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EDITED BY
ELIZABETH COX

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A HISTORY OF
NEW ZEALAND
WOMEN IN
ARCHITECTURE

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MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

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18. 'VIGOUR AND ZEST': LILLIAN CHRYSTALL Lynda Simmons



Lillian Laidlaw
(later Chrystall)
in Paris in the 1950s.

History is often determined through those who are the first in their field to accomplish particular milestones, and the late Lillian Laidlaw (later Chrystall) is a major figure in this country's architectural history because she was the 'first female' in several areas of her life – most prominently as the first female architect to win a national-level award for a building in New Zealand. In 1967, Chrystall was awarded the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) Bronze Medal for the Yock House, Remuera, Auckland (1964).

Lillian Laidlaw was also the first female studio tutor at the Auckland University College School of Architecture (now the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning) in 1948, working in a part-time capacity as assistant to Vernon Brown (alongside Anthony Treadwell), who became a strong influence on her early architectural practice.¹

She was also the first woman on the Auckland Savings Bank (ASB) Board of Trustees in 1975; and the first female chair of the ASB Board in 1983, reflecting her interest and her family background in business. Her father, Robert Laidlaw (1885–1971), was the founder of Laidlaw Leeds, which later became Farmers Trading Company, one of New Zealand's earliest department stores, and her brother established the Lincoln Toy Company in 1946.² She later commented, 'My father never expected any less of me than he did of my two brothers.'³ Lillian Laidlaw was active in both the business sector and community organisations, including charitable support and being a founding and continuing member of the Auckland Zonta Club in 1965. She was awarded an OBE in 1989 for public services.⁴

Lillian Chrystall credited a year-long family trip to Europe at age 12 as foundational to her education, and enrolled at Auckland Girls' Grammar School on the family's return just as the Second World War broke out. After considering and then dismissing running her own business in fashion – she had even decided on the name of her business – she was admitted to the Auckland University College School of Architecture in 1944.⁵ She was one of five women among the 36-person intake for that year, alongside contemporaries who included Dorothy Gawith (later Mahon) and Susanne Sharp (later Priest), who also graduated in 1948. She was active in university student politics, including as a member of the university's Students' Executive, and took part in a large student debating event to discuss the proposed move of the university out of the central city in 1947, after which she was reviewed as being a 'lucid and convincing speaker'. The university magazine noted she 'display[ed] vigour and zest in all her activities'.⁶

During the university summer breaks, Lillian worked for Massey Beatson Rix-Trott Architects, and after graduation in 1948 she worked at the university

ABOVE: The Auckland house designed by Lillian Laidlaw for her parents at the beginning of her career in the early 1950s, and published in *Home and Building* in 1954.

BELOW: Laidlaw designed this house in Ngapipi Road, Ōrākei, for her brother, Lincoln Laidlaw, in the 1950s.





as studio assistant to Vernon Brown. In the same year she became an Associate member of the NZIA and a registered architect.⁷

Her desire to run her own practice and business led her to establish Lillian Laidlaw Architects in December 1949. While not being the first woman to set up her own practice in New Zealand, she was certainly one of the first, after the short-lived practice of Lucy Greenish in 1927, and the practices of Monica Barham (1946) and Muriel Lamb (1952).

In 1950, Laidlaw left New Zealand for Europe, and she maintained her membership with the NZIA during the years she was away. Between 1950 and 1952 she was employed in Erno Goldfinger's (1902–1987) then-small office in Piccadilly, London, working mainly on postwar reconstruction, including repairing a public school and factory complex in Birmingham.

This was followed by two years in the practice of Hungarian architect André Sive (András Szivessy, 1899–1958) in Paris, after an introduction by Goldfinger. She describes working on a low-cost housing project in Aubervilliers as interesting, due to its technologically innovative prefabrication methods, and Sive's ongoing collaboration with other architects such as the Prouvé brothers (Jean and Henri) and Claude Raccoursier.⁸

While living and working in Paris, Laidlaw was influenced by the developing postwar modernist thinking she experienced at the CIAM conference (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) at Aix-en-Provence, France, in 1953. While there she visited the recently completed Unité d'habitation apartment building in Marseille, shown around by its architect, Le Corbusier. She was also influenced by her experiences travelling through Switzerland and Austria.

In early 1954 she returned to New Zealand and re-established Lillian Laidlaw Architects in Auckland. Her return, as she later recalled, came as something of a shock: 'I came down with a thud – I was relatively discontent for many months.'⁹ In that year, the house she had designed for her parents was featured in *Home and Building*. It had been built next to the family's existing large home in Argyle Street; she had designed it before she went away, and the old house was sold. The magazine described the relationship between 'positive father' as client and 'wilful daughter' as architect, noting that neither got their own way entirely but both were now living happily together in the house; Laidlaw said she was grateful for her parents being such 'good guinea pigs'. To get around building restrictions at the time, the house was designed as two flats, but the family always intended to live in both. A short summary of her career to date and her photo were published in the same magazine.¹⁰ She also was commissioned to design a warehouse and office buildings for her brother.

Her first employee was recent graduate David Chrystall (1927–2014), who became her life partner, and they married in 1955. The practice name changed to Chrystall Architects in mid-1956, and they maintained it together until their separation in 1980, after which Lillian continued to run the practice on her own from Princes Street in the central city and later from Ponsonby, until her retirement in 2011, at age 85.

Together they set up a home office at 27 Airedale Street in central Auckland, because after living in Paris and London Lillian wanted an alternative to the developing suburbs – 'I knew I wanted to live in the centre of the city.'¹¹ The renovation they did of the old cottage, which included a large architectural studio along its entire length, was published in another *Home and Building* article in 1955, extolling the value of living in the city.¹²

Within the practice partnership, Lillian and David worked on separate projects: David focused on schools and community buildings, while Lillian, for the first 10 years, took on commercial projects, due to her experience overseas and family business connections. After her success with the Yock House in 1967, the practice attracted mainly residential projects, alongside David's continued community projects.

ABOVE: Lillian and David Chrystall in the mid-1950s.
BELOW: Lillian Chrystall, after receiving her OBE in 1989.



ABOVE: The interior of a Lillian Chrystall house in Beach Haven, Auckland, completed in the 1970s.

BELOW: A house designed by Chrystall on Hapua Street, Remuera (1969).

Behind this division of work in the practice lay their wish to maintain autonomy in their designs: 'Had we worked on the same designs it would have been intolerable,' she admitted. 'But we didn't. We each have our own work and sometimes keep different hours, too. David often comes in as early as 7 a.m. and leaves for home early in the afternoon, I start later and go home later.'¹³

As mentioned above, one of the projects on which Lillian worked within the practice was the Yock House in Ngapuhi Road, Remuera, Auckland, which received the NZIA Bronze Medal for Residential Architecture in 1967. (The NZIA awards system in the 1960s had three categories: Gold for public architecture, Silver for commercial, and Bronze for residential. Therefore, Bronze represents first in the residential category, not the more usual third place.) This was the first time a woman had been awarded a medal by the NZIA. The judges described the house as 'a brilliant essay in assured simplicity. It succeeds without affectation but with tremendous subtlety and sensitivity. The construction and detailing throughout are direct and elegant and in simple New Zealand building terms.'¹⁴

In addition to the Yock House, notable buildings designed by Chrystall include a house for her brother Lincoln Laidlaw (1950s), the Fraser house (1950s), and 33 Kauri Loop Road in Oratia (1974). As well as the 1967 Bronze Medal, she received an NZIA Auckland Branch Merit Award in 1957, and an NZIA Branch Award in 1979 for the (Philip) Yock House in Mission Bay (for the brother of her earlier client). In 2013, she received an NZIA Local Enduring Architecture Award, again for the (original) Yock House.¹⁵ In 1974 she was admitted as a fellow of the NZIA, probably the first woman to receive this honour.

Her views on design were tied to the socially conscious ideals of the mid-century era, with a heightened awareness of placing simple human experiences at the core of the design: 'I think the movement of people is very important . . . and the ease with which a person in a house – or a river of people in a public building – moves is an essential part of the designing.'¹⁶

Lillian and David Chrystall lived in Airedale Street for 22 years, during a time when inner-city living was not common in New Zealand. Initially the office and home were combined, but in early 1959 (after the birth of their second child) the office shifted to nearby Symonds Street.

Their urban home became a meeting place for architects, artists and writers, developing a culture where ideas about art, design, urban issues and politics were discussed and debated. As described by Lindley Naismith:

Their little house in Airedale St, just down the road from their office in Symonds St, became a mecca for a lively clan of architects, including Bill Wilson, Ivan Juriss and the other members of the Auckland Group, as well as Peter Bartlett, who shared their office, John Goldwater, and the writer Jack [Lasenby]. Bill Wilson would often stay the night. A young David Mitchell, then a second year architecture student, answered their ad for a baby sitter for their three kids and ended up working in their office – the scene around their dining table was 'a real blast'.¹⁷

As a result of Lillian's experiences with wartime restrictions and materials shortages working in Europe, her convictions that architects have a 'social responsibility for what we designed'¹⁸ were strong, and aligned with those of the friends and colleagues who were guests at the regular Friday night gatherings at Airedale Street. One 'urban activism' project to emerge from this small group was to lobby to pedestrianise Vulcan Lane, which was then a delivery service lane.¹⁹

While Chrystall Architects operated from Symonds Street and Princes Street, there were usually between three and five people working in the office. One of those they employed over the years was Pam Ingram, who has acknowledged

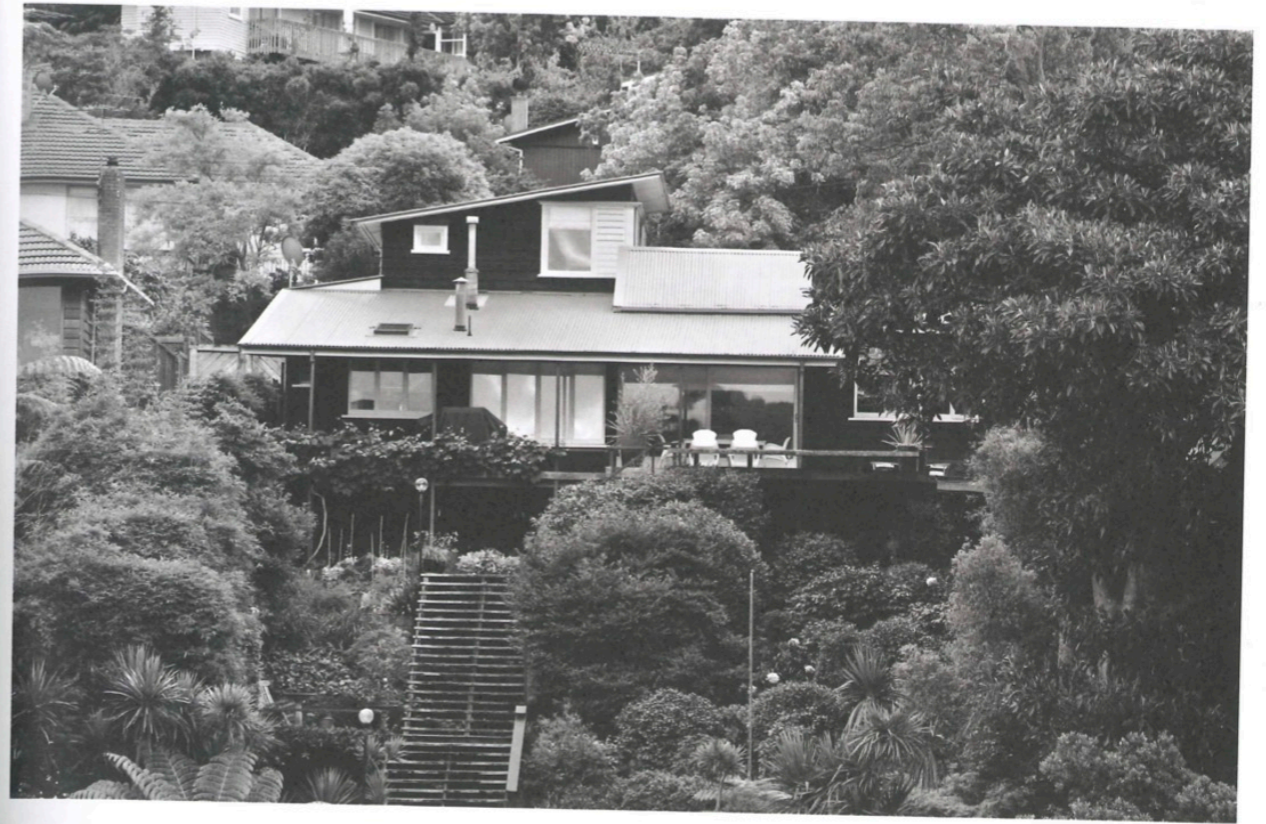
Lillian's support of other women in the profession and the difference to her previous office experiences: 'With Lillian I was given more responsibility. I had my own jobs and my own clients. I was beginning to do more of what I wanted to do: create beautiful, optimistic, inspirational objects with qualities of honesty and hope.'²⁰

Unlike many others of her time and since, Lillian Chrystall found a childcare system that enabled her to maintain the practice as well as raise a young family. She employed a series of nannies who were also mothers and could look after the three Chrystall children alongside their own. The proximity of home and office meant she was nearby if and when needed. As she told *Broadsheet* magazine in 1973, 'You can't opt out for a few years to rear children – you would be left high and dry.'²¹ In 2019, she rephrased this arrangement in more direct terms which clearly expressed the tension that can exist between practice and motherhood: 'The practice needed me more than the children needed me, so I got an alternative mother.'²²

To honour the influence of Lillian Chrystall's full, influential and rich career, one of the three Architecture+Women NZ Dulux Awards is named after her. The Chrystall Excellence Award is part of the triennial awards programme which was established in 2014 and recognises women who have had careers in architecture over several decades. At the inaugural awards dinner held on 27 September 2014 in Auckland, Lillian Chrystall presented the A+W NZ Chrystall Excellence Award to Julie Stout. Recipients since 2014 have been Sarah Treadwell (2017) and Christina van Bohemen (2020).²³

Lillian Laidlaw (Chrystall) died in February 2022. While a reluctant star, she was recognised for her work with many community and public groups, and generated a significant body of high-quality work. She was – and remains – a role model to so many architects. Much more than a legacy of firsts.

- 1 The first female academic full-time staff member was Sarah Treadwell, appointed in 1981.
- 2 'Make the most of Equality', *New Zealand Herald*, 21 February 1985, section 2, 2.
- 3 Michael Brett, 'Lillian's Got a Way with the Board', *Auckland Star*, 15 June 1986, B1; 'A Brief History of Prominent Zonta Member: Lillian Chrystal OBE' (<https://zonta.org.nz/district-16-history/prominent-member-histories/prominent-member-history-lillian-chrystal/>); Natalie Meredith, 'Lillian Chrystal, BArch, FNZIA', bachelor of architecture research paper, Unitec, Auckland, 1997.
- 4 Lillian Laidlaw's parents, Robert Laidlaw and his American wife Lillian Viola Irene Watson, were both from Brethren Christian backgrounds. Alongside his business life, Robert was also a Christian public speaker, broadcaster and writer, publishing the popular evangelical book *The Reason Why* (1927).
- 5 Lillian Chrystall, interviewed by Julie Stout and Lynda Simmons, 3 October 2019, video and transcript (<https://architecturewomen.org.nz/archives/aw-nz-interview-lillian-chrystall>).
- 6 *Craccum*, 26 Feb 1947, 1; 'Tamaki Debated', *Craccum*, 8 August 1947, 6.
- 7 'Lillian Chrystall', 1948, NZIA registration applications, Series Code 18486, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.
- 8 Lillian Chrystall, interviewed by Bruce Petry, 1992, New Zealand Architecture Post-WWII Oral History Project, OHColl-0308, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 'Spotlight', and 'Overlooking a Magnificent Harbour View', *Home and Building*, vol. 16, no. 10 (March 1954), 27, 34–37; Ian Hunter, *Man of Our Time: Triumph against all odds* (Auckland: Castle Publications, 1999), 279–80.
- 11 Chrystall, interviewed by Petry.
- 12 'City Lights', *Home and Building*, (April 1955), 31, 76.
- 13 'Career Still Excites Citation Winner', *New Zealand Herald*, 11 December 1979, 1. The schedule mentioned here could also possibly have been established during the early childhood years of their three children, to manage a childcare routine.
- 14 'NZIA Bronze Medal for 1967 (Antony) Yock House, 1964', *Home and Building*, (May 1967); 'Yock House, Auckland', *NZIA Journal*, September 1967, 284–87.
- 15 'A House Overlooking the Manukau' [Fraser house], *Home and Building*, (July 1960), 44; 'A Home for Bush Lovers' [Kauri Road], *Building Progress*, July 1973, 6–7; 'House Design Competition', 3rd Place Equal, *Home and Building* (July 1976), 21; '1979 Auckland Branch NZIA Awards', *Home and Building* (May 1980), 27; 'Bridging The Gap', *Home and Building*, (December/January 1986), 84–85.
- 16 Chrystall, interviewed by Petry, 1992.
- 17 Lindley Naismith, 'Determined Not to Be a Lady: A profile of Lillian Chrystall' [2005], Architecture+Women



ABOVE: The Yock House in Remuera, Auckland (1964). This image was taken in 2008, after alterations had been made.

OVERLEAF: A house designed by Chrystall at Kauri Loop Road in Oratia, West Auckland (1974).

- NZ, 11 February 2013 (<https://architecturewomen.org.nz/archives/profile-lillian-chrystall-linaismith-2005>).
- 18 Chrystall, interviewed by Petry.
- 19 Chrystall, interviewed by Stout and Simmons.
- 20 Tom Hyde, 'Building Their Reputation: Women architects', *More*, September 1986, 28–37.
- 21 Sandra Coney and Hilary Haines, 'Our Quest for Wonder Woman', *Broadsheet*, 8 April 1973, 8.
- 22 Chrystall, interviewed by Stout and Simmons.
- 23 Lynda Simmons, 'Filling the Gaps', *Parlour*, 5 November 2018 (<https://parlour.org.au/public-realm/the-aw-nz-dulux-awards-filling-the-gaps/>).

