

New Zealand Colours in Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Trade and travel between other nations in the world has always influenced the design and colours of New Zealand houses which have been reinterpretations of other countries' practices and fashions. However the design and colours of our homes has also been influenced by local building materials and the colours of the diverse landscape, all contributing towards creating our own vernacular style.

Many nationalities have come to settle over different periods, but the significant influence of the indigenous people who arrived here a thousand years prior to the white man, is still clearly evident. While they adopted some of the European ideas they have also had enormous impact on New Zealand's art and culture.



Figure 1: New Zealand settlement.

The long narrow peninsula of New Zealand is also the country's outreach towards the Polynesian islands in the Pacific Ocean, and it was from here that the first inhabitants came to New Zealand in the 9th Century AD, as the Polynesians migrated south from their homeland to become the indigenous 'Maori' people in a country they called 'Ao Tea Roa' (Land of The Long White Cloud).

Then the Europeans came - firstly the whalers in the early 19th century, followed by the merchants, the grog sellers, and the missionaries – in that order.¹ The first batch of settlers arrived from England on 22 January 1840 after the New Zealand Company was formed for the purpose of establishing the colony.²

2. ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCES

The Maoris had traditionally built their huts of earthy materials with carved figures on the more important structures, and early European building materials were also of an earthy construction including sun-dried brick (adobe), cob, sod, wattle and daub, mud and stud, and rammed earth (pisé) with thatched roofs, often protected with a home-made lime wash or whitewash.

Initially houses were prefabricated overseas, and since early settlement New Zealand has always been a land of freestanding wooden houses built of flexible materials to withstand earthquakes (particularly in the North Island), and also because there was an abundance of timbers. Further south in the cities of Christchurch and Dunedin which are away from the fault lines, building materials included stone and brick.

Construction of the first type of houses was based on the Georgian style which was fashionable in England at the time. Unfortunately the early houses were built facing the wrong way because in the southern hemisphere the sun rises in the northeast and sets in the northwest. Verandahs, which derived from the British in India were also added to help protect the foundations of buildings as well as providing shade in a harsh climate.

Auckland and Wellington (the largest cities in New Zealand) are years older than towns on the west coast of America, and when new settlements were alive with construction activity in the early 1840s, both San Francisco and Los Angeles were no more than small Mexican villages beside old Spanish forts. From 1820s New England whalers frequented New Zealand shores and trade was developed between the two countries with New Zealand Kauri incorporated into the now famous 'Painted Ladies' of San Francisco. Other similarities with San Francisco and Auckland are that they

lie at exactly the same distance respectively above and below the equator, therefore the two communities share a similar temperate climate.³

In the battle of the styles, the earliest colonial house was followed by our own style of 'Villa' (the name having been borrowed from Italian country houses along with the language of classical architecture),⁴ followed by Arts & Crafts houses, Tudor Revival, Bungalows influenced by both English and American design and Art Deco or 'Moderne'.

In the 1950s the interior walls came down and the houses became bigger with more windows, made possible by the use of new building materials, and construction was changed forever.

At the same time 'State' houses were being built by the government in many different styles to accommodate war veterans and an expanding population, as well as construction towns for the sole purpose of developing hydro-electricity schemes, the building of railways and to accommodate workers at timber mills. (Because New Zealand's European occupation is less than 200 years old, the infrastructure is relatively modern as we had to start from scratch, developing our own guidelines as we progressed.)

The preferred 'natural' look of dwellings today includes the use of local products such as schist and other quarry stones, timber, corrugated iron, exterior plaster (stucco), concrete slabs and cement sheet cladding - all materials that are perfectly in balance with the rugged landscape. Straw bale, energy efficient and one-off design houses are also dotted throughout the country.

3. COLOURS IN ARCHITECTURE

Red is the sacred colour of the Polynesians and Maori Art is in the Oceanic tricolour tradition of red, white and black representing the power of the gods. Various architectural carvings were painted with a variety of red clays mixed with shark liver oil giving a range of hues, from red to orange.⁵ Iron ore was also used.

Not a lot of research has been done on historical colour in New Zealand, but we know from black & white photos and paint scrapings that several colours were used on the facades of our early buildings. All paint ingredients had to be imported in the early years, and pigments were all earthy colours except for the dark green which may have been bought out by the Irish settlers.

Located in a local paint shop recently was an unopened imperial gallon of paint from an early New Zealand paint manufacturing company established in 1925⁶. The label painted on the can listed the colours available as "Bright Red, Extra Bright Red, Middle Red, Dark Red, Chocolate, Purple-brown and 'Fadeless' Green", indicating that Victorian colours were still widely used up to this time.

On early Colonial buildings (1840-1860) there was a simple one or two-toned colour scheme, if houses were painted at all. Early wall colours tended to imitate stone, with creams, fawns, buffs and greys. Although white was not common, it was used for window sashes on the simplest buildings. Earth buildings were usually limewashed.⁷

Mid Victorian houses (1860-1890) were painted in the same earthy colours as the earlier period but a darker range of tones was introduced. Weatherboard colours were Buff, Dark Buff or Drab (Olive), while trims, if picked out, were several shades darker. Sashes and doors were very dark reds, browns or greens – including olive greens.

In late Victorian and Edwardian times (1890-1914), the most common dark colours used on houses included dark greens, reds, maroons and dark brown. Light colours were creams, fawns, drabs, dark pinks, buffs, pale greens and greys. Simpler homes retained the three colour palette with light weatherboards, dark trim and a different dark colour for the window sashes and doors.

The Bungalow years (1914-1945) saw a greater range of style and use of colour than ever before using pale colours such as off whites, buffs and creams for the body of the house and dark greens, dark reds and even blacks for the trim and shingles under the gables and bay windows. An alternative was for the entire house to be painted or stained black.

The Art Deco period in New Zealand was particularly noteworthy, as the city of Napier (in the North Island) was mostly destroyed by an earthquake in 1931 and rebuilt in this new style, making it one of the few cities from this era still intact. Both Art Deco and Moderne styles from 1925 to late 40s used paler pastel colours such as off white, pale greens, pale pinks, and light browns. Details were picked out, often in contrasting colours such as a mid green/melon orange, mid green/dark blue or mid

green and Cobalt blue. Window frames and sashes would be a light colour, while doors would often be painted in a very dark colour such as blues and greens.⁸

Since this time, New Zealand houses have continued to be a myriad of colour combinations combining both heritage colour schemes and those of individual choice.

In the 1960s Western Samoans and Cook Islanders came to New Zealand to work in the timber milling and construction industries, and these people brought cleaner and brighter colours to our house facades from their own culture, including bright pinks and lime greens.

The 1970s brought about a return to inner city living by the younger generation who renovated the villas that had been left derelict for many years and had become slums. These 'villas' are now highly sought after and while today they are often painted in white or heritage colours, some have taken on a new identity comparable with the 'Painted Ladies' of San Francisco.

The late 20th Century brought about the Mediterranean look with the colours of Tuscany, and the 'stressed look' was also popular on rendered buildings. Somewhere in the 1980s it also became fashionable in New Zealand to have houses painted one colour with a contrasting trim on the window sill alone, regardless of style.

Today there is a wide variety of paint types and finishes available for both exterior and interior use, including an increasing awareness of natural environmentally friendly products.

4. COLOURED GLASS

Decorative glass which was either coloured, etched, stained or leaded was an important decorating element in the villa,⁹ and its popularity carried on throughout the period of Arts & Crafts to the bungalow period, and became fashionable again in the late 20th Century. The villa had stained glass in the main rooms and around the front door in vivid colours and various designs, from simple geometric shapes to pictorial patterns, or solid coloured glass with an etched pattern. Designs may have included plants from the old country or ships in which they may have sailed when migrating to New Zealand. Against the all-white villas, the coloured glass provides the only contrast of colour.



Figure 2: Window designs from Di Stewart. *The New Zealand Villa, Past & Present*.

At the end of the 19th Century the colours of glass became more subdued, however they became brighter again in the bungalow period, but never as colourful as in the villa.

5. ROOF COLOURS

Period style houses can be identified by the various roofing materials used, such as wooden cedar shingles that weathered with time on the early Georgian homes, slate on Victorian buildings and terracotta tiles on the bungalows. Corrugated steel roofs were imported in the Victorian period and were traditionally painted green, red oxide or left unpainted. Concrete tiles (sometimes coloured) were used extensively during the middle of the 20th Century on mass-market housing, while today roofs come in all colours and finishes. Colorsteel® have over 20 pre-finished colours ranging from light shades, through earthy colours to black, as well as in their natural state.¹⁰

6. FUTURE INFLUENCES

All of the influences on our culture from different parts of the globe have helped make New Zealand the colourful place it is today as each group has left their mark. Newer houses may still be painted in earthy colours, but greys and neutrals have become popular in both light and dark shades. As a relatively new country in the world, we will continue to evolve as further influences of new cultures, wider travel experiences and ideas of a new generation are incorporated.

References

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10. Colorsteel®, <http://www.colorsteel.co.nz>.