

Reflecting on what our housing conversations no longer say

New Zealand's housing conversation has always been a metaphor for different things.

When our country was young, and our towns and cities were new, we used to talk about building communities and creating spaces for families. Housing was synonymous with employment and industry. Governments were building New Zealand incrementally through schemes. We were building roads, towns, suburbs, schools and homes. The state housing period focused on creating suburbs of homes fit for a modern technological age.

But since the 21st century, those progressive housing conversations have been replaced by something that is almost exclusively financial. It's like houses have lost whatever character made them reflect where New Zealand was at different stages in time – expansion, industry and quality of life.

Now houses are strictly investments. We have an obsession with them.¹ Some of us want to own more and more of them for a number of reasons.² We no longer wax lyrically about houses as new communities or making jobs and promoting industry. High-end home ownership is a waterfront mansion with its own boat shed, helicopter pad, pool overlooking the sea and private access to the beach. Conspicuous consumption is alive and well through a media interested in publishing the owner's name.³

Meanwhile, in 2013, Lorde strikes a chord with a younger predominantly renting generation who "[Are] not proud of my address, in the torn-up town. No post code envy."⁴

Digital records of the housing conversation

DigitalNZ⁵ (DNZ) provides a unique data source to look into New Zealand's history through a media lens. DNZ receives information from more than 200 organisations including museums, media companies and government departments across New Zealand and the world across a variety of media formats and makes it available through a single open-source data service.

Historical information from the National Library of New Zealand, including its Papers Past⁶ series, are free-text searchable, offering a unique insight into the content of New Zealand's historical media records.

This *NZIER Insight* uses DNZ's open-source data service and word clouds to explore how the housing "conversation"

has changed in the media over time. Word clouds are a technique that reflects the most frequent non-common words in a text. Where a corpus of text is large, word clouds use frequency of word occurrence to distil the "flavour" of the written content on the assumption that texts with different narratives will possess different frequencies of keywords. After common words used in written English are removed, word clouds suppose the frequency of the remaining keywords can be used to gauge the general content or flavour of the corpus. The interpretation is more "art" rather than "science" – there's no statistical test or null hypothesis that can prove an interpretation is wrong.

New Zealand talks about housing a lot

Figure 1, from DNZ open-source data service (see caveats), records four periods across New Zealand's historical media

¹ https://nzier.org.nz/static/media/filer_public/98/7c/987c99b1-d879-48ca-ac2c-58e05307ac5c/nzier_public_discussion_document_2014-04_-_home_affordability_challenge.pdf

² *Op cit* page 18.

³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/108873109/eight-sales-for-more-than-10m-so-far-this-year-new-data-shows?rm=a>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlcIKh6sBtc>

⁵ <https://digitalnz.org/>

⁶ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>

Figure 1 Housing media references

The graph displays the volume of articles published over time. The blue line represents the monthly count, showing significant fluctuations and a major peak in 1921. The red line represents a smoothed trend, highlighting two primary periods of high publication activity: one around 1921 and another starting around 2000, peaking in 2021.

Back then, “housing” meant expansion

The government was establishing the regulatory machinery, reflected through prominent words like “Bill”, “Act” and “committee”. Connections back to England and financing were reflected in words like “London”, “British”, “price” and “gold”.

Connections to “London” and “British” still reflect a colonial New Zealand, but their frequency is diminishing.

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State "housing" meant quality and modern with a unique architectural flavour

There's now a technology and quality dimension entering the housing conversation: words like "garage", "appliance", "power" and "condition" enter the word cloud as new keywords. Other words, like "large", "good", "room", "services", "bungalow", "modern" and "state" together with "section" and "street" reflect the time period that cemented the notion of the "Kiwi half acre" into the New Zealanders psyche of what are "homes".

21st century houses are financial investments

The nature of the housing conversation has also become much more homogeneous. From 2008 on, the commercial flavour is almost exclusively maintained (Figure 6). “Rental” is now a frequent word.

Houses are investments, and there is no architecture, industry, technology or quality dimension at all to the housing conversation.

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Figure 6 Word cloud 2008–2018



- Historical counts of housing-related conversations between 1946 and 2008 look understated compared to prior and following years. The National Library of New Zealand is the dominant data source prior to 1946. The latest year Papers Past⁷, the main newspaper-related data source, has digitised is 1950 for the *Otago Daily Times*. Other key national newspapers, like Auckland's *New Zealand Herald* and *Auckland Star*, Wellington's *Evening Post* and Christchurch's *Press* have been digitised up to 1945. Currently, only approximately 40 percent of the digitised material is available electronically through DNZ's open source system. As later years become digitised, the volume of housing-related content will undoubtedly increase.
- From 1946–1990, the Alexander Turnbull Library and Auckland Libraries provided most of the media information.
- Since 2008, Radio New Zealand, the Department of Internal Affairs and TV3 have supplied most of the information.

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