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THE BROADSHEET OF THE AUCKLAND BRANCH OF THE NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

BLOCK

Simple Simple Simple

Sean Flanagan outlines the history of a Modernist virtue

Simplicity is a quality often set to work to win favour for contemporary architecture, and in New Zealand - with our pioneering heritage - we are prone to wax lyrical about this virtue. Indeed, the idea of achieving great things by simple means gets to the very heart of our cultural myths. Take for example the stories of Sir Edmund Hillary's exploits. Want to go to the South Pole? Just take the tractor from out back.

Oftentimes critics use simplicity to suggest that a work of architecture is founded on irrefutable principles. In this way the judgement that something is simple tends to rule out further discussion. The call to simplicity is a great silencing device. It is the blunderbuss of the critic's arsenal, going off with a thunder and laying dead all possible retort.

Our obsession with simplicity was brought to light in a holiday browse of *Houses New Zealand* - the latest periodical to run off the AGM press. The current issue focuses upon the work of the Wellington-based architect Gerald Parsonson and a number of critics are rolled out to comment on his houses along the Kapiti Coast. Amongst the reviews, it was Tommy Honey's article that drew attention for its use of "simplicity". In the space of the nine paragraphs used to describe the Peka Peka house, Honey refers to simple things on nine occasions. The general form of the building is presented as simple, seemingly because the construction was simple, all of which results in simple interiors that could of course only be furnished ... well ... simply. One suspects the text either slipped under the editor's radar or simplicity was accepted as the sole descriptor to encapsulate the house.



Parsonson's Peka Peka House

Honey's appeal to the simple life can be historicised. While the association of the 'simple' with the 'good' in architecture can likely be traced back to deep philosophical origins, the history of simplicity as the critics thunder shot appraisal has its history in the Modern Movement and the war for the survival of modern architecture.

The celebration of architecture as a simple thing has its roots in the crisis that affected the Modern Movement during the 1930s and 40s. Bruno Zevi characterised this period as a time of revolt against the new; a time when modernists struggled to establish a foothold in society due to growing political, intellectual, sentimental and psychological discontents with modernism. Added to this was

the fact that the 'aesthetically indifferent' English saw modernism as the product of cranks, foreigners, and revolutionaries. Times were bleak.

Faced with this crisis, historians like Pevsner and Giedion got busy writing in defence of the Movement. Both were active supporters of modernism and their texts endorsed modern architects by unleashing a family of heroic concepts in defence of their work. Alongside ideas of honesty, sobriety and clarity, the call of simplicity as a guiding principle of modern architecture was one of the major weapons in the fight to stall the growing discontent. The turn to such heroic concepts was prompted by the need to found modern architecture on solid ground, to present it as virtuous and irrefutable. This move had the pleasant side effect of casting opposing styles in a less favourable light. Pevsner, for example, charged Art Nouveau and architectural eclecticism with being marred by frippery and caprice. Reyner Banham later identified how the defence of the Modern Movement on the grounds of being an honest, clear and simple approach to building was a strategy deliberately employed to avoid arguments on aesthetic or symbolic grounds. Arguments of this kind were more likely to stir hostility, and statements about aesthetics and symbolism were more easily challenged by opposing architects. Sticking to the simple line was a surer way to silence critics.

In the later half of 20th century, the celebration of the clear and simple side was supplanted by the revisionist histories that revelled in the other sides - exploring where modernism was also marked by frippery and caprice or tarnished with anomalies and contradictions. The revision of the canonical accounts of modern history was fuelled by architects who suspected that the honesty, clarity and simplicity central to these accounts did not tell the full story. Their suspicions were fuelled, for example, by the growing awareness of the early works of the modern masters; works which revealed the development of modern architecture to be slightly more complicated than a solid and simple line marching towards the irrefutable truth of building.

According to Banham, at the heart of these suspicions a realisation that critics' constant reference to concepts like honesty, clarity and simplicity established a 'zone of silence' in the history of modern architecture. The ongoing appeal to these heroic terms was held partly responsible for obscuring the complexities of modern architecture. The appeal to these concepts was recognised as part of a strategy employed to ensure modernism a foothold in society, but the implications of this strategy were now also clear. The simple claims dominated and silenced other stories about modern architecture and also, as modernism became more popular, architecture in general. The liberal application of these heroic terms rendered architecture less than life-size because a lot was left out of the story. The simple view was, to paraphrase Banham, a view through "the marrow-hole of a dry bone." SF



James Casebere in New Zealand

Casebere attempts to operate at the point at which photography, architecture and sculpture intersect. His enormous, astonishing photographs are shot inside highly crafted table-top model interiors that he painstakingly builds, floods, and lights. Hauntingly beautiful, his work will be shown from February 1st to March 15th at Jensen Gallery - it's on the corner of McColl and Roxburgh Streets, Newmarket.



John Wardle Lecture

6pm, Monday 25th February
University of Auckland School of Engineering

RSVP to John Balasoglou at
aaltobooks@xtra.co.nz

10 CPD Points

2008 GIB Architects' Regatta

The date has been announced for the annual GIB Architects Regatta - Monday 18 February 2008. Race start time is 4.00pm, registrations are invited from all architects, their consultants, clients, and guests. The entry fee is \$100 per boat (+ \$10 per crew in excess of 10). 65+ entries sailed in the 2007 Regatta and a similar number is anticipated for 2008. MC will be Pete Montgomery. The entry form can be downloaded from www.gib.co.nz or the NZIA website.

Not too Late to be Good

Judy Cockeram from the University of Auckland School of Architecture is teaching a workshop at a new architecture school in Peshawar, Pakistan. Looking to help them establish a good architecture library, she is gathering books. The books will be shipped in mid-February, so its not too late to make a contribution. Look on your shelves for any text that you feel you could let go of and deliver them to the school office at the School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland within a fortnight.

Any queries answered by email at j.cockeram@auckland.ac.nz



Purchase your copy of the 'Disagreement' issue of *Interstices: A Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* by sending a cheque for \$32.95 (payable to Auckland UniServices Ltd.) to Julia Gately, School of Architecture and Planning, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Purchase back issues online at www.mercurysubs.co.nz/shop/Architecture/Interstices.html. *Interstices* 03 to 07 are available; *Interstices* 01 and 02 are out of print.

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Skirtings vs Surfing

Twenty five years ago I joined a group of some thirty people, gathered at a large rambling house high in the Waitakere Ranges. We were bound together by affection for and an occasional presence at a small bay in Northland at which our host owned five lots of land on a steep hillside high above the eastern end of the bay. Anticipating a budget impost on land ownership in Roger Douglas's first budget, he had decided to dispose of the land.

We all wandered around the living room like bit players in an army film, strips of annotated masking tape stuck on our left breast identifying our interest in one or another of the lots on offer, I became 'Cheshire Lot 4'.

All that was required was a modest deposit to secure the land, the balance to be paid on gaining a building consent. In those days before buildings leaked or were thought to be a despoliation of the natural landscape in need of mitigation I felt capable of meeting the modest demands of the Town and Country Planning Act and the fledgling NZS3604. I had, though, not counted on a subterranean greasyback buried as deeply in the geotechnical report as under the land itself.

Through the years of negotiation with the local county engineer the lots changed hands as the cast from that windy night lost patience and drifted off. This left only Lot 4 leading the charge, followed by new conscripts who chanced the puny down payment and awaited the outcome of our skirmishes.

The tricky issue was the need to drain the site to stabilise it yet dispose of effluent on site, in effect re-irrigating the drained site. Like much of our business, this seemed to be entirely a matter of coefficients, analysis and usage rates and I sent engineer after engineer into the fray. It was though, as so often seems to happen, legal footwork that won the day as the sheets of calculation and negotiation were set aside and a deft bit of legalese cleared the way for construction to start.

Such was the fatigue of our neighbouring landowners that any desire for a unique home away from home was long gone and three houses were constructed from the same set of plans I'd drawn up, though procured by quite different methods. I called up every contact from kindergarten to practice, another was built by fixed price contract and the last by the hyperactive owner himself. As one might expect the owner-builder's cost was much the lesser, the cost of labour not appearing on the balance sheet. Much to my chagrin the second house built under fixed price contract was much cheaper than my 'mates rates' special; the contractor who to his advantage had a full scale prototype not eight meters away was happy, the owner was happy, the architect was not.

Aside from this rather basic lesson in construction pricing and the foolishness of hourly rates, the three buildings have also provided a number of interesting truths. Each has the same form, materials, arrangement of openings and only slightly different orientations, indeed each was built from the same set of drawings, yet each bears the mark of its delivery: ours a collection of whatever a mate

could offer within the general format, the contractor's a summation of least sub contract prices and the owner-built job benefiting from spending on better joinery rather than labour.

At first glance the orientation of the house within the bay has the greatest effect on character, the relationship to the run of surf and landform being the most obvious yet the changes in reflected light and glare are significant too, the owner-built job's tinted glass significantly adding to the sense of remove from the outside.

The interiors are a standard unpainted ply, though each house has adopted a different strategy to finishing lines; I stuck with 'nothing under 25x25 without written approval of the architect' and gave no such approvals, while the other two eschewed such a raw approach and adopted an increasing reliance on skirtings, architraves, sill boards and the like. The affect of these bits of wood snaking around transitions in plane though fussy to my eye, is probably insignificant in the scheme of things and ranks far behind the feeling of difference induced by furniture and paintings. A somewhat more sobering impact of our lack of finishing lines was a greatly increased labour cost, my assumption of square ex-factory ply sheets being sadly awry and begetting a great deal of hand tailoring of the lining to achieve an informal, unlaboured (hah) look.



These are very exposed buildings that sit high gabled chin first into the edge of tropical cyclones, and the way in which they have responded is interesting. Our house was designed with a sort of 'drained detail' approach to the big timber beach-facing sliders; reasonably big head overhangs with plenty of gaps for air to blow around and water to drain; while breezy at times this has worked tolerably well. The contractor's house used aluminium joinery that attempts to be a barrier to wind-driven rain but more often acts as a conduit. The owner-built house's timber joinery chose a well draft-sealed detail over our drained and ventilated version, and as with the aluminium sliders the flooring inside the doors has had to be replaced.

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The Fine Print

Excerpts from the reports to NZIA Auckland Branch meeting held Dec. 4th, 2007. It was evidently quite a short meeting.

COMMITTEE FOR AKL / FAL PORTFOLIO: Stephen Martin

The Future Auckland Leaders programme graduation function was held last week at the Auckland Museum. The three project groups presented their work carried out over the last year, these being:

1. Cultural and Historic Literacy
 - A research project into the value to Auckland leaders and organisations of being culturally literate in the local context
 - A resource list for individuals or organisations wanting to gain knowledge and understanding in this area
2. Skills for Auckland
 - A pilot skilled new migrant mentoring programme
 - Half of the participants obtained jobs or work experience as a result of their participation in the programme
 - This project has a clear legacy in that the Committee for Auckland are implementing a migrant mentoring and internship programme in Auckland next year (OMEGA)

3. Our Stories

- Two books aimed at children aged 7-10 years telling the cultural, historical and geographical stories of Maungakiekie and Piha
- To be published in 2008 by Raupo Publishing (formerly Reed)

Thank you to NZIA Auckland Branch Chairman Pete Bossley and Jasmox Director Richard Harris for their attendance and support. The Skills for Auckland team have been providing input and advice to the OMEGA (Organisation for Migrant Employment in Greater Auckland) project in the last week.

The FAL programme has been an excellent forum for developing:

1. Experience in cross-sector team work
2. Skills in voluntary project conception and implementation
3. An understanding of leadership theory and practice
4. An appreciation of the current and future issues facing Auckland

TECHNICAL ISSUES PORTFOLIO: Michael Middlebrook

Building Code Review

We met with the new Minister of Building and Construction, Shane Jones, and discussed performance design and the Building Code Review. The Key points were:

- The Minister is not interested in new compliance measures that will increase the cost of building
- The Minister was concerned that the costs of building failure are being met by the Architects and Councils (and therefore ratepayers) and that this is unacceptable.
- The Building Consent process needs to be improved so that the Councils are not taking responsibility for building performance.
- Peter Thorby reported that the location of metrics in the Building Code is being reviewed and that they will be moved elsewhere.
- A Task Group is to be set up to assist with the overview of the Building Act implementation.

Building Consent Issues

We are hoping to have a forum between several key Councils and the Auckland Branch early in the New Year. We are also having ongoing discussions with Auckland City to both clarify documentation requirements and to review the use of Practice Notes to guide performance design.

Skirtings vs Surfing

Continued from previous page

Occupation and changes of ownership as well as different approaches to maintenance have wrought changes and from the sea the houses no longer look quite like three peas in a pod or, as the local surfing magazine described them, "yuppie huts". The owner-built house has been sold and flashed up with air conditioning, an en-suite with drain pipes draped over the rear verandah and new wide bifolding windows, and the contractor's model has had vertical battens applied to the exterior ply.

These are pretty basic kiwi baches and this is not Pessac, but these modest little boxes illustrate some fairly clear ideas that have been progressively manipulated here - even at the time of construction - and it is a source of great interest to see in which detail god, or the devil, dwells. It may be that the soporific effect of the sea air (and the food and booze which inevitably accompany it) have made me less demanding, but there is a kind of diminishing return to effort involved; get the big issues of shape and space under control, worry about openings and light, and then start to ease off the anxiety as the interior is detailed, and spend the time saved chasing negative details at the beach. PC



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BLOCK'S Top Five Books

to spend your
Christmas book
vouchers on

It's a special Christmas pleasure to locate a book voucher amongst the prezzies, and figuring out what to spend them on helps ease January's back-to-work pain. Here is a selection of BLOCK's current literary favourites.

1

Barcode

Charles Walker and Jessica Barter
Balasoglou Books, 2007
\$25.00 from Aalto Books



Begun just two years ago, the Auckland Architecture Week has established itself as the highlight of our architectural year, and the most exciting part of the Week has proved to be the student constructions. The 2006 Architecture Week included more than a dozen constructions that collectively represent a vast amount of thinking and energy, so it's fantastic that Balasoglou Books have decided to record and present what would otherwise be lost to the mists of time. Buy a copy and try to spot future the NZIA Gold Medal winners. Best acquired direct from Aalto Books: aaltobooks@xtra.co.nz.

2

Walter Niedermayr / Kazuyo Sejima +
Ryue Nishizawa / SANAA

Moritz Kung
Hatje Cantz, US\$60.00



Sejima and Nishizawa's recently completed New Museum in New York is a multi-storey museum configured as a loose stack of unadorned boxes, the small horizontal offsets between the volumes creating balconies and skylights. This is the latest in a series of projects that have made Sejima and Nishizawa's Tokyo-based practice, SANAA, among the most exciting in the world. Walter Niedermayr, a photographer best known for his pale photos of mountain landscapes; this book is the catalog for an exhibition of his photos of SANAA projects – the stunning images capture the light and almost almost effortless quality of the buildings.

3

Atmospheres

Peter Zumthor
Birkhauser, 2006
US\$24.00 from www.amazon.com



This book reproduces the text for a lecture Zumthor presented back in 2003. With section headings like "the magic of the real", "levels of intimacy" and "the light on things", the insightful and poetic text expands on the themes of Zumthor's previous writings. It isn't a very recent book – it was released in 2006 – but grab it while you can. Zumthor's last two books – *Thinking Architecture* and *Works* (both 1998) – both went swiftly out of print and became extraordinarily expensive items available only from rare book dealers. A quick internet search shows the cheapest available copy of *Works* is priced at US\$2,600.

4

The Big Picture

Hamish Keith
Random House, 2007 RRP\$49.99



As with *RW* architecture, the local arts scene is remarkably short of general histories. What art histories we do have tend to focus on work in just one medium – painting, sculpture, print-making, etc. With this book, based on the recent six-part TVNZ series of the same name, Hamish Keith not only weaves together developments in all artistic disciplines, he insightfully connects them to key developments in our nation's history. All we need now is a history of architecture that's as good. If you're in Wellington before September 2009, pop into Te Papa to see the *Toi Te Papa – Art of the Nation* exhibition. This comprehensive survey show includes many of the works selected for Keith's book and TV show.

5

New New Zealand Houses

John Walsh & Patrick Reynolds
Random House, 2007 RRP\$90.00



If you didn't buy this when it came out, someone almost certainly gave it to you for Christmas. Including 25 houses by architects who represent a cross-section of the local scene, this book comprehensively records a moment in New Zealand's architectural history. It will undoubtedly get more interesting as the years go by, as we're able to better understand the place in history of each house and each architect – pivotal, peripheral, or terminal.

Calder  Stewart
Roofing

