Out-of-Print 2: Monographs

Readers of recent issues of Architecture New Zealand will have followed the minor controversy surrounding Bill McKay’s review of A Southern Architecture, the recent monograph on Ted McCoy’s work. The book, published by Otago University Press, was strongly criticized by McKay for its limited commentary or analytical text. McCoy replied, defending his intentions for the book, and editor John Walsh adjudicated (a masterpiece of literary gymnastics that negotiated the back-and-forth between Mr. McKay and Mr. McCoy without slipping a consonant), while also agreeing that McCoy’s book demonstrates a failing common among monographs – a paucity of independent critical comment.

The argument has made the nature of architectural publishing in NZ a topical issue. It follows a noticeable swelling of the monographic ranks since the millennium, and particularly since 2004 when the NZ Architectural Publications Trust published the first of its ongoing series of monographs on local practices.

Kiwi monographs fall into two broad categories: (i) the research-heavy books on historical figures, most of these to date being on colonial architects; and (ii) celebratory surveys of the work of still-practicing architects, published at the height of their commercial success and often funded, in part at least, by the architects themselves. It is this second kind that dominates the recent wave of monographic activity.

What is the role of such books? In a playful yet insightful essay titled “Well, Hello Dollies”, Peter Wood pondered this question with reference to five such books (Architecture NZ, May/June 2006). He compared them to Greatest Hits CDs and wittily argued that increased publishing on local architecture is necessarily a good thing, while also raising the questions of professional vanity and self interest, and the tendency for the publication of Greatest Hits to erase the Greatest Misses from the published record.

The phrase ‘vanity press’ is used frequently and lightly. It trivializes the value of survey type monographs that document and celebrate the work and careers of often very good architects. Are we being too harsh on our local heroes? Many of the recent monographs on contemporary figures do include contextualizing essays. Further, all around the world monographs present a sanitized version of architects’ outputs; the projects and stories presented are those that the architects are happy to have shown and told. For example, even a quick flick through Japanese magazines from the 1970s yields dozens of projects omitted from Tadao Ando’s Complete Works. Really complete surveys are usually only produced well after an architect’s death, and even then only for the most significant figures.

But what accounts for the boom in local publishing since the millennium? In large part, it can be ascribed to simple macro-economics – the sustained building boom has freed up cash and provided the means to pay photographers’ and printers’ bills. Another factor has been the energy of some key individuals: Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, who as a prolific writer and television presenter has placed design and design history in front of a much broader audience, and John Balasoglou, whose work with the NZ Architectural Publications Trust and Balasoglou Books has significantly improved the quality and breadth of Kiwi architectural publication.

There is more to come – monographs are pending on Wellington modernists, John Blair, Holmes Group and Group Architects. Even as the architecture industry slips into the economic doldrums, it seems the health of our architectural culture is on the up. Julia Gatley & Andrew Barrie

Adding to an already bumper year for Kiwi architectural publishing, the NZ Architectural Publications Trust has just released a book on three Wellington practices: Architecture+, Herriot+Mahush, and Studio of Pacific Architecture. To celebrate, BLOCK surveys Kiwi monographs.
Although he served as President of the NZIA, Professor C.R. Knight is best known in NZ's architectural history as the figure against which architecture students at the University of Auckland rebelled in the years after WWII, a period of ferment that produced the Architectural Group. The conservatism Knight's critics complained of is confirmed in his choice of hundred-year-old subject matter for his book. Knight died before the book was published, but it is a very useful guide to Selwyn's churches, well illustrated and full of the intriguing stories of the buildings.

More a biography than a monograph, this book was written by George's son Gordon. Troup was also a mayor – serving as city father in Wellington from 1927 to 1931. Troup also eventually joined the select group of NZ architects to receive a Knighthood.

This book, subtitled A Brief History of the Public Works Department, Ministry of Works, 1870-1970, is a history of the Department/Ministry rather than a history of its works. It was conceptualized as a centennial history, but then took another five years to complete. It is chronologically structured and emphasizes the key role of particularly for his classical Vocal and Bob Semple in the realization of public architecture and engineering. The chapter on 1950 to 1970 is perhaps of most interest to architects today, with the MoW having produced many fine public buildings under Government architects such as Gordon Wilson and Fergus Sheppard.

This hard-to-find book is a handcrafted limited edition – only 400 copies were produced – with textured paper, stitched binding, a paper dust jacket, and tipped-in black-and-white photos. It includes a brief biography of C. T. Natusch, who was known for his large Edwardian country houses, built from Hawkes Bay through to Rangitikei and Wanganui. Many of them are the homesteads for large farms, although the most accessible of them today is the highly recommended Wanganui B&B, Bushy Park (1906) (the hosts also provide dinner). His three sons became architects, as did his grandson, the Hawkes Bay modernist Guy Natusch.

Cracking open this masterpiece of 70s publishing, you can almost smell the fondue: it's edge-to-edge recycled bricks, circular windows, and shaggy beards. Subtitled The Genius of New Zealand's Ian Athfield, the book was put together not long after Ath won a high-profile international housing competition in Manila, but by the time the book hit the shelves Ath was moving beyond his astonishing early houses and housing projects to work more in the commercial and civic realms. The book was put together by Gerald Melling, then a young architect with literary cred as a journalist, poet, and novelist who was later to serve as editor of NZ Architect magazine.

According to the preface, this self-published book started life as a promotional pamphlet that grew into a book. The book was produced at the high point of W&M's post-Miesian heyday, and includes much that was omitted from the recent New Territory monograph and in that sense gives a more even coverage of the firm's historical output. The text is purely descriptive, interspersed with early and post-Miesian works, in an equally beautiful light. A must have.

W&M fans should also seek out the 2005 volume, No Beard. Subtitled Warren & Mahoney: 50 years of New Zealand Architecture. (Balasoglu Books, Auckland) and, of course, BLOCK itinerary No. 15, Warren & Mahoney in Christchurch.
Those keen on this subject architectural heritage has been meant the city’s 19 of any later economic booms and 1880s. Thereafter the town economic growth in the 1870s during a period of rapid majorities. Oamaru’s beautiful buildings, of which Whare-Ra Taylor’s eleven Hawke’s Bay Wellington-based Chapman-Taylor demonstrates very literally that Hay’s best-known buildings are Waiohika Homestead in Gisborne (1902-26) and the National Tobacco Company Building (now Rothmans) in Napier (1931-33). His work represents a key moment on NZ architecture’s slow and uncertain journey towards modernism. The HBCT also published Robin Craw’s Keith Murray in Context (1986) and Paul Waite’s In The Beau-Arts Tradition: William Gummer Architect (2005).

In The 1880s, the port town of Oamaru was as large as Los Angeles. Forrester and Lemon were responsible for the majority of Oamaru’s beautiful limestone buildings, produced during a period of rapid economic growth in the 1870s and 1880s. Therefore the town slipped into a slumber, and fortunately for the fans the lack of any later economic booms meant the city’s 19th century architectural heritage has been left largely unmoled. Those keen on this subject matter should look out for Peter Shaw’s Whitestone Oamaru: A Victorian Architectural Heritage (Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 1995).