

# The same but different; the Plischke Gray House and Studio.

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## **Abstract**

*This paper documents the last house designed in New Zealand by émigré architect Ernst Plischke before his return to Austria in 1963, and additions and alterations to the house by Wellington Architect John Gray from 2004 – 2008. Plischke and Gray’s drawings, interviews with Gray, and the evidence provided by the original house are measured against the altered and extended house and principles of the ICOMOS NZ Charter. Additional knowledge of an important lesser known house with positive and negative qualities augments Plischke’s carefully edited oeuvre suggesting that his practice in New Zealand was more diverse than the historical record to date indicates. The house is also discussed as an exemplar of issues associated with the restoration and redesign of major scale contemporary adaptations to modest historic fabric. Gray’s critical design based research and his negotiation between original and new work emerge as key tactics available to architects in the difficult position of major adaptation to the work of a master.*

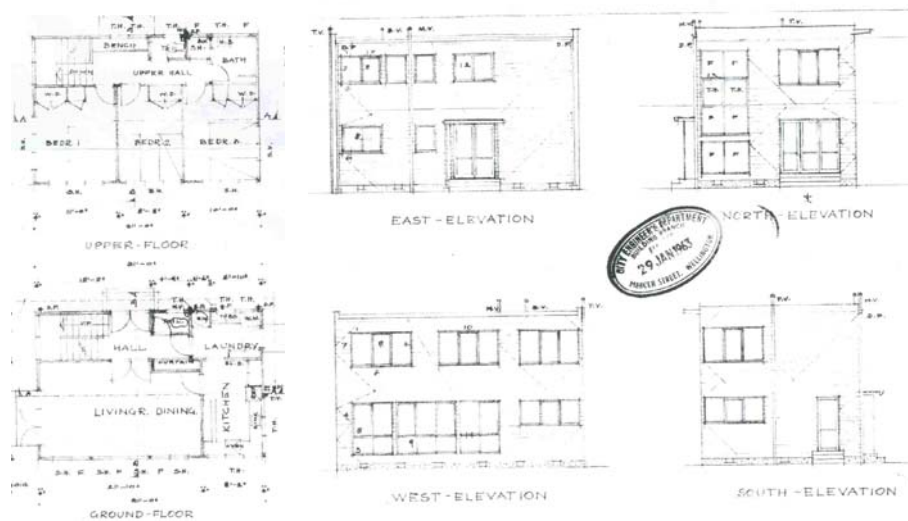
## **44 Moana Road**



**Figure 1** Plischke Gray House 2011  
(Anne Noble)

“The political history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century divide the life and work of Austrian architect Ernst Plischke (1903 – 1992) into three phases. The years of education and initial success in Austria were followed from 1939 to 1963 by emigration to New Zealand and, finally, by his return to Vienna as professor of Architecture at the academie der bildenden Kunste<sup>1</sup>.”

The last house realised by Ernst Plischke in New Zealand prior to returning to Austria is located at 44 Moana Road Kelburn and has not until recently been recognised as a Plischke house<sup>2</sup> despite being next door to other Plischke designed houses.<sup>3</sup> Scholar and architect John Gray has documented the circumstances of the houses design and construction<sup>4</sup> and problems Plischke experienced with the client, budget, and builder. The Wellington City Council archive plans from E.A. Plischke, a signed and hand written notation in the specification that the builder was to be responsible for all costs associated with moving the building location at his suggestion, and a client memoir from Gisi Hirschfeld noting the houses design by Plischke prove the source of the design beyond doubt.



**Figure 2.** Original floor plans. (*Office of E.A.Plischke 1963.*)

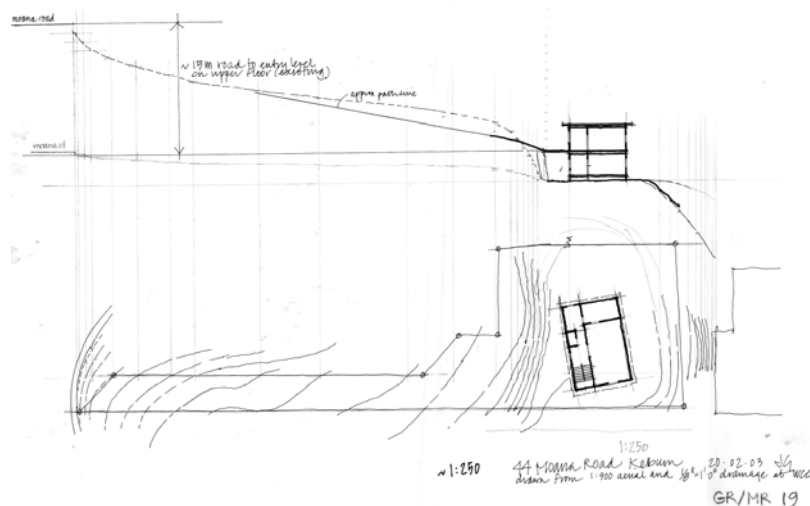
**Figure 3.** Original Elevations. (*Office of E.A.Plischke 1963.*)

“We had Plischke design another house for us on a useless bit of the section at Moana Road after we were established for a while, and my son wanted to come with his family and stay a while. We decided to build a cheaper house there, and whereas our house had special fittings, the other was just a standard house, yet it was another splendid house he built for us again.”<sup>5</sup>

The original house had three bedrooms, a small bathroom and a study niche on the first floor, and a small separate toilet on each level stacked one above the other. It had a beautifully detailed stair and stairwell space positioned directly to the north. The lower level had an open plan living area with a separate kitchen. Simple economic materials such as plywood panels and doors, and basic locksets were used throughout the project. The elevations had a simple aesthetic composition based on a repeated proportional system and simple timber detailing similar to that used on the exterior of the adjacent Plischke houses.

### Recent additions and alterations

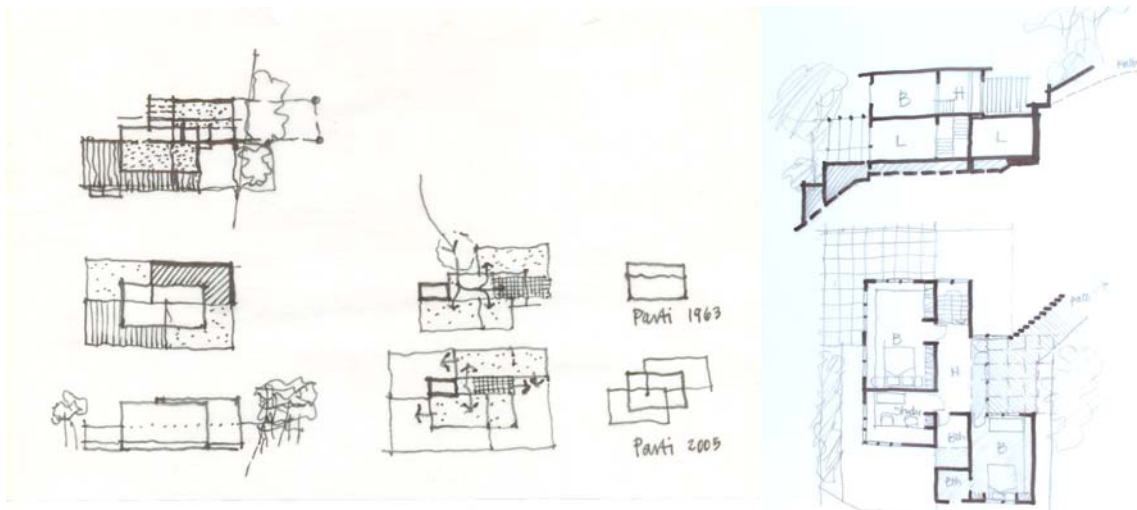
The 2004-2008 generation of work to the existing house is the focus of this paper. Gray's critical alteration and additions will be recorded as a case study to document the house as historical record, and tease out issues associated with the design of major scale contemporary changes to modest historic fabric. Gray's critique of the house as designed and realised, and the series of design changes that occurred during or soon after its construction included the following. The resiting of the house further from the road and with a change to the house orientation, the omission of a window on the South Elevation, the slight moving of a window on the West Elevation, the reversal of the slight roof fall from east to west, the addition of a bridge and first floor access to the house and mirroring of the stair access direction. Despite the changes that had occurred between the design and building and in the period since, the house in 2003 remained relatively true to Plischke's original design and clearly recognisable as such.



**Figure 4** Existing site sketch (John Gray 2003)

The house was sited badly on a narrow bench cut into a sloping site with a western orientation. There were also planning problems. A simple two floor stacked plan had living areas on the lower floor and sleeping accommodation on the first floor. The main entry on the ground floor east directly faced the cut in the slope, so the main access was down a long

sloping path, a set of exterior steps, then through the cut behind the house. A narrow bridge had been constructed from the path directly into the first floor of the house as the house was completed or soon after. This resulted in an entrance through what was the study niche directly into the passage opposite the bedrooms. Inadequate ventilation resulted in excessive moisture and mould build up, and no insulation combined with the western orientation resulted in extreme temperature fluctuations. The house also lacked access to exterior habitable space. It was as if the house had been designed for an ideal flat site and then not adapted to suit its actual steep site.



**Figure 5.** Parti sketches. (John Gray 2004.)  
**Figure 6.** Plan and section. (John Gray 2004.)

### Gray's research and design

Gray studied the existing house, its condition and its context. He also studied Plischke and his work.<sup>6</sup> He then designed a series of different ways to alter and add to the house. Major strategies Gray considered were; inverting the upper and lower planning so that living areas co-incident with the entry level and the sleeping areas were at the lower level, adding a third new bedroom level over the entry level, and building into the gap behind the house. Gray's analysis identified the original house parti and arrived at a clear new parti that would differentiate the existing and the new, require the least possible change to the existing and give a clear strategy for dealing with the required works for the different parts of the building. New volume was to be minimised, a new contrasting volume was to be slipped behind the house in the space between the house and a steep bank, and a new outdoor living area was to be added in front of the house. This was to occur in a scale and manner that allowed the original house form to be primary and to remain legible. Additional space for a guest room and studio would be designed as a discreet building on site that would operate in association with the house but be separate from it.

### **Work within the existing.**

Work within the house preserved, restored or altered the existing fabric. The significant qualities, spaces and architectural elements were faithfully retained and restored to the extent possible. These included the stair, the living room, the building planning and the houses pure form and proportions. The stair was dismantled, restored and reassembled. The exterior walls were refurbished and upgraded with insulation, and double glazing was retrofitted. A special double glazing edge design allowed the glass to be housed within the existing window rebates and created a subtle difference to the original so the change is legible. Design changes that had occurred over time were left in place or altered to suit the needs of the existing and new design. For example the left hand upper window of the west facing elevation of the house had been built out of line with the location shown in Plischke's original design but was left in place. In another situation a new window was inserted into an upper bedroom on the south face as per Plischke's original design drawings. The added bridge and pergola elements were retained but adapted to a revised 2004 design. The existing house planning remained substantially unchanged except for the minimum changes necessary to adapt the house to contemporary living needs. The intention was to modify as little as possible. The lower floor planning remained including the general kitchen layout but with new fittings and the wall between the kitchen and the living room replaced with glass shelving to create a connection between the kitchen and living areas. The bench adjacent to the dining room is tiled using the same tiny mosaics Plischke used in adjacent houses. Tim Nees architect, the son of the craftsman who had completed similar work for Plischke was contracted to design and construct the mosaics.



**Figure 7.** Plischke Gray House Interior towards kitchen 2009  
(*Dr Rosangela Tenorio*)

Upstairs a similar tactic was applied. The bedroom locations remain with a wall between two of them removed to create more space. Details commonly used by Plischke such as bookcases below windows and a built in make up cabinet<sup>7</sup> were introduced within the new space but with a twist; the introduction of a deep 10mm negative detail between the bookcase top and carcass. The detail subtly changes the composition, and allows its design origins in architect John Gray to be read. The most significant changes are in the upper floor entry. An upstairs toilet cubicle was removed to expand the entry space and acknowledge the reality of the house upper level entry and provide a scale in proportion to its use. The existing plywood doors to the bedrooms had the paint removed and the walls beside are lined with matching plywood panels so that together they form a timber panelled wall masking the existing bedroom doors opposite the entry. A new high gloss Formica ceiling with a wide negative perimeter detail was inserted below the existing ceiling reflecting the height of the entrance space, stair and vertical north facing window, increasing the light and apparent volume of the space. Gray's new design elements within the space adopt a Plischke spirit often with subtle differentiations that make it clear that the work is new.



**Figure 8.** Plischke house stair (*Dr Rosangela Tenorio*).

**Figure 9.** Plischke Gray House Entrance 2011  
(*Anne Noble*)

### **Additions**

Additions attached to the existing house are treated in a similar but more explicit manner to the interior insertions. They are a discrete complementary yet contrasting new generation of work. The exterior of the major addition to the rear retains the same pared back economic spirit as the existing house, but is hidden against the bank and where visible contrasts with the existing house materials and colours. The proportions and scale of the new addition are based on the existing building form and proportions. The materials and colours are different



yet as equally modest and restrained as Plischke's original house design. Flat sheets with negative joints painted a mid grey colour clad the walls, and rubber sheet roofing contrast clearly with the original materials. On the ground floor the existing pergola and glass screen are relocated and extended creating a north and west outdoor living area and providing some relief from the low northwest sun. On the first floor the access bridge is extended to create an entrance courtyard with a pergola over and a new screen wall to the north. The design of the pergolas and screens is based on the existing and the design of similar elements in other Plischke houses. The conceptual separation of old and new continues inside where the grey walls continue to differentiate new from existing. Red stained plywood ceilings and dark grey walls create more intimate evening spaces that contrast clearly with the open sun filled daytime spaces of the original house.



**Figure 10.** Plischke Gray House 2011 (*Anne Noble*)

### **The Studio**

A new three floor studio building has also been built on site as a means to reduce the scale of the addition required to the Plischke house. The building contains a cardeck, a photography studio and workroom, a guest bedroom and bathroom suite, and a bloke's shed. This separation and relocation of some of the new brief volume is important to the alterations and additions to the original house, allowing them to be of relatively modest scale and volume, ensuring that the original house is not overwhelmed by the new work. Gray's studio building design was influenced by what he learnt from studying Plischke and the parallel house additions and alterations project. The elevation and window proportions, and the design simplicity relate clearly to the original house yet a more contemporary and assertive architectural presence also emerges. Very thin copper shim is resourcefully applied as layered rain screen cladding strips over a plywood cladding.

A lift shaft is expressed outside the main volume, clad in the same weatherboard as the house. On the interior of the studio modest pine plywood ceilings are stained green extending the view through the trees inside. Studio walls are clad with polystyrene insulation as finished surfaces, providing an elegant and economic pinable acoustic lining solution. The aesthetic here is developed from eking out and expressing the simple beauty of function and use with a similar spirit to Plischke.



**Figure 11.** Gray Noble Studio Elevation study (*John Gray 2004*)

**Figure 12.** Gray Noble Studio 2009 (*Dr Rosangela Tenorio*)

### **Adaptation**

An architect for a new generation of work to existing historic fabric is faced with the existing characteristics of the architecture in a changed contemporary context. The historic value of architectural fabric and its constituent parts varies and can be quantified according to agreed standards and guidelines<sup>8</sup> where the historic value of a project is recognised. In the 44 Moana Road case the house had not been considered important by Plischke or historians to date, and the extent of technical alteration and the area of additions required to ensure continuing use was significant. Degrees of intervention for conservation purposes when altering places of cultural heritage value are defined by principle 17 of the ICOMOS New Zealand Charter<sup>9</sup> which is clear that the least degree of intervention possible should be applied, from defined categories preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation. Adaptation is the process involving the most change and this becomes problematic when the extent of change is significant and introduces new design work as was required at 44 Moana Road. The project highlights issues and opportunities faced when adapting historic fabric.



“Adaptation means the process(es) of modifying a place for a compatible use while retaining its cultural heritage value. Adaptation processes include alteration and addition.”<sup>10</sup>

Comprehensive definitions and guidelines for adaptation are also noted in the ICOMOS NZ Charter<sup>11</sup> and provide a baseline that changes made to the Plischke Gray house design will be measured against.

### **Questions emerging from the case study**

The determination of the significance of the existing fabric and its parts, of what was essential to restore and retain was a key question. No formal planning for conservation<sup>12</sup> documentation and archiving, or recording<sup>13</sup> was considered necessary at the time the project was begun. Documentation of existing material and identification of the cultural heritage significance of the architecture and its key elements occurred as the project proceeded but was not systematic or documented formally as it could usefully have been.

A related issue was how to balance the extent of alteration and addition that was required and acceptable. To what extent should the removal of original material and adaptation of the space occur? How do you determine the acceptable extent of design editing? For example the kitchen was completely separated from the living areas, and had outdated appliances and fittings out of step with contemporary cultural expectations. Removing the wall changed the spatial proportions, but retained the planning. Minimum intervention<sup>14</sup> suggests the least possible loss of existing fabric and this idea was also important to Gray. The risk was that the extent of alteration and new work would overwhelm the existing.

Issues arose regarding what to restore and reconstruct, and how? For example should the bridge be removed to reinstate Plischke’s original design intentions? And how should required technical and environmental performance improvements such as double glazing, insulation and new finishes be made with minimum impact? Respect for surviving evidence and knowledge<sup>15</sup> requires recognition of the contribution of all periods. The new design in one case reinstates according to the original design, (the south window) mostly retains post original design changes, (the west upper window, stair and roof fall) and reserves the greatest extent of alteration for the post design generation of work (the bridge and North pergolas). Critical judgement has been applied to minimise the effects of recent changes on Plischke’s original design and minimise the extent of alteration, yet achieve maximum useful design improvement.

Original and new work sometimes risk becoming conflated here, yet most often there are deliberate subtle differences in the design of the new and existing elements. Legibility of what is original and new is for the most part apparent, but sometimes requires specialist knowledge or commentary to identify the differences.

How to alter and add to the existing architecture to enable its ongoing use<sup>16</sup> is the critical issue. The ICOMOS NZ charter notes that new work should be minimised, reversible, not affect the cultural heritage values, and be compatible and complementary with the original form and fabric. The work undertaken was to a modest building in use, and of a scale and type that was not reversible. The work undertaken is however both compatible and complementary to the existing. Through close attention to his existing work, the project, reading and research, and through people associated with Plischke and examination of other Plischke projects Architect John Gray gained knowledge of how Plischke worked, and potential to apply Plischke's sensibility to new design work. This raised the question should the new work be a discrete design generation, or follow after the style or spirit of Plischke? The risk here was the recreation of a contemporary imitation of a Plischke design that obscured the qualities of the original.

Architect Alistair Luke argues that when dealing with ongoing use of a significant historic design nuanced judgement by highly skilled architects is required, and that this skill may not always be held by conservation architects whose priority is to avoid intervention. He terms the process of change for contemporary use as dynamic restoration. Luke's 2003 version of the Sutch-Smith House matches contemporary changes with the historical to the point of deception. Luke is at odds with Historic Places trust staff over this type of adaption of significant historic fabric at the Henderson house.<sup>17</sup> It is hard to imagine this philosophy being acceptable when applied to Aalto's Maison Louis Carre, The Rietveld Schroder House, or Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy. These three houses now operate as museums and have not needed to be altered for continuing use. They demonstrate pure conservation and its inflexibility, architecture frozen in a moment in time. Luke's alternative argument for dynamic restoration is anti historical, erasing the marks of history visible in the changes that occur over time, and recreating a contemporary seamless work that conflates the work of different architects and periods. The Plischke Gray house demonstrates a third way that critically negotiates between past and present design generations minimising and balancing the inevitable compromises to the conflicting needs of each. The original scale and qualities of Plischke's design remain clear despite the changes and a subtle increase in the quality of built in fittings and finishes within the original house. Gray's contributions to the design are clearly defined architecturally, and can be measured along side the work of Plischke.

With historic fabric it is the changes that have occurred to the fabric over time as a result of its use that testify to its history and make it legible. The house as existing and its post design additions remain as evidence of the original designs immediate shortcomings. The omission of a project from the record of an architect who was so careful with the archiving and presentation of his work<sup>18</sup> suggests that Plischke did not want to have his association with this house remembered as has occurred with other Plischke projects.<sup>19</sup> This may be because of changes that occurred between its design and construction, or simply because of the houses modesty or that he did not consider it his best work. It may also be that the historical record is discontinuous for other reasons, for example the project plans being left with a New Zealand based architect such as Bob Fantl to supervise the latter parts of the construction when Plischke returned to Vienna?<sup>20</sup> These questions enhance the houses importance historically, and its place in a more complete version of history. Further study of this house and similar lesser known Plischke houses may yield a slightly different story of the transitional phase of Plischke's work before his return to Vienna than has yet been documented. There is also the possibility of additional research to be done on Plischke's low budget houses of which this is one.<sup>21</sup>

Adaptation processes are not as straight forward as cultural heritage assessments and historic preservation guidelines suggest. Major adaptation necessarily results in hybrid authorship reflecting the sensibility of both original and adaptation architects as is the case in the Plischke Gray House. It is a matter of judgement weighing existing heritage values against present requirements. Gray's design based research proved a successful way to determine what should be edited and how because it extensively tested and assessed alternative design proposals and details ahead of changes being made. This enabled the least possible change and impact on the existing for the greatest improvement in terms of present needs. Grays addition and new studio building models how to address issues associated with altering historic fabric with restraint and clarity using the separate adjacent building, the contrasting addition and the subtle design twist as design tactics to ensure the legibility of both generations of work. It also contains some sublime spaces and is worthy of further study for its architectural qualities. The new work is complementary yet remains legible, the same but different. The house has been updated in a manner that respects its historicity, accommodates its ongoing use, and that will extend its life expectancy, and its audience.

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- <sup>1</sup> August Sarnitz & Eva B Ottillinger, *Ernst Plischke; the complete works* p7.
- <sup>2</sup> The house is not mentioned in Plischke's writing, included in the archive in Vienna, or listed in Sarnitz and Ottillinger's catalogue of Plischke's works *Ernst Plischke; the complete works*.
- <sup>3</sup> The AD Priestley house of 1951 and the Hirschfeld House 1956.
- <sup>4</sup> John Gray, *On being apprenticed to Ernst Plischke*, The problem of Plischke symposium, Alan MacDermid Building VUW 19 Feb 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> Gisa Hirschfeld, Ernst Plischke's Hirschfeld House (1956): A Client's Memoir, *Modern New Zealand*, issue 4 Dec 1995 pg13
- <sup>6</sup> John Gray, *On being apprenticed to Mr Plischke* The problem of Plischke symposium, Alan MacDermid Building VUW 19 Feb 2011, and interviews with the author March 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> Similar to the Plischke design in the adjacent AD Priestley house and the Sutch -Smith house.
- <sup>8</sup> Guidelines for investigation, recording and assessment of buildings, preparing conservation plans and assessing cultural heritage significance of buildings are published as a series of documents published by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. These documents define the standard practices and procedures used in conservation architecture in New Zealand.
- <sup>9</sup> The International council on monuments and sites New Zealand ICOMOS NZ Charter (based on the 1964 ICOMOS Venice charter) is a set of principles and guidelines on cultural heritage conservation. The NZ Charter is widely used in the New Zealand heritage sector including local Government and the NZ historic Places trust and forms a recognised benchmark for conservation principles and practice.
- <sup>10</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Definitions p9.
- <sup>11</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* p7-8 "Alterations and additions may be acceptable where they are necessary for a compatible use of the place. Any change should be the minimum necessary, should be substantially reversible, and should have little or no adverse effect on the cultural heritage value of the place. Any alterations or additions should be compatible with the original form and fabric of the place, and should avoid inappropriate or incompatible contrasts of form, scale, mass, colour, and material. Adaptation should not dominate or substantially obscure the original form and fabric, and should not adversely affect the setting of a place of cultural heritage value. New work should complement the original form and fabric".
- <sup>12</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Principle 4 p2.
- <sup>13</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Principle 11, and 12 p4.
- <sup>14</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Principle 6 p3.
- <sup>15</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Principle 5 p3.
- <sup>16</sup> ICOMOS New Zealand Charter, *International council on monuments & sites New Zealand Charter* Principle 8 p3.
- <sup>17</sup> Alister Luke, *The restoration of Sutch - Smith House and Henderson House* The problem of Plischke symposium, Alan MacDermid Building VUW 19 Feb 2011.
- <sup>18</sup> August Sarnitz & Eva B Ottillinger, *Ernst Plischke; the complete works* p7.
- <sup>19</sup> Tony Richardson *Hidden Heritage; the Hamilton Work of E.A Plischke* p75 notes that the Pickard House receives no mention in Plischkes writings and suggests that Plischke disowned that project.
- <sup>20</sup> Plischke sometimes used other architects to supervise construction works on his projects for example the Pickards and Henderson houses, Tony Richardson *Hidden Heritage; the Hamilton Work of E.A Plischke* p73.
- <sup>21</sup> Bob Fantl in 'Plischke Revisited' Tommy Honey *Home and Entertaining*, August / September 2004,p44.