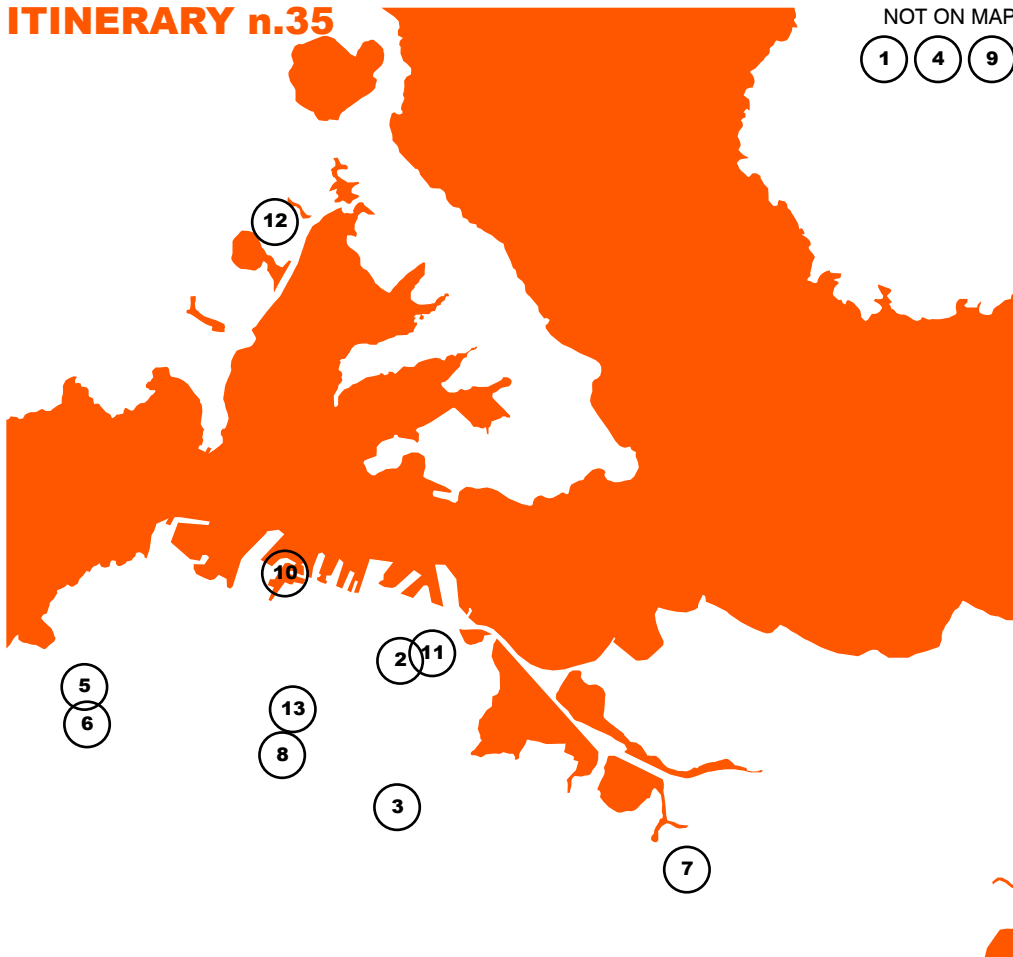


## ITINERARY n.35



NOT ON MAP

1 4 9



## RTA Studio

Like most -isms, architecture is just one of the disciplines to make use of contextualism, which can be defined as a doctrine that emphasizes the importance of context in solving problems or establishing meaning. For architects, this is most commonly understood as a design approach that seeks to integrate modern architectural forms into traditional urban patterns, but the implications of this approach extend beyond the purely formal. In addition to the relation between a building and its surroundings in the city, contextualism also suggests that good architecture takes into account the relationships between a building and its cultural, economic and social background, and also between humankind and architecture more generally.

And as in philosophy, linguistics, and other fields, contextualism in architecture is not without its critics. The most famous (and perhaps shortest) refutation of contextualism was Rem Koolhaas' "fuck context". This *bon mot* from the "Bigness" essay in *S, M, L, XL* (1995) is, ironically, often repeated out of context; Koolhaas was not advocating an urban-scale "hump 'em and dump 'em", but describing the effect on the city of buildings over a certain size. Here in New Zealand, we seem more comfortable with contextualism, with many architects preferring to explain their work as some kind of response to its setting. This is encouraged by planning regulations - most will have come across the diagrams which suggest that given a site bordered on one side by, say, a modern building and an Art Deco structure on the other, the sensitive designer ought simply to merge the two.

We might blame the urban "looseness" of New Zealand's overwhelmingly suburban cities, but even in our big cities architects often focus on the landscape rather than the built aspects of the environment as their primary context. Even the recently opened International Terminal at Wellington Airport, a building that looks to be a major achievement in the history of New Zealand architecture, was described by its architects as "rocks" referencing the nearby coastline. The forms are undeniably exciting, but the explanation does seem to highlight the wrong things about the project - the building doesn't sit on a rocky coast but acres of tarmac - and we can wonder about the implications of metaphorically tethering giant rocks to visiting planes.

Auckland's leading contextualists, RTA Studio are not averse to throwing a few landscape references into the mix - they describe the AUT Auditorium as alluding to local geomorphology, and the roof of the Oranga Community Centre is likened to "mist lying over the mountains". Their buildings, however, are profoundly urban. Creating such architecture is difficult - knitting buildings into existing social and urban fabric requires a sensitivity that seems rare in this country - but even more startling is their ability to quicken that sensitivity with bold architectural gestures.

Much of RTA's output to date is extraordinary projects created from unpromising commissions. Faced with tightly constrained sites, limited budgets, or the need to reuse existing buildings, they've created buildings of remarkable strength and clarity. It is exciting to ponder what RTA may now achieve when freed from such difficult circumstances. Celebrated recent projects such as Ironbank and the AUT Lecture Theatres mark a step up to large-scale civic and commercial projects. Ironbank, an award magnet, is set to become one of our defining buildings of the decade; if more such commissions come their way, we can expect our city to become a much more exciting context in which to play out our lives. *Andrew Barrie*

## Biography:

Richard Naish was born in Bluff, but was raised in the Taranaki. After completing architecture studies at the University of Auckland, he worked for a year at Jasmx. He then spent three years in London working at ORMS, a large London-based architecture practice, before returning both to Auckland and Jasmx. Tim Melville was born in 1964, growing up in Meadowbank. After his studies at University of Auckland in 1989, worked at John Porter Architects for five years. He then spent a year working at ORMS in London (where he and Richard established their friendship and the seeds for their future practice were planted), before returning to Auckland to do a four-year stint at Jasmx. The pair established RTA in 1999, Richard tending to look after design direction and Tim focussing more on production and implementation. The practice has received more than 40 local and international awards. Now with 15 staff, the practice is working on a wide range of projects including masterplanning, institutional and commercial projects and single-family houses.

1

2002

Mahurangi Estate Winery  
162 Hamilton Road  
Warkworth



As with many winery buildings, this project marries production with brand-building functions. The building houses both wine making facilities and a hospitality area where visitors can observe the production process, sample the product, and grab a bite to eat. A glazed wall between the two main spaces allows visitors to see the wine making process. Beyond housing these functions, the building form seeks to establish identity by the use of timber from *Macrocarpa* trees that previously stood on the site and by placing corrugated iron 'light chimneys' to create a distinctive silhouette (although RTA would re-use these devices on later projects). The project received an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2002. See *Architecture NZ* Nov./Dec. 2002 and Sept./Oct. 2009.

2

2003

Arena  
6-8 Heather Street  
Parnell



This mixed-use development includes a small hotel (operating as the Quest Parnell), apartments, commercial offices and retail space, all stacked over several levels of underground parking. The various functions are wrapped around a landscaped courtyard designed to provide a focus for the complex and bring light into the interiors. The Louis Kahn-esque material palette of fair-faced concrete and raw timber is softened with planting and the building's complex silhouette, the overall effect being remarkably strong and crisp. The project received an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2004. See *NZ Apartment Design Trends* vol. 19 no. 150, 2003, and *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2009.

3

2003

Gregory Store  
201 Broadway  
Newmarket



RTA Studio have produced a number of stores for this New Zealand-based women's fashion brand. The stated objective of the interiors is to "add a sense of femininity to the brand." The Newmarket store, a pared-back spaced marked out by classical volutes, was the winner of a Highly Commended Award in Best Awards in 2003. Auckland-based RTA fans might also check out the store at 365 Remuera Road, Remuera (2002) – those further afield could visit the stores at 371 Victoria Street, Hamilton (2005), Shop 119, The Square, Palmerston North (2006), or 222 Lambton Quay, Wellington (2005).

4

2003

Oranga Community Centre  
52 Waitangi Road  
Oranga



Positioned along one edge of Fergusson Park, this complex includes Plunket rooms, government agencies, an internet lounge, and other activity spaces. RTA explain the design in contextual terms - the administration building references the surrounding state houses, while the 'activities' building's curvilinear concrete walls and floating roof planes allude to volcanic craters and 'mist lying over the mountains'. The entry lies between the two forms, marked by a water feature intended to establish a notional connection to the nearby Onehunga waterfront. Two sculptural gateways mark the entrances - one carved by Renata Blair relating to Mangakiekie (One Tree Hill) and the other by Charlotte Fisher relating to Rarotonga (Mount Smart).

5

2003

Bayside Lofts  
57 Livingston Street  
Grey Lynn



This development involved the conversion of an old factory into a series of loft apartments and commercial offices. The offices occupy the lower levels, with large areas of south facing glazing inserted to draw in natural light. Above, the configuration of the existing building required the apartments be long and narrow, but 'light chimneys' bring natural light down through the roof into the centre of the apartments. The best view is from the carpark of the adjacent Countdown supermarket. This is an interesting neighbourhood architecturally - head up Livingstone Street to see houses by Stevens Lawson, Malcolm Walker, Pattersons, and Felicity Wallace.

6

2004

440 Richmond Road  
Grey Lynn



This retail and office building slots between Edwardian and 1930s buildings, the GRC facade cleverly resolving the differing proportions of the adjacent facades. The new addition wraps around the existing building, creating a new frontage on Hakanoa Street. The slatted timber rain screens on this northern wing are intended as a contextual reference to the neighbouring weatherboard houses. The project won an NZIA-Resene New Zealand Award in 2006. Pop across the street to see the RTA-designed building at 401 Richmond Road (winner of an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2004), or head north to see their project at 316 Richmond Road (2007). See *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2004, July/Aug. 2006, Sept./Oct. 2007 and Sept./Oct. 2009.

7

2004

Meadowbank School Hall  
68 Waiaatarua Road  
Meadowbank



RTA's oeuvre demonstrates their ability to effectively employ complex sites - think of Ironbank's cunning use of the change in ground levels between its street frontages. This school hall has different ground levels and faces different conditions - carpark, path, classrooms, tennis courts - on each of its sides, but manages to effortlessly resolve them. Within, the facilities include a multifunctional hall, a community meeting room, kitchen, toilets, storage and two classrooms beneath. The building named for local boy and past pupil, international motor sport legend Bruce McClaren.

8

2004

24 Exmouth Street  
Newton



When this retail and office project received an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2005, the citation read: "A sensitive addition to a row of shops on New North Road that respects and responds to the context, this addition demonstrates that contemporary architecture has its place within an existing context. A simple and small-scale insertion consisting of retail on the ground floor with a rental space above draws on the typology of the terrace house with the incorporation of a service yard to the rear providing view and amenity. The selection of corten steel cladding complements the existing façade." See *Architecture NZ* Mar./Apr. 2005 and Sept./Oct. 2009.

9

2005

Saint Kentigern College  
Science Building  
130 Pakuranga Rd, Pakuranga



The refurbishment of this 1970s building involved the addition of new science laboratories, freshening up of the existing facilities, and the addition of a new entry space. RTA have also prepared a masterplan for the site and are about to start to construction on a new arrivals building to house administrative and communal functions. While you are on site, check out two Warren and Mahoney buildings: the Arts & Technology Building (2001) and the Girls College Classrooms (2004). See *Architecture NZ* July/Aug. 2004.

10

2007

Te Wero Bridge Competition  
Auckland City



This project was one of four finalists selected in the first stage of this two-stage international competition. The second stage proposal was completed in collaboration with Minifie Nixon of Melbourne. Here's how they described their proposal: "The seabird has cultural significance to both Maori and European mariners. It is a motif that has been explored by many significant NZ artists both modern and ancient: both Maori and European. ... Te Wero Bridge's opening bascules – like open wings of a bird settling on sheltered harbour – will become a welcoming gesture and symbol of guardianship to sea-tired vessels returning to the refuge of the Viaduct basin." See *Architecture NZ* Nov./Dec. 2007.

11

2008

RCP Offices  
5 Eglon Street  
Parnell



RTA were involved in both the refurbishment of a mid-century building and car park, and the separate project for the interior office fit-out for project management firm RCP. The base building was gutted and stripped back to a bare concrete and steel shell, with crisp new elements inserted with minimum fuss. In an intriguing inversion of the *Grand Designs* recipe-for-disaster, RCP elected to project manage the project for themselves! The project received an NZIA-Resene Auckland Award in 2008 and a New Zealand Award in 2009. See *Prodesign* Oct./Nov. (2008), *Architecture NZ* May/June 2009, and *Progressive Building* Dec./Jan. 2008/2009.

12

2009

AUT Lecture Theatres  
90 Akoranga Drive  
Northcote



An understated gem of a building, this elegantly resolved building houses lecture theatres and a conference centre. The project (Building AF on the campus plan) received an NZIA-Resene Auckland Award in 2009, and has been shortlisted for a prize at the 2010 World Architecture Festival. See *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2009. While you are there, zip into Building AA to check out RTA's AUT Auditorium (2002) – two lecture theatres inserted into the shell of a 1960s building that received an NZIA-Resene NZ Award in 2004). See *Architecture NZ* Mar./Apr. 2003.

13

2009

Ironbank  
150 Karangahape Road  
Auckland City



This mixed-use retail and office development must surely be the nation's most awarded building ever, having been the recipient of the NZIA-Resene Architecture Medal, a Gold Award in the Best Awards, *Metro* magazine's nod for best new commercial building, a Highly Commended citation at the World Architecture Festival, and even a special urban design commendation from our former Mayor. See *Metro* Dec. 2009, *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2009, Nov./Dec. 2009, and May/June 2010, *Commercial Design Trends* vol. 26 no. 4, 2010, and *Architectural Review* Mar. 2010.

## Other Addresses:

**G2 Gallery (2001)**  
Kitchener Street  
Auckland City

Winner of an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2001, the citation described the project (which had a budget of \$20,000 including architectural fees) as "Small but perfect."

**58-64 Fort Street (2002)**  
Auckland City

This refurbishment of a century-old warehouse won an NZIA-Resene Local Award in 2002. See *Urbis* Spring 2002 and *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2009.

**108 Penrose Road (2002)**  
Penrose

An office and warehousing complex.

**22 Stanley Street (2004)**  
Auckland City

A adaptive re-use gem. See *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2007.

**OM85 (2007)**  
85B Onehunga Mall  
Onehunga

Located in an industrial zone near the Manukau waterfront, this is an office and warehousing development.

**1-3 Pompallier Terrace (2005)**  
Ponsonby

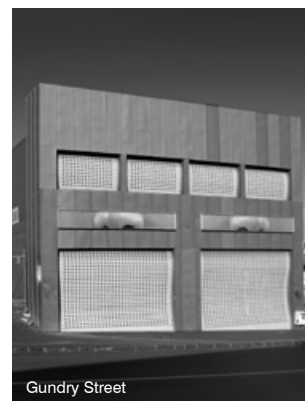
**582 Karangahape Road (2008)**  
Auckland City

See *Prodesign* Dec./Jan. 2008/2009 and *Architecture NZ* Nov./Dec. 2008. Pop around the corner to see RTA's building at 4 Gundry Street (2004).

**.99 (2009)**  
318 Richmond Road  
Grey Lynn

This interior for advertising agency won a Gold Award in the Best Awards 2009.

**Colenso BBDO/Aim Proximity (2009)**  
100 College Hill  
Ponsonby



Gundry Street

## Sources:

All photographs are by Andrew Barrie, and drawings are courtesy of RTA Studio. Many thanks to Rich and Tim for their generous help in preparing this guide.

RTA's projects have been widely published in local journals and, increasingly, international magazines over the last ten years. The best single source on RTA's work is John Walsh's feature and interview on the occasion of RTA turning 10 years old in *Architecture NZ* Sept./Oct. 2009. The essay by Tim (who is Auckland's rep on the national NZIA Council) on the state of the architecture profession is worth a look: *Architecture NZ* Nov./Dec. 2007. Another intriguing article is the rather negative commentary on the state of New Zealand architecture, which presented Ironbank as a rare highlight, in *Architectural Review* Mar. 2010.



582 K Rd