ERNST PLISCHKE
ARCHITECT

PRESENTED BY THE NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON
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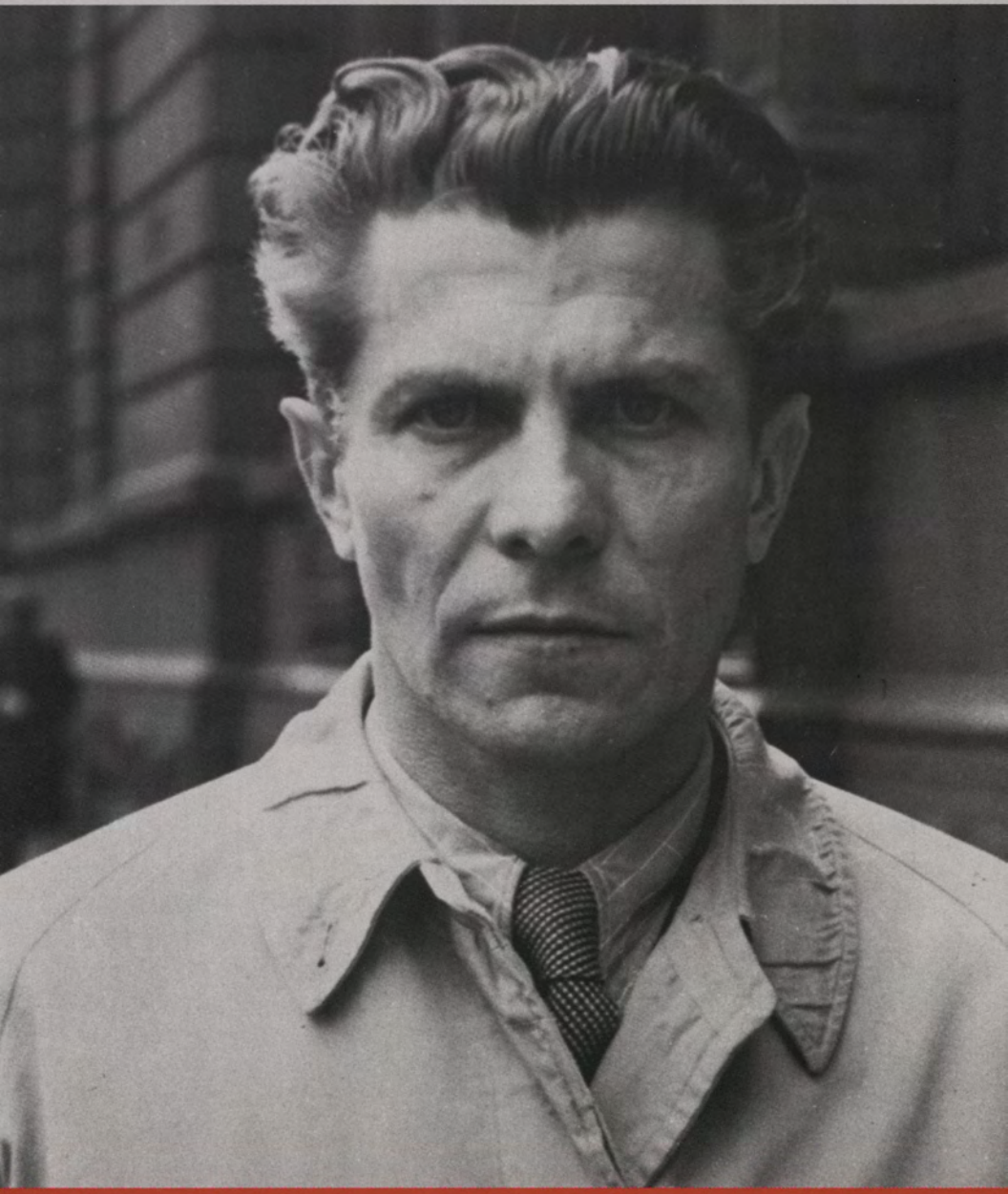

Exhibition organised by City Gallery Wellington in association with the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) Vienna and the Kaiserliches Hofmobiliendepot (Imperial Furniture Collection) Vienna.

City Gallery WELLINGTON
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ERNST PLISCHKE
INTERNATIONAL MODERNIST

HOW AN AUSTRIAN ARCHITECT CAME TO WARTIME WELLINGTON

Ernst Plischke came to New Zealand as a refugee from Hitler in 1939. At the time he emigrated, he had already achieved considerable prominence as an architect in Vienna. In marked contrast to the British-trained background of his contemporaries in architecture in New Zealand, he had studied with the leading luminaries of modernist architecture in Central Europe and America. Born in Klosterneuberg, a town outside Vienna, in 1903, Plischke was the son of an architect and worked alongside his uncles in the family joinery business every summer holiday, gradually learning the techniques of traditional Austrian woodcraft. At sixteen he entered the Kunstgewerbeschule (College for Arts and Crafts) in Vienna and studied there for four years, three under architect and designer Oskar Strnad. After three more years at the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) under Peter Behrens, he graduated in 1926, winning the Master School prize. Plischke went on to work in the offices of both Behrens and Josef Frank before moving to New York to work in partnership with William Muschenheim in 1929.

Plischke enjoyed great critical success in Vienna before the war, designing apartments for the intelligentsia, and his work featured in major architectural magazines. Two landmark buildings epitomise his achievements as a young modernist architect in Europe: a completely white country house built of wood on the shores of Lake Attersee, and a pure glass Labour Exchange building in Liesing, a suburb of Vienna. With the onset of the Depression, however, his clients became fewer and, despite great acclaim, commissions were sparse. To make matters worse, his involvement in a worker housing project aligned him politically with the Jewish Social Democrats in Vienna, and his architecture in the 'International Style' was seen as antithetical to the National Socialist desire for 'blood and soil'—an architecture grounded in a specifically German heritage. Plischke's Labour Exchange building (1930–31) at Liesing had its clear glass sides boarded up with wooden shingles by the authorities after Anschluss (the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany).

Although motivated by the need to ensure the safety of his Jewish wife Anna and her two children, Plischke viewed his emigration from Austria to New Zealand as a chance to start afresh and make his mark as an architect in a new land. He was to stay in New Zealand for twenty–four years, initially working as a government employee in the Housing Department during the war, and then afterwards in private practice with partners Cedric Firth and Robert Fantl. Uncompromising in his approach, yet needing to adapt his designs to the local materials and available technologies, he did much to foster the acceptance of the international modernist style of architecture in Wellington.

DESIGNER OF THE FIRST EUROPEAN MODERNIST HOUSE IN NEW ZEALAND

Plischke's emigration to New Zealand had been facilitated by the Refugees Committee in Christchurch, chaired by Karl Popper, who was then teaching at the University of Canterbury, and Otto Frankel, for whose family Plischke had done architectural work in Vienna. To thank Frankel for his help, Plischke designed a small house for him and his wife, the painter Margaret Anderson. Unconventional in design, the living areas opened up to the garden through large French windows. With this modest house, Plischke used a sawn timber finish which in Austria he would have left to acquire a patina but, as he was unsure of his materials in New Zealand, he followed advice to treat the wood with burnt umber and raw linseed oil for preservation, with trim and windowsills picked out in white. While being built the Frankel house met with some bureaucratic interference because it had only small secondary windows for the kitchen and laundry showing to the street, thus contravening a Christchurch City Council bylaw. Plischke later used the house as a prototype standard in his 1947 publication *Design and Living*, both in an axonometric view and featuring an interior incorporating his furniture designs and Anna's 'living terrace' idea as a natural extension of the living space.

Cover, top: Ernst Plischke
Kahn House, Ngaio, Wellington 1940–41
Photographed by Irene Koppel
Courtesy of the Irene Koppel Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Cover, bottom: Ernst Plischke in 1947
Photographer unknown
Courtesy of Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Graphic Collection, Plischke Archive

LABELLED AN 'ENEMY ALIEN'

Growing hostilities in Europe meant that on arrival in Wellington in May 1939, Ernst and Anna Plischke were given the nationality 'German' and had to comply with the Aliens Emergency Regulations. Being 'enemy aliens' meant that the Plischkes were vulnerable to accusations of espionage, always unfounded, but nevertheless requiring explanation. In September 1940, Ernst Plischke had to appear before the Alien Registration Board and read a three page statement in his own defence against the claims of a young girl who had made a statement to police alleging that she had overheard Plischke discussing shipping in the English Channel with another of the German-speaking refugee architects in the Housing Department. This allegation of espionage activity was matched by a similar denunciation of Anna by the wife of the Chief Engineer of the *SS Kurow* who had taken German lessons from Anna Plischke before the war. Mrs Standring reported that Anna persistently enquired as to the whereabouts of Mr Standring when it was none of her business. On another occasion, steel tubes were observed being delivered to the Plischke's Todman Street house. Ernst Plischke had to produce photographs of his studio in Vienna to explain to police how he used tubular steel framing for furniture.

'A BOLSHEVIK WITH STRANGE IDEAS'

A job had been found for Plischke on arrival in Wellington as a draughtsman in the Housing Department. There he was surprised to discover that Gordon Wilson, Government Architect in the Housing Department, was already familiar with the 'Plischke architectural style' through English language publications which had featured his work. A colleague in the Housing Department at this time recalls the attitude towards Plischke of the New Zealanders who were working there: 'He was an Austrian with very strange ideas', Geoff Nees recalled in a 1985 interview. 'Because of his ideas, Plischke had to be a Bolshevik. Bolshevism came to their minds whenever they did not understand something.'

BUILDING FOR WELLINGTON WIND

The people who were most likely to understand Plischke were fellow refugees, and his second private commission in New Zealand was for Gertrud and Joachim Kahn. The Kahns were Bavarian, Jewish refugees who were involved in agricultural chemical manufacture, founding the firm of Ados Pharmaceuticals in 1938. In his 1940 design for their house, Plischke was able to partially dispense with the traditional stud frame construction and use a much sparer skeletal frame in timber with an infilling of glass to create an early (for New Zealand) glass sliding door. The edges of the door and the window frames were rebated so that they would fit together to withstand the pressure of the wind and rain, and the channel in which the door moved was designed to run deeply to ensure that it would be both watertight and draught proof. 'I wanted to achieve free spaces and shapes, which transcended any feeling of heaviness and monumentality,' Plischke wrote of his work at this time. Looking out from the inside of the Kahn house, it is possible to see his conception of openness and lightness in interiors which flow naturally into the outdoors.

IN GOVERNMENT SERVICE

Ernst Plischke's initial work for the Housing Department was designing state housing—part of the Labour Government's drive to improve living standards nationwide. Here he quickly showed his experience in designing apartments and was asked to draw prototypical 'multi-units' for state housing developments in Auckland and Wellington. This approach of combining the dwelling structure with the landscape is conveyed in the watercolour perspective of the multi-unit housing block which Plischke designed for Orakei. This study was exhibited in the Government Court at Rongotai in 1940 and was the kind of experimental work which Plischke relished. Frustration soon set in for Plischke, however, when his beautiful designs were altered, rendering them, in his words, 'tame and mundane'. The fact that his spacious continental flat-roofed apartment designs were always modified before construction led to much dissatisfaction—he felt that Gordon Wilson was professionally jealous and therefore thwarting him.

TOWN PLANNER FOR SATELLITE CITIES

In 1943 Plischke moved sideways into a position in town planning where he was designated Community Planner. While in this position he was asked by Prime Minister Peter Fraser to write a book to educate New Zealanders on how to design their living spaces. This was the best-selling and highly influential *Design and Living*, which was published in 1947. The text and illustrations were based on the Army Education and Welfare Service bulletins on housing which Plischke had produced for distribution to servicemen during the war, but expanded to include ideas on town planning appropriate for a 'new' country like New Zealand which he thought of as a tabula rasa. His drawings of the ideal town use Venice as a model with a public square at the centre. Plischke incorporated his ideas into the new satellite towns of the Hutt Valley. The framing of architectural views through planned construction was uppermost in his mind when designing the multi-unit blocks for Auckland (which face each other across a courtyard with trees and vegetable gardens behind). The immediate post-war period was not a happy time in his life, as his designs did not fare any better under town planning than they had under Housing Department bureaucracy. After seeing Naenae, Taita, Mangakino and Kaiangaroa built without the facilities and landscaping he had intended, he resigned from government service.

AFTERMATH OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Plischke's reputation as an architectural polemicist and lecturer on art and design led him to be put forward as a candidate for the Chair of Design at the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland in 1947. When his application was unsuccessful, because (he believed) anti-Germanic paranoia was still running high in New Zealand directly after the war, he decided to become an architect in private practice. The success of his book *Design and Living* gave the idea of the 'Plischke house' considerable currency, and he was inundated with requests from readers, many of them returned servicemen, to design houses for their newly purchased sections. Unfortunately, without sitting the Royal Institute of British Architects examinations, Plischke was not able to gain admission to the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA), and therefore could not practise architecture on his own here. Unlike other refugee architects such as Frederick Newman and Robert Fantl, Plischke would not study for these exams, believing that his six years of professional training in Austria was a superior qualification. He chose instead to take a colleague from the Housing Department, Cedric Firth, into partnership and together they worked on commissions for houses. Anna Lang, Plischke's wife, assisted with designs for gardens to complement the houses.

A NEW CLIENT BASE

From the partnership of Plishke and Firth (he dropped the 'c' from his name to help New Zealanders pronounce it) came stylish houses remarkable for their technical finesse. Although he continued to attract clients from the immigrant community throughout the 1950s, Plischke's most important houses were for New Zealand-born professionals and intellectuals. He began working on the 2,000 square feet Giles House in 1948. The client was an electrical importer and the budget for construction was liberal. The exterior of the house was clad in flush weatherboards to give a smooth

Top left: Plishke & Firth, Architects
Sutch-Smith House, Brooklyn, Wellington 1953–56
Photographed by Paul McCredie in 2004
Courtesy of Paul McCredie Photographer

Top right: Ernst Plischke
Kahn House, Ngaio, Wellington 1940–41
Photographed by Paul McCredie in 2003
Courtesy of Paul McCredie Photographer

surface—this material was differentiated from the concrete under structure texturally by the use of coloured paint. His other important Wellington commission was the Sutch-Smith House in Brooklyn, designed for economist William Ball Sutch and his lawyer wife Shirley Smith, who had returned to New Zealand in 1951 after a period working for the United Nations in New York. Plischke had finally found a client as interested in design as he was and, rather than the standard architectural fee of 5% of the total cost of the building, Plischke was paid a salary by Sutch for a year while he worked on the breathtaking design for the bi-nuclear house, which cantilevers out over a hilltop in Brooklyn.

MASSEY HOUSE

Plischke designed over forty private houses, but the most important commission for the partnership of Plishke and Firth was the landmark Massey House (1951–57), an office building with a glass curtain wall on Lambton Quay in Wellington, the city's first modern high-rise.

Commissioned by the Dairy Board and Meat Producers' Board, the building—with its eight storeys of reinforced concrete and glass and radical U-shape—announced the importance of the primary industries in post-war New Zealand. Fronting Lambton Quay, the former foreshore, and backing on to The Terrace, the site was notorious for drainage problems and underlying seismic thrusts. Yet the load-bearing large round columns still soar white and free-standing, exposed at the top and bottom of the building and visible behind the glass curtain walls of each façade. The interior boardrooms and offices were lavishly appointed with native timbers and the foyer walls of rose-coloured Italian marble could be admired through the uninterrupted expanses of plate glass at street level. For a time after its completion, Massey House featured in fashion advertisements, representing then, as it does now, the epitome of style.

AS CHURCH DESIGNER

Although best known for his private houses and for Massey House, Plischke, a non-practising Catholic, also made a significant contribution to church design. His primary schooling in a medieval and baroque monastery in Klosterneuberg had a lasting effect on his thinking about church design. His buildings for a variety of religious denominations were acclaimed for their simplicity, versatility and modernity. The first of these was a Methodist ecumenical community centre, wooden-framed and finished in plaster, in Khandallah, which was designed in 1948. His churches in reinforced concrete—the Catholic church of St Mary's in Taihape (1951–52) and St Martin's Presbyterian Church in Christchurch (1953–56)—combine plain and traditional exterior finishes with unconventional interior effects. He continued to develop his ideas about church architecture, and he wrote an article on the subject for the journal *Comment* in 1961.

BACK IN VIENNA

From 1957 until 1962 projects which would extend Plischke's architectural ideas in New Zealand became fewer. By 1963, Plischke was working on his own and when offered the position of Professor of Architecture at his old university, the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, he gladly accepted. He had received the City of Vienna Prize, awarded annually for distinction in the arts or sciences, in 1962. Following his repatriation, he returned several times to New Zealand to visit family, and in 1969 he was given an honorary fellowship of the NZIA.

Back in Vienna, his Masterschool for architecture attracted loyal students and he was honoured with a major exhibition at the Akademie der bildenden Künste to coincide with his eightieth birthday. Until his death in Vienna on 23 May 1992, he continued to articulate his architectural ideas and published an account of his life in architecture in 1989. While he is now acknowledged as a pioneer of classical modern architecture in Austria, it is in New Zealand, and principally in Wellington, that the majority of his architecture can be found. His major achievements as a furniture designer, urban planner, architect and teacher have long since been internationally recognised, and his contribution to the development of modernist architecture in New Zealand is now acknowledged as unrivalled.

Linda Tyler
Curator, The Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, Dunedin

Accompanying the exhibition *Ernst Plischke,* City Gallery Wellington boasts an engaging and stimulating programme of free public events—including a keynote lecture series, floortalks, a panel discussion, tours, readings and late night music gigs.

Highlights are detailed below, but for a full list of events and up-to-date information, please ask at the Gallery reception desk, check out the events calendar at www.city-gallery.org.nz or see City Gallery Wellington's ad in the entertainment pages of Saturday's *Dominion Post*.

PUBLIC EVENTS PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

KEYNOTE LECTURE SERIES

PLISCHKE: THE NEW WORLD AND THE NEW VIENNA, 1929–1939
Professor August Sarnitz
Sunday 5 September, 2pm
Professor of history and theory of architecture at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna, August Sarnitz co-wrote the monograph *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World* and curated the 2003 exhibition which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Plischke's birth. Sarnitz explores Plischke's experiences in the United States in 1928–1929, as well as his meetings with Le Corbusier and the French avant-garde. He will examine Plischke's first buildings in Vienna and Austria as a framework for his further development in New Zealand.

URBAN AND URBANE: ERNST PLISCHKE IN WELLINGTON 1939–1963
Linda Tyler
Sunday 19 September, 2pm
Linda Tyler is New Zealand's leading expert on Ernst Plischke's life and work. She discusses his architectural achievements in this country and his contribution to intellectual and critical thought in New Zealand through his publications and teaching.

PLISCHKE AND HIS UTOPIAN PLANS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING
Robin Skinner
Sunday 3 October, 2pm
Victoria University School of Architecture lecturer Robin Skinner discusses Plischke's contribution to New Zealand state housing and explores his community planning work as seen in the Wellington suburbs of Naenae, Epuni and Taita.

THE SUTCH-SMITH HOUSE
Alistair Luke
Sunday 17 October, 2pm
Local architect Alistair Luke discusses his restoration and modernisation of Plischke's residential masterpiece, the Sutch-Smith House.

PANEL DISCUSSION

PLISCHKE AND BEYOND: THE FATE AND FUTURE OF MODERNISM IN NEW ZEALAND ARCHITECTURE
Chaired by Tommy Honey
Sunday 31 October, 2pm

FLOORTALKS

DESIGNED AND LIVED IN: BUILDINGS BY PLISCHKE
Chris Cochran and Gregory O'Brien
Sunday 12 September, 2pm

IDEALISM AND PLISCHKE'S TOWN PLANNING
Greg Bowron
Sunday 14 November, 2pm

Admission is free for all *Ernst Plischke* public events.
Bookings are essential for the *Ernst Plischke* Keynote Lecture Series.

Public events programme bookings and enquiries:
Tel: (04) 801 3987
Email: robyn.walker@wcc.govt.nz

FREE WEEKEND EXHIBITION TOURS

Free public tours of *Ernst Plischke* every Saturday and Sunday at 1pm. No bookings required. Meet in the gallery foyer.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

City Gallery Wellington offers an exciting and enriching programme of curriculum-linked exhibition tours and workshops in our on-site classroom for primary and secondary students. Book early to ensure your class doesn't miss out on an education visit to *Ernst Plischke*.

Education programme
general enquiries and bookings:
Tel: (04) 801 3965
Email: fiona.sullivan@wcc.govt.nz

Māori education programme
enquiries and bookings:
Tel: (04) 801 3081
Email: janina.dell@wcc.govt.nz

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FREE ENTRY Open daily 10am–5pm

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