The Houses of
BERNARD COX

Exhibition Booklet

written by Margaret Tate

for The Manawatu Branch Committee

of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust

May 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Margaret Tate	Research and Writing
Harvey Taylor	Exhibition Design
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Materials Production and Photographic Processing were by:

Elmar Digital 2000 Ltd.
Fotofirst Ltd.
Bruce Watt Ltd.

Except where specified all photographs were taken by Pat Scrivens between July 2000 and March 2001.

THANKS

We should like to thank the many people who have given encouragement and professional advice. David Chapple, Milton Brogden and Jack Cantlon, friends and associates of Bernard Cox, have given invaluable help. Ian Matheson has made his experience available to us during all stages of the project and has willingly helped us to access the excellent resources of the City Archives Office. We are greatly indebted to Bernard Cox's daughters, Margaret Kidd and Elizabeth Silva of Taupo for the use of their family records and their willing cooperation with the whole project.

Sincere thanks are due also to the present owners of Cox houses who allowed their homes to be photographed and who gave us valuable information about their history. As our research became known many members of the community contributed their photographs and their memories. Thank you. We needed you all.

Print Synergy

I BERNARD COX, ARCHITECT

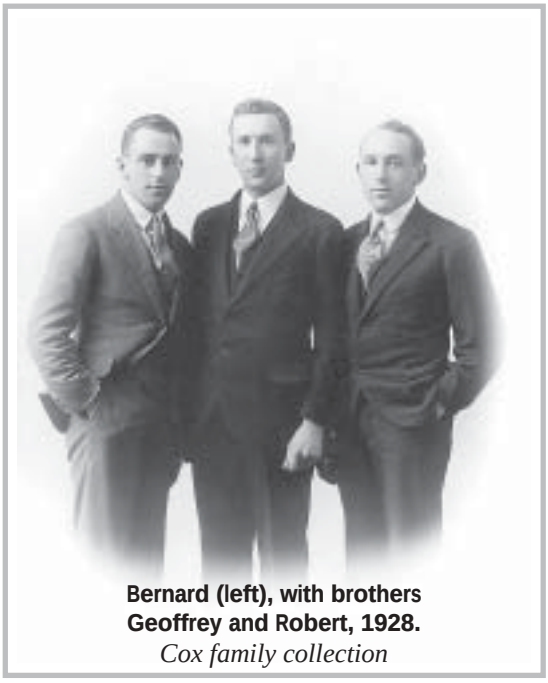
The Early Years (1905-1935)

Bernard Cox was born in Dunedin in 1905, the second son of Sarah and William Cox, owners of a piano shop in the city. During his primary school years he was encouraged by his mother to attend Saturday morning art classes and he showed an early interest in both art and architecture. While at Otago Boys' High School, from 1919 to 1922, he studied art under Leslie Coombs, a practising architect.

After leaving school Cox was apprenticed for four years to the Dunedin firm of Coombs and White, which at that time was involved in large-scale construction works. A fellow apprentice, George Callander, a few years his senior, was later to be his partner in Palmerston North. Cox completed his qualifications as a draftsman, attended lectures at the Otago University School of Mining Engineering and completed papers towards the First Professional Examination of the Institute of Architects. From 1923 to 1926 he distinguished himself as a distance runner for the University Club. His achievements led to the offer of an athletics scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania that allowed him to further his interests in both sport and architecture. In 1928 he left Dunedin to begin his studies in the United States.

Childhood home, 689 Cumberland St., Dunedin.
Cox family collection

Cox in Otago University sports gear, about 1926.
Cox family collection



Bernard (left), with brothers Geoffrey and Robert, 1928.
Cox family collection

Experience in art, architecture and engineering marked his seven years overseas. In addition to study he widened his professional experience by working in the office of G. Edwin Brumbaugh, a well-known Philadelphia architect, and from 1930 worked for several engineering firms in Montreal at different times. He also had a number of casual jobs and is reputed to have been a delivery agent for a sly-grogger and a deck hand on a cattle ship. He obtained his Certificate of Proficiency in Architecture in 1934 and became an Associate of the Institute of American Architects (AIAA). After a short stay in England, he returned to New Zealand in 1935.

Pre-War Practice (1935-1941)

By this time his family had moved to the North Island. His elder brother Geoffrey was a lecturer at Massey Agricultural College, his brother Robert was employed in the Dental Department of the Wellington Hospital and their mother, Sarah, now a widow, had also moved to Palmerston North. Bernard married Myrtle Schlierike of Palmerston North in 1936 and they moved into their first home in Victoria Ave. He designed houses for his mother and his brother Geoffrey nearby and also bought nearly three acres of land. This was to be the site of a second Victoria Avenue house, built in 1941 and considerably extended ten years later, in which he and his family lived for many years.

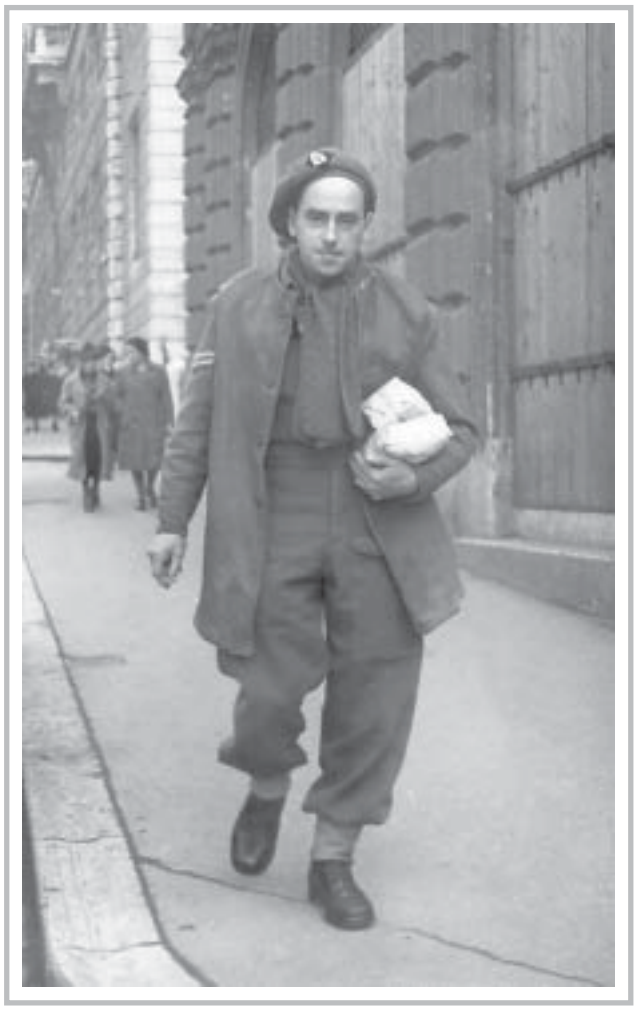
First Cox home, Victoria Ave., 1935.
Cox family collection

Cox and Callander with fellow architects, Mangahao Power Station, 1952. Left to right: John Bowering, Bernard Cox, George Callander, Reginald Thorrold-Jaggard, Ernst West, and John Reynolds. William Thorrold-Jaggard took the photograph.
W.T Jaggard collection

Cox set up practice with Callander in Palmerston North in the late thirties, a difficult period for private architects. The Depression of the 1930s caused a reduction in State lending and a contraction in the building industry. In the late thirties the Labour Government responded to the housing shortage with the massive State housing project and private builders had to compete with the State for skilled labour and materials. The beginning of the Second World War then caused labour and materials to be diverted to the war effort and the Building Emergency Regulations gave the Building Controller widespread powers over the whole industry. Nevertheless, in this period, Cox found a number of clients responsive to his enthusiasm for radical overseas trends and his work was given special prominence in *From Swamp to City, A Short History of the Growth and Development of Palmerston North*, published in 1937.

Army Service (1941-1946)

After having been in practice for only five years, Cox was called up for army service in 1941 and served initially in the Home Guard. Rumour has it that he spent his time collecting opossum skins in the Manawatu Gorge or alternatively designing his family home, having completed his assigned task of surveying possible gun emplacements in the Tararuas in record time. Certainly their family home was built before Bernard had to leave his wife and baby daughter, Margaret, for service overseas with the Second NZEF. His second daughter, Elizabeth, was born after the war.



Cox shopping in Rome, November 1944.
Cox family collection

Palmerston North Railway Station.
Welcome to returned servicemen, January 1946.
Cox family collection

He served in North Africa and in Italy as a engineer, where he was in the front line assessing buildings for forward base hospitals. He held the rank of sergeant and his commanding officer was Ronald J. McMillan, structural engineer of Palmerston North. After the war, the two men worked together on projects in Palmerston North, including McMillan's own residence in Jickell Street. Cox was discharged from the army in 1946.

Post -War Practice (1947-1961)

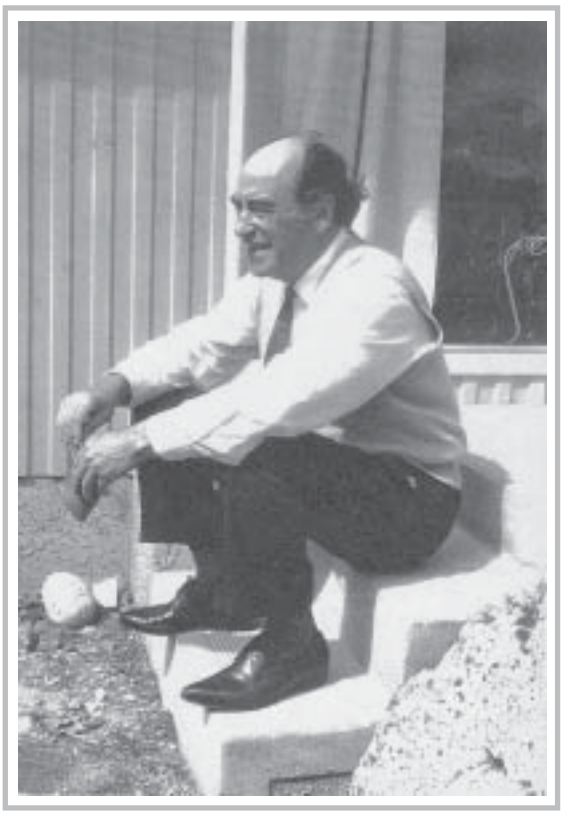
Cox now set up practice again, operating from the *Times* Building in Broadway. Milton Brogden and Jack Cantlon, who later established their own successful architectural practices in the city, were his cadets. There was some initial difficulty in getting recognition for his overseas degree but after his war service, the New Zealand Institute of Architects finally decided to accept his qualification and membership of AIAA and he was awarded his New Zealand Diploma of Architecture.

Following the war there was tremendous demand for homes for the families of returned servicemen. From 1949, the National Government increased State investment in home ownership. However, to spread the available resources, they reduced the standards of house design and the lending limits and consequently there was widespread development of low-cost group housing schemes in the new suburbs. Architects found it difficult to get permits for unconventional designs and worked for many individual clients who could afford only fairly small homes. There were urgent calls for the removal of the restrictions established in the war years.

Nevertheless, Cox's practice flourished. He worked with several leading builders such as John Sylva, who could meet his exacting requirements and find practical solutions to these problems. He concentrated almost entirely on residential work and in the years between 1947 and his retirement in 1961 he was in high demand, designing homes for many well-known families in the business community. Most of these were in the new subdivisions opening up in the Hokowhitu area and though Cox's work can be seen throughout the city, he made a particular impact on this suburb. He built so many houses in the Victoria Avenue/Lincoln Terrace area that it became known as 'Cox's Alley'. He took a close interest in City Council affairs, and was sometimes referred to as 'the thirteenth councillor'. In 1959, he was particularly active in the development of Lincoln Court, which was included in the subdivision of his own Victoria Ave property.

Cox was fortunate in having overseas experience at a time when visionary architects and planners were challenging convention. He thoroughly understood the principles of modernism and continued to explore its possibilities throughout his life. Fellow architects all express their admiration for his work and several acknowledge him as a formative influence. He is remembered as a colourful personality and a stimulating companion by all the builders and clients who worked with him.

Extensions completed to family home, Victoria Ave., 1952.
Cox family collection



Retirement (1961-1970)

Cox retired in 1961 because of ill health, sold the family home in Victoria Avenue and moved with his wife to one of the two houses of experimental modular design he had built in Lincoln Court. In retirement he energetically pursued other interests and became well known nationally for work on the techniques of philately. He died in 1970. His wife Myrtle continued to live in Lincoln Court but moved to Taupo to be near her daughters shortly before her death in 1984.

Retirement in Lincoln Court (1965-1970).

II EARLY ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCES

Classical Training

Cox had chosen to study at an architectural school considered progressive for its time. However examples of his student work show that classical principles still dominated the curriculum at the University of Pennsylvania. One of the best known of his teachers was the French architect, Paul Cret (1876-1945) who influenced generations of students. Cret favoured many new construction techniques and materials and Cox's preference for metal framed windows may be derived from his approach.

The period Cox spent in the United States provided him with sound professional training and varied practical experience. However, his interest was captured by modernism, the new architectural movement that had arisen in Europe a decade earlier and was now challenging the American orthodoxy.

Mitchell holiday home, Paraparaumu, 1935.
Fairclough family photograph

The International Style

In 1927, the year of Cox's arrival in Pennsylvania, the first articles on a radical new style began appearing in American magazines. A major exhibition on modern architecture was mounted in New York in 1932. It set out to demonstrate that this European style, termed modernism or the International Style, was now being adopted throughout the world. Two leading exponents of the International Style were the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius who, in Germany, had founded the Bauhaus in 1919. Gropius later had an extended and distinguished career in the United States.

The architects of the International Style offered a vision of the ideal homes and cities of the future. They developed a revolutionary use of building materials such as steel and ferro-concrete. This reduced the number of load-bearing walls, made the placing of inner walls a matter of choice and facilitated the new ideas of open planning. They aimed to take advantage of modern methods of mass production and sought vastly improved methods of heating and lighting. The interest of these visionary thinkers extended to all aspects of domestic life including the design of furniture. In their view, houses in the modern world were to be 'machines for living in'.

Though many of these ideas were characteristic of the modern movement generally, the appearance of the International Style house was startlingly unfamiliar. The modernist architects identified with contemporary artistic movements such as Cubism and houses were built in austere cubist shapes, usually with flat roofs. They could be looked at as a unity from above and below and presented interesting shapes and angles when viewed from various sides. They no longer, as in the past, offered one facade to the street. The innovation of linking inner and outer space, which often included upper terraces and roof gardens, was also regarded as unfamiliar and daring. Their rejection of all previous, familiar styles of domestic architecture was a challenge to the taste of the American public.

Cox home 1935 (detail).
Cox family collection

Pre-War Cox Houses

These overseas influences are clearly reflected in several of the houses Cox designed on his return to New Zealand. Many older residents remember his first house in Victoria Avenue because of its 'portholes' and the Elmira Avenue house, built for T.P. Hart, caused a sensation. "People just stopped their cars and stared." The Mitchell holiday house in Paraparaumu was built in the same style and a few other clients also began to accept his radical ideas.

These houses were built of concrete, which sometimes included colours such as green or buff, thus eliminating the need for painting. Their proportions and the placing of the windows created shapes that were visually satisfying in the style of contemporary artists and they were in striking contrast to other new houses of the time. Though they were somewhat ahead of public taste, other Palmerston North architects admired them as successful examples of innovative design and building methods.

Debate on this style raged in New Zealand architectural circles well on into the fifties. Comparatively few International Style houses were built in New Zealand and the work of Cox in the thirties is therefore significant nationally.

Hart house, Elmira Ave., 1939.
Mason family photograph

Hart house, Elmira Ave., about 1950.
Mason family photograph

III THE NEW ZEALAND MODERN

Post-War Cox Houses

In the post-war period, the modern movement changed its emphasis. Architects in many countries became interested in designs more appropriate to a particular culture or environment. The centennial celebrations in 1940 created new interest in our own heritage of simple pioneer houses and farm buildings and recent work in Sweden and California now seemed to provide us with the appropriate models. On his return from war service, Cox responded to the new face of modernism and was acknowledged as a formative influence on the new generation of architects who began their careers in Palmerston North after World War II. We are fortunate in having access to several books from his reference library, which argue persuasively for these new ideas. He incorporated them effectively in his plans and constantly explored innovations in kitchen design, lighting methods, window treatment and the integration of the house with its site. The Palmerston North public welcomed these trends which were now in tune with the spirit of the times. The work of Cox was in high demand.

Changing Tastes

In the fifties, groups of architects, particularly in Auckland and Wellington, set out on a crusade to change the taste of the New Zealand public. Exhibition homes were built and a welter of new magazines such as *Home and Building* offered plans and articles on the new style. Architects supported the general desire to modernise the building industry and reduce the cost of labour and materials. Concrete block construction and the use of pinus radiata for cladding were economical and at the same time reflected the modern design principles. The low-pitched roof they favoured required less support than the normal heavy tiled roof and in general they selected materials to create an effect as light and open as technically possible. The architects celebrated honesty, simplicity and truth and were critical of the Art Deco style, sometimes termed moderne or modernistic, because this styling merely concealed conventional building practices.

Split-level house with careful window treatment.
Johns house, Hardie St.

Weatherboards painted with creosote.
Fife house, Hughes Ave.

Great attention was also given to the aesthetics of the exterior appearance. Writers in architectural journals ridiculed the riot of superficial ornament that they saw as characterising the Victorian and Edwardian periods. They hated decoration and described their designs as 'wholemeal bread' - as compared with iced cake. The exterior colours were generally subdued with brown-stained or creosoted weatherboard being favoured. The general effect was horizontal but rooms projecting or recessed to allow for sun or view created a variety of angles and verticals. This produced subtle effects of light and shade and the phrase 'less is more' was in current use. These houses were not designed to impress by their 'street appeal' but were built in harmony with a particular site. Though building restrictions often required architects to design quite small houses, they hoped to convince people of the difference between the careful detail of the architect-designed house and the rectangular boxes of the group builders in the new suburbs.

The rooflines form striking angles.
Bodle house, Aranui Rd., Newbury.

Design for Living

Following World War II there was tremendous demand for homes for returned servicemen and a strong emphasis on family life. The modern movement was not only an architectural style but also involved a social vision. It promoted a new design for living based on the needs of the modern family. Women were no longer expected to work in inconvenient kitchens separated from family living - or in cold dismal washhouses. Kitchens and laundries became small but efficient working spaces with banks of cupboards and space for the new refrigerators and washing machines. Bookshelves, cabinets, chests of drawers and divans were all built-in to save space and eliminate dust.

Built-in bedroom furniture in angled window.
McMillan house, Jickell St.

Ample storage in passage and bedrooms.
McMillan house, Jickell St.

Living areas could be opened up or divided by sliding doors to provide for flexible use by different members of the family. They were usually separated from the bedrooms which, in split-level houses, were up a short flight of stairs. Terraces, often sheltered by a light screen, gave access to outside living space and the garden.

A feature of most styles at this period was the greatly increased size of windows. Windows were designed to provide good ventilation, light and heat - a forerunner of more recent ideas of passive solar heating. Large areas of glass with ventilation provided by louvers top and bottom were a common design. Rooms were frequently protected from the summer sun by wide eaves, which still allowed the lower winter sun to penetrate the house.

A light, open, uncluttered domestic environment was the achievement of the modern movement and influenced the design of the family home for the rest of the century.

Large windows with metal frames and a terrace screen.
McMillan house, Jickell St.

A Vision of Home

While the model for some modernist New Zealand architects seems to have been a garden shed, Cox was always concerned for the aesthetic appearance of the house and achieved elegant and subtle effects in both interior and exterior design. It seems that he was influenced by the example of the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) whose work was included in the 1932 exhibition on the International Style and who designed some of the most famous American homes of the period.

Wright's vision of the home was one of spaciousness and sunlight, warmth and solidity, and a feeling of shelter. He favoured the fireplace as focal point, broad overhanging eaves for shelter, the long horizontal line and the flexible arrangement of rooms. He believed in the incorporation of the house with its natural environment. He incorporated the terrace, sometimes cantilevered out into space, as an essential part of the structure and early in his career developed the idea of opening up interior space. He pioneered the use of new building materials and methods, an essential feature of modernism. He said that "the machine should be a tool in the hands of the artist."

In his later years he turned his attention to the problem of applying these principles to homes for people of moderate means and was highly innovative in his approach to practical aspects of daily living. He wrote two persuasive books on these themes, *The Natural House* (1954) and *The Living City* (1958) which were widely available in paperback editions in the fifties. An understanding of his vision and example is helpful in appreciating several of Cox's most interesting designs.

Long horizontal lines, showing Frank Lloyd Wright influence.
Phillips house, Trent Ave.

This house recalls the lines of some of Wright's 'prairie' houses.
Rees house, Te Awe Awe St., 1947.
Watt family photograph

IV FOUR COX HOUSES

The Fife House

The Fife House in Hughes Avenue, built in 1950, is an excellent example of the New Zealand post-war style and is largely unchanged. Creosoted or black stained weatherboards with white trim was a popular style at the time and favoured by Auckland architects such as Vernon Brown but most houses of this type have been subsequently painted in lighter colours.

The house was build for Dr Clifford Fife, Associate Professor of Soil Science at Massey University and his wife Zoe who also lectured there for a time. Dr Fife played a major part in the design of the house, building a model to illustrate his ideas. He also personally selected bricks for the chimney from the local brickworks at Terrace End. Cox drew the plans and added significant details such as large windows in lounge and dining room. All the windows have metal frames, a construction favoured by Cox but unusual at the time.

Contemporary Polaroid shots of interior furnishing.

Though not large in floor area, the house is very different from the standard rectangular box. Rooms are projecting or recessed to capture sun in both living and bedroom areas. The general effect is horizontal but the angles of the roof, the vertical mass of the chimney and the narrow piping defining the porch produce interesting visual effects. The roof was originally covered in malthoid, a bituminous material, because of the shortage of iron. There were persistent leaks - a common complaint - and the house was re-roofed twice before the problem was solved.

The house was carefully designed for family living. There is a substantial amount of built-in furniture including chests of drawers in the bedroom, a valve radio in the diningroom and a special alcove in the lounge for the piano. The washing machine, originally a heavy Bendix, was mounted on a concrete slab and hidden behind cupboard doors off the kitchen. Additional heating was provided by a chipheater with a wetback in the kitchen. The kitchen leads to the dining room, which has access to the sunny terrace. The terrace screen, the carport and the garage were added later by the family in harmony with the original design.

Zoe Fife says, “We didn’t have much money but we liked nice things.” The flooring was native timber and initially covered by rugs and Foxton flax matting. Original paintings by a relative were displayed throughout the house. The plain curtains in the lounge, the off-white divan in the dining room and the blond oak dining suite were characteristic of good taste in the fifties. As a family member says, “It was modern then and still looks modern.”

Easy traffic flow in an open plan!
Willis family photograph

A dining room arranged for easy service.
Willis family photograph

The Whitehead House

The Whitehead House in Albert Street, built in 1953, is another example of the 'wholemeal style'. It was built for Eric Whitehead, a city retailer, when the family property was subdivided. It has a split-level plan that divides the living and sleeping areas and, in this case, takes advantage of a sloping site. Cox gave particular attention to efficient kitchen and dining areas in this design. In this kitchen, small wooden louvers provide ventilation for the stove to the outside wall. The revolving cupboard was also an innovative feature at the time. The carefully designed chimney section originally incorporated fireplaces in both lounge and dining room and reflected on a modest scale the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright. A built-in china cabinet and a hatch opening into the kitchen are shown in the photograph. The open plan rooms were originally divided by a sliding door.

The success of the plan is reflected in the fact that this house has had few alterations. Its owner expresses enjoyment in its careful detailing and quiet functionalism. "We really liked the house and always made sure that any changes we made were consistent with the architect's style. Because of the layout it seems larger than it really is. Now that the family has grown up and left home it still suits me very well."

The McMillan House

The McMillan House, Jickell Street, built in 1950, was designed to take advantage of a site fringed with native trees on the edge of the Hokowhitu lagoon. The owner was Ronald J. McMillan, a consulting structural engineer, and the house reflects close collaboration between Cox and his client.

The house is an example of the split-level style handled with particular flair. The predominant horizontal lines are given interest by the variety of materials used - a veneer of concrete blocks at the garage entrance, weatherboards for the lower storey and vertical board and batten for the upper level. The exterior was originally varnished and later painted dark brown but is now white. Two terraces built on bold engineering principles integrate the house with its site at both living and bedroom level. Projecting window bays in each of the bedrooms create an interesting effect both inside and out.

A terrace built on bold engineering principles.

All windows have narrow metal frames and this increases the effect of unbroken walls of glass in the living areas. The upper area is also flooded with light from the projecting window alcoves in the bedrooms and the west-facing clerestory windows. Particular attention has been given to the interior finish, the joinery being the work of the Manawatu Joinery Company of Joseph Street. Oak was used for room dividers, sliding doors, large built-in units in the bedroom wing and the pelmets throughout the house. Well-designed commercial fittings reinforce the effect of simplicity. The light fittings, originally fluorescent, are flush with the ceiling, a black commercial handrail trims the stairs and the industrial type garage door reinforces the horizontal lines of the street frontage.

The house has the effect of simplicity, light and space. It is both functional and visually satisfying and has remained almost unaltered. In this house Cox reveals his capacity to adapt the essential features of the modernist movement to local conditions.

An imaginative treatment of the bedroom wing.

Main room with entry screen, stone fireplace and tall windows.

Main room showing lighting in ceiling panel.

The Cox Family Home

The original house built in 1941 was of modest size but the wide eaves, the large windows and the brick fireplace were features that became characteristic of Cox's work. The major alteration in 1952 doubled the living area. The front entrance is not emphasised but is simply shielded by a glass and timber screen. Entry is directly into the living area with some privacy afforded by a freestanding panel - a common feature of modernist houses. A striking feature of the new living room is the bank of tall windows on both sides. Its heart is a fireplace that Cox built from stone he had personally selected, undertaking most of the work himself.

He also gave particular attention to innovative lighting. A sweeping dropped ceiling panel unites the living and dining areas and its curve contrasts in an interesting way with the vertical planes of the tall windows. It allows light to focus upwards from concealed fluorescent tubes and downwards from commercial type inset light fittings. Built-in glass display cabinets are separately lit. Three conical shades direct light down to the dining table. A panel of light switches near the kitchen gives great flexibility to the lighting control of the living and dining areas.

As in most of Cox's houses some access to the garden is provided. A barbecue recess is included in the exterior of the stone fireplace, which is the focus of a small garden courtyard. The dining room opens on to a terrace. When the original house was built in 1941 it was reached down a long drive and the living rooms looked out on the other side to extensive open grazing land, a stream and a small lagoon. The drive is now an avenue of mature trees leading to a large circular garden near the main entrance but successive phases of subdivision have reduced the site and therefore the vista for which the house was designed.

The house was altered after it was sold in 1965 but the changes were all undertaken or supervised by Cox himself. The special features of the exterior such as the bold mass of the chimney, the angles of the roof, the wide eaves and tongue and groove soffit have all been faithfully preserved.

V THE COX LEGACY

Many houses designed by Bernard Cox were originally sited on half-acre sections. They were approached by long curving drives and the living rooms were designed to look out on landscaped gardens at the rear. This integration between house and garden was an important aspect of the whole design and the landscaping of this period merits further research. A few houses have fortunately retained these original settings.

Rees house, Te Awe Awe St., well maintained for over fifty years.

A survey of the houses in Palmerston North designed by Bernard Cox shows that a number have been victims of recent subdivisions and have been demolished or removed. Some of the innovative homes built in the thirties have unfortunately been substantially altered and can only be appreciated in contemporary photographs. Many houses designed for particular sites have had their carefully planned gardens severely reduced in size. A city is always growing and changing and we must accept some of these changes as inevitable.

However, it is encouraging to see that a large number have been cared for and appreciated by successive owners who have respected the qualities of the original design when making alterations. Some developers, reluctant to demolish Cox houses, have sold them for removal. A large house on a site by the Hokowhitu lagoon was successfully moved in 1990 to Newbury, where it once again looks out on extensive lawns and gardens. We hope that this spirit will continue as the quality of the houses and the features of the modern movement become better appreciated. Most of the smaller houses are meticulously designed to be both functional and aesthetically satisfying. Their effects are quiet and subtle and the qualities enjoyed by their owners may be missed by passers-by. Living areas for instance often face the garden rather than the street. Some larger houses are particularly elegant and compare very favourably with those houses in other cities often photographed to illustrate the qualities of the modern movement.

Rees house, Te Awe Awe St. in its mature garden setting. October 2000.

Bodle house, Ihaka St., on original site by the Hokowhitu Lagoon.
Donaldson family photograph

The houses designed by Cox are important. They are examples of modernism, a major twentieth century movement that revolutionised the way houses are designed and constructed and which expressed the social vision of the mid-twentieth century. They are also Palmerston North houses built by a local architect for local families and still, a half century later, afford great satisfaction to their present owners. They reflect our values and our culture, contain part of our history and contribute to the rich urban tapestry of the city. We hope that they will continue to be maintained and enjoyed for many years to come.

House removed to Newbury, 1990.
Donaldson family photograph

A new life for the house on a rural site.
March, 2001.

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Note:
Those who wish to obtain more information on the topic should consult the collection of well-illustrated books on New Zealand architecture held in the Palmerston North City Library. Substantial records relating to Palmerston North houses are available in the City Archives.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
You are welcome to contact the following people for more information on the work of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust or on local programmes:

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SPONSORS
Generous contributions to this project have been made by Creative Communities New Zealand, the Palmerston North Community Arts Council and the Palmerston North City Council.