

WAITAKERE CITY COUNCIL

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT OF

FORMER ATKINSON HOUSE
(and Titirangi Community House)



Report to Waitakere City Council

by

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1.0 THE BRIEF

The brief was to carry out a heritage assessment of the old Titirangi Community House at No. 1 Rangiwai Rd, on the corner of Titirangi Rd. As the house was originally built for the Atkinson family, who lived in it from 1946-7 until 1967, the house will henceforth be called the Atkinson house in this report.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The heritage assessment of the Atkinson house has involved:

- a preliminary site inspection
- a visit to architect Paul Jenkin, who is knowledgeable about the architect Tibor Doner, who designed the Atkinson house. Paul Jenkin, who now lives in the house at 50 Kohu Rd, Titirangi, which was Doner's own house, provided useful background and documentary material
- locating and talking with Fane Kearney (nec Atkinson – daughter of Harry and Edna Atkinson for whom the house was built). Fane Kearney lived in the house from the time it was built until the mid-1960s and has provided a two-page written account of the house
- a further visit to the Atkinson house, accompanied by Fane Kearney and Paul Jenkin, with Fane Kearney providing a commentary on the original form and fabric of the house, and additions or alterations that have since taken place
- research into Auckland University School of Architecture Library holdings: Robin Skinner, *T.K. Donner - Architect*, B.Arch. thesis, University of Auckland, 1994; and the Doner file in the Sheppard Collection
- obtaining the LINZ land record
- checking Waitakere City Council archives.

3.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Fane Kearney, Atkinson descendant, who provided information about the history of the house and Paul Jenkin, who provided information about Doner, the architect. The 1994 University of Auckland B.Arch. thesis by Robin Skinner, *T.K. Donner - Architect*, also provided invaluable information.

4.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

4.1 The Architect

The Atkinson house was designed by Tibor Doner.

Tibor Karl Doner was born in Hungary in 1907 and was brought to New Zealand by his parents in 1924 (Appendix A). In 1932, he graduated with distinction from Auckland University with a bachelor's degree in architecture. He was an outstanding student and won prizes for his work, e.g. the Auckland Brick Manufacturers' prize for house design competition, open to second and third year students (Appendix B).

Doner's early career, commencing during the depression years, consisted of private commissions. He joined the Public Works Department in 1937, and designed Auckland's post offices during those years. With architect Tony Bartlett, he won the competition for the design of the Savage Memorial in 1941 (Appendix C). He also designed the United States Army hospital at Avondale during World War II, which was specifically designed for conversion into the Avondale College and Intermediate school group in 1945 (Appendix D).

Doner eschewed traditional European architectural styles, instead adopting the influences of the European Modern movement and the Bauhaus. All of his work was governed by the "purity" of those philosophies. His attention was always directed towards international architecture.

In 1944, Doner was appointed by the Auckland City Council as its first City Architect. His office undertook all new building works. Some of these works won prizes.

Notable among Doner's works during these years were:

- Auckland Civic Administration Building: this was considered to be his most significant (and largest) building, typifying his dedication to new technology and his "state of the art" approach to all design matters. Robin Skinner, in his 1994 thesis on Doner, states that "by the 1950s, the United States was beginning to dominate western architecture and it was there that Doner looked in his design for the major civic square and elegant administration development.". Unfortunately, the building was not erected until the 1960s, some years after its design, and by then had been overtaken by the construction of other innovative buildings. (Appendix E)
- Ellen Melville Hall (1954) (Appendix F)
- Parnell Swimming Baths (1951-56), which won the NZIA Gold Medal (Appendix G)
- City Testing Station, Great North Rd (1953-57), which won the NZIA inaugural Silver Medal (Appendix H)
- Freeman's Bay housing, Whitson Tee(1951) (Appendix I).

Many other civic buildings were designed by Doner or under his supervision, such as libraries, swimming baths, the first remodelling of the Auckland Art Gallery, the ACC workshops, the modernist Khyber Pump Station, the abattoir, pensioner and low-cost housing, a water treatment station and car parking buildings (Appendix J).

In 1941, Doner and his associate Bartlett won fourth place in the Auckland Cathedral Design Competition (Appendix K).

A list of the known works of Tibor Doner is set out in Appendix L. (Unfortunately, some of his records have been destroyed.)

During his time with the Auckland City Council (1945-67) and afterwards, Doner carried out numerous private commissions, mostly in domestic architecture. Many of these houses still exist, including of course the Atkinson house, which is the subject of this report (see Appendix M).

Although reasonably common for an architect in public employment, private commissions were officially forbidden in the terms of employment. A colleague recalls that during his time with the Public Works Department, Doner would spend the morning checking work in the field, the afternoons working at his drawing board, and the evenings on his private jobs.

Doner carried out a lifelong exploration of material, form, colour and texture. He searched unceasingly for the latest products and techniques and where these were not available, developed his own. This restless creativity is apparent in much of his domestic design, as well as in his civic buildings.

Many of Doner's houses present a strong vertical emphasis. They are distinguished by vertical white-painted tongue and groove weatherboards (also earlier used by Walter Gropius), hand-laid stone walls or foundations, flat or "shed" roofs, the plentiful use of glass oriented to the sun, rounded walls and curved or angled floor plans. His designs shared a philosophy with other innovative New Zealand architects of the day, such as Vernon Brown and the Group architects.

Doner's own house at 50 Kohu Rd, Titirangi is a remarkable house, which was named as one of the "Top 50 Houses of the 20th Century" by *NZ Home and Entertaining Magazine*, June/July 2002 (Appendix N), and also featured in *Home and Entertaining* Dec/Jan 2000. It has a graceful curved façade and is filled with unusual design elements, lovingly crafted, e.g. rounded interior walls with a subtle "wine-glass" profile, hand-plastered wall surfaces, hand-laid stone and brick walls and paved surfaces (interior and exterior), timber veneer joinery and built-in furniture. The roof cladding, thought to have been laid by Doner over the original malthoid-type roofing at some stage, is composed of a concrete "biscuit" containing broken glass as an aggregate, so that as you stood on the flat roof, it would shimmer in the sunlight at your feet as you gazed at the panorama of Auckland before you. (That roofing has also now been covered.)

According to Fane Kearney, the Atkinson house, built 1945-6 was to some extent a “guinea pig” for some of the design elements of Doner’s own house, built shortly afterwards.

4.2 The House

The Atkinson house, later the Titirangi Community House, was designed by Tibor Doner and built in 1945-6. It was built for optician Harry Atkinson, his wife Edna and their five children, on land that was previously part of the large estate of Harry’s father, Henry Atkinson. Harry Atkinson had acquired the land at the beginning of 1945 (Appendix O).

Harry and Edna Atkinson and Tibor and Margaret (Madge) Doner were close friends. The builders for the Atkinson house were Jack, Reg and Rob Newby, but according to Fane Kearney, Harry Atkinson and Tibor Doner also assisted with the construction. She recalls many lively debates between Atkinson and Doner during the construction of the house, fuelled by the volatile Doner.

During construction, the family lived in a bach on the property, which was later shifted and became part of the Rangiwai Rd Hall (now the Catholic Church).

Fane Kearney recalls that the house was very easy and comfortable to live in, designed for the sun and with views to the south over the Manukau Harbour and to the east and north over Titirangi. The open plan design worked well for the family and for the children and their friends at play. The house and its large sitting room accommodated 120 or so people on the occasion of two family weddings. (See early photographs of house, Appendix P – courtesy Fane Kearney.)

Harry Atkinson was a well-known classical music buff with very sophisticated stereo equipment for that time, and Titirangi music evenings were held at the house.

The grounds of the property were extensively landscaped by Edna Atkinson, who was a gardening columnist for *Home and Building*. Many visitors came just to see the garden. Some of the plants she planted are still on the property, e.g. kiwifruit vine, camellias, feijoa trees, etc.

The Atkinson house has achieved some recognition and featured in the *NZ Arts Yearbook* 1946.

4.3 Recent History

After the house was sold by the family to the Waitemata County Council in 1967, it was used as an office administration centre by the Council. Little change was made to the building, however.

In 1978, the County Council moved its district office to Henderson and the old Atkinson house became the Titirangi Community House, a function that ceased recently when the new Community Centre was built. The house is now vacant.

5.0 DESCRIPTION OF BUILDING

5.1 General (see photographs, Appendix Q)

The house is in the Modernist style. The philosophy underlying Modernist design was that the form of a building should reflect its function. The use of simple forms should clearly reveal both the structure and the materials. The design of buildings should be closely related to the lives of the people using or living in them.

The Atkinson house follows these precepts. It is designed like a boomerang, with two wings set at an angle to each other (greater than 90 degrees) to take maximum advantage of panoramic views and the northern sunny aspect. The rooms are arranged so as to make family living easy, free and comfortable. Materials are plain, close to nature (use of timber veneer and stone) and the built-in fittings are designed to make the house more convenient and livable.

The sitting room occupies the south-western wing of the boomerang, the bedrooms the northern wing, and the utility rooms (kitchen, lavatory, laundry and bathroom) and entrance hall occupy the axis area.

Most of the exterior joinery, including along the face of the bedroom wing, is original.

The interior walls were covered with scrim and plastered by Doner, to some extent as an experiment. The original material is still present throughout the house, though now painted over.

Some of the sitting room furniture, now gone, was custom-designed by Doner for the room.

There were decks off the sitting room and the bedroom wing, which have since been enclosed.

5.2 The Rooms

(From notes made during tour of house with descendant, Fane Kearney.)

Sitting room: The bay at the north-west corner was originally a deck, sheltered by a glass wall on the western side, from which to enjoy wide views. It was closed in after ownership passed from the family. The fireplace and built-in shelves are original. The glass doors to the hallway are not

original, and replaced a fixed glass panel on the northern side and a glass swing door. The other joinery is original.

Hallway: The glass windows and door facing north are original. The seat/locker was where the vacuum cleaner was stored by the family.

Kitchen: The sink unit is not in the original position (was further west along the wall) and is thought to be a later installation. The cupboards and shelves are original. The frosted window into the hallway is original.

Laundry: Original fittings (washing machine and water heater, etc) have gone. The water from the washing machine used to drain down a hole in the south-western corner of the floor.

Lavatory: Little changed.

Bathroom: The bath is still there, but not visible, under boarding and is possibly original. The shower tiling and curved rail and the built-in wall cupboard are original. The shower used to have a glass end to it. The linoleum is probably original.

Bedroom 1 (small southernmost bedroom): Used to contain bunks and a wardrobe in the corner. Originally there was a curtain across the opening into the corridor, but this was soon replaced with a wall and glass door.

Bedroom 2 (small middle bedroom): The wardrobe is original. Originally there was a curtain across the opening into the corridor, but this was soon replaced with a wall and glass door.

Bedroom 3 (master bedroom): Room contained a double bed and a single bed, with built-in shelves and a small cupboard (both still there). Window joinery original. The curved dressing room in the north-east corner has gone.

Bedroom 4 (northernmost room): The door to this room is original, but not the shelving. There used to be a large, built-in sewing bench, designed by Doner, in the north-western corner. In the eastern bay, there was a bed, then a built-in dressing table and then a bed on the other side of it, near the door from the corridor into the room. The bay had a curtain across it.

5.3 Condition and Integrity of Building

The scope of this report does not include a condition report, but the building appears to be in reasonable condition, and to contain sound timbers. In terms of its original form and construction, the building still has considerable integrity.

6.0 HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The former Atkinson house at No.1 Rangiwai Rd, Titirangi, later the Titirangi Community House, has considerable heritage significance, on the following grounds:

- it is a good example of domestic Modernist architecture in Auckland; there are few such buildings in Waitakere City and only a limited number in the Auckland region
- it was designed by a noted Auckland architect, Tibor Doner, who left a very considerable architectural legacy in the Auckland area
- the innovative design and construction methods are of considerable interest
- the building was used by the community for many years and is valued by the community.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of the building's heritage significance, I recommend that the former Atkinson House and Titirangi Community House be included in the schedule of heritage items in the District Plan.

APPENDIX A

Life of Tibor Donor

APPENDIX B

Auckland Brick Manufacturers' house design competition - winning design by Donor

APPENDIX C

Savage Memorial – winning design.

APPENDIX D

Design of United States Army Hospital /Avondale College and Intermediate school group

APPENDIX E

Auckland Civic Administration Building

APPENDIX F

Ellen Melville Hall

APPENDIX G

Parnell Swimming Baths

APPENDIX H

City Testing Station, Great North Rd

APPENDIX I

Freeman's Bay housing, Whitson Tce, 1951

APPENDIX J

Donor's civic works - various

APPENDIX K

Auckland Cathedral Design Competition

APPENDIX L

A list of the known works of Tibor Doner

APPENDIX M

List of private commissions

APPENDIX N

Doner's own house featured in *NZ Home and Entertaining Magazine*

APPENDIX O

No.1 Rangiwai Rd, certificate of title

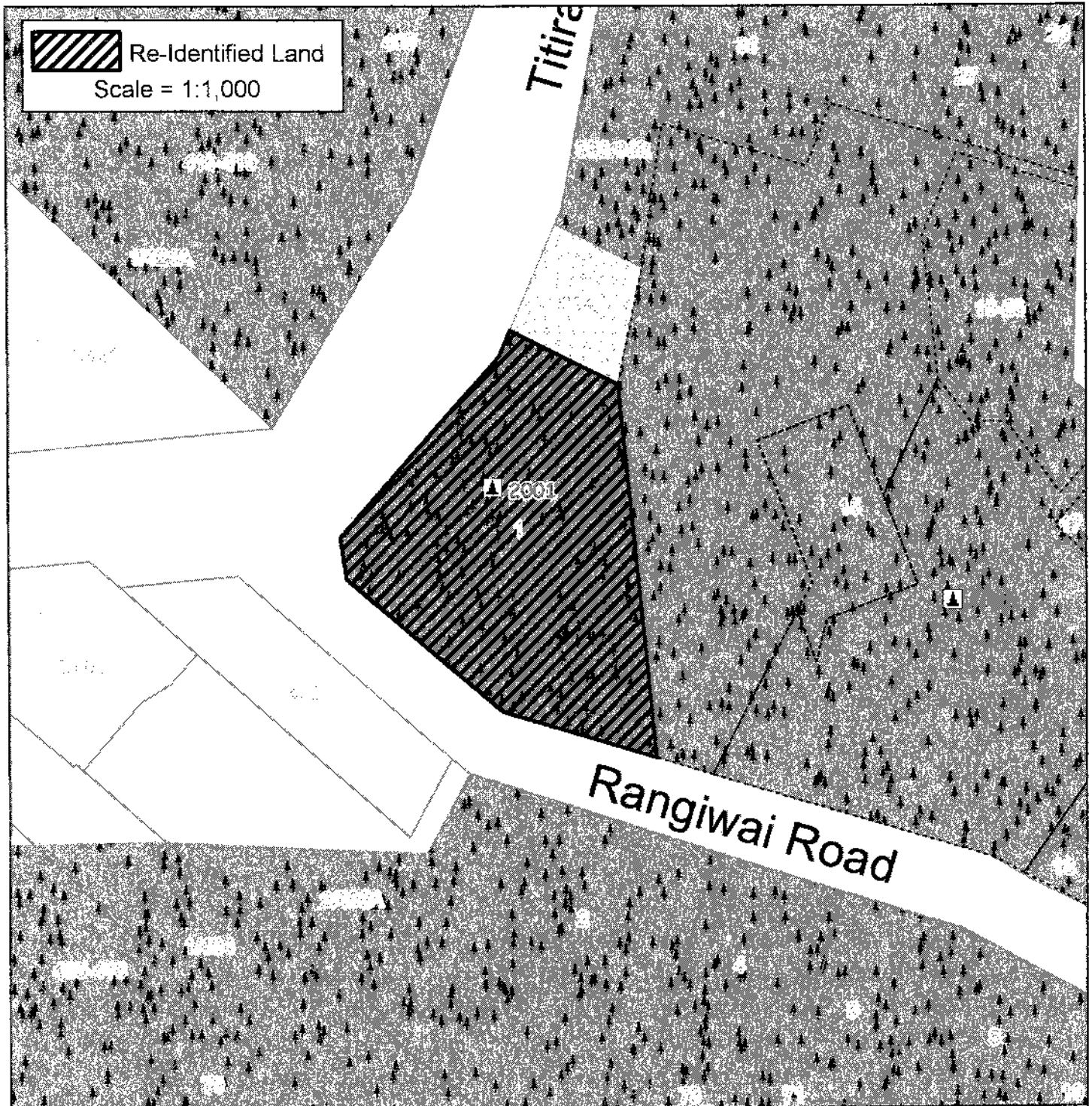
APPENDIX P

Early photographs of house

APPENDIX Q

Photographs of the house, interior and exterior, 2002

Proposed changes to map number G10 Human Environments



Proposed Plan Change No.

*From 'Open Space Environment' to 'Bush Living Environment'
Addition of Heritage Site #2001*

Lot 4 DP191856. 1 Rangiwai Road, Titirangi