



BLOCK

09 2014

LECTURE THREE
THIS IS NOT A BUILDING
BY PATRICK REYNOLDS



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Introduction

The Block Foundation is delighted to have hosted the third Block dinner and lecture, an evening during which we diners allow ourselves the pleasure of sitting back and having someone else sing for their supper, entertain, provoke and comment on our craft.

In previous years we have been honoured by architectural critic and author John Walsh and gold medal architect David Mitchell. This year, photographer Patrick Reynolds kindly agreed to deliver the almost annual Block dinner.

The architectural fraternity has a number of dynastic families. We might think of the Mitchells, the Mollers, the Leuschkes, the Wilds, the Athfields, the McCoys and even those around our kitchen table. It is hard though to find a family that is so saturated in architecture as the Reynolds. It must have been an extraordinary time around architects' Ian and Marilyn's dining table, described so memorably by Kent Dadson as a "gannet colony". Those of us who, in conversation with any of the Reynolds siblings, have sought to find the slightest fissure into which one might insert a contribution will have some feeling for the cut and thrust around that table.

If a robust argument and solid lungpower are obvious outcomes, so too is a particular and profound understanding of the power of the architectural image. Patrick has spoken of a childhood surrounded by *Abitare* magazines, and of the influence of those powerful, high contrast, black-and-white images, invariably focusing on contemporary architecture with a strong social bias. This early immersion in the printed image has begot a thoughtful, passionate and robust relationship with the camera over the last 25 years. After studying for a Bachelor of Arts at Auckland University, Patrick studied photography at Elam before travelling overseas and returning as the energetic artist many of you have dealt with. We have enjoyed his beautifully composed architectural work, almost always occupied by fleeting figures, those players for whom we make stages. But he has another body of work, too: beautiful expressive images that are held in the collections of Auckland Art Gallery, Te Papa Tongarewa, Waikato Museum of Art and History, and the Wallace Collection among others.

Patrick has also made significant contributions to many major books on New Zealand architecture: *New New Zealand Houses*, with John Walsh in 2007, *Villa*, with Jeremy Hansen and Jeremy Salmond in 2009, *Homework*, with John Walsh in 2010, *A Place for Art: Auckland Art Gallery* in 2011, *Big House Small House*, with John Walsh in 2012, *Modern*, with Jeremy Hansen and others in 2013 and last, but not least, *Architecture Uncooked*, with me in 2008.

In his twitter home page he describes himself as "Urbanist. Impatient optimist. Often thirsty". On the night Patrick had to be thirsty a little longer as he delivered the 2014 Block Lecture, which we have pleasure sharing with you here. *Pip Cheshire*

Block Editors:

Pip Cheshire, Andrew Barrie, Nat Cheshire, Sean Flanagan, and Ian Scott.

This Is Not a Building

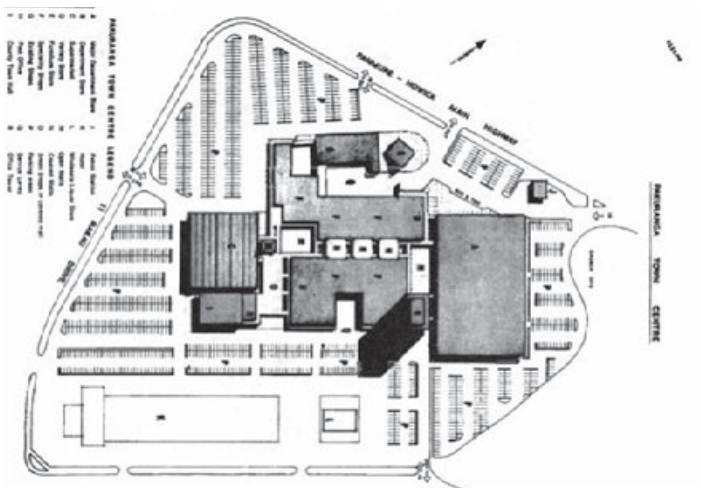
Patrick Reynolds, August 2014

I have decided that I ought to start at the beginning. After all, as Pedro Almodóvar said, *"If it isn't autobiography, it's plagiarism."*

The beginning then, is in the house my parents designed and built the year I was born, 1962. It was peculiar for its context, as pretty much every architect's house of the period was; an exposed slab floor, an all but flat gable supported on Oregon beams, and most alarmingly for the neighbours, a whole wall of glass where a proper front door ought to be. The context was semi-rural Howick, my parents moving there from Ponsonby partly because it was only at this distance from the city that they could afford a site and secure a state loan to build, but also, my mother recently admitted, that such a long commute would prevent Ian from 'just nipping into the office' all weekend.

They were of course doing what the whole western world was also doing at the time, leaving the city and its tired Victorian and Edwardian structures for the space and air of the country and in the hope of making their own little 'Brave New World': It was an act not only consistent with the global zeitgeist but also with their faith; Modernism.

Anyway, there was work out there away from the old city. This is the Pakuranga Plaza by KRTA as reported in the June 1964 Home + Building a year before it opened. From bare farmland to, as the text says, *"the most complete shopping facilities outside the city"*, covering 20 acres, with free car parking for 1100 cars. *"Car parks and access roading will cover eight acres"*, so 40% of the land. Balefully it adds, *"It is also hoped that some high density housing will be built on the vacant land about the Centre"*. Fifty years on and instead all we've had is more, and wider, roads.



And Home + Building Magazine is still around, now simply called HOME, and it is a publication that I have had a long relationship with, the current issue has an article I shot on the Barbican, in a kind of coincidental echo of this period. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It is clear to me now that there were two aspects of this upbringing that were deeply formative to my subsequent career.

First was the culture within the house where, for example, I would pore over the architectural journals my father brought home from the office, Architectural Review, Architectural Record, etc, each with a little piece of paper stapled to the cover listing the partners initials that gave these journals a sort of sacramental air.

And my mother would borrow European housing magazines from the library like Abitare, Domus, Arkitektur und Wohnung, but also, weirdly, Country Life. When I questioned her later about this, she said 'Oh it's just a little architectural pornography, dear'. And of course she was right, the Georgian piles shown in that magazine were no more attainable than the idealised forms on display in other magazines more conventionally understood to be porn. And given that Modernism was an absolutist creed, Country Life was pretty transgressive stuff, and a sign of the nuance in my parents' architectural taste.

These publications, as well as my parent's architectural books, all had their photographic styles, and it seems it was this I was absorbing, more than the architecture per se, let alone the text, which, anyhow, was often glamourously in another language.

In fact, I doubt I read much of the text, rather strange really that the pictures in these essentially technical journals freighted some kind of enchantment for an otherwise ordinary boy stuck in an increasingly ordinary suburb. I would lose myself in these images of buildings in those other worldly settings; a house commanding a snowy mountain vista, or, thrillingly, projects in those big European or North American cities. So very different from the world outside my door.

Which was of course the second influence. As a young kid the beach and bush were great, but slowly the farms separating this colonial village from the city began to fill up with invasions of thin new houses. The wild gullies we used to play in out the back of our ridge-top house rang out with the sound of skillsaw and hammer as their steep sides were reshaped with a new kind of road; the twisting, terminating, tidily curb-and-channeled, cul-de-sac.

That perfect image of the suburbs. Going nowhere but the arse of the sack.

By the time I was a teenager, like an ill Shakespearian omen, Pakuranga had come to Howick-ville, we were now in deepest sprawl-land, and I got a very direct lesson of how in the pursuit of country living suburbia kills the thing it loves.

Quoted in the new Gatley and Walker history of the Architectural Centre, Vertical Living, historian Erik Olssen gives the following description of the forces at work in forming this new post-war world.

'[P]eople were impatient to return to domestic certainties which life had so far denied them. For many women and men, marriage, a family, and a house and garden in the suburbs was the consummation of their dreams.....Life had given them more than their share of excitement'.

In other words suburbia was designed to be dull. No wonder my generation went for Punk with all of its refreshing inanities and incivilities. For in the words of Jarrett Walker, that very fine thinker and transport planner (believe me, it's a thing): 'The world moves on by each generation disagreeing with its parents'.

It is hard to overstate just how witheringly dull 1970s south east Auckland was for a teenager, and how appallingly cut off you were if without a car. Don't start me on the meandering Howick bus, our only other means of escape. The bright lights and dangers of Auckland City, such as they were, seemed almost as distant and exotic as those foreign cities in the magazines. It hasn't improved since.



My friends all got cars, drinking and driving pretty much summed up the weekend entertainment. I left. Signed up for a BA in History and Philosophy at Auckland Uni. I had yet to take a photograph.

A year later I was in the Elam photography department, having falling in love with the medium during that first year and somehow managed to blag my way in to Art School. Anyway I had already become disillusioned by academic philosophy which seemed to me to reduce serious issues to a game, which still seems to be the case if the leader of the ACT Party is anything to go by.

And with photography it turns out I was a quick study, though looking back now I see I was typically undergraduate in my choice of subjects, including artistic versions, *avant le lettre*, of what we now know as the 'selfie'. And the inevitable appearance of girlfriends as models, not always, it would seem so happily... well you gotta work with what you got.

Soon enough there were other subjects as my generation and others did indeed come to disagree fairly vigorously with our elders, especially in the form of the government.

Now I want to unpack exactly what it was about photography that seduced me so suddenly, because it is still the same thing that informs my work today. Essentially it is best summed up in one word: Transformation. The camera, for better or worse, transforms its subject. And it does this through a paradox that is at the very heart of its nature. Somewhere between its limitations and its persuasions it casts a spell.

First the limitations: Every photograph represents a reduction of the world, an edit, just a part, in both space and time. A snap, as they say.

Oh and a mechanical one at that, each photograph is just the result of the various optical, mechanical, and chemical or digital processes that the machine, its user, and the conditions allow. Furthermore it reduces the complex world we move through down to a mere two dimensions, without smell, or sound, or other sensations.



Yet it seems that it is because of this, that images can address the dream world. The photograph is sufficiently insubstantial, when it's any good, to maintain a poetic force: truth through reduction.

Paradoxically these reduced 'copies' of the world are also new creations, in that each photograph invents something completely new, something that wasn't there before, and perhaps perplexingly, something very persuasive.

It's great force is this power of persuasion. The photograph of a thing can become more real almost than the thing itself. Or rather it can so redefine a person or place, it can be a mechanism to seeing the world afresh. And when this occurs then its transformative properties have gone full circle back out of the camera and into the world again.

Again it achieves this through an apparent weakness, as Roland Barthes famously, and succinctly, put it:

"The photograph is always invisible, it's not it that we see."

We mistake the photograph of the thing for the thing itself. This is true of all photography, but perhaps it is less immediately apparent in architectural photography. So back to the autobiography for an example.

After completing a degree, (history, middling) while at the same time doing a couple of furious years at Elam, and having my first exhibitions, both with Elam mate Fiona Pardington (one advertised with the, it now seems inevitable selfie).

I set off for Europe. Where of course I searched out both minor and major moments in architecture. And to find backdrops to make an even higher class of selfie, of course.

But while there I also gained the formative lesson in transformational power of architectural photography.



In 1986 I made a sort pilgrimage, alone, from London to Utrecht to see Rietvelt's Schroder House. It was one of a number of Modernism's masterpieces that I both felt I knew and was keen to visit. Imagine: the audacity of a 3-D Mondrian! Here is an example [below top] of the kind of images from publications that had informed this enthusiasm.

And here [below bottom] is the photograph I took that day. To say I was disappointed is an understatement. What on earth is that on the left? I honestly had no idea it was attached to anything, let alone that great lump of bricks, and just out of frame on the right is an also previously unknown railway embankment, it felt so slight, and lost, and incapable of carrying my dreams of it.

I scurried away trying to hold on to the images I previously had and erase the unfortunate experience of the real thing, and back on to that excellent Dutch public transport and to the pleasures of Amsterdam, somewhat chastened.



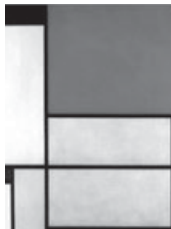
But this experience was a great teacher, it taught me how powerful photography could be and that the ideas freighted in even something so solid as a building require careful framing. Is this a form of deception? Possibly, but then that version of the Schroder House in my startled snap is no less just one reading than the carefully composed frames that preceded it, the ones certainly more faithful to the ideas of De Stijl. There is no reality.

So much so that I see the task of the architectural photographer as addressing the conceptual source of the project through its corporeal form.

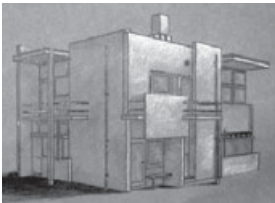
The Building Imagined. Or should I say re-imagined. No building is complete until it has been photographed. Only then can it re-enter the dream world from where it came.

And of course it goes full circle as there has always been an exchange between architecture as building and architecture as imagined ideal: So the images of architecture beget new architecture. So this circle is really more of a spiral or perhaps double helix.

And here are a couple of good examples. [*The building photographed' below.*] Note the building behind, no real sense that it's attached or even relevant, its presence is not erased but just reduced. Also note in the foreground; bike racks.



The Building Imagined



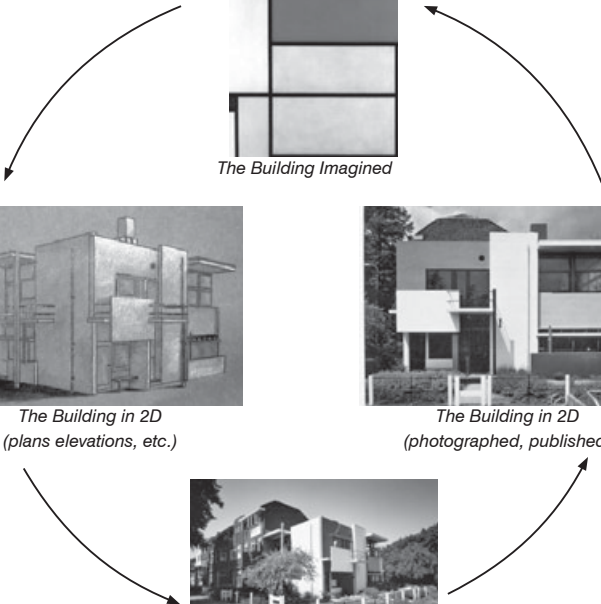
*The Building in 2D
(plans elevations, etc.)*



*The Building in 2D
(photographed, published)*



The Building Constructed



Here's an even more heroic approach [*below*], the windows at 90 degrees a genius touch; animating and abstracting the building and adding to its sculptural force, as does the low camera angle.

But of course this somewhat ambitious idea of the role of architectural photography has its critics. My favourite is summed up by English architect HS Goodhart-Rendall in this attack on Modernism from 1938:

"The Modern architectural photograph is magnificent, the drawing interesting, the building an unfortunate but necessary stage between the two."

I didn't get into Mrs Schroder's little house on that visit, perhaps I'd agree that I'd really been tricked by those photographers if I had? It was closed up and about to be restored, it was made a World Heritage Site in 2000. Don't they have a Gerry Brownlee over there?

So in summary I don't think I can put it better than the great American Photographer Duane Michaels when he said:

"Photography deals exclusively with appearances, but nothing is what it appears to be."

This idea has always been central to both my personal and professional work. Although in the former I have tended to address it more directly, and the later more subtly, which is perhaps even more effective?

I don't know, but here is a quick survey of both, with interruptions, to flesh out that thought.

[At this point in the lecture, Patrick showed a number of his photographs. What follows is a small selection.]







Photographing the built environment requires that you look very hard at it. And after a couple of decades of doing so here in Auckland and comparing it to other places I visit, I feel pretty disappointed with what we've done and continue to do. In fact I'd go so far as to say we've made a big mess of much of this isthmus, and increasingly in my life time. This is not a criticism of architects, but rather of a culture that doesn't value architecture and design quality, or simply perhaps the urban world at all.

It seems that we're so impressed with the beauty of our natural environment that we fail to believe that anything we build can add to it, and therefore, perversely, we've become careless builders.

So here [*below top*] is a noble emissary from a future New Zealand on the banks of the Thames contemplating the ruin of London. An idea from Macaulay; basically describing civilisation and the then world's biggest city as a fallen state, but New Zealand as pristine and prelapsarian. It is an anti-urban idea and one we've swallowed about ourselves, and it's made us lazy and careless, with both the natural and urban realms.

So here [*below bottom*] is an undated version, our new New Zealander contemplates those great sculptural straddle cranes, a cruise ship heading to Rangitoto Channel, and an ocean of second hand cars.





It is telling how we choose to use our space. One view [top left] of a now departed effort on Ponsonby Rd.... and another [top right], a good example of different photographic approaches, but also this one shows what a terrible place for humans this premier shopping street is. More a traffic sewer. Look at the brave humans, no doubt they gave up waiting for a turn to be allowed to cross.

Well what about newer parts of Auckland, where we've had complete control to design the perfect environment with all that we've learned. No inherited Victorian street pattern. Modernism's desiderata: A blank slate

By one of my favourite photographers [below top]. This is it. The machines have won. I've looked, there's not a single human in this image. Why would there be? You'd never make it across those absurd roads alive, or not at least without your life slipping away waiting at the beg-button, and I thought Ponsonby Rd is bad.



It was like a whole new and underdeveloped resource was fished Maui-like out of the sea, lovely and beachy and critically now so close to the city.

It was transformational. And like all truly transformational projects its effects were not understood by most before hand, not even by those promoting it. It was hopelessly underscaled and timid, and quickly seen as obvious after the fact.

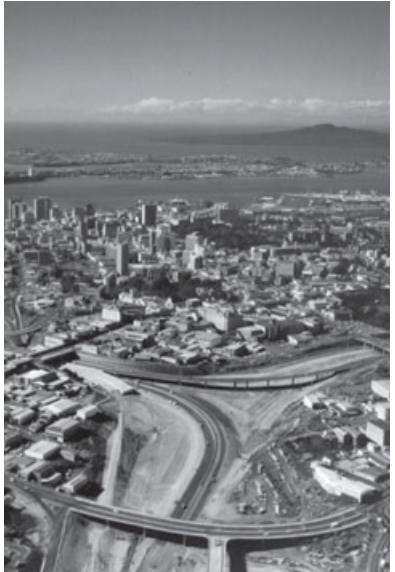
But then it lead to this. The biggest urban motorway interchange in Australasia. The great land eater. 50,000 people and 15,000 buildings were removed for this. We used to be so bold.

And this was the justification. It was slum clearance. Doré again, and those ideas about the moral corruption of the city.

Those people out in Pakuranga, for example, have to be able to drive directly to those others over the bridge it's a long way, and the old mixed use living areas are in the way. This is simply a policy of privileging the movement needs of one group over the habitation needs of another. Suburb good, city and inner suburb; expendable.

And it wasn't even the advice. De Leuw Cather's Motorway plan was to follow '*the completion of the rapid transit network*'. Furthermore on their original plan they also advised the motorway ring route as the priority, not driving SH1 though the heart of the city. We have over built motorways and built them in the wrong order, and the wrong places.

We have sacrificed all of our urban gullies to vehicle movement and severed whole areas intractably apart, in particular we have made a noose for the city throttling its vitality and therefore the economic force of the whole region.



[Patrick's lecture concluded with a discussion of the CFN, a cause he champions through transportblog.co.nz.]

What is the CFN?

Patrick Reynolds, September 2014

The CFN is a deeply considered answer to the question of how Auckland, our only city of scale, can best compete at all levels this century. It is a world class Rapid Transit Network to go with our world class Highway Network.

1. It is designed for maximum economic efficiency; evaluating capital costs, operating costs, and long term value. It is a fully integrated top tier network; using busways where they are best option and extending the existing rail network where that adds more value, and ferries where they offer their particular advantage.
2. It builds on what we already have; it extends and complements our existing systems. It is the key to getting the highest value from earlier investments, especially our widespread road and highway networks. And it unlocks hidden capacity in the existing legacy rail network, and enhances its operational efficiency. It is about working our physical infrastructure harder and smarter as the city grows.
3. It facilitates better quality of urban form and supports higher quality of life and therefore the international competitiveness of the city, the nation's gateway. It also complements the growth in Active travel; cycling and walking.
4. It greatly strengthens the city's resilience through diversifying movement options in ways that are consistent with changes in technology and social trends and helps protect the city's functionality against shocks in price or supply of imported fuels.
5. It greatly enhances freedom and choice for businesses, residents, and visitors alike. It supports the entire city, not just inner areas, including future growth areas on the urban fringe. It will make the choice to not partake in congestion in Auckland a truly viable one for more people, at more times, and for more trips.

It essentially is the answer to the question of what is needed next? And it is not just a 'nice to have' but rather a carefully costed and highest value complement to the last sixty years of investment in motorways. It will unlock the motorway system for higher value users, in particular freeing it up for its vital role in the freight supply chain. In short to gain the next level of value from the urban state highways we need to invest away from them to keep them flowing efficiently. It also is what is needed to gain the agglomeration economies that flow from city shaped development.

And wonderfully It does not require anything other than a reprioritising of projects already identified for Auckland, and is achievable well within existing budgets. It takes no money away from other parts of the country's transport share nor is it dependent on novel sources of revenue. It does however require an understanding that Auckland is at a new stage of development. One that requires more than just the single mode of

I would like to conclude, with a quote from one IB Reynolds in an interview in the New Zealand Herald of August 1967. 47 years ago: Who said, with typical understatement, “[An] arterial rail system with lateral bus feeders makes sense as a machine for [Auckland’s] transport.”

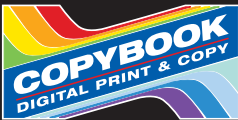
Which neatly undoes taking too literally my talk of ‘disagreeing with parents’ in fact that whole interview is amazingly prescient, and shows what could have been, and what we must do now.

Because the kids are alright, some in fact are a bit of a chip off the old block.



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