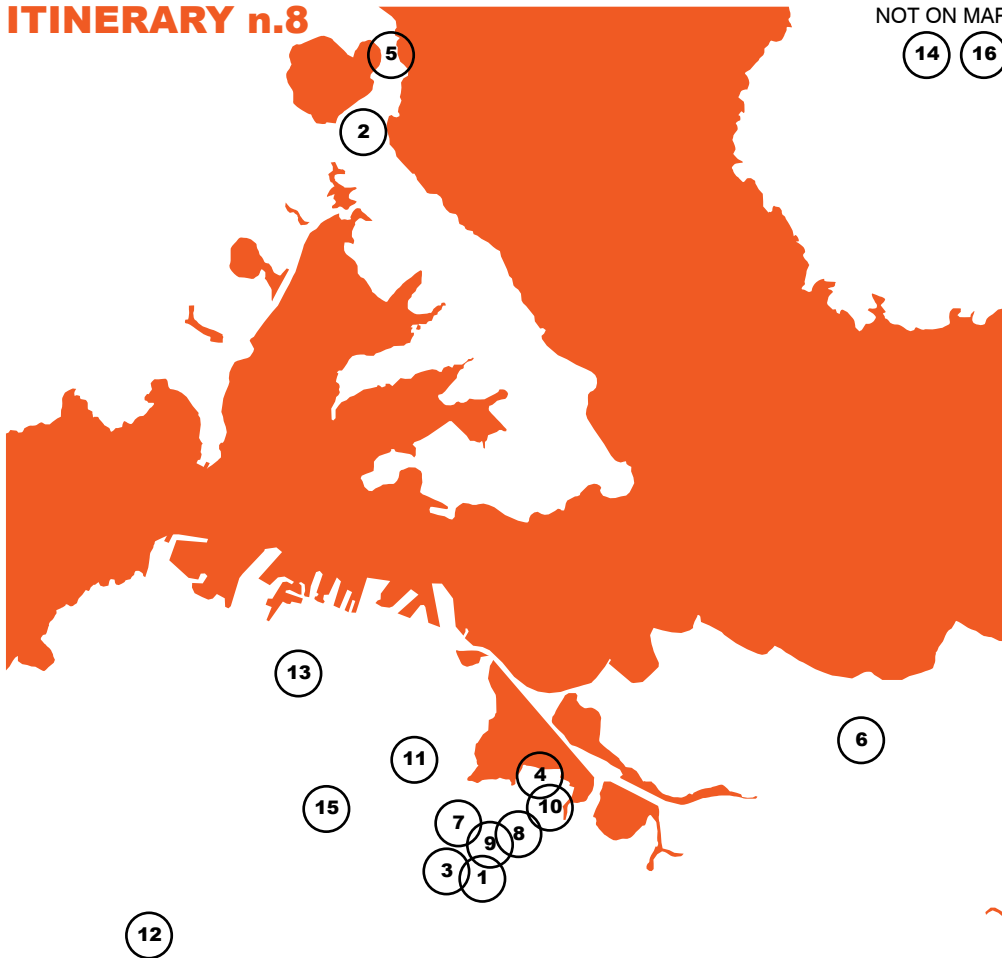


## ITINERARY n.8



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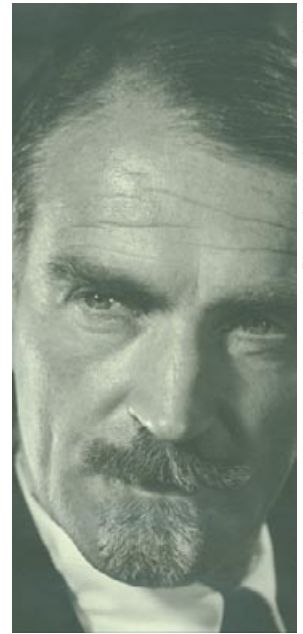


Photo: Auckland Architecture Archive

Timed to coincide with Architecture Week, an exhibition entitled *From the Architecture Archive: Vernon Brown* runs from October 12<sup>th</sup> to November 24<sup>th</sup> at the University of Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery on Shortland Street. For more information see [www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz).

## Vernon Brown in Auckland

Standing 1.8 metres tall, Vernon Brown was a towering presence in New Zealand design for over two decades. His opinionated writing and pithy broadcasts helped him achieve a national audience for his radical ideas on modern design, and his memorable aphorisms include: "The roof was low-pitched because there is no snow in Arney Road" and "machine nonsense...is in danger of driving the whole of architecture down to the level of a streamlined WC pan." Despite being best known for his creosoted "Brown" boxes with white trim which have been described as looking like coconuts with bites taken out, Vernon Brown never entirely abandoned the English Georgian idiom. Clients who wanted a traditional look got pastel weatherboards, shuttered casement windows and a pitched tiled roof (see the Sandringham house and surgery for Dr. Rosten, 1946, or the Hamblin House, 1943, St. Heliers).

Yet, regardless of their look, the houses are all unmistakably modern in planning. He complained in an essay for *Art in New Zealand* that the worst influence on housing in New Zealand was the obsession with fronting up to the street. House, windows, garden, curtains were all dressed for the street view, he said, railing that it was nonsensical that there should be still backs and fronts to our houses. Designing from the inside was the only way to overcome this limitation, using glass partitions and mirrors to fill interior spaces with natural light and orienting the rooms to sun and garden through large sliding doors and corner windows. Social life was to be facilitated by house design, and Vernon Brown liked nothing better than a good party.

He was at the epicentre of Auckland society in the 1950s, as Eric McCormick describes: "...that little group of Aucklanders presided over by Mr ARD Fairburn, whose bodily ailments are diagnosed by Mr Douglas Robb, whose literary productions are printed by Mr R W Lowry, whose habitations are designed by Mr Vernon Brown, whose legal affairs are disentangled by Mr F H Haigh, whose persons and whose inner lives are portrayed in the fiction of Mr Frank Sargeson." Indeed, Brown did design a house for Frank and Honey Haigh in Bell Road Remuera in 1942 – now shifted out to the Kaipara where it has become bed and breakfast accommodation – and additions and alterations to Bob Lowry's house in One Tree Hill in 1947, both sites for legendary social gatherings. Frank Sargeson rejected Brown's designs as too bourgeois – "Bloody Vernon! He's given me a terrazzo sink!" – but houses in Forrest Hill for writers R.A.K. Mason and Maurice Duggan remain as Stockholm-tar finished testaments to the importance of good architecture in this period of New Zealand's cultural history.

Very few of Vernon Brown's domestic designs have survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century unscathed. Of the 50 identified in Christina Troup's excellent 1978 inventory, less than half remain. Only one (his own 1939 house at 91 Arney Road) has a Historic Places Trust registration. Unfortunately, his well-heeled clientele hailed mostly from the Eastern suburbs where the pressure of development has supplanted what he used to like to describe as unpretentious loaves of wholemeal bread with latter day ephemeral confections as insubstantial and overly sweet as sponge cake. *Linda Tyler*

## Biography:

Born in Liverpool on 23 March 1905, Vernon Akitt Brown studied architecture at Northern Polytechnic in London joining the Society of Architects by the age of nineteen in 1924. Emigrating to Auckland in 1927 he became an A.R.I.B.A. in 1930 and weathered the Depression to become a Registered Architect in 1937. Joining T.E. Norman Wade in practice in 1937, he had responsibility for the design of new premises for Caxton Printing Works in Federal Street, a fit-out for L.D. Nathan's Shipping Office in Queen Street, and the Auckland Glass Company in Hobson Street. Despite these commercial successes, it was domestic architecture that was to dominate his career with the award of a Bronze Medal for his own house at 91 Arney Road in 1940. Studio instructor at the School of Architecture from August 1942, he continued his practice in partnership with Robin Simpson until the latter's death in 1947, his busiest years. Another Bronze Medal was awarded for the Lemon House in St. Stephen's Avenue in 1946, just one of around 70 domestic designs completed before his own early death at the age of 59 years in 1965.

1

1938

Architect's Own House  
54 Bell Road, Remuera



The first of three houses he designed for himself and his family, although substantially altered it is still recognisable as being in his stripped Georgian style. It was built the year after his marriage to Lesley Waller in Remuera in 1937, and sandblasted onto the entrance way windows were symbols for their astrological signs: Aries for him, Virgo for her. Brown was a competent watercolourist, with a work purchased by the Auckland Art Gallery in 1936 and council membership of the Auckland Society of Arts since 1933, so room to paint at home was important, as was light, admitted here by large sash windows which open onto views over Hobson Bay.

2

1939

Mrs G. Thorne-George House  
18 Campbell Road, Takapuna

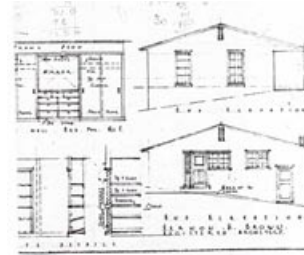


Designed for the widow of a descendant of former Governor Sir George Grey, this house on the hill behind Takapuna township enjoys views over Thorne Bay from the lounge, sun porch and balcony, and Lake Pupuke from the kitchen at the back. It was published in *Home & Building* in May 1939 in an article entitled "...A Pair of Modern Houses". Brown's text which accompanies the exterior photographs argues that while "a modern denial of style ... is necessary", a wooden house should not pretend to be anything else or snub its origins. Hence the board and batten dressing on the gables of this house, the casement windows on the upper storey and shutters and sashes below.

3

1939

Architect's Own House  
91 Arney Road, Remuera



With a low pitched corrugated asbestos roof, and plenty of built in furniture, this house was built across the section with the main room at the north end, an L shape running the full width of the plan. Entering the house through the rear from Arney Road, a hall separated from the dining room by a book case and decorative glass screen brought visitors into what Vernon Brown considered the hub of family life. A large verandah and long thin nursery are at the front of the house to catch the sun. This house won the NZIA Bronze Medal for domestic architecture in 1940 and has a Category I Historic Places Trust listing.

4

1941

Architect's Own House  
334 Victoria Avenue, Remuera



Photo: Frank Hoffmann

Built on the edge of Hobson Bay on a long narrow section, the house is oriented to the sun and water. Only the hall and stairs are on the south side. The base of the house was brick with wood framing sheathed with cedar ship lap above, stained with a mixture of creosote and Stockholm tar, and allowed to weather. The last house that Brown built for his family of five, it had four small bedrooms and a large master bedroom. Wartime economy drove the design and the dining room again was the centre, "an all purpose room giving access to a covered verandah" as he described it in *Home & Building* in 1942.

5

1942

Neville Wright House  
33 Kitchener Road, Takapuna



Built up on concrete piers on a 40-degree slope facing the sea and the north, this house has unrestricted views of Rangitoto. Weatherboarded with the characteristic creosote finish, in the west end is a small sun deck which opens off the dining area to give an outdoor eating area with a sea view. All windows facing the sea are double hung sashes, and the wide overhang was designed to shelter the house in its exposed situation. This house is still lived in by its original client. It is easily visible from the beachfront walk - while passing don't miss Mike Austin's neighbouring Chapple House, completed in 1967.

6

1943

Percy Hamblin House  
7 Tarawera Tce., Kohimarama

A boxy rectangle in form, the monopitch roof in the designs has been replaced by a low pitched concrete tiled gable. The upper level is dominated by a large sundeck almost the same width as the bedrooms with a roof overhang. Downstairs, three double hung sash windows on the north side allow maximum sun to enter the living room, with side opening casement windows adjacent for the all important dining area. Both the upstairs bedrooms have built in wardrobes and dressing tables.

7

1944

A.H. Winter House  
27 Arney Crescent, Remuera

Although this house has a Marshall Cook addition at the rear and is undergoing alteration at present, it retains much of its original character with a concrete tile, pitched roof, and large expanses of double-hung sash windows in blocks to the northwest corner allowing views over Hobson Bay and plentiful sun. The house sits up on a brick basement garage, and has been given a black and white Vernon Brown exterior colour scheme recently.

8

1945

Edna Birkinshaw House  
250 Victoria Avenue, Remuera



Photo: Sparrow Industrial Pictures

Dr. Edna McKenzie married novelist Fay Weldon's father, Frank Birkinshaw in 1941, and she bore him two further children, Barbara and Alan, who survived to adulthood despite living in this long, north facing, three bedroomed house with its precipitous unfenced concrete deck. With its monopitch roof and sliding glass doors, this was Vernon Brown's strongest modernist statement at this point, and shows considerable influence from Robin Simpson. A curving ply wall and inset Chinese ceramic panels are part of the unusual interior fittings, which also features recessed lighting, and glass walls dividing interior spaces. It appears to have been completed in 1950, and featured on the cover of *Home & Building* the next year, as well as being a full page illustration in the 1951 *Arts Year Book*.

9

1946

Helen Shaw and Frank Hoffmann House  
75 Bell Road, Remuera



Czechoslovakian born photographer Frank Hoffmann (1916-1989) was a Jewish refugee from Hitler who arrived in New Zealand in 1940, and found work in the Auckland studio of Clifton Firth. On Christmas Eve in 1941, he married the writer Helen Shaw (1920-1985), part of the musical, literary and artistic circle that included Vernon and Lesley Brown. From 1942, he began to overshadow Maja and Rowland Briery of Sparrow Industrial Pictures as Vernon Brown's preferred choice of photographer, often employing dramatic angles which exploited the contrasting black and white colour schemes of Brown's houses. This house has been substantially altered and the photographer's studio removed.

10

1946

C. Tidmarsh House  
3 Sonia Avenue, Remuera



Photo: Frank Hofmann

Using a monopitch roof on a two storeyed house for the first time, Vernon Brown here created an overhang to protect the upstairs bedrooms from the midday sun. Downstairs, a large living room and dining room occupy the front of the house, divided by an angled fireplace designed to heat both spaces, with large banks of windows going around the corner at each end. The lean-to carport was also innovative, with the main entry coming off it and bringing visitors into the side of the lounge by the stairs which are lit by a vertical strip of glazing to the south extending almost the full height of the house. Other Brown works nearby include the Dr. R. Anschutz House at 44 Ventnor Road and the Reg Savoy House at 38 Mainston Road (both of 1942).

11

1946

T.M. Hawes  
462 Parnell Road, Parnell



Timber-framed and finished in rough weatherboards, this house was painted white, with a roof of grey cement tiles, and an interior finish of fibrous plaster. Vernon Brown published photographs of the completed house in *Home & Building* in 1947, commenting on the modern convenience of radiant ceiling panels for heating and convection heating in the entrance hall, with ventilating pelmets above the casement door-windows at the front. The shower was encased in plate glass within a bathroom colour scheme of pale blue and off white walls with a deep red floor. Opening onto a secluded garden with mature fig and citrus trees, the house has views to Mt. Wellington and a "brick-paved boardwalk [which] runs the full length of the house, serving living and dining rooms."

12

1946

Dr. M. Rosten House & Surgery  
521 Sandringham Road,  
Sandringham



This two storeyed house with attached clinic at the corner of Halesowen and Sandringham Roads was originally designed to have a flat roof, but was altered in accordance with the client's wishes. Practising from home, this immigrant doctor wanted a separate entrance for his patients, and compact consulting rooms. Within a small area, Vernon Brown detailed an examination room and surgery and reception area for a nurse, and enlivened the space with an obliquely angled waiting room. The reception area had a doorway into the hall of the house so that bathroom conveniences could be shared, and the kitchen was also easily accessible.

13

1948

Auckland Glass Company  
124 Hobson Street, City



Built of concrete with a non-structural skin of glass and asbestos, columns and beams in this building were covered on the outside by plaster. On the ground floor was the general sales office, with office staff on a mezzanine with the manager and the glazing department. A showroom, studio, leadlight department and workshop were on the first floor, with a glass finishing department above on the second floor. The roof and structure allowed an extra level to be added later. In discussing the building in *Design Review*, D.G. Porter wrote: "In designing a city building on a section of limited frontage such as this, the architect is designing part of the street wall ... its quiet dignity offers opportunity for new buildings to live with it in harmony."

14

1949

Maurice & Barbara Duggan  
House  
48 Forrest Hill Rd, Forrest Hill



Photo: Barbara Duggan

Built for author and advertising man Maurice Duggan and his physiotherapist wife Barbara, this house has a low, single pitched roof, an open plan living area, and large sash windows with rough-sawn weatherboard walls. "House at Forrest Hill - quelle folie" Duggan wrote on the back of photographs he sent to friends. "We put up a Vernon Brown nucleus, leanto roof, arse to Rangitikei and the road, and stained the Oregon weatherboards with creosote and Stockholm tar, painted white the frames and bargeboard, stained the huge pine deck... we could look across the gully of Nile Road to Ron Mason's wattles, [Greville] Texidor's gable..."

15

1949

Dr. & Mrs. D.J. Doyle House  
45 Maungawhau Road, Epsom



Photo: Frank Hofmann

Designed for a steeply sloping site at the top end of the road, this house was designed on three levels with the main living rooms on the top floor. Rock that was quarried from the site was used for the foundation walls, and an existing stone wall formed the two inside walls of the garage. Vertical shiplap boarding and stained rough-sawn weatherboards clad the house, with a roof of corrugated asbestos. Post-war material restrictions meant that provision was left for future extensions, but the original top floor contained the bathroom, kitchen, laundry, main bedroom, dining room (which Vernon Brown was designating "Meal Space" on the plans by this time) and living room.

16

1954

A. Hooper House  
72 Cook Street, Howick

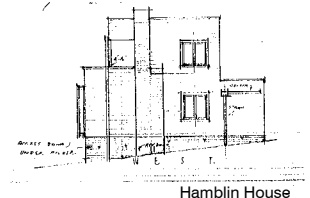


Photo: Sparrow Industrial Pictures

Vernon Brown's commentary on this house is couched in universal terms: "The terms Classical and Romantic will continue to have several meanings in several contexts ... The intellectual grid that the mind imposes through the eye makes the difference between objective and subjective, a bus shelter and a cell. This house at Howick is a private house, an enclosure for two people who over the years have developed a certain way of living. The open and closed holed parts allow the owners to see out through glazing related in size and placing to the use of the areas. It was felt unnecessary to share the living with the outside world. Privacy was considered important. One point worth mentioning: the entry into the house. In too many instances does one get the impression the hole has been made from the inside by someone under great urgency to get out."

### Sources:

The contemporary photos are by Linda Tyler, the heritage images courtesy of the University of Auckland Architecture Archive. Key sources on Vernon Brown's work include *The Vernon Brown Architectural Papers: An Inventory* compiled by Christina Troup as an Auckland University Library Bibliographical Bulletin in 1978 lists all the papers held in the Architecture Archive at that time, and also the many files on individual houses. The entry in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* drew on Fred Beckett's unpublished biographical outline, held in manuscript in the Architecture Library at The University of Auckland. Jonathan Gibb's 2005 Master of Architecture thesis entitled *Inspiration: Vernon Brown* includes material drawn from oral histories taken with Vernon Brown's colleagues, students and family as well as sections on his work as an architect, a teacher and painter, with a full bibliography appended.



Hamblin House