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**New International Selection**  
**Full Documentation Fiche 2003**

International working party for  
**documentation and conservation**

of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the  
**modern movement**

**composed by national/regional working party of:**

0. Picture of building/ group of buildings/ urban scheme/ landscape/ garden



depicted item: Kahn house exterior, photographer Xanthe Howes, June 2005

See also Irene Koppel's photographs [c.1941] reproduced in numerous publications including:  
Tyler, Linda "The Urban and Urbane: Ernst Plischke's Kahn House" *Zeal and Crusade: the modern movement in Wellington* ed John Wilson (Christchurch: Te Waihora Press, 1996) p. 33.  
Plischke, Ernst A., *Ein Leben mit Architektur* (Wien [Austria]: Löcker, 1989) p. 255.  
*The modern movement in architecture: selections from the Docomomo registers* ed Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (Rotterdam, Netherlands: 010 Publishers, 2000) p. 188.  
Tyler, Linda "Gulliver's Adventures in Lilliput" *Architecture New Zealand* (Sept/Oct 2003) n. 5, p. 80.

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## **1. Identity of building/ group of buildings/ group of buildings/ landscape/ garden**

### **1.1 Data for identification**

current name: Kahn house

former/original/variant name: Dwelling for J. F. Kahn

number(s) and name(s) of street(s): 53 Trelissick Crescent, Ngaio

town: Wellington

province/state: Wellington

post code: 6004

block:

lot: Lot 1 D.P. 8974

country: New Zealand

national topographical grid reference:

legal description: Lot 1 D.P. 8974

current typology: RES (residential)

former/original/variant typology: RES (residential)

comments on typology: The single family detached house is New Zealand's standard residential typology but the continental modernism of the building sets it apart from its contemporaries.

### **1.2 Status of protection**

protected by: state/province/town/record only: The Kahn house is currently registered as a Category I Historic Place (NZHPT 2005)

grade: Category I

date: 9 December 2005

valid for: whole area/parts of area/building (i.e. Lot 1 D.P. 8974)

remarks: The current owner is very supportive of this NZHPT registration. The house is not listed in the Wellington City Council District Plan Heritage Schedule.

### **1.3 Visually or functionally related building(s)/site(s)**

name(s) of surrounding area/building(s): Ngaio Gorge and Trelissick Park border the south side of Trelissick Crescent in the vicinity of the Kahn house. Houses in the immediate environment are predominantly early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century bungalows.

visual relations: views from house across to suburban Wadestown

functional relations: n/a

other relations: n/a

## **2. History of building(s) etc.**

### **2.1 Chronology**

commission or competition date: c1940

design period(s): c1940-1941

start of site work: 1941

completion/inauguration: c1941-1942

### **2.2 Summary of development**

commission brief:

There is little available information about the commission brief. The Kahns commissioned Plischke c1940. It is likely that Plischke was awarded the commission because he was also part of the refugee community and was a personal friend of the Kahns.

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design brief:

There is little documentation of, or information about, the design brief. It has been noted that the clients requested: "two bedroom, but an expansive living area with a stage at one end"<sup>1</sup> The stage was requested because Joachim Kahn was a talented amateur actor. The house is a three bedroom house (as per plans) but the occupants have always used the third bedroom as a study and this room has an original built-in bookcase, supporting the speculation that this was always intended as a study.

building/construction: City council approval for the building was gained in April and May 1941.<sup>2</sup>

completed situation:

original situation or character of site:

The original site has been described as a "windy hill top with panoramic views."<sup>3</sup> The house was planned with specific reference to the site. The house was oriented so that the L-shaped living/dining room caught all day sun from its rising in the east through to its setting in the west. Likewise views of the surrounding hills and the harbour can be seen from this room. The harbour view in particular is reserved for the stage area of this room. That Plischke was especially conscious of designing and highlighting this relationship to the exterior can also be seen by his use of translucent glazing in the hallway area immediately adjacent to the living/dining room to prevent an early glimpse of openness and the view.

Plischke described the site as follows: "The position of the site was uncommonly beautiful. An uncluttered hill, from which one could look over all the roofs to the sea. The view and the sun were there but also the strong cold wind that comes from the South Pole [...] To deal with the heavy winds and the driving rain, special details had to be worked out for the sliding door to the living room. For ventilation, flaps above the floor and below the ceiling were planned. The solar energy stored during the day through the large areas of glazing was sufficient for the evening. On days when the sun did not shine a portable electric radiator provided enough warmth for the entire house."<sup>4</sup>

It has also been noted that the site had views of the harbour and knowledge of this resulted in accusations that the Kahns were spies.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 Relevant persons/organisations

original owner(s)/patron(s): Gertrude and Joachim [also: Joseph] Kahn

architect(s): Ernst Plischke

landscape/garden designer(s): the planting and terracing was done by Gertrud and Joachim Kahn

other designer(s): nil

consulting engineer(s): nil

building contractor(s): H. Bradshaw, Khandallah<sup>6</sup>

### 2.4 Other persons or events associated with the building(s)/site

name(s): n/a

association: n/a

event(s): n/a

period: n/a

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<sup>1</sup> *The modern movement in architecture* p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Building Application Form (22 April 1941) Wellington City Archives Ref: 00056:265:B21586

<sup>3</sup> *The modern movement in architecture* p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> English translation Sarnitz and Ottillinger *Ernst Plischke* p. 164; original text in German: Plischke *Ein Leben mit Architektur* p. 253.

<sup>5</sup> Tyler "The Urban and Urbane" p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Building Application Form (22 April 1941) Wellington City Archives Ref: 00056:265:B21586

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## 2.5 Summary of important changes after completion

type of change: alteration/extension: Basement garage and driveway<sup>7</sup>  
date(s): 1965<sup>8</sup>

circumstances/ reasons for change: Addition of basement garage and driveway

effects of changes: Addition of basement garage

persons/organisations involved: Orchiston & Associates (architects).<sup>9</sup>

type of change: alteration/extension: fence extending along the north-west elevation between the western corner of the house and the perimeter boundary fence<sup>10</sup>

date(s): unknown

circumstances/ reasons for change: fence

effects of changes: alters landscape context

persons/organisations involved: unknown

type of change: alteration/extension: built-in bookcase and shelves in eastern bedroom<sup>11</sup>

date(s): unknown

circumstances/ reasons for change: addition of bookcase and shelves

effects of changes: minor

persons/organisations involved: unknown

type of change: replacement of many of the timber framed windows with aluminium framed windows

date(s): c2005

circumstances/ reasons for change: thermal comfort

effects of changes: negative impact on the appearance of the southern end of the house

persons/organisations involved: commissioned by Claude Kahn

## 3. Description of building(s) etc.

### 3.1 Site/building character

*Summarize main character and give notes on surviving site/building(s)/part(s) of area.*

*If a site: principle features and zones of influence; main elements in spatial composition.*

*If a building: main features, construction and materials.*

**General Description:** The house is a three bedroom house (study and two bedrooms), which was originally a single storey (basement garage added 1965), with an "L-shaped" split-level living room and dining recess. Steps connect the kitchen and dining room. The service areas and bedrooms are conventional. It was originally painted sky blue,<sup>12</sup> and was "well hidden from the street and is oriented to sun and view."<sup>13</sup> The living room and dining room walls were originally painted teal and apricot.

### Construction:

Materials: Concrete base, Timber walls

Roof: Bitumen Fabric (Malthoid)

Joinery: Rimu, Matai and Totara (native NZ timbers)

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<sup>7</sup> Wellington City Archives Ref: 00058:508:C21930

<sup>8</sup> Wellington City Archives Ref: 00058:508:C21930; Tyler dates the garage and driveway addition as 1966 which may reflect the date of completion. Tyler "The Urban and Urbane" p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Wellington City Archives Ref: 00058:508:C21930

<sup>10</sup> Claude Kahn interview (28 April 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Claude Kahn interview (28 April 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Tyler "Urban", p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Tyler "Urban", p. 37.

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Reinforcing: Structural steel

Cladding: "weatherboard cladding to the south."<sup>14</sup> The northeast and northwest elevations are primarily glazed.

n.b. drawings attached

**Context:** suburban residential

### 3.2 Current use

of whole building/site: Residential

of principal components (*if applicable*): n/a

comments: nil

### 3.3 Present (physical) condition

of whole building/site: General good condition, some paint cracking due to interior condensation in the living/dining room

of principal components (*if applicable*):

of other elements (*if applicable*):

of surrounding area (*if applicable*):

comments:

### 3.4 Note(s) on context, indicating potential developments

*Indicate, if known, potential developments relevant for the conservation/threats of the building/site*

The context is suburban. The area is well developed and potential developments in the near future are unlikely.

## 4. Evaluation

*Give the scientific reasons for selection for DOCOMOMO documentation*

### Intrinsic value

#### 4.1 technical evaluation:

The Kahn house used an "innovative construction system ... [a] wooden skeleton and flat roof,"<sup>15</sup> Plischke described it as "break[ing] away from stud frame construction and the [New Zealand] Housing Department Standards and [a] start on a timber skeleton building as I have done in Attersee,"<sup>16</sup> which allowed floor to ceiling glazing on the northern elevations. The construction was very different to the usual New Zealand construction at the time.<sup>17</sup>

The glass door on the north-east elevation was an innovative adaption of industrial prototype (garage roller door).<sup>18</sup> Tyler describes this as the first glass sliding door in domestic architecture in New Zealand.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.2. social evaluation:

The Kahn house was designed by an émigré architect for Jewish émigré clients. It reflects the social context in New Zealand during World War II when numerous Europeans (especially Jewish) immigrated to

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<sup>14</sup> Tyler "Urban", p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> The modern movement in architecture p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Tyler "Gulliver" p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Tyler "The Architecture of E.A. Plischke" p. 74, Shaw "Plischke in NZ" p. 61, c.f. Lloyd-Jenkins At Home p. 109, The modern movement in architecture p. 188.

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New Zealand to escape Nazi persecution.<sup>20</sup> These people were often listed or classified as "enemy aliens" (as was the case with Plischke and his Jewish wife Anna Lang),<sup>21</sup> and they often formed close social and intellectual communities apart from mainstream New Zealand. Engagement with European art and design (what Tyler calls "the urbane") characterised the aesthetic appreciation of this social group. This is reflected in the modernist design of the Kahn house, and the client brief for a split-level or raised stage/platform in the living space, which was new to the New Zealand house.<sup>22</sup> That the house is still owned and occupied by the Kahn's son, Claude, adds to its historical value.

#### **4.3. cultural and aesthetic evaluation:**

The Kahn house was designed by Ernst Plischke, an award-winning modernist architect who resided in New Zealand from 1939 to 1963. It was the first house Plischke designed in Wellington and the second he designed in New Zealand, the first being the Frankel house (Christchurch, 1939).

The split-level living room was "larger than was usual."<sup>23</sup> This, and the floor to ceiling glazing, were unusual in New Zealand domestic architecture at this time. The Kahn house used an innovative construction system, and is reputed to have the first residential exterior glass sliding door in New Zealand. It is also said to be the first flat-roofed house in Wellington.<sup>24</sup>

The split-level living room both articulates separate spaces for living and dining while providing one continuous space. The change in levels (to accommodate a client brief for a stage) provides different views down to the harbour. The privileging of this stage/dining area has meant that steps up to the dining level were required in the kitchen to compensate for the different levels.

The house is planned to amplify the effect of the living/dining room as an open space connecting with the exterior. The progression to the living/dining room is deliberately enclosed. The window at the end of the hallway uses translucent glass to provide light while suppressing the view. The original interior colour scheme still survives and the exterior blue is a close approximation of the original. There are some built-in furniture and fixtures (in the kitchen, toilet, bathroom and study). Most of the existing furniture (table, couch, armchairs, bookcase) while not designed by Plischke, were the original furniture used to furnish the house. Much of this was brought from Germany in 1936 and so it provides a very good instance of the original context.

The Kahn house was used by Plischke<sup>25</sup> to make "the case locally for Internationalism in architectural style."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tyler "The Architecture of E.A. Plischke" pp. 29-32, 73 ft 20, O'Brien "The importance of being Ernst" p. 17, Lloyd-Jenkins [At Home](#) p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Tyler "Urban" pp. 35-36, Lloyd-Jenkins [At Home](#) pp. 108-109.

<sup>23</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Claude Kahn interview 28 April 2005.

<sup>25</sup> [Design Review](#) (1950) pp. 93-95.

<sup>26</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 37.

## **Comparative significance**

**4.4 canonical status (local, national, international)** The Kahn house was the first modern house in Wellington,<sup>27</sup> and the first Plischke house in Wellington (it predates his other Wellington houses by seven years).<sup>28</sup> It is the second Plischke house in New Zealand, the first being the Frankel house in Christchurch (1939).

The house was designed by an internationally renowned modernist architect, Ernst Plischke (1903-1992) who arrived in New Zealand on 9 May 1939.<sup>29</sup> Plischke emigrated from Austria to New Zealand due to the impending WWII and Nazi persecution. By the time he immigrated to New Zealand he had established himself in international architectural circles and had been published in Alberto Satori's *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Funzionale* (1935), studied with Peter Behrens,<sup>30</sup> and worked with Josef Frank,<sup>31</sup> was awarded the Greater Austrian State Prize for Architecture in 1935.<sup>32</sup>

In New Zealand, he was initially employed as a draughtsman by the Department of Housing Construction<sup>33</sup> until setting up practice with Cedric Firth (1948-1958) and later Bob Fantl, largely because he didn't sit the required N.Z.I.A./R.I.B.A. professional practice examinations to qualify to register as an architect in New Zealand.

He published New Zealand Services Current Affairs Bulletin "About Houses" (1943), *Design and Living* (1947) (an expanded version of the earlier NZSCAB publication), *On the Human Aspect of Architecture* (c1970), and his autobiography, *Ein Leben mit Architektur* (1989). He was on the editorial board of *Design Review*, and was a member of the Wellington Architectural Centre. He also designed Wellington's first modern skyscraper (Massey House) with Cedric Firth.

Plischke left New Zealand c1962-1963<sup>34</sup> to take up a professorship in Austria (Professor of Architecture at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste/ Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna)

This is one of four Plischke houses which are registered by the NZ Historic Places Trust. The Kahn house is one of 19 buildings selected to represent New Zealand in Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (eds), *The Modern Movement in Architecture: Selections from the DOCOMOMO Registers* (Rotterdam : 010 Publishers, 2000).

## **4.5 historic and reference values:**

Plischke is an historically significant figure in New Zealand architecture. His life and work in New Zealand has been widely published and well documented [see below].

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<sup>27</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 33; Shaw "Plischke in New Zealand" p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 34; O'Brien "The Importance of Being Ernst" p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Tyler "Urban" p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> 1963, Tyler "Urban" p. 38; 1962, Shaw "Plischke in New Zealand" p. 61.

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## 5. Documentation

### 5.1 archives/written records/correspondence etc. (state location/ address):

Wellington City Archives, 28 Barker St, Wellington

New Zealand Historic Places Trust, Antrim House, 63 Boulcott St, Wellington

### 5.2 principal publications (in chronological order):

Plischke, Ernst A., *About houses* (Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1943)

Plischke, Ernst A., *Design and living* (Wellington, N.Z.: Dept. of Internal Affairs, 1947)

Plischke, E. A. "Two Houses" *Design Review* v. 2, n. 5 (February-March 1950) pp. 93-95.

Plischke, Ernst A. *Vom Menschlichen im neuen Bauen = On the human aspect in modern architecture* (Wien: K. Wedl, 1969)

Plischke, Ernst A., *E.A. Plischke* (Wien: Akademie der Bildenden Künste, [1983?])

Tyler, Linda "The architecture of E. A. Plischke in New Zealand, 1939-1962: a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History in the University of Canterbury" (Thesis (MA) University of Canterbury, 1986)

Plischke, Ernst A., *Ein Leben mit Architektur / Ernst A. Plischke* (Wien [Austria] : Löcker, 1989)

Shaw, Peter "Plischke in New Zealand" *Architecture New Zealand* (Jan/Feb 1991) pp. 61-64.

Tyler, Linda "The Urban and Urbane: Ernst Plischke's Kahn House" *Zeal and Crusade: the modern movement in Wellington* ed John Wilson (Christchurch: Te Waihora Press, [1996]) pp. 33-38.

*The modern movement in architecture: selections from the Docomomo registers* ed Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (Rotterdam, Netherlands: 010 Publishers, 2000)

Tyler, Linda "Gulliver's Adventures in Lilliput" *Architecture New Zealand* (Sept/Oct 2003) n. 5, pp. 77-84.

Sarnitz, August and Eva B. Ottillinger *Ernst Plischke: the complete works: modern architecture for the New World* (Munich; London: Prestel, 2004)

Lloyd-Jenkins, Douglas *At Home: a century of New Zealand design* (Auckland, New Zealand: Godwit, 2004)

O'Brien, Gregory "The importance of being Ernst" *Heritage New Zealand* (Spring 2004) n. 94, pp. 16-17.

McCarthy, C. "Kahn House" *NZHPT Register of Historic PLaces* (9 August 2005; 9 December 2005)  
<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7633>

Tyler, Linda "Kahn House" in Julia Gatley (ed.), *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904-1984* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p. 40.

### 5.3 visual material (state location/ address)

original visual records/drawings/photographs/others:

Wellington City Archives, 28 Barker St, Wellington

recent photographs and survey drawings:

New Zealand Historic Places library, Boulcott St, Wellington

film/video/other sources: nil

### 5.4 list documents included in supplementary dossier

- copies of original plans and drawings
- copies of original specifications
- copy of original Building Application Form
- copy of drawing for 1965 garage addition
- Digital photographs (Xanthe Howes 28 April 2005)

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## 6. Fiche report

name of reporter: Christine McCarthy

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telephone: +64 4 463 6164 fax: +64 4 463 6204

e-mail: christine.mccarthy@vuw.ac.nz

date of report: July 2005; revised September 2010 following peer review by Dr Julia Gatley

### examination by DOCOMOMO national/regional section

approval by wp co-ordinator/registers correspondent (name): Dr Ann McEwan

sign and date: 4 April 2012

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### examination by DOCOMOMO ISC/R

name of ISC member in charge of the evaluation:

comment(s):

sign and date:

ISC/R approval:

date:

wp/ref. no.:

NAI ref. no.:

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