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

BLOCK

In Praise of Clarity

Are We Obscuring Our Big Ideas Behind Too Many Big Words?

We are all indebted to JASMAX and *Home* magazine for their sponsorship of the recent architecture film festival. Our present age well prepares us for the compression of emotions and events as our technologies coalesce into yet more beguiling slivers of black plastic. These last few days in the darkened theatre though have us catapulting round, and beyond, the extremities of our profession as we are bought face-to-screen, as it were, with architecture as she is wrought beyond our shores. I am used to crawling out of the theatre, head hung low in self-criticism, but this year's doco on Maya Lin gave me cause for more self-criticism than usual. Those who have seen the film will, I am sure, share my admiration for her extraordinary sensibilities and abilities; be they of conceptualising, designing, drawing, politicking, speech making and project realisation, and even her choice of hats!

Maya Lin's Viet Nam Memorial is an immensely potent piece of work but it was her flawless rhetoric in describing it and defending it in the face of aggressive opposition that seemed to set her most at odds with the way we do things here. Perhaps, given a similarly traumatic event, one of us might similarly compress the emotional content of a memorial to the extent that she has, but I am certain that none of us would be as articulate in its promotion. Perhaps the cameras here dwell too long on those who still wear the self-consciousness of the good keen bloke, and a generation of coherent speakers is yet to come into focus. Let us hope so, but in the meantime we seem marooned in a state of confusion; a sense that we need to speak and share our ideas yet are unable to do so without leaving our audience bewildered.



Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington

This condition has garnered some rather unwelcome column inches and airtime for the profession of late, as *Listener* columnist Joanne Black has drawn attention to the fate of a small street in Wellington. The short, mixed-use street provides one of three frontages for Studio of Pacific Architecture's proposed new home for the Royal Society. Ms Black attacks on two fronts and while I suspect that the change of the street's character occasioned by the new building is at the heart of the matter, she has taken a couple of passing swipes at StudPac's prose. Referencing the competition entry text and their website description of the project, she lampoons then castigates the architects for the complexity of their language; it obscures rather than illuminates the ideas the building has in play, though the building too earns her scorn.

I have previously laboured on about competition text, and as one of the Royal Society competition judges I have to say that on that point at least I have some sympathy with Ms Black, though I hasten to say that StudPac's entry was not alone in its enthusiastic experimentation with the language. Where Ms Black did not make a causal link between the building and the obscurity of the ideas espoused in the text, a few grumpy souls on the NZIA chatlist showed no such reservation.

There has been a long-running thread about the decline of architects' abilities as a result of the decline of Auckland's architecture school, dating from - well, there is no agreement about that, the date seeming to be correlated with the year at which each chatlist writer left the school. This discussion grew out of disgruntlement with project managers usurping our traditional territory but seized on the hapless competition winners as yet further proof of the corrupting power of appearing to base architecture on obscure text. This is in contrast to basing architecture on the range of lost skills the correspondents point to and, I think, misses the point. StudPac's scheme has a lot of strengths; it siezed opportunities other competitors didn't see and can be made into a strong building for the Society. That it is communicated via thickly layered prose is a problem of our age, an age in which we have the increasing desire, but not yet the verbal tools, to clearly communicate complex ideas, and is perhaps in contrast to an earlier age which felt no such need.

I have never been shy of making gross generalisations from a few events, and Maya Lin's poise and eloquence bought to mind a work session a couple of weeks ago in which I holed up with a Seattle-based interior designer and another from Brooklyn over a bunch of developed design drawings to work through the matters at hand. I thought I had things pretty well sewn up and was on the home straight to building consent, yet within seconds of the remains of a pre-meeting mile-high sandwich being cleared away I was swamped in a barrage of suggestions and questions.

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The comments were, almost by turn, challenging, witless, or insightful and while I prayed - fruitlessly it turned out - that some modicum of self review might be applied to a statement before gaining airtime, I could not help but contrast it with how a similar session back home might run. In the two days poring over drawings there was little that was not debated, pulled apart and examined and, in many cases, reassembled the better for the process. There was of course the feeling that one might have got there a damn sight quicker had there been a little winnowing of the commentary, yet for all that ideas and alternative designs were presented by my associates, examined empirically, discussed directly, and reviewed without cant or rancour. Nor was there any trace of the taciturn intransigence of defending an idea that bedevils discussion here, as if the mere existence of underlying thought gave an idea unassailable authority.

It is a special skill to be able to make complex things comprehensible and architects have a pretty full plate given the acronym soup we are forced to swim in. Yet Maya Lin, clearly swimming in similar waters, showed the authority accruing from a strong idea simply communicated. Ideas need not be simple, those of war, death and reconciliation with history are certainly not, yet Maya Lin's identification of the Viet Nam war memorial's critical elements and her ability to share those with a wide and at times hostile audience is a powerful lesson for us. If we are to continue our muddy ways we should not be affronted at the scorn of journalists like Ms Black, nor at the quick association made between the quality of description and that of the subject. *PC*

Each Block is laid by a dedicated editorial team, all of whom happen to work at Cheshire Architects: Andrew Barrie, Pip Cheshire, Nathaniel Cheshire & Sean Flanagan.

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Stevenson Spring Series Continues

Time – 6.00pm; 10 CPD Points; Location - Life Outside by Stevenson Showroom – 2 Gillies Ave, Newmarket (cnr Gillies Ave and Eden Street); Dates:

Tuesday 30 September – The Big Urban Issues:

Adam Wild, Sills van Bohemen, Anthony Flannery, & Richard Goldie

Tuesday 7 October – In Foreign Lands:

Pete Bossley, Architectus, Pip Cheshire, & Moller Arch.

[ARC/SEC] architecture per second

The excellent show on the potential of reactive architecture – interactive and automated systems, light-sensitive facades, mobile landscapes, and hybrid machine-buildings - is open until October 7th.

St. Paul Street Gallery
34 St. Paul St., Auckland Central
10am - 5pm Tue-Fri, 12pm – 4pm Sat

www.stpaulst.auckland.ac.nz

The Department of Building and Housing has a design competition underway for a low-budget (you thought you had problems) starter house. More details at:

www.minhousing.govt.nz/designcomp-index



Vector Arena

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The Fine Print

Excerpts from the reports to NZIA Auckland Branch meeting held September 5th, 2008.

CHAIR'S REPORT: Christina van Bohemen

Activity over the last month:

Meetings with Richard Harris and Beverley McRae:
General catch up on Branch activities and concerns: Plan Change 163 (in particular application to become a party to the Appeal),
The awards entries book
RH supportive of AK branch satellite events – north/west and south Auckland. (no plan yet by CvB).

Council Meeting on 28 August along with other Branch Chairs:

Issues raised included:

- The awards book (and associated decision process)
- Dissemination of information from TIG + PIG.
- Received summary of Council Planning day: Strategic direction (Councilors to report) including an update on the communications strategy.
- Generally issues on track, but noted need for NZIA to address the need for research about the numbers and position of women within the profession - from graduation to registration.
- General concern that the economic downturn will have an impact on subscriptions - ie institute income, accordingly Branch budgets have been frozen to FY07 levels.

Plan change 163:

- Attending a series of meetings to work through solution to current review of PC163
- Working party of all parties chaired by Jeremy Salmond
- Informal meetings of Auckland architects to review criteria for demolition and new building controls.

Events:

- Stevensons Spring Series - #2 Big Urban Issues includes a presentation from ACC on Te Wero Bridge. Revised programme to be issued by JB
- Architecture Weekend - Sponsorship to be confirmed ASAP, final programme still to be confirmed
- Architecture Week 09
- PB : Auckland City Exhibition
- Working group meeting proposed for next week – time to be confirmed

PRACTICE ISSUES GROUP: Charissa Snijders & Richard Goldie

Practice Issues Group Presentation:

Held at the NZIA offices D72, Wednesday 13th August 2008. The presentation was on "partnering/joint ventures" - whatever you wish to call it - basically any project where two architects are working together to deliver one building.

The approaches to these arrangements vary from full engagement of the Architects together to separate appointments, and everything in between. However, what these 'arrangements' do have in common, and have to be considered and resolved between the parties are:

- Scope of service undertaken by each parties
- Management of the arrangement
- Dispute resolution between the parties
- Fees and costs
- Liability and insurance
- Copyright/ownership of documents

The presentation had three presenters - one speaking at each end of the spectrum of "partnering/joint ventures" arrangements spectrum - from forming a company to having separate agreements on the same job - and the third presenter talking about the options in between.

The presenters were Malcolm Bowes of Architectus (who set up a formal company with another architect to undertake a project) at one end of the spectrum, Richard Goldie of Peddle Thorp (working with JPW from Sydney on Britomart and have separate engagements on the same projects) at the other end of the spectrum, and Richard Harris of Jasmax (who has done lots of the stuff in between).

Plus, a 'devils' advocate in the form of a roving lawyer Mike from Simpson Grierson added comments to each of the arrangements' in the time between each presentation.

The format was excellent as it allowed the presenters to interact with each other and also the general audience could ask questions.

10 CPD points were awarded to this event.

To date, Rosemary has loaded the June presentations, and will aim to have the other two presentations on the website as soon as possible. Members need to login onto the Members' Section of www.nzia.co.nz and will find it under the Auckland Branch Activity.

Richard Goldie wrote an article about the PIG for *Cross Section* magazine this month.

FUTURE AUCKLAND LEADERS: Gary Lawson

Ports of Auckland:

August has seen the FAL group have a visit to The Ports of Auckland for another of our infrastructure fact finding missions. It was an interesting and revealing presentation of the key role the port plays for Auckland and indeed New Zealand's livelihood, and what an important piece of infrastructure it will continue to be in the years to come. Nice waterfront site, too.

We also had the first of our five leadership modules, presented at the UofA's new business school. It was a thought provoking lecture full of discussion and exercises designed to build our leadership understanding and skill base.

PUBLICITY PORTFOLIO: Stephen Martin

1. Standing by for NZIA Council advice regarding the NZIA communication strategy and plan.
2. Assisting John Balasoglou with presentation of the NZIA Auckland Branch spring lectures commencing later this month.

TECHNICAL ISSUES PORTFOLIO: Michael Middlebrook

Self Certification:

We are working on a discussion paper on the pros and cons of self-certification. Within the TIG there is strong polarization on this. One view is that most architectural firms do not have the level of general competence required and that human nature will defeat the objectives for doing this.

The other view is that we need to do this as the current situation cannot be made to work and systems can be put in place to ensure that the New York experience is not repeated here. This could be one of the most important issues facing the Institute and needs extensive informed debate at Council level with input from DBH, NZACS, BOINZ and others.

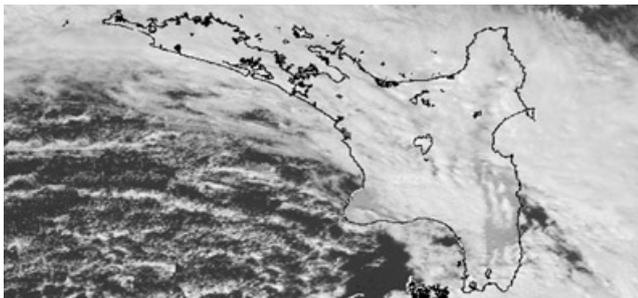
Simply Climatic

Form Might Well Follow Climate, But What is Climate Following?

Two years living in a blue room on the south-side of a Kingsland villa taught me the value of sunshine and stirred an interest in the relationship between architecture, the weather (short term atmospheric events) and climate (longer term atmospheric events). A move into practice sustained this interest for several reasons. Firstly, the weather locates building in the physical world and thereby prompts an intersection between architecture's vertical and horizontal dimensions; between its lofty ideals and the muddy ground upon which it stands. The weather puts ideas to the test. Secondly, the intersection between architecture and climate largely takes place indoors. Pour through the rhetoric of sustainability and passive design and it becomes clear that the science is directed towards the creation of an interior atmosphere. And one only need scour the latest periodical to realise that the interior is often a weakness in contemporary architecture.

The ongoing Unitec SCALA seminar series provides evidence of the importance of climate to kiwi architecture. The seminars, involving local architects discussing their residential portfolios, often turn around climate stories. Indeed, some participants propose climate to be their *raison d'être* for building and veer towards architecture being a direct translation of atmospheric patterns; the unfettered product of wind, sun and rain. In this context climate is presented as a simple, solid ground for building (one laid over a moral base-course), and the architect stands as a conduit; a being through whom the four winds blow, and out comes building. This conviction in climate as a form-giver is often paralleled by an unwillingness or inability to discuss other sides of design, including the role that history, memory, and taste play in practice. But in the light of climate science, these things are perhaps seen as frivolous and unsustainable pursuits.

Listening to the seminars, I wondered if there was a connection between the role climate plays in architectural conversations and its role in everyday discourse where it is a familiar topic. Architects who speak about the climate often come across as very solid characters, presumably because their architecture feels well grounded. I was interested if there was a connection between the climatic architect's solidity and the stability that weather brings to daily chit-chat.



Maui's Fish Battered in Cloud

Guides to social etiquette advise steering clear of the climate in conversation, warning that the banality of the topic can reflect poorly upon the speaker. Despite this, we are often drawn to discuss things like the rain of late, or observing that summer comes earlier each year. Anthropologists believe we discuss the climate so often because it is a non-threatening topic about which opinions are unlikely to differ too drastically. Its safety lies in its apparent universality – in the belief that there is a definitive climate providing a commonly shared experience – and in the impersonal nature of weather talk. Climate conversations avoid sensitive or personal matters. They do not delve into private lives or address the emotions, feelings, or tastes. They do not put anything personal on the line, but centre on empirical observations. In this way, climate is considered a solid topic. It encourages one to speak without fear of being challenged, thus avoiding that most fearful moment of conversation – the awkward silence. But while avoiding silence, climate conversations are also marked by it; they avoid sensitive or personal matters, but cannot eliminate them. One such matter, generally avoided but lurking quietly in the background of every such monologue, is the history of the term 'climate', and the idea that it is a finite thing. The anthropology of weather and climate is an emergent area of enquiry that offers interesting thoughts on climate as a culturally defined concept.

Anthropologists recognise the emergence of a modern idea of climate in the later half of the 18th century. At this time, atmospheric events were thought to operate according to regular rhythms and abide by natural laws that could be observed and scientifically modeled. The belief in nature being governed by laws embodying a universal harmony was fundamental to Enlightenment thought and this belief was intimately tied to the emergence of the scientific methods through which philosophers reasoned natural phenomena. For weather watchers, the development of the weather journal as a rigorous record encouraged the observation of regularities, patterns and cycles. As one anthropologist comments: "The enterprise of systematic weather observation emphasised the normal regularities of the atmosphere rather than the violent peculiarities." Complementing the development of the weather journal was the increased availability of watches and clocks, and an increased awareness of the calendar due to advances in publishing that saw more almanacs, periodicals and newspapers become available. This all helped to formalise record keeping because people could place events within a chronological structure. With watches and journals in hand, the natural philosophers confirmed the rule of a benevolent providence over an orderly world. God as the Great Mathematician was manifest in nature's harmonies and proportions.

Borrowing an architectural term, anthropologists propose that the modern climate 'domesticated' atmospheric events. The weather journal normalised the extraordinary by placing it in a regular tables of dates, and though the journal did not lessen the impact

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