



03 2010

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

**BLOCK**

## Home Grown: A Distinct Paradox

Sean Flanagan Investigates the Mythology of New Zealand Architecture

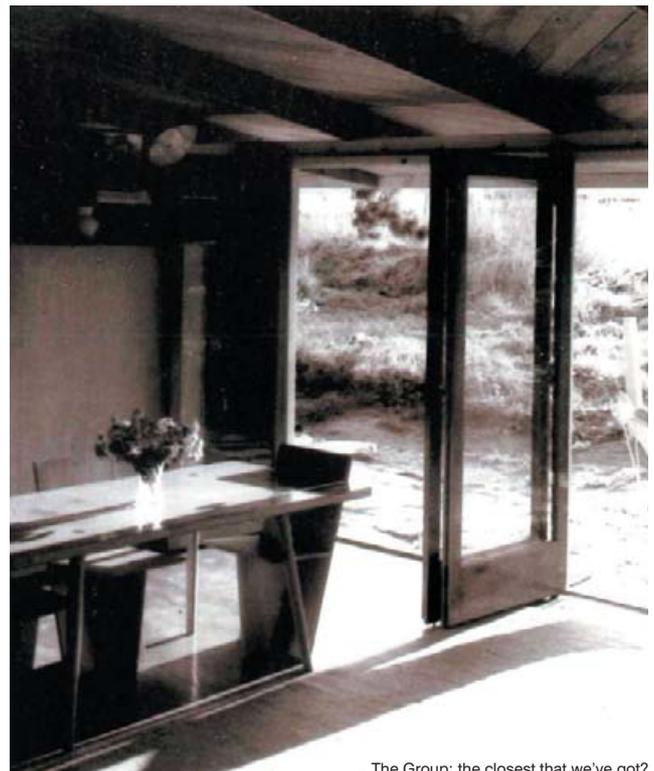
A mythology is comprised of stories and associated rituals that turn around other people and events in worlds parallel to our own. These stories and rituals help to bring meaning and significance to our lives here and now. Karen Armstrong proposes that mythology first flourished during the Paleolithic period as something vital to the Paleolithic hunter's survival. Whereas logos – logical pragmatic thought – helped the hunter develop efficient tools for killing, mythos – or mythical thought – helped them deal with the traumatic spiritual experience of a dying animal writhing in front of them and spilling forth blood not unlike the hunter's own. The Paleolithic hunter could logically establish how it was best to hunt, but there was profound anxiety around killing an animal to provide food for the hunter's survival. Why was the world this way? Mythology helped provide a sense of stability in the face of these tumultuous questions.

Some of the clues we have to Paleolithic mythology lie on cave walls in Lascaux where paintings of animals, shaman and hunters suggest that humans have long imagined worlds parallel to our own, pondered ideas of deities in paradise, performed rituals of sacrifice to honour beasts who had given their own lives for our survival, and imagined the possibility of life beyond death - all in aid of lending a sense of significance to our daily turmoil. Armstrong contends: "Mythology often springs from profound anxiety about essentially practical problems, which cannot be assuaged by purely logical arguments." When faced with life's perplexing realities, Armstrong says mythology helped the hunter "reconcile himself to the tragic facts of life that threatened to overwhelm him, and prevent him from acting effectively." And because it helped set the hunter in the right mindset for effective action (i.e. further hunting), Armstrong proposes that mythology can be understood as a guide to living more richly.

When the tragic facts of the daily grind threaten to overwhelm the architect and they too find themselves plagued by profound anxiety about essentially practical problems it is no surprise they also turn to mythology as guide to what they can do – architecturally speaking – in order to practice more richly. Arguably one of the most dominant myths that helps guide many is the myth of 'New Zealand architecture'. The idea of making buildings so they carry a sense of this place is something that helps many practice more intensely and hopefully make richer buildings. The idea can bring meaning to one's work. With this in mind, it may not be a step too far for some to say that the idea of New Zealand architecture is a myth. But the way in which the vision of something home grown often acts as a guide goes a long way towards suggesting that New Zealand architecture has a mythical dimension. Indeed, one could argue that the vision of a world in which architecture intensely manifests the spirit of this place guides many architects in the same way the vision of a divine world to which spirits return guided the Paleolithic hunter.

Before venturing too far into mythology it is worthwhile identifying some of New Zealand architecture's dominant characteristics. To do so, we turn to those who searched in vain to find it, those who entered into a crusade to make it, those who thought they found it in their own work and those who, on reflection, nearly found it in the work of others. And so we have Samuel Hurst Seager who at the turn of the 20th century could find no examples of architecture in New Zealand "showing the gradual process of development leading to distinctive forms of expression". At mid-century we have the Group Architects proclaiming "New Zealand must have its own architecture, its own sense of what is beautiful and appropriate to our climate and conditions." In the 1970s we have John Scott commending the woolshed as symbol of New Zealand architecture because "it is the only building that we've all had a hand in – that's grown out of our needs, our requirements, our kind of way of living." And around the same time Sir Miles nominated the Group Architect's houses as "the nearest that New Zealand architecture had come to making something of its own."

*Continued p.2*



The Group: the closest that we've got?

## Home Grown Continued from p.1

The general characteristics are clear. We are looking for an architecture that is our own and by implication no one else's. We are looking for an architecture that is distinctive to this place and therefore one that distinguishes this place from others. And the other quality of course is that New Zealand architecture is elusive; it is difficult to grasp. We repeatedly tell ourselves of the need to do our own thing and then, a little later, berate ourselves for not having done so or wryly observe how nearly we got there. New Zealand architecture is a near thing. Admittedly the observations of Seager and crew all stem from last century, but one would not have to look too far into contemporary discourse to find recent examples where we flagellate ourselves for failing to make something of our own.

When something is distinct it has by definition been separated or set apart from other similar things. With this in mind one must acknowledge that our march towards architectural distinction is complicated by the history of this land and its people. The fact we are so set apart by geography paradoxically inspires within us an interest in connections between people, places and ideas. And the fact that our islands are so separated from the world's major landmasses has meant that settlement here has often been at the hands of people skilled in voyaging, skilled in forming connections and, one could say, skilled in overcoming distinctions. We can call this a 'distinct paradox' and in Aotearoa it complicates every move towards making something of our own, whether it is in architecture or any other cultural pursuit. The distinct paradox turns around the idea that the more physically set apart a place is, the more connected the culture of that place tends to be with other places and therefore the more complicated (and perhaps more anxiety ridden) is the process of seeking something that is distinctly one's own.

Our land certainly had distinct beginnings. Following a rift from the supercontinent of Gondwana about 170 million years ago, there was a continual process of separation as the mini-continent to which we belonged drifted apart until, about 5 million years ago, islands resembling our current shape emerged in the same geological divide that gave rise to New Caledonia, Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands, the Chatham Islands and the sub-Antarctic islands. From the most ancient times we have been set apart. But, as John Andrews has identified, this fundamental separation immediately cast us into a world of colonisation and our land became home to animals, plants and people who had the ability to voyage long distances from one homeland to another. Andrews says: "Current biogeographical thinking suggests that much of the biota arrived after New Zealand had become a set of islands, which is in many ways the key to what New Zealand is – a country that has been repeatedly colonised from across the sea by plants, some animals and, if we want to make the distinction, people." The distinct paradox arrives with our earliest colonisers who land on our shores and challenge the idea of anything being our own.

Michael King proposes that our first colonisation in fact occurred in the 1200s AD with the arrival of Pacific Islanders from east Polynesia. Deliberate colonisation by the ancestors of the Maori followed an initial voyage of discovery. King emphasises the deliberate nature of the colonisation to counter theories of accidental settlement that have been used to displace Maori from this land. He describes the Polynesian navigator's use of natural way-finding signs (migrating birds, cloud formations, stars at night and the direction of ocean swells) to build a case for their deliberate actions. They came and went across the Pacific in a determined fashion, using maritime skills vastly superior to the Europeans who at the same time "had not ventured beyond the Mediterranean or the coast of their continent". What the Polynesians accomplished with their expansive voyaging was "analogous in daring and accomplishment to the later exploration of space." The vast geographic separation of Pacific islands was overcome by master mariners who, in their outrigger or double-hulled canoes carried under sail people, animals, plants, technologies, faiths, knowledge and memories from one island home to another. From its Polynesian beginnings, Maori culture is proudly understood to have established itself as a unique entity, but it is a complex culture with beginnings that continue to raise questions of distinction.

It was some time before Europeans developed the skills and technologies of long-haul maritime voyaging. Abel Tasman first sighted the west coast of the South Island in 1642 and James Cook rediscovered and circumnavigated our place in 1769. The New Zealand Company, which spearheaded systematic colonisation here, dispatched its first ship, the *Tory*, in 1839. Reflecting on these dates, one can conjecture that the long time taken for Europeans to colonise here was due to the need to have in place advanced and secure transportation strategies and communication protocols before setting out to such distinct lands. And so again the paradox emerges, for as Andrews has argued, secure transportation and communication capabilities meant that those who ventured here from Europe maintained "good connections not only with their country of origin but also with the rest of the world." Geographic distinction inspired a culture of connection. "Thus", says Andrews, "the distinctive feature of New Zealanders was the ease and degree to which they were exposed to and able to borrow from other cultures, especially Britain, the United States and Australia."

Given our history, the outlook at first appears bleak for New Zealand architecture. The endemic borrowing distinctive to our culture is the very basis for Seager's aforementioned disappointment in the colony's architecture. He could not find anything of our own because, he said, our story is told "in the forms of art developed in England, Italy, America and elsewhere." He suggested the kleptomania resulted from our youth, with the architectural quotations being perfectly understandable "for a fresh environment can not possibly produce fresh forms of art in opposition to the force of traditions and precedents." He hoped this was something we would grow out of, but it remains questionable given that our borrowing in fact helps distinguish us. For those interested in this idea, New Zealand architecture arguably lies somewhere between the hope of cultural maturity and the complexities of the distinct paradox; our good connections, and our urge to borrow.

When times get bleak and we berate ourselves for still not having achieved something of our own, one often hears proclaimed the achievements of New Zealand literature which is heralded as a success in capturing a sense of this place. But one wonders whether literary types find it a blessing or a curse to have fulfilled their New Zealand promise. In contrast, an architecture that is distinctly our own maintains a visionary quality. It is seemingly just out of reach, an idea beyond, but connected to, everyday experience. It exists in a world somewhat parallel to our own where distinction reigns, unlike the chaotic and anxious world of the everyday where we continually deal with things arriving on our shores. To discuss New Zealand architecture in this way, as existing almost in another world but with a capacity to influence our daily lives, is to return to the realm of mythology. But this return is not intended to undermine the significance of New Zealand architecture. Instead, mythology offers a model of thought for exploring further what New Zealand architecture is, what it does, and what it means. And we must acknowledge the significance of this mythological side because, as Sir Miles suggests in his assessment of the Group's houses, New Zealand architecture is a near thing, but it is not quite here. SF



## Art That Moves

### Pip Cheshire Explores Len Lye's Universe

Art That Moves: The Work of Len Lye  
Roger Horrocks / Auckland University Press  
ISBN-10: 186940422X / ISBN-13: 978-1869404222

I reckon I remember the first time I saw a Len Lye as clearly as where I was when the chaps came off the ladder on the moon. I had seen Calder in a giant retrospective, seen the guard swinging back a bronze ball to let it fly and ricochet from turned, and tuned, steel bowl to steel bowl across the gallery floor. As it swung it set up a zinging cacophony that bought the crowds from the far reaches of the Lichtenstein show to smile in delight - that was a thing alright. But Universe, that loop of steel bending and bulging in a lascivious fashion to unseen forces, teasing the little ball of cork above until they collided and set up an unholy wailing - wow that was something else again. And that sound, it seemed at once to be born of the furnace and the mill, yet echoed and resonated with a primal twisting of noise that suggested nothing so much as the Pythagorean music of the spheres.

And what about those movies? Jittering syncopations of light and colour at a thousand miles an hour - Django Reinhardt's guitar strings dancing across the screen - moving and sliding faster and faster. I remember a half hour's silent obeisance to Rothko's dark fields and then hearing that jaunty music from a secluded corner of the gallery and finding again the delight of Lye's mad looping infectious enthusiasm.

So I was keen for this book, not a biography but a review of the work by one with an intimate knowledge of the man and his projects, having worked with Lye the year before his death, currently sitting on the Lye Foundation Board, and with a professional teaching-based knowledge of motion pictures. I am sorry to say that I think the book suffers from this very familiarity and intimacy of the writer with his subject. Perhaps there are just too many agenda in the text for it to hold together, or perhaps the

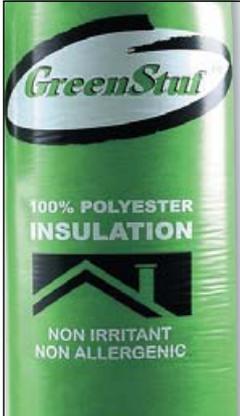
structure of the book - a serial stepping through the context of Lye's work and then a discussion of his film, and then of his sculpture, and then of the Foundation - is just too ordered to carry the passions of one so close to the action.

It is, though, a well assembled book; lots of clear, well researched text appropriately illustrated with photos of work, frames of film and delicious slow exposure images of sculptures in motion. There are plenty too of Lye himself; always a smile of whimsy and enthusiasm while fabricating, painting and posing with friends, peers and those technicians and craftsmen who realised the very difficult technical challenges his projects set.

The writing occasionally has a sense of having been assembled from spoken notes - lectures perhaps? A point, for example, may be made at length about some detail or other, and then the author 'turns' to us, the readers, and says "this is important so I will address this at some length", and then continues to do so. This is familiar as a way of public speaking but seems laboured and unnecessary in print. Structuring the text in an episodic fashion - first setting the historical and creative context, and then a close examination of the work within each medium - clearly separates the book from biography. This allows one the freedom of a more erratic, less linear reading, it does however mean that influences and events are repeated within each chapter.

This is carping criticism and well overshadowed by the writer's clear exposition of a subject he knows well. Particularly so Professor Horrocks' special field of film, which is superbly and closely examined: the experimental and ad hoc technology employed; the relationship between music and image, production and timing; the evolution of Lye's mastery of time and technique in service of the pure expression of movement. Throughout his life Lye trained himself to remember intimately

*Continued p.4*



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## Miles: A Life in Architecture

23 April – 29 May 2010

**The Gus Fisher Gallery:** 74 Shortland St

**Opening:** Friday 23 April, 5.30pm

**Exhibition hours:** Tuesday - Friday 10am - 5pm

This exhibition celebrating Sir Miles Warren's substantial contribution to modernism in New Zealand and his subsequent move towards a post modernist idiom, as well as his achievements as a draughtsman and watercolourist. Traversing the architect's career, from the Dorset Street flats to College House, the Christchurch Town Hall and the New Zealand Chancery in Washington, the exhibition includes seldom-seen watercolour perspectives of building projects.

Sir Miles has been at the forefront of architecture for more than 45 years. He established Warren and Mahoney Architects in Christchurch in 1958 and completed the Dental Nurses' Training School later that year. This building won the first of what would be many NZIA Gold Awards. Sir Miles was made a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1965, was awarded a CBE in 1974 and became the first New Zealander to be knighted for services to architecture in 1985. With his retirement from the practice of Warren and Mahoney in 1995 he was given New Zealand's highest honour when he was admitted into the Order of New Zealand. In 2001 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by The University of Auckland. In 2003 he was made an Icon by the Arts Foundation, an award limited to a living circle of 20 people of which he is the only architect.

This exhibition was developed and toured by Christchurch Art Gallery with support from The Warren Trust, Pyne Gould Corporation and Luney's Construction.

### Saturday 24 April, 1pm

Sir Miles Warren in conversation with exhibition curator, Dr Rodney Wilson. The architect will be available to sign copies of his 2008 autobiography after the event.

### Saturday 1 May, 1pm

Dr Jessica Halliday, architectural historian and leader of the New Zealand Architects of the Postwar Period oral history project, will give a talk on Miles Warren and brutalism.

### Saturday 8 May, 1pm

Linda Tyler, Director of the Centre for New Zealand Art Research and Discovery, gives a guided tour of the exhibition.

### Saturday 15 May, 1pm

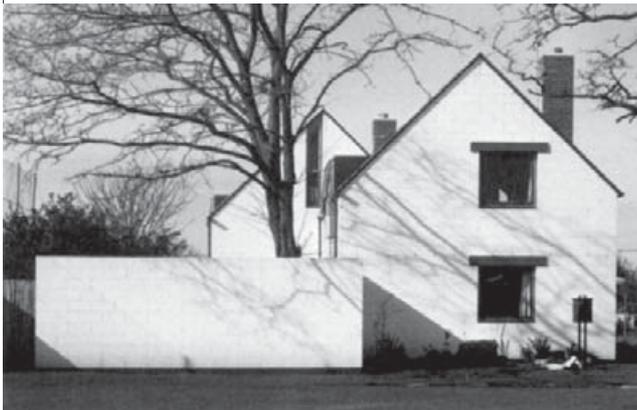
Visit to the Nathan House in Remuera where Anna Nathan, the original client, discusses the 1979 design with Peter and Amanda Stanes, the current owners. Numbers strictly limited. Bookings (09) 9236806 or gusfishergallery@auckland.ac.nz

### Saturday 22 May, 1pm

Paul Walker, Associate Professor in Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, will speak about Miles Warren's contribution to modernism in New Zealand. Walker wrote the introduction to *New Territory: Warren and Mahoney – 50 years of New Zealand Architecture* published by Balasoglou Books in 2005.

### Saturday 29 May, 1pm

A talk by Shannon Joe, principal of Warren and Mahoney on the design of the new student accommodation for The University of Auckland.



## Len Lye

*Continued from p.3*

and precisely the sensory experiences of his day - indeed days might even be defined by the first waking experience. Thus waking to a barking dog would beget a 'sound' day, while the following might be a 'light' day were the sun to have woken him. This studied focus on the sensory became a sort of exercise, a training in observation of movement that later found expression in everything from quick drawn and sculptured doodles to the complex ordering of marks and images applied directly to film stock.

Horrocks is strong on this stuff, and we gain a good understanding of the degree to which Lye pushed the boundaries of the emergent technology in his relentless desire to break the imperative of narrative and realistic film - a phenomena he called 'the Griffiths syndrome' after early Hollywood proto-blockbuster director DW Griffiths. We get to understand too the difficulties of financing projects in the absence of established national art funding agencies and there are resonances with our own trade in the uneasy reconciliation of commercial imperative and creative endeavour. The, at times, seemingly relentless erosion of creative intention by those involved in the realisation of complex projects will be uncomfortably familiar. In exasperation Lye wrote "It seems to me that art is the only hope we have of ever getting perfection but, to get it, we have to make a kind of war. If so it's the only war worth fighting" - might this not be a clarion call for architects?

Horrocks is somewhat less articulate on the sculptural work than he is on film. There is a good discussion of the link between movement in the films and the movement of the sculptures, but only rarely do we understand the spatial implications, and the physical characteristics of the work when considered as discrete, finite objects. This is partly inevitable due to their hermetic, transportable, self referential nature and the primacy of motion as the project's focus, yet I have always been deeply dissatisfied by the gaffer-taped power chord on the gallery floor which seems to mar every installation.

These are minor and personal criticisms more to do with my inability to escape the 'thingness' of the thing, the distractions of practicality despite the Jovian thunderclaps a meter or two above. It is though the sculpture, or more particularly the discussion of its ongoing construction, that is the least satisfactory aspect of this book. The Lye Foundation has realised a number of projects after Lye's death and this has occasioned some rather trenchant criticism from within the art world and aimed at the Foundation board, on which the author sits. Horrocks, I think rather unwisely, mounts an argument in defence of this ongoing production to end the book. The defence sits awkwardly with an otherwise clear and interesting examination of Lye's work. The arguments seem of the moment, where the balance of the text is not, the arguments too seem thin and the analogies used are tenuous and serve only to suggest the writer, and presumably his fellow Board members, 'doth protest too much'.

The last chapter aside, this is a fine book, the inclusion of a DVD with four of Lye's films, a documentary and short film of some of the sculptures is an extraordinarily generous insertion in the rear cover. The films are breathtaking and all the more so for watching them with Professor Horrocks's erudite explanations of historic context, technique and Lye's creative and philosophical imperatives at hand. *PC*



# The Fine Print

## Combined Excerpts from the Reports to NZIA Auckland Branch meeting of June 2009.

### CHAIR'S REPORT: Christina van Bohemen

Harry Street and I have met to discuss general handover issues. Harry has agreed to represent NZIA Auckland Branch at C4A. We agreed that Auckland Governance and Urban Design will be the major preoccupation this year.

New Committee Members – yet to be confirmed:

Andrea Bell, Eva Segedin (both @ Pete Bossley Architects) – PIG Group Coordinators.

John Anderson is keen to contribute/support PIG but not to the Branch Committee)

Marianne Riley (Future Auckland Leaders Programme) – Jasmx  
Sam Williams (Cook Sargisson Pirie) – Events + Calendar/Year Planner updates

Andrew Patterson (interested in Finance, Sponsorship, C4A)

Ross Brown also expressed general interest in becoming involved.

Jerome Buckwell has agreed to work with John Balasoglou on event organization as well as TIG.

Harry is hoping to persuade somebody new to take on the role of Secretary. Possibilities include the two other council nominees ( I do not want to take this position on).

Communication received on upcoming events. These include:  
Communique Series @ UoA (Kathy Waghorn Organiser), DINZ Talks, Mayoral Conversations, Miles Warren Exhibition 23 April – 29 May @ Gus Fisher Gallery

Meeting with Nicola Short, Heritage Manager:

- Keen to have input/discussions on how what tools/information (within District Plan) would be useful for the development community (both CBD and city suburbs).
- ACC is compiling a database of modern heritage buildings
- The physical model of Auckland City has been found and restored. It will be part of an exhibition at Auckland Museum.
- Various building artefacts have been located in ACC buildings. An inventory will be prepared and Auckland Architect input requested for identification exercise.
- Discussion about the need for both registration of and CPD for architects working for TAs, (eg specialist heritage/conservation architects).
- PC 163 – Maps due to be circulated. Environment Court Hearing will trigger the notification process.

Request for some daytime issues group/CPD sessions received.  
Follow up item: NZIA Awards records process – Wendy Garvey and Nicola Short. The Big Idea - discuss

### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES GROUP: Megan Rule

#### 1. EIG Presentations

April 27 (4th Tuesday) – Kevin Tate and Alison Greenaway, science and social researchers from Landcare, will talk about international policy and the science behind climate change and NZ policy direction for future planning and design.

May 5- Lois Easton, an environmental scientist from Beacon Pathways Research, will talk about residential environmental performance outcomes and how these might influence future design strategies for both new and existing residential models in NZ.

#### 2. NZIA Environmental Policy

The NZIA environmental guidelines have just been released on the NZIA website along with the heritage guidelines for membership feedback and input. EIG plan to focus on this issue during one of their upcoming sessions so that interested members have a forum for contributing to the final draft.

#### 3. Sustainable Talk Series

EIG is liaising with Hugh Byrd at Auckland University regarding possible sustainable talks later this year.

### TECHNICAL ISSUES GROUP: Jerome Buckwell

The Last TIG seminar was held on 23rd February. The seminar was an informal round table talk, discussing what our members wanted out of the Technical Issues Group and potential subjects that could be covered. Attendance was low however some very valuable topics were highlighted.

To this end, the first few seminars in 2010 will discuss all aspects of the 'Building Envelope'. We hope to have a series of lectures starting with a lecture by Mark Bassett of BRANZ focusing on 'understanding the physics of how cavities work'.

We then hope to move on to 'Building wraps, membranes and vapour barriers - the how to/not to guide' followed by 'Insulation', 'Curtain walling' and 'Alternative Solutions – Building Code Compliance'.

### HERITAGE PORTFOLIO: Adam Wild

#### 1. NZIA heritage

The NZIA regard heritage as one of the five key "stakes in the ground" and a Practice Note has been published (PN 5.202 Built Heritage). Now a guideline has been published and is available on the NZIA website at:  
<http://www.nzia.co.nz/downloads/NZIA%20HERITAGE%20POLICY.pdf>

#### 2. Auckland city plan change 163

A hearing timetable has been set for April to deal with issues associated with the Residential 2 activity zone. Changes in assessment criteria developed for the Residential 2 zone may have an effect on the residential 1 and 3 zones, which will be heard at a later date.

#### 3. Heritage and urban issues presentation by Nicola Short (manager, Auckland city heritage dept.)

A meeting co-hosted by the heritage and urban issues groups was held at D72 on Tuesday the 16th of February and featured a presentation by Nicola Short describing Auckland City's emerging historic landscape policy. This analysis and associated non-statutory policy is seen as an important tool in guiding appropriate growth and development on the Isthmus by including the historic landscape in a clearer "perception of place".

### UNITEC: Tony van Raat

Well, we did well in the recent CAA International Student Competition: 2 out of 5 top prizes out of 92 international entries. The best bit was that our entries were all from 2nd year against an open field (the winner was in 6th year!).

The year has started and current studio projects include design/document/build in the Coromandel with Marsh Cook and Dave Strachan, another such for a waka centre in Northland with Rau Hoskins and Carin Wilson, urban intervention in Kingsland and again in Waitakere, a refugee reception centre, a performing arts centre on the Tank Farm with Nicholas Stevens, a rural passive/aggressive marae with Gary Lawson, etc, etc. The normal range of projects.

Can I remind people that there's a course happening in Tuscany open to architects and students in June/July. Great value at \$1,2000 for 2 weeks of lectures, tours, etc.

### UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND STUDENT REPORT: Aishwarya Basur & Jordon Saunders

This year has already kicked off with an exciting start. The first week was spent doing a full school paper sandal charette. We have three overseas trips happening within the first semester; Michael Milojevic is taking a group of 70 to Spain early next week, Rewi Thompson is taking a group to Brisbane and Manfredo Manfredini is taking a group of Thesis students to China. There is an intensive studio with Lada Hršak from Amsterdam happening this semester also. Paola Leardini is taking a prefab sustainable/ zero emissions house paper with third year students, with the intended outcome of a single built residence. The Media Centre is intending to open access to the school's digital fabrication unit within the semester. The Communiqué talks will start again early this semester and there are a number of very exciting speakers, both local and international.