



Learning about Landscape

Odo Strewe and the Group

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In Europe and the United States, landscape architecture came late to the modernist party. New Zealand was no exception. While architects here were exploring variants of modernism from the late 1930s, modernist landscapes did not appear until the middle of that century. When Odo Strewe arrived in Auckland in 1948, his gregarious nature and commitment to the modernist project led him to engage with members of a vibrant arts subculture, mainly in the west of the city. Bill Wilson and other members of the Group, as well as many of their clients, were part of this subculture. This chapter surveys a body of work that Strewe did with the Group, primarily Wilson, and proposes that his development as a practitioner in the new field of landscape architecture was enhanced by this collaboration and by the dialogue that accompanied it. Architecture was a key ingredient. In the absence of any local landscape discourse, it was through his relationship with Wilson and the Group and the projects involving landscape and architecture that Strewe established himself at the forefront of the new discipline.

THE EARLY PROJECTS

I have known Mr Strewe since 1946 [sic] and during the years I have come to regard him as the leading landscape designer in this country.¹

So begins a 1965 reference written by Wilson. His original meeting with Strewe is shrouded in

the banality of urban myth. The story goes that they met on a bus: Strewe, carrying his tools, was on his way to a landscape construction job; Wilson, who happened to be on the same bus, recognised someone in the building trade and struck up a conversation. Whatever the truth of this story, the professional and personal relationship that developed between Strewe and Wilson is pivotal to the history of modernist landscape architecture in New Zealand.

In 1949, Strewe collaborated with former Architectural Group member, Bill Toomath, on a competition entry for a proposed World War II Garden of Remembrance memorial in Wellington, overlooking the harbour and the city.² Strewe's handwritten plant identifications on the drawings in the Wellington City Archive confirm that it was he who made up the plant lists.³ Strewe gained professional profile from this proposal, initially in the general press, when he and Toomath were announced as competition winners, and later when *Design Review* and *Home and Building* published articles about the memorial proposal.⁴ Ambivalence about the idea of a war memorial, and a consequent lack of funding, meant that this project was never built.

Formal involvement with the Group dates from October 1951 and concerned a fee dispute. In a letter from Strewe requesting payment for his landscape work at the Second House, he referred to his original quote and then went on to describe the nature of the landscape project direction:





Odo Strewe in Auckland, 1961.
Strewe Family Collection.

All discussions on the aforementioned subject were h old [sic] in your office of 29 Lake Rd. in which you Mr. Bill Wilson have taken prominently part and I have still in my possession a sketch with directions what to do at . . . [the Second House].⁵

The letters of quotation, acceptance and dispute make it clear that Strewe implemented a landscape scheme, sketched by Wilson, which comprised a large lawn, a guava hedge, a collection of fruit trees and a small selection of ornamental plants. It could be described as a fairly conservative scheme, consistent with the normative New Zealand suburban garden. It is instructive that, while this house has achieved iconic status in the canon of New Zealand architecture, until recently the landscape has never been mentioned.⁶

In 1951, Strewe laid the bluestone floor in Hackshaw's George House in New Lynn.⁷ While Hackshaw's original drawings show a brick and concrete planter under the stairs, photographs after construction show continuous carpet instead.⁸ At the time, Strewe's own house at Great

North Road had a banana palm in the middle of the living room. It seems the original idea was too adventurous for Kevin George.

These early projects show Strewe in professional contact with members of the Group. Born in China and brought up in Berlin, he had studied horticulture at a State Agricultural College in the German city of Halle from 1929–30. He arrived in New Zealand in 1938, a refugee from Nazi Germany. He was interned on Somes/Matiu Island for the duration of World War II, during which he was placed in charge of a section of the prison garden. There is no evidence of any landscape design training in his history, but following his 1948 move to Auckland he set up the Auckland Landscape Garden Service.

Wilson was an inspiring teacher and the milieu of the Group encouraged rigorous enquiry and discussion. Strewe brought landscape to the discourse and was thus able to tap into the Group's ideas about modernism, including knowledge of specific projects and literature about landscape modernism. It was this combination of working together and discourse that provided the platform for Strewe's initial development as a landscape designer.

PROMOTING THE NEW PROFESSION

In Europe during the late 1930s, members of the emerging discipline of landscape architecture understood the need to establish connections with other professions, and with architects in particular, to foster commissions.⁹ They also understood the need to promote themselves in the public arena, and used the print media and television to raise their profile. Before leaving Berlin, Strewe's business had been in advertising publishing, and he was well aware of the importance of collaboration between media and practitioners in establishing and developing areas such as landscape architecture. He orchestrated this dual collaboration in Auckland in the early 1950s, promoting his work through articles in *Home and Building* magazine (July 1951 to September 1952) and collaborating on a series of projects with Bill Wilson.





The exhibition building was a medium used by the Group to advertise their work in a broad public arena. A single-page brochure published to promote the Group's All-Pine Prefab at the 1953 Auckland Birthday Carnival listed the main contributors, including 'Mr O. Strew [*sic*], who carried out the landscape gardening'.¹⁰ For the 1956 Parade of Homes in Mt Roskill, Strewe proposed a landscape for a low-cost Group home, 'to give the section a matured atmosphere'.¹¹ These two examples illustrate his ability to form productive alliances and to capitalise on media events.

New insight is apparent from 1952 when Strewe began to use the word 'space' in the articles he was writing for *Home and Building*. Up to this point, the content of the articles had been primarily horticultural and constructional, with an understandably modern emphasis on function. In September 1952, however, in the last article he would ever write for the magazine, he began by articulating a view of design as the manipulation of space. The beginning of this article reads like a personal epiphany:

Do you realize when you walk along the road you walk through space? Enter your house and you are faced with the problems of space. Space not only means inside space but also that space embracing the structure. You will understand architecture when you realize the two space conception 'within' and 'without'.¹²

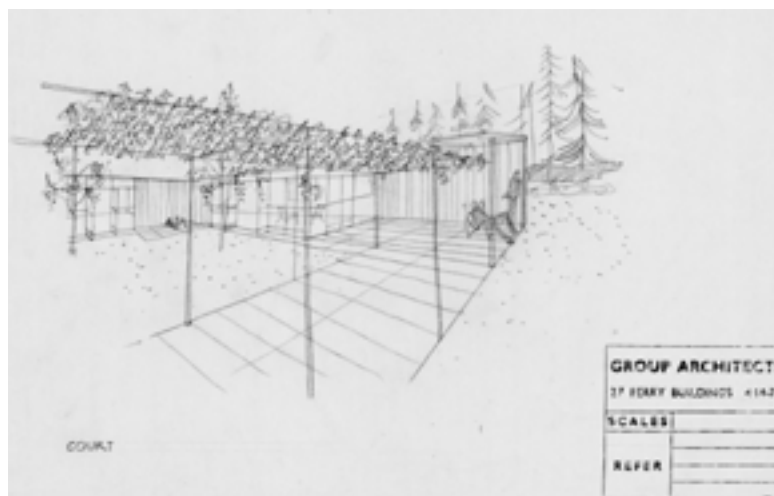
This identification of the new quality of space, and the command of this space as the major element of the new (modern) garden, were consistent with similar ideas expressed in 'a note on the Modern Garden by Dean Joseph Hudnut' in Christopher Tunnard's 1948 re-issue of his seminal *Gardens in the Modern Landscape*,¹³ as well as in the writings of the American landscape architect Garret Eckbo. This concern for space, which had been part of architectural discourse since the turn of the century, was now emerging as a major axiom of modernist landscape design,¹⁴ and became embedded in Strewe's design vocabulary as a result of his engagement with Wilson and the Group.

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESONANCE

The Tremewan family moved into their uncompleted house in the new West Auckland suburb of Te Atatu on Boxing Day 1953.¹⁵ Earlier that year, Ray Tremewan had written to his architect, Wilson, 'If possible I would like you and Oddo [*sic*] Strewe to agree on the positioning of the house – if Oddo agrees to drawing garden plans for a natural garden'.¹⁶ The building was U-shaped, part of an exploration of the courtyard form being undertaken by the Group at this time. Instead of completing the fourth side of the courtyard with enclosed, built space, the Tremewan House opened the living room to an

Perspective sketch showing the outdoor room and pipe-frame pergola enclosing the Tremewan House courtyard. GP98, UoA Architecture Archive.

The outdoor room and pergola shortly after completion. Architectural Centre Collection, PA-Coll-0811-12-03-08, Alexander Turnbull Library.





outdoor room, defined by one (southern) wall and a roof, and completed the fourth side of the courtyard with a grape-clad, pipe-frame pergola that connected this space to the main bedroom on the northern wing. This 'open' closure allowed the extensive landscape of the adjoining reserve and estuary to be viewed from the courtyard.

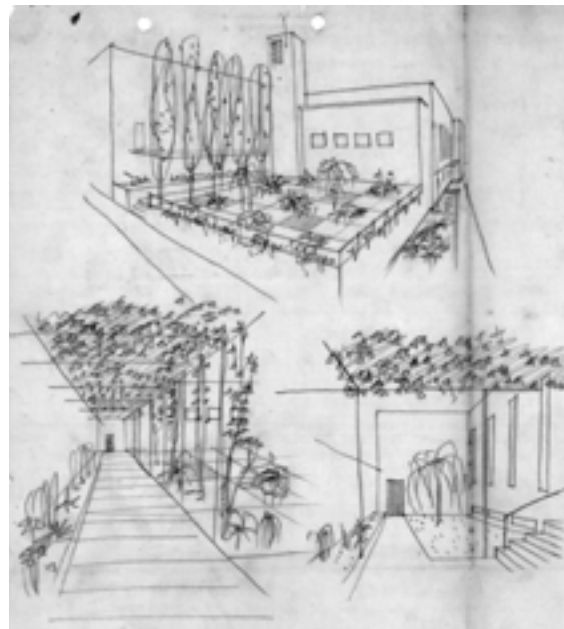
The treatment of landscape in this project shows the influence of another collaboration: that between architect Serge Chermayeff and garden architect Christopher Tunnard at Chermayeff's own home, Bentley Wood, in Halland, Sussex (1935–38).¹⁷ In much the same manner as the thinned woods at Halland, Strewe designed a group of Claret Ash and Pin Oak trees¹⁸ to go into the reserve beyond the site boundary, and mediate between the house and the long view of the mangroves and estuary. The vertical glazed screen at the end of the terrace at Bentley Wood was, at Te Atatu, rotated through 90 degrees and became the pergola that framed these extended views. This pergola, clad in grapes,¹⁹ morphed into a more useful, southern hemisphere device by providing shade, as well as another space for outdoor activity.²⁰ The courtyard contained landscape planting designed by Strewe, but also featured a piece of sculpture by Molly McAllister, paralleling the

inclusion of Henry Moore's 'Recumbent Figure' at Bentley Wood. The contract drawings, by Wilson, acknowledged not only the landscape planting and the sculpture, but also a location within the courtyard for sunbathing. Strewe was well known in Auckland for his belief in the therapeutic benefits of sunbathing, and the recognition of this activity in the formal documentation reflects his influence. Wilson's perspective sketches also privileged inhabitation of the courtyard, the 'outside' space of the project, while there were no human figures shown in the interiors of the building. The Tremewan House contained a significant number of elements from Bentley Wood: the long views mediated by selected planting; the framing by the end wall; the rectangular paved outdoor space for lounging or sunbathing; and the sculpture, all of which had been transformed in their new (New Zealand) context. Strewe and Wilson would have seen Bentley Wood as a model that resonated, at several levels, with their own situation. It was a project that involved a highly skilled architect and a landscape architect who also wrote regularly in design publications. Both Strewe and Wilson would have recognised individual disciplinary excellence within it; but more vitally, a kind of interdisciplinary resonance.

Their collaboration continued, and in the Mormon Chapel landscape design, proposed for upper Queen Street in 1954, the Auckland Landscape Garden Service was for the first time recorded as the lead consultant, with Group Architects described as 'associated'. The landscape proposal treated the ground surface of the front court onto Queen Street as a grid, which repeated the window elements of the building's façade. The tall, exposed wall of the adjoining building was softened by a climber-clad, pipe-frame pergola, which provided shelter for the side entrance to the chapel. The document describes the existing architectural setting and then proposes both hard and soft landscape elements. Between the lines of type, Strewe and Wilson's discussion and disciplinary exchange can almost be heard.

This notion of interdisciplinary resonance, and its resulting reciprocal influence, is demonstrated in several other projects of the same period: first,

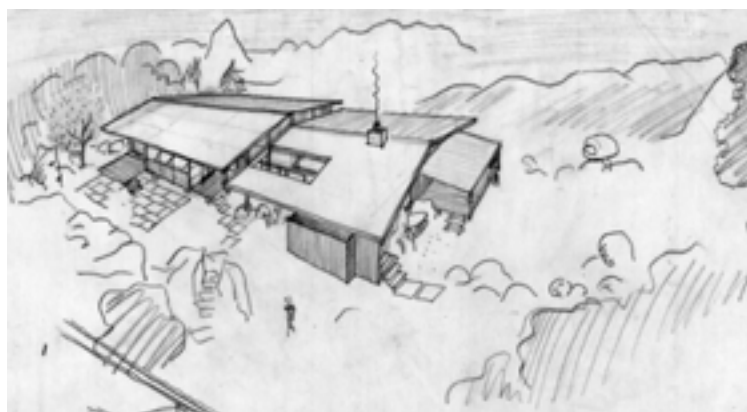
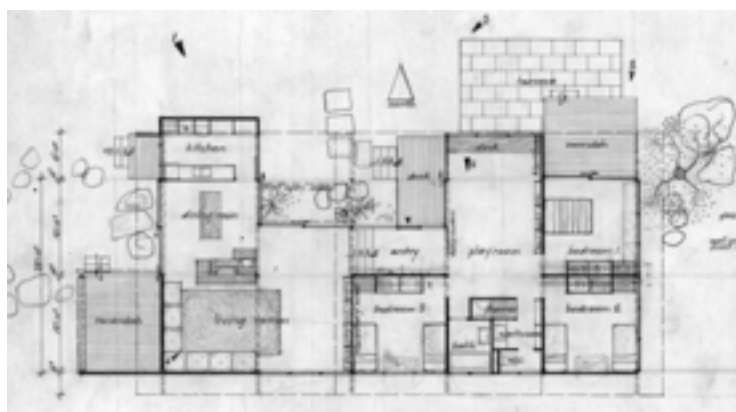
The gridded floor pattern and pipe-frame pergola designed for the Mormon Chapel in upper Queen Street. Mormon Chapel File, Group Box 7, UoA Architecture Archive.





the 1955 Whangarei house for Graham and Ann Kemble Welch. It has been remarked of the Group that, despite their calls for an indigenous architecture, their emphasis on rationality and adherence to modularity are characteristics that privilege the universal rather than the local.²¹ Writing to Graham Kemble Welch in March 1955, Wilson stated, 'the house as we have suggested it, we have proceeded from two possible analyses of the site'.²² The archival record includes four plan sketches of

the site, by Wilson. These sketches, the roughness of which indicates that they were done at an early site visit, included not only dimensional information, such as distance to boundaries and levels, but also the location of rocks and, more particularly, trees, including species names and sizes. The sketch designs, which Wilson forwarded with the letter quoted above, included trees, plants and rocks in plan and perspective.²³ Strewe was not directly involved, but this project represents

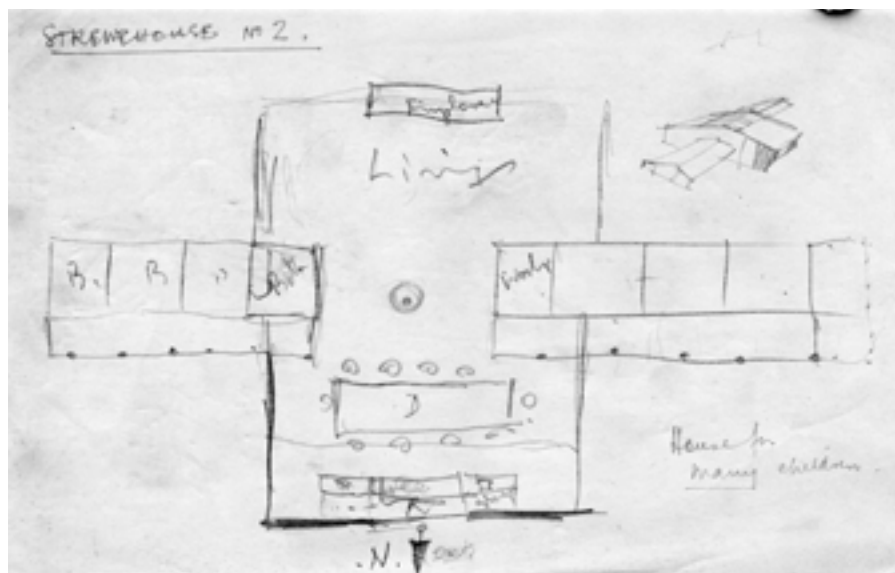
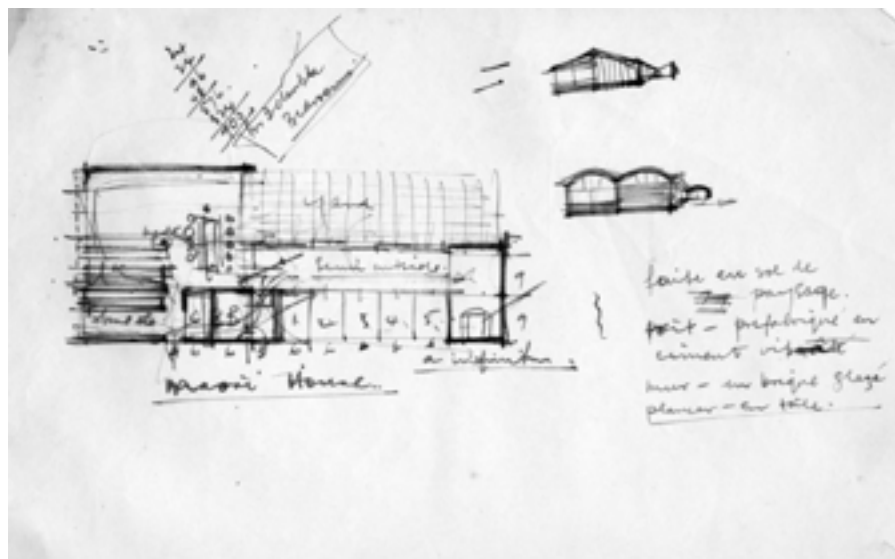


Wilson's plan and perspective for the Kemble Welch House, including rocks, trees and other landscape elements. GP90, UoA Architecture Archive.

The Kemble Welch House when recently completed. Kemble Welch Family Collection.

a shift in the information Wilson records and presents about the site. Prior to this, apart from the Tremewan House, records in the archive and formal contract drawings by Wilson refer only to site dimensions and topography. Undoubtedly, the Whangarei site was a powerful one, located on a knoll and containing volcanic rock outcrops; but this significant increase in recorded information about landscape suggests that, in this interdisciplinary exchange between them, Wilson was learning from Strewe about the media of landscape. However, this may be oversimplifying the situation, as both the clients were deeply involved in versions of landscape: Graham Kemble Welch was a doctor but also an amateur landscape painter who had been published in *Landfall*;²⁴ his wife, Ann, was an avid gardener and the granddaughter of Thomas Mawson, who became the founding president of the British Institute of Landscape Architects in 1929.²⁵ Both Strewe and the Kemble Welches account for the significant increase of landscape presence in this project.





One of Wilson's sketches for barrel-vaulted Māori housing, this one annotated in French. Wilson Plans File, Group Box 13, UoA Architecture Archive.

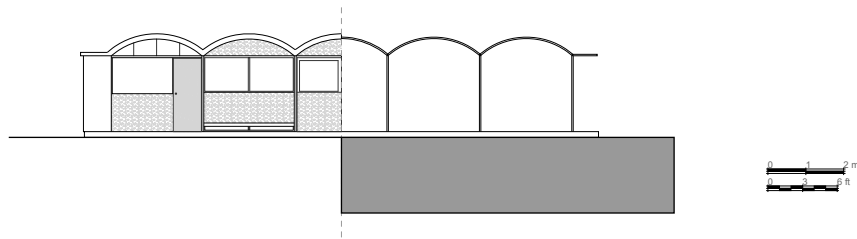
'Strewe House No. 2: House for many children'. Wilson Personal File, Group Box 13, UoA Architecture Archive.

STREWE HOUSES

These interdisciplinary resonances also affected architecture. The University of Auckland Architecture Archive contains files named 'Wilson Plans' and 'Wilson Sketches'. They include two pages – slightly less than A5 in size – of sketch plans, sections, elevations and notes titled 'Maori Housing'. They are explorations of planning and formal possibilities using a bay system covered by barrel-vaulted roofs. Notes on the drawings list the qualities required for Māori housing. One includes a material list for the project, written in French. This collection of sketches also contains two different plans for a Strewe house. Both of the plans are drawn by Strewe: one is dated September 1953; the other is titled by Wilson, 'Strewe House No. 2', and subtitled, 'House for many children'. There are multiple influences and explorations going on here. The formal and material influences appear to come from Le Corbusier's production, in the 1930s, of what Frampton refers to as his 'archaic' works,²⁶ the best known of which is the single-storey, vaulted, turf-covered Petite Maison de Weekend at La Celle St Cloud (1935). The annotations in French strengthen this suggestion. There are other resonances: Wilson's plan for a 'Maori House' shows a line of five single bedrooms annotated 'a [sic] infinitum', the implication being that this bedroom wing could be extended to house even more children. The 'Strewe House No. 2', with its annotation by Wilson, 'House for many children', connects these projects, suggesting that, with Strewe's collaboration, Wilson is using Strewe's project to experiment, to test a house for the local outsider (Māori), in order to realise the possibilities of architectural modernism's social project. There are other possible explorations: Wilson himself was married with four children by this time and the project may have been a covert way of investigating a 'Wilson House'.

Barrel-vaulted roofs, in what is thought to be the Group's only realisation of this element other than the Juriss Studio at Stanley Bay, appeared at the new Strewe property in Scenic Drive, Titirangi. The Chicken House (1954–55) was an 'experimental building in sprayed aerated concrete' over a





TOP Part elevation, part section of the Streve Chicken House at 1:200. The building never housed chickens, but is remembered as the site of many great parties. GP111; redrawn by Ian Scott, © UoA Architecture Archive.

Streve's restaurant, 'Odo's', remained unbuilt. Streve House File, Group Box 11, UoA Architecture Archive.

steel mesh called 'Colterro'.²⁷ The structure was a galvanised steel pipe frame, a barrel-vaulted version of the pipe-frame pergola that Streve and Wilson had used in the Tremewan House and at the Mormon Chapel. In this case, the normally exposed landscape structure became the enclosed structural frame for the architecture. The Chicken House served as temporary accommodation for the Streve family until they finally moved into a new house on the same site in the summer of 1955–56; thereafter it was accommodation for guests and members of the landscape workforce.

While Streve was innovating structurally and constructionally (he built the Chicken House with the help of his landscape construction team), he also attempted to start a restaurant on the property, to be called 'Odo's'. Designed by Wilson, with family accommodation below, it was timber-framed, clerestoried and showed all the structural rigour typical of the Group. The proposal contained a plant-filled conservatory at the front entrance, and there are coloured perspective presentation sketches by Wilson showing significant landscape development for both the restaurant and the living accommodation.

However, the restaurant did not proceed and was replaced by a stand-alone, single dwelling of modest size, also designed by Wilson. The new house was sited on top of the knoll, thus reasserting the importance of family and the domestic over the fraught commercial possibilities of the restaurant. This time, the structural system was the preserve of the architect – a rigorously modulated, light timber frame. A photograph in the family album shows the Streves outside their completed dwelling: the French doors to the bedrooms are open, the mudguard and headlight of Streve's Fordson work van intrude organically into the frame, the crazy paving is pointed with white cement to articulate the contour of the stones, and fairy bamboo and Abyssinian banana palms surround the family. For both men, this new family home and landscape signifies the conclusion of a period of intense professional work together (1952–56), where they learned reciprocally about landscape and architecture.





An early colour photograph of the Streve House. Streve Family Collection.

Streve's postcard to Wilson:
'Mediocre Auckland. Viva Italia.'
Group Architects File, Group Box 3,
UoA Architecture Archive.



CONCLUSION

Late in 1956, Streve returned to Germany, visiting a country he had not seen for twenty years. Intent on maintaining contact with the Group, he sent postcards from the boat. Another, sent once he got to Berlin, illustrated the recently completed modernist tower, Torre Breda, by Gio Ponti in Milan and had the following message on the back: 'Milano What a city what architecture! Mediocre Auckland. Viva Italia. Odo.'²⁸

Streve returned to New Zealand in 1958, but there is little evidence of joint work by Wilson and Streve beyond this time.²⁹ There are a number of reasons for this. In the early days of his design career, the Group's agenda of functionalism and efficient planning aligned strongly with Streve's own European modernist views. However, the Group's search for New

Zealandness would have been problematic for him for, like many who had suffered at the hands of the Nazi regime, he was wary of nationalist tendencies. He was personally and politically outspoken and, as his design confidence grew, his ambition extended beyond Wilson's belief in an 'architecture with a small a' and his rejection of the aesthetics of personal expression.³⁰ During the same period, landscape architecture was increasingly influenced by a broad-leafed tropicality generated in California and Brazil, and it was with this formal and material palette that Streve developed a significant reputation during the 1960s. Although the discourse and the friendship with Bill Wilson continued, the collaborative work did not. Streve continued to practise in Auckland until leaving to live and work in Australia in 1970, where he remained until his death in 1985.

