are in public libraries in New Zealand.

He preached that every family home should have three zones each with a distinct function. The first zone is to provide for housework, the second zone is to allow space for group activities and recreation in the living rooms, the third zone to provide privacy in bedrooms for sleep, or rest, and close proximity to conveniences was essential. These three zones are best serviced by a hall or passage the size of which should be aesthetically devised. He opposed the principle of designing a house prior to finding the section.

Max looked for ways to reduce building costs. These were often determined by archaic building bylaws. Rectangular homes which lent themselves best to future expansion were desirable. Prefabricated storage fittings were cheaper than, and preferable to, solid internal walls. They saved the framing of walls between rooms that did not need privacy, added to a feeling of spaciousness between living and dining room which did not need a solid wall and a door. He advocated prefabricated light timber roof trusses to replace individual rafters. That enabled roofing to be completed as soon as the walls were erected so allowing internal work to be proceeded with in bad weather. Rosenfeld introduced these revolutionary concepts, which are today used as if no other methods had previously existed.

Max travelled widely, and became progressively more convinced of the benefits of prefabrication. Aware of how much time a woman spent in the kitchen, he advocated a layout requiring minimum walking, bending and effort. He emphasised there should be minimum traffic in this area to prevent accidents, such as a mother carrying a hot pot of soup tripping over a child.

Hygiene is fundamental, and he emphasised the quality of a house should be measured not by the luxury of the living room or ostentatiousness of the exterior, but by the quality of bathroom, toilet and laundry. He advocated a bylaw requiring a small hand basin in every toilet. The cost of that is minimal, the advantages to hygiene inestimable. Max felt strongly about this and corresponded with Dr. Turbott, a former Director General of Health. Max

frequently quoted Turbott's reply "The gospel of washing hands after voicing bodily wastes needs preaching the world over. Enormous loss of lives and decline in health occurs; traceable to carriers of bowel diseases who fail to wash hands. This failure in our country spreads infectious hepatitis, food poisoning, worms and other troubles. Simple washing of hands in soap and water removes contamination. From toddler days on, everybody should wash hands after lavatory visits and before touching foods".

He was not happy with the common placement of laundry facilities in the kitchen. So often in New Zealand, especially in rural areas, a laundry serves as a change room for work clothes, gardening or sports clothes, a repository of boots and outdoor clothing. He thought ideally the laundry should be a transition room between outdoors and indoors. A house is like a machine. Even though all parts of the machine are present it is the assembly that determines function and smooth operation.

Storage space is important. One long cupboard is preferable to several small ones. Often storage space can be created above a false ceiling and things infrequently needed can be stored there. He emphasised the waste of heat by convection through a chimney and encouraged the use of space heaters. He saw a concrete floor as often being more economical than a wooden floor with advantages in being borer and vermin proof, and fire and draught proof. Properly built concrete floors at ground level are suitable for the elderly as they do away with the need for steps. Properly laid and insulated a concrete floor is neither cold nor damp. He paid attention to lighting, insulation, condensation and the minimising of noise levels. He gave practical advice for noises resulting from plumbing.

Max also wrote extensively about renovating homes, and building holiday homes and retirement villages.

Shortly before Max left Prague in 1939 Karel Capek wrote his "Prayer for Tonight" closing with the words "Never let a nation be called small whose faith is great enough to build a better future". Max wrote that he had lived in New Zealand almost 50 years. He came here by chance through the intervention of Clement Attlee. He wrote not long before his death "If I were a young man and could not live in the country of my birth in an era of freedom as was the case prior to the Second World War, I would choose New Zealand because it proved to me that anyone who is willing to justify his existence cannot possibly miss the mark". He knew of other Czechs, and immigrants, who had contributed to New Zealand society. He was glad to have had the opportunity.

He gained much satisfaction when one of his books was reviewed in the Times Literary Supplement as being a completely practical manual for those who want to have a hand in the building and design of their homes. The review emphasised that "in spite of the New Zealand orientation the English planner of a small servantless home may find that most of the designs are of universal application".

When Clement Attlee, as Prime Minister of England, visited New Zealand Max presented him with a copy of that book at the Auckland Town Hall. Attlee was happy to receive that book and had full recollection of sponsoring the Rosenfelds to New Zealand many years before. Max emphasised his debt to his wife Marta, who acted as his secretary throughout his career, and tolerated his enormous collection of books and papers. All his work was done at home. Innumerable homes for innumerable people are his monument. It was commonplace for strangers hearing his name to greet him and thank him for his help and inspiration. He will undoubtedly be remembered in the history of architecture in New Zealand.

Note

1. Max Rosenfeld wrote a very detailed account of his work and submitted it for this volume just before he died. It has been edited and abbreviated for reasons of space, by Laurie Gluckman