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# **The Model Suburb**

## **The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct, Palmerston North**

A research exercise presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for  
the Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey University

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# Introduction

A significant aspect of the policy of the First Labour Government of New Zealand upon coming to power in 1935 was housing. Housing was always an issue for governments and political parties during the early half of the Twentieth Century in New Zealand, but it was only after the Depression of the 1930s that it was brought to the fore. In fact, the history of government housing schemes in New Zealand dates back to the mid-1890s, when health reformers argued that slum dwellings would become a feature of towns and cities in the country unless more adequate housing was built to replace them. In 1900, they successfully pressed for inclusion of municipal housing schemes in the Municipal Corporations Act of that year, which permitted local bodies to both buy land and construct workers dwellings on it, and to buy existing houses for workers.<sup>1</sup> The act would become the basis of the ideals that shaped the planning, construction and promotion of government housing schemes in years to come.

To solve the problem of slums in New Zealand towns, the Municipal Corporations Act embodied the creation of model workers dwellings within the towns.<sup>2</sup> To create them, controls on dwellings, dwelling space, road width and the position local authorities to control the construction of houses and the amount of people that lived in them were passed in the Act. The act enabled 'city beautifiers' to create an urban aesthetic of parks and open spaces in town centres that would be appreciated by people living in suburbs, while forming in statute the regulation of housing conditions

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<sup>1</sup> Gael Ferguson, *Building the New Zealand Dream*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1994, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, p. 51.

and suburban land settlement schemes.<sup>3</sup> A precedent was set for future housing in New Zealand.

In the following years more efforts were made to carry out improvements to housing in New Zealand. Health was not the only issue behind these efforts. For example, in 1905 the Liberal Government, upon hearing of poor opportunities for wagedworkers to own homes, passed the Advances to Workers Act and built several small state-housing areas.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, State housing schemes were seen as a way <sup>to</sup> of enabling immigrants to settle into New Zealand. W.F. Massey, who became Prime Minister in 1912, saw government-assisted housing schemes as being both a new encouragement to immigration and an antidote to the new and subversive ideologies of the political left.<sup>5</sup> In the following years, new ideas of life at home and technologies began to take shape. During and after international tensions flared, successive governments became concerned that housing in the country had to be suitable for the well-being of children who represented New Zealand's future, while the arrival of electricity in the 1920s saw houses become a wider area for work and leisure activities, with developments such as hot water and the wireless appearing in many homes. <sup>6</sup>

There were renewed attempts by many organisations to press for improvements to housing in New Zealand and abolish slum dwellings once and for all. The First World War and the 1918 Influenza Epidemic fuelled concerns that health and the moral

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<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Penny Isaac and Erik Olssen. 'The Justification for Labour's Housing Scheme: The Discourse of 'the Slum' in *At Home in New Zealand: History Houses People*, ed. Barbara Brookes, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac and Olssen, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.

wellbeing of New Zealand would suffer from poor housing and slum areas. Dirt, disease and exploitation were believed to be the constant companions of slum-dwellers, and concerns were raised over substandard living conditions such as overcrowding and inadequate ventilation in poorer housing areas.<sup>7</sup>

These concerns over housing, especially in working-class suburbs, prompted government authorities to examine the housing situation more closely than before. One such response was the 'First New Zealand Town-Planning Conference and Exhibition', staged in Wellington between 20 and 23 May 1919. One approach to the housing problem discussed in the conference was the garden city concept. Samuel Hurst Seager, an early advocate of garden cities and town planning in New Zealand, had originally suggested this design in 1900.<sup>8</sup> This was based on an article in Sir Ebenezer Howard's 1898 publication *Tomorrow - A Peaceful Path To Real Reform*, where an idea to stop adding to the overcrowded cities of the time by establishing self-sufficient satellite towns in green belts was put forward.<sup>9</sup> It was hoped that the towns would create a total change in the lifestyles of the people that moved into them from the cities. Their inhabitants would experience a pleasant environment that would improve their quality of life and ultimately make them better human beings with more worthy aspirations.<sup>10</sup> An integral part of the garden city concept was a curved street with room for trees.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Pilkington, *Savage Crescent Walk* (Pamphlet), New Zealand Historic Places Trust (Manawatu Branch), 1994, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Pilkington, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

This renewed government interest in the state of dwellings in poorer areas of New Zealand brought changes to housing construction legislation. The year 1919 also saw the Housing Act being passed. This new act, an enlargement of the 1910 Workers Dwellings Act, included new concepts such as the provision of public parks, recreation grounds and reserves, libraries, halls and other buildings in housing schemes for public servants. However, the newly formed Housing Board largely ignored these requirements when constructing the new housing areas and the scheme was crippled by a combination of the rising material costs, a shortage of joinery in New Zealand and a lack of government commitment.<sup>12</sup>

The 1920s saw more interest in housing development take shape as both state lending and the release of suburban Crown land for sale in the 1920s caused a rise of prospective housing development on the outskirts of the main towns.<sup>13</sup> This was the start of a brief period of housing development, with an emphasis on rapid subdivision and expansion. Many people at the time found the prospect of living in these new areas inviting, as they offered a chance to move out of the built-up town areas and into an environment with more space and better living. However the schemes had major pitfalls. Many people who hoped to become new suburban dwellers found themselves signed up for a scheme that largely relied on state funds.<sup>14</sup> Government retrenchment and the failure of land development and building firms during the late 1920s caught out many people wanting to buy new houses. In May 1925, it was reported that people were living in tents on the designated sections of their new

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<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90.



houses on the Tramways Estate in Point Chevalier, Auckland, as they lacked the money to build and were unable to sell their sections.<sup>15</sup>

Many local authorities were unenthusiastic <sup>about</sup> towards the housing schemes. In 1924, the Dunedin City Council built seven cottages, for which there were 100 applicants.<sup>16</sup> The most significant housing venture of the 1920s, a plan for workers dwellings in Orakei devised by the Housing Department and the Auckland City Council, became one of the region's 'most expensive and exclusive residential areas.'<sup>17</sup> As a result of these failed schemes, most of the country's population found themselves living in rented dwellings instead of living in houses of their own.<sup>18</sup>

The housing situation in New Zealand encountered more problems during the 1930s. The Depression of the early 1930s caused considerable unemployment of people in the building industry. For example, The Auckland Carpenters Union had 1000 members signed to their books, but could only find half of them and only sixty were 'engaged fully to the trade.'<sup>19</sup> From 1930 not only did the Coalition Government impose a policy of deliberately lending less money for housing through the State Advances Corporation, but many home owners found themselves incapable of keeping up mortgage repayments as economic conditions worsened at the onset of the Depression. Many of them were forced to sell their homes at a greatly reduced price or simply moved out and returned them to the State Advances Corporation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Erik Olssen, 'Towards a New Society' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, eds. W.H. Oliver and B.R. Williams, Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 276.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 276

<sup>19</sup> Erik Olssen, 'Depression and War' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Keith Sinclair, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 216.

<sup>20</sup> Pilkington, p. 3.

Concern over the poor condition of inner city housing rose again. In 1934 an article in *Truth* reported that 7,000 families in the central Wellington Area lived in 'rotten, decrepit, stinking, disease-pregnant, damp, and vermin-infested houses', while the City Engineer of Auckland described thirty-five per cent of all inner-city housing as being totally unsatisfactory.<sup>21</sup>

In November 1935, the country went to the election polls. The Labour Government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, replaced the unpopular Coalition Government, which had failed to adequately solve the problems that the Depression had brought down upon the population of New Zealand. The new Government quickly moved to implement policies to improve the well-being of the Dominion's population, including a housing scheme that in the words of the Minister of Finance, Walter Nash, would provide every New Zealander with 'a house fit for a Cabinet Minister.'<sup>22</sup>

In September 1936, the Ministry of Housing and the Housing Department came into existence with the intention of setting up the construction of new state houses under the revived Housing Act of 1919. At the head of the new department was the Parliamentary Under Secretary for Housing and the Director of Housing Construction, John A. Lee. The Department rapidly expanded to include a staff of Town Planners, Architects, Draughtsmen, Quantity Surveyors and 'Stores.'<sup>23</sup> The State Advances Corporation continued to administer the scheme's financial aspects and the letting of completed houses.

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<sup>21</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 276.

<sup>22</sup> Olssen, 'Depression and War', p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> J. Wells, *A History of State Housing Construction in New Zealand*, MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1944, p. 38.

Labour was convinced that by funding a housing scheme, they would be able to fulfil the need for 6,000 new homes per year, while simultaneously relieving the country's unemployment.<sup>24</sup> By the time Labour had come to power, twelve per cent of the workforce was unemployed, a large number of which were workers from building or associated trades, or general labourers.<sup>25</sup> The Government also aimed to use materials produced and manufactured in New Zealand in the construction of the housing areas.

John A. Lee was chiefly responsible for the successful launching of the new Government Housing Programme. The building standards of the new state houses were based largely around his ideals of the types of homes that were to be constructed. Lee believed that the new houses should not be constructed like workers barracks, but should instead be sound new houses built up to the standard of, and preferably better than, the houses lived in by average citizens.<sup>26</sup> Every house was to have a separate plot of ground and was to be individual in design as much as possible, although standardization would run through the whole scheme regarding construction issues such as the height of the windows. The plans were designed to position the living room in the sunny side of the houses, while the kitchens were set up so a woman could run her home without having to move too much. No two houses in the same area were to be the same in appearance, while a high standard of quality construction would be maintained.<sup>27</sup> The Labour Government wanted the term

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<sup>24</sup> Pilkington, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Wells, p. 39.

‘Worker’s Home’ to mean a house built to a new high standard, rather than a house built to an average standard.<sup>28</sup>

Labour also claimed that it was building for the future; where people would be placed in a position to pay decent rentals for decent houses.<sup>29</sup> The old capitalist system of the oldest and poorest houses for people with the lowest incomes could not be changed overnight, but it would be changed. Houses were to be provided, not according to the purses of the people, but according to their needs.<sup>30</sup>

The first of these State funded housing areas were built early in 1937 in the Hutt Valley, at Miramar, Wellington and at Orakei, Auckland. As early as 1936, the State Advances Corporation had been planning to establish a state housing area in Palmerston North, where it was seeking at least three hundred sections in a block there.<sup>31</sup> Eventually a large education site covering almost seventy acres in the West End of the city was chosen as the site for the new housing scheme.<sup>32</sup>

The site for the new Government housing venture would become known as the Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct. By the end of 1937, construction of the precinct was under way. Although nowhere near as big as other state housing projects like those in Wellington and Auckland, the Savage Crescent precinct would become significant in the history of New Zealand housing, and New Zealand History as a whole. Between 1938 and 1944 a total of 245 houses were built in this subdivision.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wells, p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, August 6, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Pilkington, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Pilkington, p. 4.

Savage Crescent was an example of comprehensive site planning with symmetrical street patterns and provision for shops and a central reserve.<sup>34</sup> These features were intended to be typical of an ideal State Housing suburb. Each State housing precinct was to have its own shopping centres, reserve land and community hall. It would also have to be close to schools and churches and have good access to public transport. The houses were built according to the 'solar principle of planning', in which all living rooms and bedrooms were to be given a northerly aspect, whether or not they faced the street, which was a significant housing innovation for that period.<sup>35</sup>

The design of Savage Crescent was influenced by Sir Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City' philosophy. The Government sustained the idea that mean streets made mean men, and pursued the ideal of a nuclear family living happily in suburbia.<sup>36</sup> The 'garden suburb' within workers housing areas was seen as a way of meeting this ideal. In Savage Crescent, the layout of the area was designed to contribute to the 'garden suburb' atmosphere with an emphasis on front gardens, good walkways and the suburb being organised so that it would not become a route for major traffic.<sup>37</sup> The individuality of house designs in the precinct was maintained.

The Savage Crescent Precinct was a good example of how the designs of housing schemes for working-class people in New Zealand almost changed overnight. Although State houses are instantly recognisable in New Zealand streetscape, in Palmerston North it is worth looking at the houses that were built before Savage

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<sup>34</sup> Royce A. Hunt, *Takaro: Demographic and Social Characteristics of a State Housing Suburb*, MA thesis, Massey University, 1970, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Pilkington, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Cathrin Shaer, 'Quality Street', *Wallpaper*, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Pilkington, p. 7.

Crescent, which were not built to the same high standard of planning and construction as those in later suburbs such as Savage Crescent.<sup>38</sup> Once completed, the houses were generally well received by their tenants, many of whom would enjoy the community lifestyle and the 'garden suburb' atmosphere the precinct provided. Many of those people would live in the precinct for the rest of their lives.<sup>39</sup> By the end of March 1938, Savage Crescent was part of a large-scale State housing scheme, in which preliminary surveys of 1,985 acres had already been made for State housing areas throughout the Dominion.<sup>40</sup>

When World War Two broke out, the Government's primary concern of supplying good housing to New Zealanders made way for the need to defend the Dominion from foreign invasion and join the allied war effort. Even then the Government considered housing construction to be second only in importance to the war effort.<sup>41</sup>

By 1944, an effective tenancy application system for people wanting to move into the new houses had been established. The selection of tenants was made through committees posted at the offices of the Housing Construction branches after the applicants had been graded according to the sizes of their families, degrees of urgency and the times that the applications had been lodged.<sup>42</sup> By then, there was no difficulty in letting all the completed houses, and the high number of applications for houses

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid* , p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Pilkington, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> 'Survey Operations – Report of Surveyor General on, for year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1938 - Housing', *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, Vol. II, 1938, C.-1A, pp. 2-4.

<sup>41</sup> 'State Advances Corporation of New Zealand – Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 1942 Part II – Housing Account', *AJHR*, 1942, B.-13, p.4.

<sup>42</sup> 'State Advances Corporation of New Zealand – Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 1944 Part II – Housing Account', *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1944, B.-13, p.5.

caused concerns that there would be difficulty in supplying houses to even the most urgent cases.<sup>43</sup>

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct in Palmerston North is an example of the First Labour Government's housing policies. The Labour Government's State housing schemes of the 1930s can be seen as a response to a desperate need for housing schemes of better standards than those of earlier governments. Attempts by governments of New Zealand during the early years of the twentieth century to produce housing schemes that would benefit people unable to afford their own homes and decrease slum areas in the cities were either half-hearted or misguided, and it was not until the Labour Party was voted into power in 1935 that any serious attempt was made to launch a large-scale housing scheme that would provide good-quality homes for the New Zealand masses. The Savage Crescent precinct is an example of the housing standard that Labour aimed for. It also gives a valuable insight into Labour's attitudes towards government housing in the 1930s, and how people responded to Labour's housing schemes. Therefore Savage Crescent is an important part of the history of New Zealand housing, and New Zealand history as a whole.

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<sup>43</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1944, B.-13, p. 5.

# Chapter One

## Savage Crescent and the Vision of the First

### Labour Government

After its 1935 election success, the Labour Government quickly passed several policies to revive a Dominion that had suffered from the Depression and the policies of the Reform Government. In 1936 the Reserve Bank was nationalized, the old age pension was restored and increased, the Arbitration Court was instructed to introduce the forty-hour week when possible and to provide a minimum wage for all workers sufficient to support a man, his wife, and three children.<sup>44</sup> These policies were all parts of a vision of the First Labour Government to achieve a better standard of living for all New Zealanders.

For the Labour Government, housing played an important role in achieving this vision. Michael Savage in particular was committed not just to the building of public housing, but also to building public housing based on sound construction and design principles and where sunlight would be the principle consideration in the positioning of the houses.<sup>45</sup> When visiting Australia during the late 1920s, Savage had been impressed by the attractive, high-quality, state-rental houses built by the South Australian State Government, although he maintained the belief that it would be better

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<sup>44</sup> Olssen, 'Depression and War', p. 221.

<sup>45</sup> Caroline Miller, 'Its Most Ambitious Town Planning Scheme': The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct, Palmerston North', *Planning History*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1998, p. 16.



for people to own their own homes rather than rent them from the government.<sup>46</sup> The Labour Party conference in 1934 had been in favour of a Government housing scheme for New Zealand.<sup>47</sup> Savage stated 'I think we can have smiling homes in New Zealand; that we can use the public credit for the purpose of building homes worth living in.'<sup>48</sup> The Labour Government developed a pragmatic attitude when it came to the construction of the new houses. It would not risk either worker control or state ownership of the construction process.<sup>49</sup> Its approach to the design of the new houses envisaged no less than a whole new housing environment for New Zealanders.<sup>50</sup>

Fears over the construction of generic workers housing suburbs prompted the Department of Housing Construction to launch a competition in June 1936 to produce the first range of house designs within the department's guidelines, which stated that each house was to have a prominent roof mass and would be in the general style of an English cottage.<sup>51</sup> Over four hundred designs were submitted.<sup>52</sup> Labour welcomed many of the designs put forward as it was now convinced that design standardisation would evoke images of the slum-like tenement housing of Britain and Europe. As John A. Lee argued in 1937, 'rows of identical housing would have been extremely unpopular.'<sup>53</sup> The result of the competition was a diversity of building styles, all of which would become present in many state housing suburbs, particularly Savage Crescent which eventually included some of the more modern styles.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barry Gustafson, 'The Real Task Begins 1935-37' in *From the Cradle to the Grave: A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage*, Auckland: Penguin, 1988, p. 197.

<sup>47</sup> Gustafson, p. 197.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>49</sup> Ferguson, p. 137.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ben Schrader, 'Labour at Home: The First Labour Government and the Familial Suburban Ideal', *At Home in New Zealand*, p. 133.

<sup>53</sup> Schrader, 'Labour at Home', p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, p. 16.

The houses themselves showed how State housing schemes such as Savage Crescent fitted into the overall vision of Labour, which had a sentimental attachment to the institution of the nuclear family in which the husband was the main breadwinner and his stay-at-home wife was the primary child raiser and 'haven' keeper.<sup>55</sup> Above all, Labour aimed to create conditions in its State housing areas that supported and strengthened nuclear family life, which was important in Labour's housing policy.<sup>56</sup>

A significant part of Government policy regarding the design and layout of State housing suburbs was to make provision for recreation reserves, such as parks and playgrounds. While the customary requirements for a reserve in an urban area at the time were an area equivalent to five per cent of the total block in respect of areas in excess of three acres, the Housing Construction Department now aimed to provide such reserves in accordance with the best town planning principles.<sup>57</sup> Adequate areas of land were now to be set aside for adult recreation, organised games, gardens and children's play grounds which would be based on the estimated population of the district.<sup>58</sup> In the case of the Savage Crescent, the precinct was centred round a large reserve and access to this reserve from the maximum number of houses in the subdivision was a major consideration in the design.<sup>59</sup>

The design of the State houses reflected Labour's attitudes to home and family. They had clearly demarcated boundaries between public and private space, and male and

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<sup>55</sup> Ben Schrader, 'A Brave New World? Ideal Versus Reality in Post -War Naenae', *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, April 1996, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> Schrader, 'A Brave New World?', p. 65.

<sup>57</sup> Department of Housing Construction, *General Report on State Housing in New Zealand*, September 23, 1943, p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Pilkington, p. 6.

female space. Public spaces consisted of the living room, dining alcove and hall, while the home's private spaces were centred on two or three bedrooms (one for each child) and the bathroom.<sup>60</sup> The removal of the social heart of the house from the kitchen (its traditional place in the New Zealand home) to the living room would reinforce the idea that the kitchen was the official domain of the housewife.<sup>61</sup> The largest room was the living room, which was positioned north to catch the afternoon sun. The fireplace was the focal point of the living room, and it was designed so that a generous lounge suite could be placed around it. The living room was the heart of Labour's ideal home and its main purpose was 'familial relaxation.'<sup>62</sup> The Government aimed for low weekly rentals and believed that administration costs would be very small, as it was intended to use the existing organisation of the State Advances Corporation, which would receive the rents.<sup>63</sup>

Two significant aspects of Labour's vision of State housing were to see the building resources of New Zealand in materials, as well as labour reserves, being fully utilized and that the standards of housing construction would be high.<sup>64</sup> An investigation into the materials to be used to build the new houses was carried out by the Department of Housing Construction, for the Department aimed to create an 'All New Zealand House', in order that the scheme would invigorate employment in as many industries as possible.<sup>65</sup> The investigation aimed to find out the extent to which New Zealand materials could profitably be used, and manufacturers and construction workers throughout New Zealand were consulted.

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<sup>60</sup> Schrader, 'A Brave New World?', p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Ferguson, p. 134.

<sup>62</sup> Schrader, 'A Brave New World?', p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> W.B. Sutch, 'Housing' in *New Zealand's Labour Government at Work*, League for Industrial Democracy, New York, 1940, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Wells, p. 40.

Most State housing precincts like Savage Crescent were built with materials made in New Zealand and local workers. Fletcher construction won the lease of two Government owned joinery factories in Wellington and Auckland. In these factories standard components for the houses were produced and by March 1937 both factories were working twenty-four hours a day.<sup>66</sup> New Zealand clay and cement and tiles were used as roofing material, while locally made gas and electrical stoves were specified, expanding the local electrical industry.<sup>67</sup> Locally made fibrous plaster and wall boarding replaced imported wall-board and substantial orders were given to the local makers of fittings such as electric light shades.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, the material used for the wallboard in the Savage Crescent houses was Konka, a Palmerston North invention.<sup>69</sup> Corrugated iron was not considered as a roofing material for the houses because of New Zealand's manufacturing interest in tiles, which were therefore used in the roofs of most State houses. The Government also consulted Dunedin-based porcelain ware manufacturers to supply materials for all the State housing areas in the Dominion.<sup>70</sup> Local building firms won most of the construction tenders for the buildings in the Savage Crescent Precinct. These firms included W.E. Townshend Ltd, whose involvement in the precinct's construction was commemorated in the naming of Townshend Place, a street in the precinct.<sup>71</sup>

All of the new houses were to have wooden frames; one-third would be finished with weatherboard, the rest with brick, brick-veneer or brick-veneer and plaster. Each

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<sup>66</sup> Pilkington, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Wells, p. 40.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, May 1, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Miller, p. 16.

house was to have concrete foundations, heart-of-timber floors, copper piping and electric heating points in each room.<sup>72</sup> The houses would also have features such as tiled roofs where feasible, concrete paths, fences, separate rooms for lavatories and baths in family houses, clotheslines and cloak and linen cupboards.<sup>73</sup>

The Government did not intend the houses to be sold. This was because investigations revealed that many people were unable or unwilling to finance the purchase of a property for various reasons were experiencing the housing shortage most acutely.<sup>74</sup>

Encouragement was given to local authorities to undertake the new housing schemes, and for this purpose, money was made available at an interest rate of 3 cents per *percent* annum.<sup>75</sup> By now the Government was increasing housing construction in the Dominion, because a general improvement in economic conditions during 1937 and an increase in the marriage rate convinced them that the prompt establishment of new housing suburbs was necessary.<sup>76</sup> By September, 1937, the Government's expenditure on housing amounted to approximately 250,000 pounds, but already there were financial commitments for land purchase and work on new housing precincts amounting to around 1, 250,000 pounds, with most of the money being provided by the Reserve Bank.<sup>77</sup>

By the middle of 1937, the housing scheme was in full swing. The Government claimed that, in addition to providing substantial amounts of housing to address the

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<sup>72</sup> Erik Olssen, 'The House that Jack Built', or 'Mr Tyndall, go for Your Bloody Life' in *John A. Lee*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1977, p. 98.

<sup>73</sup> Olssen, 'The House that Jack Built', p. 98.

<sup>74</sup> 'Financial Statement by the Hon. Walter Nash, Minister of Finance, 28th September 1937 – Housing', *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1937-38, B.-6, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1937-38, B.-6, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, B.-6, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, B.-6, p. 5.

housing shortage, its housing operations were giving direct full-time employment to over 1,500 skilled tradesmen and labourers.<sup>78</sup> John A. Lee stated that 1,200 workers were directly employed in the Government housing scheme in August 1937.<sup>79</sup> These figures did not include associated workers that made tiles, stoves and milling timber, or the clerical staffs of building firms and it was estimated that for every man actually employed on a building, there was another employed elsewhere in connection with the same job.<sup>80</sup> By March 1938, the Government claimed that around 4,000 men were actively engaged in the construction of State housing.<sup>81</sup> Although the Government initially succeeded in obtaining local employment and the use of New Zealand materials in the construction of Savage Crescent and other State housing suburbs, it soon encountered a number of setbacks. In 1938, a shortage of materials, particularly tiles, dry timber and fibrous plaster, prompted the Government to import building supplies from places such as Australia.<sup>82</sup>

There was also a shortage of artisans, in spite of special measures that the Government passed during the early stages of the scheme, which aimed to increase the numbers of workers by bringing a large number of the unemployed into full-time employment with jobs such as artisans.<sup>83</sup> The number of artisans per house declined from 1.8 to 1.5 by 1939.<sup>84</sup> Construction employment on State Housing projects declined further in 1940, when due to the outbreak of war, a number of the Public Works Department staff, with their plant equipment and machinery, had to be withdrawn from housing work to concentrate on establish military camps and

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, B.-6, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, August 6, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 19, 1938, p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> Wells, p. 45.

<sup>83</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1937-38, B.-6, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

aerodromes. Shortly afterwards, the Department's contractors released a large number of artisans to undertake the building of the various military encampments.<sup>85</sup> Consequently for a considerable time, housing activities were slowed down in to make way for war emergency requirements. As the work at these military camps was completed, however, the artisans and the Department staff were allowed to return to housing construction.<sup>86</sup>

The outbreak of war also played a role in the Government's vision of State Housing. Even when the Second World War was at its peak and housing construction workers and artisans had been diverted from the housing scheme to the war effort, the Government resolved to resume the housing programme with all possible effort once the war had ended.<sup>87</sup> The Government recognized that housing would play an important role in New Zealand's rehabilitation after the war and that there would be a huge demand for housing by returned soldiers who wished to settle down and marry once the war had finished.<sup>88</sup> After World War Two returned servicemen were given top priority for accommodation in the new suburbs, including Savage Crescent. At that time, fifty percent of the total houses allocated went to men returned from the war.<sup>89</sup>

There were initial concerns over whether or not the Government would be prepared to pay for the maintenance of the houses once they had been built. When these concerns were raised to John A. Lee in 1938, he stated that money from the rentals of tenants

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<sup>85</sup> 'State Advances Corporation of New Zealand: Annual Report and Accounts for Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 1940 Part II – Housing Act', *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1940, B.-13, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1940, B.-13, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> *AJHR*, 1942, B-13, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> Pilkington, p. 5.

would be set aside for necessary repairs or renovations for the houses. The amount money needed to maintain each house would vary according to the construction methods used.<sup>90</sup>

The houses of Savage Crescent reflected the individual style of state houses that the Labour Government desired. The range of architectural styles of the precinct's houses included simplified forms of the arts and Crafts Bungalow, Georgian Revival and the related Mediterranean style, although most of the houses were derived from the English Domestic Revival styles.<sup>91</sup> Various brick, stucco, roughcast and timber and weatherboard designs were used to make houses throughout the precinct. The houses were predominantly single-family detached dwellings, although some double units were built.<sup>92</sup> Four pensioner flats were also built in the precinct.<sup>93</sup>

Considerable attention was paid towards how houses in suburbs like Savage Crescent were situated. Ideal housing schemes were to be grouped around a central feature.<sup>94</sup> In the case of Savage Crescent, this central feature was the reserve. The houses were to be planned and arranged on the site so that the most <sup>was</sup> is made of any view that may be obtained, while living rooms were to be given the maximum sun and a good view, preferably of the street that the house was on.<sup>95</sup> Savage Crescent residents often noted the excellent views of the suburb from their homes. Before the land surrounding the

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<sup>90</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 25, 1938, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Ian Bowman, Stuart Niven, et al., *Savage Crescent Design Guidelines*, Strategic Planning Unit, Palmerston North City Council, June 1996, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> Miller, p. 19.

<sup>93</sup> Royce A. Hunt, *A Survey of Pensioner Flats in Palmerston North*, 1968, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> Department of Housing Construction, *General Report on State Housing*, September 23, 1943, p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.



precinct was developed, some early residents in Savage Crescent could view the nearby Manawatu River from their homes.<sup>96</sup>

One reason why good views and scenery were major features of Savage Crescent was because the State Advances Corporation made sure that scenic landscape development was an important priority when designing the new suburbs. For example, landscape development for housing areas undertaken between 1941 and 1942 included the planting of approximately 450,000 trees and shrubs on tenanted land.<sup>97</sup>

Within Savage Crescent, the layout was designed to contribute towards the 'garden suburb' atmosphere. The houses did not have front fences, but would instead had front gardens that, rather than being individual, would contribute to the neighbourhood environment.<sup>98</sup> The planting of hedges and trees on occupied sections was to be carried out during the appropriate planting season, and tenants were encouraged to provide lawns and improve their gardens and the general appearance of their sections.<sup>99</sup> The erection of fences, tool-sheds, and garages to housing sections was usually carried out after the tenants occupied the houses. This often happened because all available skilled labour was initially focussed on erecting the actual houses, which were often urgently required.<sup>100</sup> In the case of Savage Crescent, garages were not included as additional features to the houses. Communal garaging was also seen as ideal feature of State Housing suburbs, and in Savage Crescent, an

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<sup>96</sup> Donna Willetts, *Savage Crescent* (video recording), 1997. From an interview with Colin Spicer, an early resident of the Savage Crescent Precinct.

<sup>97</sup> *AJHR*, 1942, B.-13, p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Pilkington, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1940, B.-13, p. 13.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, B.-13, p. 13.

area of communal garaging was built with access between 129 and 131 Savage Crescent and 8 and 6 Mansford place.<sup>101</sup>

The interiors of the houses were also built to high standards. The kitchen was sited towards the morning sun and reduced in size to allow for maximum efficiency. It also included built-in workspaces, ample cupboard space and room for a refrigerator, while household surfaces were streamlined to increase hygiene and allow for easy cleaning.<sup>102</sup> Space in the houses was to be provided in order to accommodate two single beds in both the first and second bedrooms, which were to have sufficient space for items such as clothes, books and personal belongings.<sup>103</sup>

The attention to the interior of the houses did not end with the kitchen. In a letter to Alexander Clark Ltd, Palmerston North, in regard to the wallpaper to be supplied to some of the Savage Crescent homes, the Director of Housing Construction with the Department of Housing requested a number of requirements for the wallpaper.<sup>104</sup> In general, the colours were to be of a bright blue with creams and buffs as the body. A percentage of light pink and green wallpaper were to be hung in the bedrooms. Plain modern papers were required and when patterned papers were to be used, they would have a simple tone. Papers with large patterns or dark or dull tones were not to be used, while consideration was to be taken to ensure that all rooms facing south, southeast, east and southwest would be finished with a warm-tinted paper not of a green or bluish shade.<sup>105</sup> In the case of Savage Crescent, the size of the houses that were erected there varied from four to six rooms, depending on the requirements of

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<sup>101</sup> Pilkington., p. 7.

<sup>102</sup> Ferguson, p. 134.

<sup>103</sup> Department of Housing Construction, *General Report on State Housing*, September 23, 1943, p. 50.

<sup>104</sup> Pilkington, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

the families that were to move into them.<sup>106</sup> Open fireplaces were an optional feature for the tenants, who were also given their own choice of having either gas or electric ranges installed in their homes. If they chose an electric range, all options of electric fittings would be available and meet the preferences of the tenants.<sup>107</sup>

The most remarkable aspect of the construction of houses in precincts like Savage Crescent is that they were built to a high standard of design and build, in spite of the effects the lack of resources and the Second World War had on New Zealand's housing industry. The difficulties of obtaining flat iron and wire netting necessitated changes in the standard details and the reduction in the number of lath and plaster houses that were erected.<sup>108</sup> Standard designs were continually revised, altered, and in many cases cancelled, with new designs replacing them.<sup>109</sup> This is evident in the variety of house designs at Savage Crescent. Although some would consider the individual and diverse styling of each house in the precinct part of an effort to create a model State Housing Suburb, it could also be argued that the variety of house designs in the precinct reflects the frequent changes to State House designs made during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Certain aspects of the new houses, such as their building quality, were considered excessive by some authorities. The Associated Chambers of Commerce argued that the Government standard for housing was too costly and that there was room for more modest houses than those being built for the State Housing Scheme.<sup>110</sup> By 1944, the rent for a four-room house was 26 shillings per week, while the rent for other types of

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<sup>106</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1940, B.-13, p. 12.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, B.-13, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> Miller, p. 19.

houses ranged upwards or downwards according to size.<sup>111</sup> This was in spite of a promise made by the Government in 1936 that rents for the new houses would be kept as low as possible, with a target rent of less than one pound per week.<sup>112</sup>

Disputes over rent and housing construction in the case of Savage Crescent go back several years earlier. A.W. Just, the Chairman of the West End Progressive Association, argued in November 1937 that the rental charge was too high and that a private builder could have erected houses in the precinct for 200 pounds less than the Department of Housing Construction could have done.<sup>113</sup> Just pointed out that the houses were built with the intention of providing accommodation to people whose income did not exceed 300 pound a year, but such an income limit had now seemed to vanish, and it appeared that the Government was catering only for the best tenants, who could afford their own houses.<sup>114</sup> He also attacked the building cost of 1,000 pounds per house and the weekly rent of thirty-two shillings, arguing that if the houses had been erected at 800 pounds and had a rental charge of eighteen shillings per week, they would be more affordable for prospective tenants.<sup>115</sup>

Another criticism expressed early on was that the houses were too small. The average size of a three-bedroom state house was just over 1,000 square feet.<sup>116</sup> There was also criticism that the designs of the state houses were too compact to make the houses as comfortable as those with extra space. Critics argued that the emphasis on unnecessary strength and expensive fitting could have been expended to a much better

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<sup>111</sup> *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1944, B.-13, p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 18, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>116</sup> Pilkington, p. 10.

purpose by providing a little extra floor space.<sup>117</sup> Such criticism was evidenced by the additions done to many of the Savage Crescent Precinct houses, particularly several houses fronting Park Road. At the same time many tenants that moved into the houses found their new accommodation more spacious and comfortable than the accommodation that they had moved from.<sup>118</sup>

There were also concerns that amendments made in 1938 to the 1936 Fair Rents Act was hindering the building process of some State housing areas, especially those in Palmerston North. This was because builders were stopping the construction of houses as they were unsure how the changes made to the act would affect them, as there were fears that tenants would not be able to live in the houses if the changes to the act made the rents too high for them.<sup>119</sup> At the same time, groups such as the New Zealand Federated Builders and Contractors Association were concerned about rising New Zealand timber prices, which had the potential to affect the supply of building materials for the housing scheme.<sup>120</sup>

During the same year, the New Zealand Builders and Contractors Federation argued that the Government's housing scheme was harmful to private housing interests. The Federation's members believed that the Government should make more liberal valuations on the houses so that applicants would secure more substantial loans that would revive building by private owners, and that many people who wanted homes of their own should have had the right to make their own choices in regard to the designs and locations of the buildings. They also felt that the Government should have

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 2, 1938, p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 17, 1938, p. 8.

provided financial assistance for private home building through the State Advances Department. They were convinced that the Government's housing scheme was only meeting the housing shortage to a certain point, and argued that the State Houses were only for letting purposes, which did not meet the needs of a large amount of people who wanted to live in houses of their own and that there was a need for more money being made available at a low interest rate.<sup>121</sup> A Wellington member of the Federation, J. H. Meyer, thought that the Government's housing planning and design work cramped the initiative of the individual instead of encouraging it in terms of home owning.<sup>122</sup>

A Christchurch National Party supporter, Albert J. Hern, was also critical of the housing scheme, arguing that State houses were 'concentration camps' and 'institution-like', and describing them as 'square, box-like affairs, giving the tenants little real freedom or privacy.'<sup>123</sup> He attacked the housing scheme's living arrangements, pointing out that the tenants were subject to strict tenancy laws preventing them from acquiring the properties or having the freedom to modify them.<sup>124</sup> Hern also believed that Labour was taxing the tenants by way of high rents, giving them no opportunity to acquire their own houses, and that the generic appearance of the State houses was evidence of 'Communitistic and Socialistic' ideals within the Savage Government.<sup>125</sup>

In September 1934, The Department of Housing Construction published a general report on State Housing in New Zealand. It focussed on the progress of the

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<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, Oct.1, 1938, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

Government's State Housing policy since Labour came to power and addressed several ideals of State Housing suburbs. The report stated that a housing policy had to meet many exacting requirements; firstly, in regard to the nature and the position of the land on which individual houses were to be built, then in regard to the planning and design of the houses, the soundness of their construction, the quality of its fittings and finish, and lastly, the appearance and effect that the houses would have on the street.<sup>126</sup> The street itself was to be a composition in which the road formation, house design and the planting of tree shrubs, flowers and lawns were to play an equal part in contributing to a warm and inviting environment that the inhabitants of the State Housing precincts could feel comfortable living in.<sup>127</sup>

By 1938, with construction in the West End area (as the Savage Crescent Precinct was originally called) of Palmerston North underway, and plans being made to establish other State housing precincts in the city, the Government's housing scheme had been firmly established there, and was being introduced into other towns and cities. A survey carried out during the March of that year revealed that contracts had been let for the erection of 2,427 houses and tenders for almost 3,000 houses were called for.<sup>128</sup> By April, the Cabinet had approved the contracts for the erection of houses in towns across the country that included Masterton, Hastings, Blenheim, Gore, Mt Albert and Whangarei.<sup>129</sup> The Government's vision of supplying the Dominion's citizens with affordable, comfortable housing was beginning to be realised. As the first Government housing precinct to be built outside the main regions of New Zealand, Savage Crescent presented to the public a higher standard of suburban living

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<sup>126</sup> Department of Housing Construction, *General Report on State Housing*, September 23, 1943, p. 50.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>128</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 19, 1938, p. 11.

<sup>129</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, April 7, 1938, p. 6.

than the people of provincial areas could have expected when the Government commenced its building programme in their towns.

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct met many of the ideals of this report and many of the other ideals within the Labour Government's vision of State Housing in New Zealand. An integral part of the Labour's vision was to see prosperity brought into the lives of previously downtrodden New Zealanders, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. In order to illustrate its vision of prosperity entering the lives of New Zealanders, the Labour Government set about creating mass housing schemes in which the buildings would be of a more superior quality and quantity than any previous Government Housing Scheme. The suburbs in which these houses would be built were to provide a pleasant atmosphere to their inhabitants and illustrate the latest building designs and styles rather than offer generic and uninviting workers dwellings.

Savage Crescent was designed to incorporate the features of a State housing suburb that the Savage Government considered to be ideal. The houses were built to a high standard, and featured individual and up to date designs. Their interiors were well designed for the lives and habits of the people that moved into them. The houses were initially constructed using local products and workers, although the Government eventually would encounter problems with building supplies and the employment of workers. The layout of the precinct, with its 'garden suburb' design and large reserve, provided a scenic atmosphere and an ideal environment for working class families. The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct succeeded in portraying Labour's housing vision to the Dominion.



## Chapter Two: Savage Crescent's Role in Labour Government Propaganda

Propaganda was a significant tool for the New Zealand Government during the 1930s and 1940s. It was important for the First Labour Government to promote an image of being a Government that cared for the health and welfare of New Zealanders and which, in Michael Joseph Savage's words, would 'give some real security to those who are producing in abundance and are living in poverty.'<sup>130</sup> Labour had to be seen by the public to be meeting the needs of New Zealanders. Policies such as the Government's State Housing Scheme had to be effective in the public eye. In this case, the Government had to show to the Dominion that its housing operations were able to meet peoples housing needs, produce desirable dwellings of a good building standard and above all, demonstrate the progress that New Zealand was making under Labour.

In 1935, the Housing Survey Act was passed, which launched a major survey of the quality and quantity of housing in New Zealand. Although this survey was launched when the Coalition Government was still in power, the Labour continued it after 1935. The results of the survey were not made available until March 1939, and<sup>d</sup> revealed that only 12.1 per cent of the dwellings surveyed provided accommodation below the minimum standard, while only four per cent were regarded as being overcrowded.<sup>131</sup> Although the figures pointed out that there was only a small percentage of poor housing in New Zealand, the Labour Government had been elected on a platform that committed the State to an active and ongoing involvement in what

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<sup>130</sup> Gustafson, p. 184.

<sup>131</sup> Miller, p. 15.

was perceived to be an inherently flawed housing market.<sup>132</sup> Labour also saw itself as promoting the family through its State Housing policies.<sup>133</sup> Therefore it had to show the public its commitment to providing good housing to New Zealanders.

When the Government introduced its housing programme in 1936, it was announced by the Minister of Finance in a budget speech that the sum of 3,000,000 pounds would be immediately applied to the erection of 5,000 houses.<sup>134</sup> This meant that the total cost, inclusive of land, would be 600 pounds per house.<sup>135</sup> This statement promised that the Government was setting out to provide low cost housing to low-income groups, but its looseness and inaccuracy was later shown. By 1945 very few State houses were erected at a total cost, inclusive of land, of less than 1,200 pounds per house.<sup>136</sup>

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct was one of the best examples of Labour promoting a solution to the perceived housing problem. When the Department of Housing announced the plans to construct the precinct in March 1937, it was announced in the local newspaper that the scheme would be 'conceived on the most modern town-planning lines and the latest ideas in sub-divisional development as practised in England and America.'<sup>137</sup> The article also mentioned that within the scheme, modernity and innovation would be combined to make what would be the nearest approach to perfect town planning in New Zealand.<sup>138</sup> The Labour

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<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>133</sup> Ferguson, p. 147.

<sup>134</sup> *PM* 12, 1/4/45, 'Submission of Associated Chambers of Commerce of New Zealand to National Housing Conference', 1944.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Miller, p. 12.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

Government was careful to point out the significance of the new precinct to the press. The announcement that Palmerston North would become the first city outside the four larger centres of the country to the benefit from the Government's Housing Scheme was well received by the city's population.<sup>139</sup>

Soon after the plans for a new housing suburb in Palmerston North had been announced to the press, the Prime Minister himself visited the city as part of a tour of the country. Savage publicly thanked the people of Palmerston North for the fine welcome that they had given him and said that the city had been an inspiration.<sup>140</sup> He said that in his travels he had gained first-hand knowledge of what the people were suffering from and what the people required, perhaps in reply to calls for the improvement of living conditions.<sup>141</sup> This visit made by the Prime Minister to a city where a major state housing precinct was to be built there was an example of Government propaganda promoting the idea that Labour was actively overseeing progress in New Zealand cities.

The Government quickly promoted the notion that the new housing scheme would benefit the state, which is well illustrated in *New Zealand's Labour Government at Work*, a booklet published in 1940 with the intention of promoting the benefits of the Labour Government in New Zealand, with strong propaganda overtones. According to the booklet, the building resources of New Zealand in materials, as well as the labour reserves were being fully utilized for the housing scheme and that nowhere else in the

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<sup>139</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936.

<sup>140</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 17, 1937.

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*

world did a housing development of such scope exist.<sup>142</sup> In outlining the Palmerston North housing scheme to a *Manawatu Daily Times* reporter, the Labour M.P. for Palmerston North, J. Hodgins, stated that preference for the construction of the houses would be given to all New Zealand manufacturers who catered for the building industry.<sup>143</sup> It was also claimed that the housing scheme was not undertaken only for the poorer groups, nor regarded as working class developments. Instead, the houses would be built for New Zealanders, as Labour believed that all New Zealanders should enjoy an income sufficient to enable them to maintain a reasonable standard of life.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, the Government would not be building down to the incomes of the lowest paid workers, but would be aiming to build up incomes to a higher level.<sup>145</sup> The Government promoted the Savage Crescent Precinct as being a significant step in its housing programme. In May 1937, after the building of houses at Savage Crescent had got underway, Michael Savage issued a statement that the Government's housing plans were 'practically completed.'<sup>146</sup>

A central feature of Labour's housing scheme was the promotion of nuclear family life. The idea that the suburban home was the best place to raise a New Zealand family was unquestioned.<sup>147</sup> In suburbia children could grow up in spacious, sunny surroundings, with protection from the dangers of traffic, and breathe in health-inducing fresh air instead of pollutants from city factories. It was argued that such an

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<sup>142</sup> W.B. Sutch, 'Housing', in *New Zealand's Labour Government at Work*, League for Industrial Democracy, New York, 1940, p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, May 1, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>144</sup> Sutch, p. 12.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>146</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, May 1, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>147</sup> Schrader, 'Labour at Home', p. 131.

environment would produce children who would both physically and mentally stronger than children from the cities.<sup>148</sup>

The Savage Government made the suburban ideal the centrepiece of its housing programme more than any previous administration.<sup>149</sup> Labour's vision was that every New Zealand family should, if they desired, live in a single detached dwelling in the suburbs. From education through to healthcare the state was increasingly involved in activities that had previously been taken up by extended family or private organisations.<sup>150</sup> Two other factors influenced Labour's creation of its State Housing scheme. Firstly, it wanted to create a more egalitarian society. At the same, concerns about New Zealand's declining birth rate during the 1930s raised fears that New Zealand was heading towards 'race suicide.' Therefore, Labour sought to create housing conditions that would assure the future of New Zealand.<sup>151</sup>

Many New Zealanders welcomed housing projects like Savage Crescent. To many, it was an example of the Government offering hope and good housing to those who needed it. When Savage talked of 'smiling homes' in his speeches, he reached the hearts of his audience, many of whom were living in sub-standard conditions and had no hope of ever owning their own homes.<sup>152</sup>

When the Government began to plan housing areas like Savage Crescent, they aimed to create ideal suburbs. In an effort to ensure that a true cross-section of the community would live in these ideal suburbs, in order to promote the idea that these

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<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>152</sup> Pilkington, p. 4.

housing schemes were not merely 'workers dwellings,' there was no income limit for applications to live in the houses.<sup>153</sup> John A. Lee expressed the hope that that the new suburbs would have people ranging from 'the old age pensioner to the working man withy a family in six rooms and maybe a garage and a car.'<sup>154</sup> When the plans to build the suburb that became Savage Crescent were announced, the Department of Housing Construction promoted the notion that the new precinct would illustrate a high standard of Government housing. Labour realised that a drab standardization of the precinct's dwellings would detract from the image of what they hoped would be a 'model residential quarter.'<sup>155</sup> Therefore, the Government made arrangements for a wide diversity of exterior designs to be considered for the Palmerston North housing scheme.<sup>156</sup>

Labour believed that the houses should be of a high standard, in terms of both design and materials. Labour argued that raising the quality of housing would raise the country's standard of living, therefore benefiting all New Zealanders.<sup>157</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Labour sought to distance itself from much of New Zealand's private-sector building programme. This is evident in the film *Housing in New Zealand*, made in 1946. The film began by celebrating the houses built by New Zealand's first settlers, with architect W.M. Page praising such buildings for their simple design, ample interior light and lack of unnecessary ornaments, then followed with criticisms of how houses in later years became large and pretentious with feature such as false fronts to give the appearance of a greater size than they really were, or

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<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>155</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>157</sup> Schrader, 'Labour at Home', p. 131.

built of wood shaped to resemble stone.<sup>158</sup> Page also argued in the film that the near universal practice of placing drawing rooms towards sunless street-fronts, which originated in Victorian times, was just as ludicrous, while the more streamlined *Moderne* houses of the 1930s were let down by their superfluous adornments.<sup>159</sup>

The underlying message of this film was that the designs of Labour's State Houses would be more practical and simple than housing designs of recent years that were overcomplicated in design and highly impractical. In aiming for a suburban utopia, the Department of Housing Construction gave considerable thought to planning the houses. Lee in particular had the New Zealander's enthusiasm for good views and visited housewives whenever he could, so a model house for their suggestions could be built.<sup>160</sup> The architects also wanted houses for people to work and live in. The kitchen was designed for the convenience of housewives, habitable rooms were designed 'to get the sun for at least half a day' and care was taken to ensure that front and back porches did not face prevailing winds. The department constantly revised the designs of the houses.<sup>161</sup>

The Department of Housing Construction also emphasised the importance of providing 'open space and recreational facilities' and trees.<sup>162</sup> Savage Crescent, with its large reserve, illustrated to the public how such a feature was useful to a suburb. In some of the larger subdivisions, the Department buried telephone and electricity cables,<sup>163</sup> or in the case of Savage Crescent, brought them across the back of

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<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>160</sup> Olssen, 'The House that Jack Built', p. 98.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

sections.<sup>164</sup> Such careful attention to the layout of suburbs like Savage Crescent helped enforce the notion that the new State housing areas would provide a housing area with the appearance of an integrated community park, along with a convenient, tidy environment for people to live in.

By 1944, 28,000 permanent dwellings had been erected by both the State and private enterprise throughout New Zealand during the war years, providing up to 112,000 people with comfortable residential accommodation.<sup>165</sup> In reply to criticism of the State housing policy during the recent national conference called by the Associated Chambers of Commerce, the Minister of Works, Bob Semple described these accommodation figures as ‘the best record in the world.’<sup>166</sup> He also declared that ‘as far as it has gone, the Dominion’s housing scheme has gained the admiration of observers from overseas’.<sup>167</sup>

However, the development of Savage Crescent and other housing areas came under attack from members and supporters of the National opposition. In May 1937, D.F.C. Saxton, the president of the New Plymouth Chamber of Commerce accused the Labour Government of prioritising the building of State Housing precincts in Labour Party electoral strongholds such as the Manawatu to reward their supporters, while towns that supported the opposition were overlooked.<sup>168</sup> Saxton argued that this was the case with New Plymouth, an opposition stronghold where a State housing area was to have been built before the Government decided to commence housing construction in Palmerston North instead. However, John A. Lee refuted these claims

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<sup>164</sup> Pilkington, p. 8.

<sup>165</sup> *The Dominion*, November 17, 1944.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 8, 1937, p. 11.



by pointing out that housing construction in New Plymouth had not taken place because the New Plymouth Borough Council had not carried out a housing survey or had any intention of erecting workers dwellings.<sup>169</sup> Another reason why Palmerston North had been chosen over New Plymouth was because a Crown area of land had been taken over for development in the Manawatu city. Palmerston North had been selected as the first centre outside the main areas of New Zealand for Labour's provincial housing scheme because it was easier to operate from Wellington.<sup>170</sup>

Labour used its housing programme to good effect in its 1938 election campaign. It professed in its election advertising that the scheme had cleared slum areas, erected modern dwellings and had modernised existing houses.<sup>171</sup> Labour also claimed the State Advances Scheme provided credit to the fullest extent for people wanting their own homes.<sup>172</sup>

By the mid-1940s, the Savage Crescent Precinct, having reached the pinnacle of its development, was now a model State housing suburb with its garden suburb environment, modern street planning, large accessible reserve and individual house designs. It was a testament to Labour's housing scheme, and the Government quickly saw the potential of the suburb for promoting the living standards of New Zealanders. In February 1947, it was announced that a family in the precinct, that of Mr and Mrs R.J. Evans of 5 Mansford Place, had been given the privilege of portraying the typical New Zealand family to people overseas.<sup>173</sup> The portrayal of the family was part of a plan by the Government to illustrate the high living standards enjoyed by workers in

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<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>171</sup> *New Zealand Herald*, Oct 13, 1938, p. 24.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>173</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, February 21, 1947.

the Dominion to overseas exhibitions. Normal, everyday activities of the family, such as going to work, household chores and the children going to school would be photographed, while benefits available under State Services, such as Social Security, would be incorporated in the photographs. For example, photographs of a doctor visiting the house and dental clinics at the school would be shown in the exhibition.<sup>174</sup>

Labour saw the importance of promoting a large-scale project that would gain considerable support from the public; as such a project would increase the Government's popularity. Having been elected on the promise of improving the living standards of New Zealanders, the Government realised that the best way that they could be shown to be reaching out to the lives of many New Zealanders would be to embark on a massive public housing scheme. Labour repeatedly circulated the message that the houses that would be built in the scheme would not merely be basic workers dwellings but accommodation of a high quality, incorporating all the latest building designs and styles, while drawing upon local resources and workers. The buildings were to be situated way from cities, in suburbs that would have a welcoming 'garden suburb' environment free from the inhospitable nature of the city, providing a strong community atmosphere. The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct showed to the public that Labour was able to provide New Zealanders with quality living conditions through its State housing scheme.

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<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*

## Chapter Three

# Savage Crescent's Role in the Development of Palmerston North and Early Residents Attitudes to the Precinct

When the housing suburb that would become Savage Crescent was first proposed, Palmerston North was a rapidly growing city, supported by its position as a transport node and its plentiful and well-developed rural hinterland. Its population had risen from 1,900 in 1911 to 23,953 by 1936.<sup>175</sup> The news that a new housing suburb was to be built in the Manawatu city was well received. Palmerston North had been unable to develop enough housing to meet the needs of its rising population. By October 1936, the city had encountered a definite house shortage, which had been accentuated during the previous six months by new buildings failing to keep pace with the demand for houses.<sup>176</sup> Although there had been a considerable amount of house building in Palmerston North up to that point, it had not caught up with the need for dwellings.<sup>177</sup> Government intervention, in the form of a major State Housing project, originally called the 'West End Block' was a welcome solution to the housing problem of Palmerston North.

In November 1936, the Commissioner in charge of housing was approached by the Housing Construction Department to secure areas of land in Palmerston North that

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<sup>175</sup> Miller, p. 16.

<sup>176</sup> *The Dominion*, October 7, 1936.

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*

were suitable for the erection of State houses.<sup>178</sup> When the announcement was made that a State housing suburb would be built in Palmerston North in November 1936, it was very significant as it was the first time that a city outside the four main areas of New Zealand would benefit from the Government's housing scheme.<sup>179</sup> The site chosen for the new housing suburb was a large educational reserve in the West End part of the city. Mr J. Hodgens, M.P., stated that building operations in the West End area would commence towards the end of February in the coming year.<sup>180</sup>

The history of the West End site goes back to the Government's misguided enthusiasm for education during the early years of Palmerston North's history. When the borough was first laid out, the Government of the day set aside an area of land approximating seventy acres as an endowment for Wellington City educational institutions.<sup>181</sup> The Wellington College Board of Governors held the land.<sup>182</sup> This was a very puzzling move, because if any educational institutions had been built on that area of land, the people of Palmerston North would have been expected to pay taxes for assisting the education of the youth of a city one hundred miles away.<sup>183</sup>

By the time that the Savage Government planned to build a State housing precinct in the reserve, the area had experienced very little use of habitation since its establishment, apart from nine houses whose residents market gardened or kept cows and fowls.<sup>184</sup> Eventually, the West End reserve became highly unpopular with the

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<sup>178</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>179</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>180</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>181</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>182</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 27, 1936, p.6.

<sup>183</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>184</sup> Di Stewart and Associates, *Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct Palmerston North: An Historical and Architectural Overview*, 1994, p. 7.

ratepayers and council workers alike in Palmerston North because it was not being used for anything that was making an important contribution to the city. The reserve was also disliked because the revenue received from it was so poor that it made it a burden rather than an asset to its beneficiaries. In fact, there was some doubt as to whether the reserve had ever produced enough money to pay the city's rates.<sup>185</sup> Not surprisingly, there was no opposition to having the reserve handed over for a more useful purpose.<sup>186</sup> The tenants living on the leased farmland in the area had to move out, but would get compensation under the Public Works Act.<sup>187</sup>

The West End Reserve was very suitable for housing development as it had some of the most fertile land within Palmerston North's boundaries and the steep incline of the Southern corner of the reserve made drainage a simple matter.<sup>188</sup> The reserve also promised scenic views for residents of the new housing suburb. There would be an outlook towards the city with the esplanade at one end, and a distant view of the river, Massey College and the Tararuas at the other.<sup>189</sup>

By the March of 1937, plans were finally under way for the construction of homes at the West End, as well as in other parts of the Manawatu. John A. Lee visited Palmerston North at the start of the month to visit the West End site. He was impressed with the area selected for the new housing area and promised the city's inhabitants that the houses that would be built there would be of a type that would do justice to the potentialities of the locality.<sup>190</sup> He also intimated that when tenders

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<sup>185</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, May 1, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>188</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936.

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, March 2, 1937, p. 6.

would be called, there would be opportunities for small builders from the city to tender for individual houses.<sup>191</sup> C.L. Hunter, the Labour M.P for the Manawatu, paid a visit to Rongotea and gave an address in the town's Coronation Hall. Hunter explained that because there was a definite shortage of houses throughout the country, the Housing Department was out to meet the demand.<sup>192</sup> He assured his audience that the houses were to be conveniently arranged and of the most durable housing construction.<sup>193</sup>

The plan for the new housing precinct that was agreed upon by the Palmerston North City Council was a radical departure from conventional suburb designs. The new street would be oval-shaped and formed within a rectangular area so that houses would face it on both sides and also face Cook Street, College Street and Park Road, bounding the whole rectangle on three sides, while a space twenty-one chains long and two and a half chains wide would be left in the centre as a recreational reserve.<sup>194</sup> The entrances to the elliptical street would come from Park Road and College Street, halfway along the rectangular area's longer sides, and roads would run on a diagonal plan from the corners of the area at the Cook Street end to meet the internal street. Right-of-ways would be provided to allow people on the outer position of the area access to the reserve.<sup>195</sup>

Local and outside input contributed to the construction of the new houses. In May 1937, John A. Lee announced that contracts for twenty-four houses for the housing branch were let in respect of the Palmerston North housing scheme. One contract for

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<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>192</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, March 2, 1937, p. 12.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>194</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 27, 1937, p. 9.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

the construction of eleven houses was granted to the local Townshend building firm, while another contract was given to the Wellington construction company, Higgins, Arcus and Co. to build thirteen more dwellings.<sup>196</sup> Lee stated to a *Manawatu Evening Standard* interviewer that there was a fairly substantial margin between the building firms that were successful and unsuccessful in obtaining contracts to build houses for the West End project, and twenty tenders had been received. He felt that the experience of commencing a housing scheme in Palmerston North was satisfactory evidence of the local builders ability to hold their own in an open competition when they set themselves out to prepare close tenders.<sup>197</sup>

For many people in Palmerston North, the announcement of the new State housing area could not have come at a better time. By 1937, the city was experiencing a noticeable housing shortage. Although Palmerston North shared a common housing shortage with other centres in New Zealand, few new houses were being built prior to the announcement of the West End scheme. In April that year, only three new housing permits were issued in the city, to a value of only 2,900 pounds, while the total number of housing permits that were issued for the first four months of 1937 was only eighteen.<sup>198</sup> This was a marked contrast with the housing permit figures of 1930, when house building that year was so frequent, it was carried out at a cost of over 10,000 pounds monthly.<sup>199</sup> N.A. Wheeler, the husband of a working class family in Palmerston North, wrote the following letter to the State Advances Corporation on January 9, 1937:

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<sup>196</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 19, 1937, p. 9.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>198</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, May 1, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

‘Gentlemen,

I beg to apply for one of the smaller houses you are proposing to build in Palmerston North. I am practically homeless as I live in a garage at 30 Ranfurly Street, Palmerston North, for which I have to pay 11/’6d per week, together with my wife and child aged 11 months and as it is very unhealthy I would be glad if you will kindly give me a chance. I am employed at Cook’s Saw Mills, Palmerston North, you can easily verify above particulars and I trust you will give me a chance.’<sup>200</sup>

Therefore the announcement of the West End scheme brought no concerns that that Palmerston North would become overbuilt, however many houses the Government would erect in the city, because of a large, unsatisfied demand for houses, both for rental and purchase.<sup>201</sup> One reason for the housing shortage was that there had been a temporary halt in house building programmes by small-scale building firms. The building firms were uncertain over the form and terms of the Government’s housing scheme and the probable effects that the scheme would have on their construction activities. As a result, the local builders refrained from building new houses, which aggravated Palmerston North’s housing shortage.<sup>202</sup> The housing shortage was in effect a guarantee that all the new State Houses to be built in Palmerston North would be quickly occupied once they had been constructed. In November 1936, once the West End scheme had been announced, and before any construction had taken place, prospective tenants from all over Palmerston North were submitting applications to

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<sup>200</sup> Letter from N.A. Wheeler to State Advances Corporation, *HC File 3/15*, ‘Housing Situation – Palmerston North 1936-74.’

<sup>201</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 28, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.



move into the new houses upon their completion.<sup>203</sup> It was hoped by John A. Lee that once tenders had been secured for the building of houses in what was to become the Savage Crescent Precinct, the necessary formalities would be completed so that the building contractors could make an early start on the construction of the dwellings, continually building houses until the Palmerston North housing shortage was over.<sup>204</sup> Another M.P, J.A. Nash, was hopeful that the new housing scheme would be very beneficial to Palmerston North. Nash viewed the plans for the West End scheme at Wellington in January 1937. He believed the scheme would be 'an acquisition to Palmerston North.'<sup>205</sup> The chairman of the Terrace End Development and Progressive Association, F. J. Oakley, believed that it would be nice for a similar plan to commence at a ten-acre area at Terrace end that was likely to be used in government house-building activities.<sup>206</sup>

The new housing precinct was also welcome in Palmerston North because it contributed to the development that the city was undergoing at the time. Examples of this progress included signs that major manufacturing establishments were going to set themselves up in the city, improvements to the water reservoir, and the resurfacing of many streets.<sup>207</sup> Upon their completion, new residential areas like Savage Crescent, with their modern styling, were seen as being examples of how housing was contributing to the development of the city.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>204</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 19, 1937, p. 9.

<sup>205</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, January 20, 1937.

<sup>206</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 3, 1938, p. 2.

<sup>208</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

At the same time, there were calls to increase the construction of private houses in Palmerston North. In February 1937, the New Zealand Builders and Contractors Federation held a conference in Palmerston North, where they argued that an increase in the independent construction of houses would benefit private enterprise and revive building by private owners.<sup>209</sup> There were also concerns over the construction costs of the new Palmerston North houses. It was generally accepted that the building of State houses would be considerably dearer in the smaller centres of New Zealand than in the main regions, but it was felt that the difference in the Palmerston North contracts could be covered by less than five or six pounds per house.<sup>210</sup>

The awarding of a contract for the Townshend firm to contribute towards the establishment of the Palmerston North scheme saw the company receive high praise from members of the Government. A telegram from Lee to the local M.P. Hodgins emphasised that the fact Mr Townshend had won a contract in open competition for the first provincial housing scheme showed that local firms were able to secure work from the Department of Housing Construction if they could tender properly.<sup>211</sup>

Other aspects of the work needed to establish the new precinct was eventually arranged, often through local input. By the October of 1937, the Director of Housing Construction issued instructions that work such as the erection of fences and the laying of paths in the precinct was to be carried out by day labour, while building materials were to be obtained through the Palmerston North District storekeeper.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 17, 1938, p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 19, 1937, p. 9.

<sup>211</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>212</sup> 'Memorandum for the Stores Manager', *SAC File HD W1353, 15/1/1*.

The relative speed in which the houses of Savage Crescent were built and the high demand from prospective tenants to move into the houses prompted calls for further State housing development in Palmerston North. By February 1938, Lee had decided to permit the erection of a further twenty single-unit houses and five two-unit houses facing the College Street, Cooke Street and Park Road sides of the West End area, bringing the number of State dwellings in Palmerston North up to seventy six.<sup>213</sup> This in turn prompted more calls for the establishment of other State housing precincts in Palmerston North. For example, by June 1939 the Takaro Progressive Association was calling for the development of State housing areas extended to their suburb, pointing out that there was sufficient land recently purchased by the Government adjacent to the school <sup>site</sup> ~~sight~~ of Botanical Road, and also in the stretch of Featherston Street between Seddon Street and Botanical Road.<sup>214</sup> The association argued that these areas were better than either the West End site or the Terrace End area, where State housing construction had also commenced, as they were closer to the city.<sup>215</sup>

The establishment of the Savage Crescent Precinct initially did little to meet the huge demand for housing in Palmerston North. By the February of 1938, the shortage of houses in the city was still significant in spite of the West End building activities. Land agents in the city reported that property values were very much influenced by the Fair Rents Act and many would-be buyers were requesting immediate occupation.<sup>216</sup> One Palmerston North housing agent told the *Manawatu Evening Standard* that in many cases he had several dozen tenants to choose from when he was asked to let a house for a client. The condition or size of a house was totally

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<sup>213</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 16, 1938, p. 8.

<sup>214</sup> 'Takaro Progressive Association', *HC File 3/15*, 'Housing Situation- Palmerston North 1936-74.'

<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *The Dominion*, February 4, 1938.

irrelevant to many people; all they wanted was a place to live. The agent also found that people who wanted to buy houses were more interested to know if they were able to gain immediate possession of it than the price that they would have to pay, which were high for medium-sized houses.<sup>217</sup> When another agent was asked to estimate the number of houses needed in Palmerston North, he declared it to be an impossible task. He also pointed out that once the new Government homes in the West End were completed, they were immediately occupied.<sup>218</sup> Not surprisingly, there were soon more plans to establish new State housing areas in other areas of Palmerston North. The establishment and rapid occupation of the Savage Crescent dwellings convinced both local and government authorities that further housing schemes in the city would solve Palmerston North's housing problem.

One particular group that benefited from the establishment of the West End suburb was the West End School. Prior to housing development in the West End, the school had been struggling to attract pupils. In September 1937 only nine new pupils had been enrolled in the school.<sup>219</sup> The schools' roll number that year was 383 pupils, but by the April of 1938, the roll had rose slightly to 400<sup>220</sup>, after some of the suburb's houses had been built and occupied. The school's chairman, G. Tremaine, believed that the occupation of the State houses had contributed to the school's roll.<sup>221</sup>

Most of the people that moved into the Savage Crescent houses praised the standard of living they entered. A post-occupancy survey of Savage Crescent residents that was carried out in 1944 revealed that 63 per cent of them found the accommodation was

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<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, September 8, 1937, p. 11.

<sup>220</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, April 14, 1938, p. 6.

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

adequate for their family requirements, while fifty-nine per cent found the rooms bright enough and 60 per cent believed that the precinct's streets were just as good as a normal street of privately owned houses.<sup>222</sup> A supporter of the West End scheme, A Penketh, considered the new State houses to be very comfortable dwellings.<sup>223</sup>

The success of Labour's State housing programme in Palmerston North is reflected by the huge voter turnout in the 1938 national elections. The Labour M.P Hodgens maintained his position as the Palmerston North candidate, receiving the greatest election majority (1,957 votes) that he had ever secured.<sup>224</sup>

The houses that were constructed on the Savage Crescent Precinct between 1938 and 1945 were predominantly single-family detached dwellings, although some double units were also built.<sup>225</sup> Another style of Government housing that was incorporated into Savage Crescent was the pensioner flat. Pensioner flats were two-house units constructed to suite the accommodation needs of senior citizens and were frequently built in Government housing schemes during the 1930s and 1940s. A number of old-age pensioners associations requested the building of such dwellings.<sup>226</sup> John A. Lee supported the building of pensioner flats, believing that they would provide high-class accommodation for elderly couples and would be preferable to two separate units of the same nature. He also believed that they should be a feature of high-quality housing schemes.<sup>227</sup> Four pensioner flats were built in Savage Crescent just before the Second World War, and were situated on the edge of a large block of open land on the

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<sup>222</sup> Miller, p. 19.

<sup>223</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, November 18, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>224</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, October 17, 1938, p. 7.

<sup>225</sup> Miller, p. 19.

<sup>226</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, February 1, 1938, p. 4.

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

precinct.<sup>228</sup> They were staggered to give each other a sunny aspect and privacy, and were near a bus stop and the precinct's shopping centre.<sup>229</sup> Although on paper, these flats appeared to suit the needs of their occupants, the pensioners that moved into the dwellings disliked them. They found the flats cupboards too high and difficult to reach. The residents were also too frail to use the coppers provided to the flats by themselves.<sup>230</sup> They also found that Savage Crescent did not have goods and services facilities for elderly people and believed the combined living rooms and bedrooms of the dwellings were offensive and lacked privacy.<sup>231</sup>

The people who lived in Savage Crescent's conventional dwellings had many positive experiences at the precinct. Hazel Purton and her family were the first residents of No. 25 Savage Crescent. One of the main features she noticed about their new house was the generous number of windows that enabled the house (and other dwellings on the precinct) to get all the afternoon sun, even if meant the bathroom and toilet had to face the street.<sup>232</sup> A municipal bus service helped people get to the city centre, and all the residents took pride in the tidiness of their homes and street.<sup>233</sup> Hazel received proof of the State houses structural strength when an earthquake struck Palmerston North in 1942. When repairmen from the State Advances Corporation inspected her home afterwards, they found that the only damage that the building had sustained were a couple of missing roof tiles and several small cracks in the plasterboard walls of the kitchen.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Hunt, *A Survey of Pensioner Flats...*, p. 2.

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>232</sup> Hazel Purton, letter written March 11, 1992, recalling her experiences as an early resident of Savage Crescent. From the Te Manawa Museum and Science Centre Archives, Palmerston North.

<sup>233</sup> Purton.

<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*

Another Savage Crescent resident with fond memories of the precinct's early years was Colin Spicer, who lived there as a child during the war years. Mr Spicer's parents came to Palmerston North from Wellington. Prior to moving into Savage Crescent, the family had lived in an unsuitable town flat in Featherston Street.<sup>235</sup> Although Savage Crescent was initially sparse, it offered a solid wartime community with a good neighbourhood spirit and was a secure place to live. The only serious problem the Spicer family encountered while living there was the lack of space in their home, as it only had two bedrooms, which necessitated the construction of a sleep-out behind their house.<sup>236</sup>

State housing was not the most financially profitable form of building expansion in Palmerston North during the early 1940s. The value covered by building permits, not including state houses, issued by the Palmerston North City Council for the financial year ended March 31, 1941, totalled 177,627 pounds.<sup>237</sup> However, the impact of Savage Crescent and following State housing areas on Palmerston North was still significant as they promoted large-scale suburban growth in the city and offered good living standards to its increasing population.

The West End housing scheme that was to become Savage Crescent was introduced to Palmerston North when the city was experiencing considerable expansion and population growth. The introduction of a State housing precinct to Palmerston North provided the city with dwellings that met the resulting demand for housing. It also started a State housing renaissance in Palmerston North, as plans for other State

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<sup>235</sup> Willetts, interview with Mr. Spicer.

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Manawatu Daily Times*, April 3, 1941, p. 4.

housing areas in the city were put forward and approved for construction after the West End scheme commenced. For many people in Palmerston North, the Savage Crescent Precinct offered them an avenue out of substandard dwellings and into sound, well-built houses and an inviting suburban environment, in spite of criticisms that some authorities had of the Government's housing scheme.



## Chapter Four

### Modern Attitudes Towards Savage Crescent

The establishment of the Savage Crescent Precinct was welcomed by the inhabitants of Palmerston North as it introduced large scale housing that met the demands of the growing city during the interwar years. In the following decades however, Savage Crescent's significance to Palmerston North, was largely forgotten, until recently. Two aspects of the precinct that have remained unchanged over the years are the sense of community that it offers and its comfortable environment, both of which have been maintained by its residents and authorities in Palmerston North.

The precinct was largely unchanged for years after its completion. Initially the central reserve was used to grow vegetables during World War Two, but was then turned into a park afterwards.<sup>238</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, equipment was added to the reserve for a children's play area.<sup>239</sup> But apart from that, little modification were made to Savage Crescent, especially after the plans to replace the precinct's shopping centre with a larger one was cancelled. In later years there was a sharp decline in Government-owned buildings in the precinct. The housing corporation sold a number of the precinct's dwellings to private buyers during the 1980s.<sup>240</sup> By 1993, Housing New Zealand owned only around thirty-five per cent of the properties in the Savage Crescent Precinct.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Willetts, interview with Colin Spicer.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Homefront*, Issue 13, November 1993, p. 1.

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

The historical significance of Savage Crescent was largely ignored until near the end of the Twentieth Century. In 1991, the Manawatu Branch of the Historic Places Trust approached the Palmerston North City Council to preserve Savage Crescent as a heritage site.<sup>242</sup> Cindy Lilburn, the Manawatu Branch Secretary, said that the suburb's homes could be viewed as a model settlement, but pointed out that unless some protection was implemented, the character of many of the homes would be lost.<sup>243</sup> The trust's request was granted and the precinct became an area of national significance.<sup>244</sup> The council also commissioned a report to help them consider a conservation plan proposal for the area. The report found that the original character of the precinct was largely intact. Many of the properties were still single-story houses on quarter-acre sections, and most were still divided by their original fences.<sup>245</sup>

The views of a number of the precinct's residents during the early 1990s showed that to a certain extent, the precinct still lived up to its original intention of providing a comfortable living environment for its inhabitants over fifty years after its construction. People in the precinct largely agreed that people kept to themselves, but were friendly, and that Savage Crescent was a clean area and a good place to live.<sup>246</sup> They also believed that the precinct was a good place to bring up children, and they largely liked the sight of the neighbourhood.<sup>247</sup> The residents also felt that the Savage Crescent Precinct was close to most activities in the city, such as the Esplanade and the Lido Aquatic Centre, while the reserve is popular with children.<sup>248</sup> The people that

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<sup>242</sup> Willetts, from an interview with Peter Fry, acting planner of the Palmerston North City Council's Town Planning Department.

<sup>243</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, June 14, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>244</sup> Willetts, interview with Peter Fry.

<sup>245</sup> *Homefront*, Issue 13, November 1993, p. 1.

<sup>246</sup> Nigel Curran, *Residents' Perceptions: Savage Crescent*, Bachelor of Regional Planning Project, Massey University, 1990, p. 32

<sup>247</sup> Curran, p. 32.

<sup>248</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

lived in the Precinct ranged from young people either flatting or with new families, middle aged people, families with older children or whose children had left home or elderly residents, many of which had lived in the precinct since it was established.<sup>249</sup> One such resident was Jack Shortt, who had been living in the precinct since he moved there with his wife and family in 1947.<sup>250</sup>

The most frequent concern that many people in the Savage Crescent neighbourhood had was the untidiness of rental units and their sections, compared with the units that were privately owned. They believed that the only way in which this could be improved was to promote more privately owned housing within the precinct.<sup>251</sup> However, the residents also felt that the privacy from the street and neighbours was generally of a sufficient standard, as was the case with the size of the section. Overall, they felt that the Savage Crescent Precinct was a quite satisfactory place to live.<sup>252</sup>

According to Cindy Lilburn, it was mainly good fortune that the subdivision had remained close to its original state for so long.<sup>253</sup> The general character of the area retained the original concept of the 'garden city', with many of the houses having well-maintained gardens, and the precinct retaining its spacious curved street layout and a generally scenic atmosphere.<sup>254</sup> Following the Historic Places Trust's submission to have Savage Crescent made a heritage area, the Palmerston North City Council introduced some maintenance guidelines for the precinct that have been in force to this day. No subdivision or demolition is allowed in the area, while building

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<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>250</sup> *The Dominion*, May 22, 1997, p. 11.

<sup>251</sup> Curran, p. 33.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>253</sup> *The Dominion*, May 22, 1997, p. 11.

<sup>254</sup> Curran, p. 55.

guidelines govern the types of buildings that can be built in the area.<sup>255</sup> Renovation regulations mean that the houses in the precinct now have to have their layouts maintained in order that they look as original as possible.<sup>256</sup> However, it has been ensured that the conservation policy for the precinct has not interfered with the resident's lives. When the council first considered preserving Savage Crescent, the residents did not want the precinct to be promoted either as a conservation show piece or as a desirable place to live in a way that would compromise the values that they had sought out: privacy, community and affordable housing.<sup>257</sup>

It was only in recent years that the significance of the Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct has been recognised in Palmerston North. The precinct is one of the best-maintained examples of a Labour Government housing project today. It represents the ideal housing suburb that the Labour Government envisaged back in the 1930s. It also is a pivotal moment in the history of the development of Palmerston North, and it is important that it has been preserved as a heritage site, as it has contributed significantly to the city's heritage. Today, Savage Crescent lives up to its original intention of providing a secure and comfortable living environment to its residents.

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<sup>255</sup> Willetts, interview with Peter Fry.

<sup>256</sup> *The Dominion*, May 22, 1997, p. 11.

<sup>257</sup> Di Stewart and Associates, *Savage Crescent Stage II, Conservation Policy*, 1994, p. 11.

## Conclusion

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct reflects the attitudes and the focus that the Government had towards housing schemes during the 1930s and 1940s. The precinct played an important role in the Savage Government's housing scheme and was a model suburb that portrayed Labour's urban ideals. Savage Crescent made a significant contribution to the development of Palmerston North, particularly during the 1930s, when the town's development and population were expanding. However, the national and local importance of Savage Crescent has been acknowledged only recently, after the extent to which Savage Crescent contributed to Labour's housing scheme and suburban development in Palmerston North was realised.

The precinct illustrated the aims and the standard of housing that the Government hoped to achieve with its housing programme. These ideals had originated earlier in the century, when the notion that good living environments produced good people was prominent in many circles. This notion influenced housing suburb development plans submitted for exhibitions in later years. Features of these plans, particularly the 'garden suburb' concept, were incorporated into the design of Savage Crescent.

The First Labour Government came to power when New Zealand was still reeling from the Depression. Labour, with the aim of renewing prosperity in the Dominion, realised that the lack of adequate housing was a major issue among many New Zealanders who were experiencing poverty. State housing areas like Savage Crescent were promoted as a solution to the Dominion's housing problem, while the construction of the houses was an attempt to revive employment throughout New Zealand, with locally sourced materials being used for building materials wherever

possible. Local workers were called upon to construct the dwellings. New Zealand firms gained the contracts for the new housing suburbs. Labour aimed to supply the population of New Zealand with a high standard of housing. Savage Crescent featured the latest building designs and offered its inhabitants comfortable living. The Government also envisaged housing schemes with 'garden suburb' environments. Savage Crescent was a notable example of this concept, and one of the few State housing areas to be built as a garden suburb.

The Government promoted the new State housing areas as a progressive step for the Dominion. Labour frequently pointed out the high rates of State housing construction and the rapid rate in which the buildings were occupied as being testimony to the success of the housing policy. Labour also promoted the national and overseas acclaim of the housing policy and was emphatic that the houses were to be built by New Zealanders for New Zealanders, striking a sense of national pride in the State housing scheme. Precincts like Savage Crescent were promoted by the Government as fulfilling Labour's vision of offering inviting, hospitable housing suburbs for workers. They often featured in films or publications that promoted Labour's policies.

The establishment of Savage Crescent was enthusiastically welcomed in Palmerston North. The city was simultaneously undergoing industrial development, population growth and a housing shortage during the same period and the announcement of a State housing precinct in the city was well received. The precinct was established on land that many authorities wanted to see put to good use and soon set a trend in the establishment of State housing areas in the city. The precinct's inhabitants, many of which had previously lived in makeshift or poor-quality housing generally liked living

there, and found that it offered them a welcoming community environment. The impact of the establishment of Savage Crescent to Palmerston North is reflected by the naming of three streets in the precinct after people who contributed largely to the development of the city during the 1930s and 1940s: Augustus Edward Mansford, the city's mayor from 1931 to 1947, J.L. Hodgens the local M.P. from 1935 to 1946 and Herbert E. Townshend, the contractor whose firm built most of the Savage Crescent homes.<sup>258</sup>

Today, Savage Crescent is acknowledged for its role in the Savage Government's State housing policy and the contribution that it made to Palmerston North. However, the significance of Savage Crescent has only been acknowledged in recent years, when an interest grew in the significance of State housing. The Precinct is now a heritage site, and is subject to building guidelines that preserve its layout. The precinct is well maintained and still offers its residents the comfortable living environment it was intended to give upon its establishment.

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct is a valuable reminder of State housing and Labour Government policy and ideals. The whole idea of the precinct was Labour's social modelling.<sup>259</sup> This is reflected in its garden city layout and the huge variety of housing styles in the precinct. Savage Crescent was built by the First Labour Government to demonstrate that public housing could be of a good quality and could lay the foundation for a well-organised community.<sup>260</sup> It met the ideals that Michael Joseph Savage had envisaged for the standard of living in the Dominion. So it is fitting that Savage Crescent was named after him.

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<sup>258</sup> Pilkington, p. 11.

<sup>259</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, April 10, 1993, p. 6.

<sup>260</sup> *Manawatu Evening Standard*, May 7, 1999, p. 3.



# Appendix

## Photographs

The Savage Crescent homes were provided with spacious front yards. Note the lack of front fences and the distance between the houses and the road. The individual designs of the dwellings are also evident in this photograph, taken in the early 1990s.





Even in contemporary times, many of the Savage Crescent homes have maintained the 'garden suburb' image.



By the early 1990s, badly maintained rental properties like these became the subject of considerable complaint from many Savage Crescent residents, who felt that they made the precinct look untidy. The poor state of the dwellings also prompted calls for the restoration of the precinct.





The central reserve in Savage Crescent was initially used to grow vegetables during World War Two. Since then, it has only been used for recreation.

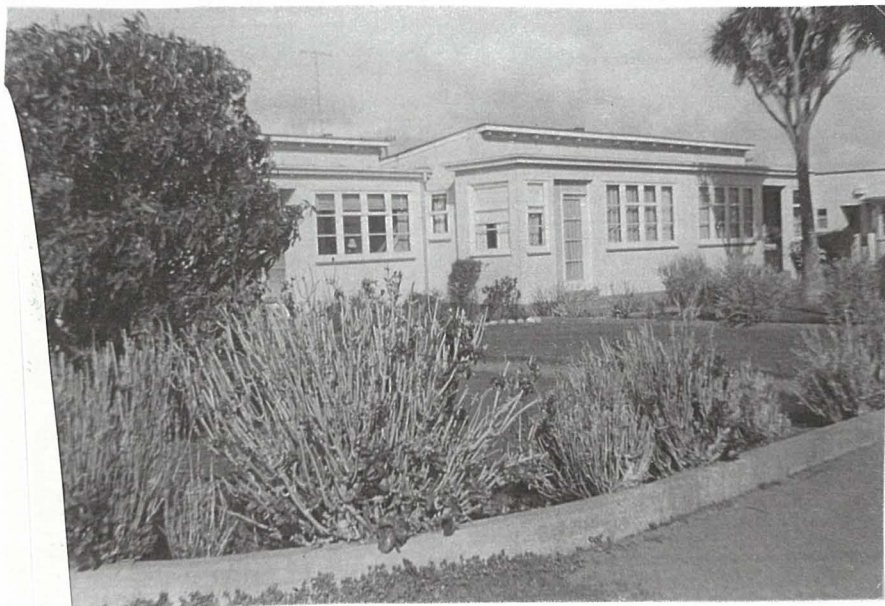


The precinct's College Street, Cook Street, intersection.

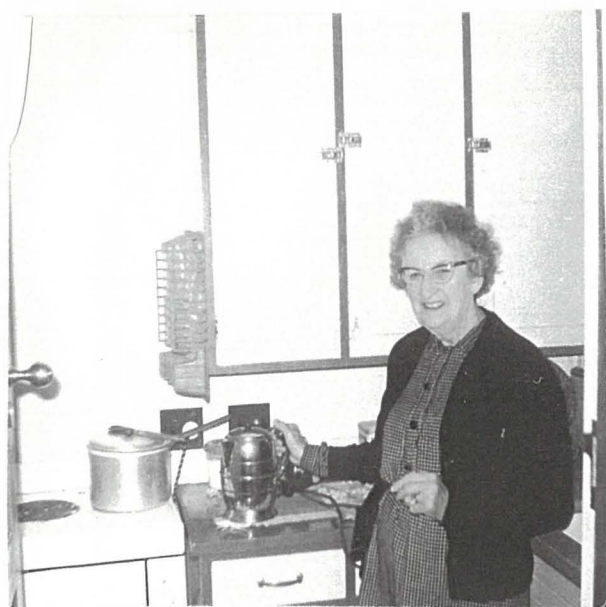




Two early photographs of the pensioner flats built in Savage Crescent dating from the mid 1960s.



Inside one of the pensioner flats. Note the high kitchen cupboards and the combined living room/bedroom, features of the flats that were disliked by their elderly occupants.



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