

BLOCK

08/09 2015

LECTURE FOUR
THE HEART'S DESIRE
BY SIMON WILSON





Simon Wilson

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Introduction

This is the second year in a row we have had the pleasure of being addressed by the son of an architect, and another who has chosen to eschew the path of his parent. I note though, that both Patrick Reynolds and tonight's speaker, Simon Wilson, have not strayed too far from that path, each developing robust engagements with the profession built upon a healthy discourse around the childhood kitchen table.

As the son of Wellington architect Derek Wilson, he grew up in a world governed by the aesthetics of Scandinavian design, gothic cathedrals and the New Zealand farm vernacular. With all that, he admits, it did not take him too long to realise there was more to drawing, let alone designing buildings, than a good eye for copying, as he had previously supposed.

He focused on writing instead.

He began as a book editor with AH & AW Reed, before taking up journalism at the Listener, where he became chief subeditor. He has also been editor of Consumer and Cuisine magazines, is a published novelist and former playwright and television writer. He has the rare distinction of being editor of the Qantas (and later Canon) Magazine of the Year for two different magazines – Cuisine and Metro – and has won many other awards as a writer and editor.

As Metro editor, Simon has promoted writing on the built environment and, in a series of his own articles (writing in the most recent issue about the container port), he has championed the emergence of the “new Auckland”. It’s a city where, as he puts it, “we have decided it is necessary to dream big, and possible to make good things happen.”

“The built environment leads the way, and that means far more is being asked of its practitioners than before. It’s exciting, but it’s also harder now, because so much is at stake. We’re doing nothing less than reinventing how we live together.”

He has said, “At Metro, our core task is a critical engagement with the city, which is an entirely different proposition from being a PR machine for it.”

And in the same editorial, “We have a Metro billboard on the Southern Motorway that says, LOVE THIS CITY, which Mayor Len Brown sees every day on his way in to work, and he tells me often how great it is. And I tell him, because we love this city, we want it to be better. So we look for ways it can be so.”

Simon will discuss that proposition in tonight’s lecture, *Dreaming up a City*.

Pip Cheshire

The Block Foundation publishes a monthly broadsheet on behalf of the Auckland branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects. For the past four years, the Foundation has also hosted the Block Lecture, a commissioned lecture intended to promote a broader conversation about the state of the art.

Block Editors: Pip Cheshire, Andrew Barrie, Nat Cheshire, Sean Flanagan, and Ian Scott

The Heart's Desire

Simon Wilson, August 2015

When I was 12, my family moved into a chicken coop. My father, Derek, who was an architect, was 45 and it was his first house. That he owned, I mean. He's 93 now, and it turned out to be his only house. We had rented until then, in Masterton where he had his first practice, and then in various parts of Wellington. In Khandallah, high on the western hills looking across the suburb, with glimpses of the harbour beyond, a chicken coop was the best he could do. He was very proud.

I'm sure most of you know why. The house was long and low, a series of rooms clad in unpainted cedar with an unpainted corrugated aluminium roof. It had electrical wiring in the polished concrete floor and seagrass matting for wallpaper; it had a high-pitched roofline with ceilings that followed the same pitch. There was the suggestion of rafters, and a few poles helped hold up the roof. It was open plan – so open plan that Dad didn't put doors on the kids' bedrooms. In some parts of the house you could look up and through from one space to another and another beyond.

My father was proud of the house because it was, as a work in progress which he would not abandon for another 40 years, the house of his dreams. And to build that is one of the things an architect is put on this earth to do. He was proud of it because of the zero-maintenance materials, which freed him to spend his spare time genuinely progressing the work – a pergola here, a new room there. He was proud because he had provided, for us, his family, and it did not matter to him that his children complained about the lack of privacy or that he had custom-designed the bench heights in the kitchen for his own comfort, not my mother's, although she was shorter than him and he never cooked anything. He was an architect. His was the greater vision.

Although, in the winter, he would come home every day from work and complain about the condensation puddling on the windowsills. His frustration was caused not simply by the fact that no one had mopped it up, but at a deeper level by his regret at having decided, when the house was built, not to pay for double glazing. Glazing aside, he was proud of his house, our house, because out there in Khandallah, where they all had to look at it, slung long and low and unpainted along the hillside, they called it the chicken coop. He loved that: it showed it meant something to them; and it showed that they got it.

That's because my father was an architect of the vernacular. He grew up on a sheep farm whose dominant building was, of course, the shearing shed, and the pitched roofs and big open areas of our house – not to mention the fast-greying cedar – were his homage to that shed. I doubt it ever occurred to him that the house would be called a chicken coop, but he loved that its nickname came from the same vernacular.

More or less. One suburb along, in Johnsonville, up on the hillside in roughly the same aspect as our house, there was a long, low, dilapidated set of buildings that actually did house an egg farm. When our neighbours said we lived in a chicken coop, what they meant was that architects can do no better than copying the shit-filled shack in the next suburb. But Dad didn't mind in the least and the meaning quickly morphed into something fonder.

Thirty years later in the same city, Warren and Mahoney encountered the same thing with their stadium on the Wellington waterfront. “The Cake Tin” was a try-on of a complaint and there was even a move to abolish the name, but the Cake Tin is a terrific stadium and the fact it has a genuinely colloquial name, bequeathed by the people, is its greatest accolade. Forgive my ignorance if I’m wrong about this, but I cannot think of a single building in Auckland that has its own colloquial name. Why is that?

I don’t really know about architecture. My dad said, paraphrasing Thomas Edison, that it was 5% inspiration and 95% perspiration, and I said to him, but can’t you just change that? Why not make it more inspiration? He laughed. He had one of those soft, friendly, loving laughs that every child instinctively knows is patronising – and then we grow up and do it to our own children.

I’m not really sure why I didn’t become an architect. I grew up understanding the value of a properly sharpened pencil and we had a lot of books in the house on architecture and art history and design, and I read them all. More or less. I do know the trick of drawing a truly straight line and I can do a pretty good freehand circle too. As a child, I drew a lot of houses. It wasn’t that I thought 5% inspiration wasn’t enough. I’d have just made it more, despite my father’s laugh. Partly, I just didn’t want to do what my father did. I’m a baby boomer. We’re the generation that was given the world and decided we could go out and do anything. The only people I knew who responded to the opportunities that gave us by merely doing what their fathers did were lawyers.

What the spirit of those times meant – for me, it was the 1970s, but it started in the 1960s – was that the people who became architects did so because they believed it would be really exciting. They, many of you here tonight, chose architecture for the thrill of it. I mean the thrill of the work – getting paid to draw houses – but also the thrill of what you would be part of: building a better world.

Of course, it is the arrogance of my generation that we think we invented everything. Including that ambition. Whereas my father flew planes off aircraft carriers in the Pacific during the war, and when it was over he stayed on to fly DDT bombing sorties into the New Territories of Hong Kong, to clear the area of malaria. He was, and still is, the mildest man you might ever meet, but in his youth he was undeniably a thrillseeker.

Back home, he got a war scholarship and did his BArch here in Auckland under Vernon Brown, rubbing shoulders with members of The Group. They’re the generation, imbued with the great spirit of the postwar age, who really did think they would build a better world. And why not? They had earned the right, and learned the need of it.

Dad was president of NZIA in 1963, around the time the Scottish architect Basil Spence came to New Zealand, saw a packet of matches and copied the logo onto a napkin for the design of our new Parliament. The Beehive, there’s another building in Wellington with a nickname.

I have no idea how true the story is, but it doesn’t matter, because it raises all the good big questions. For one, it reveals New Zealand in the 1960s was still so colonial in its outlook we summoned an old fart from Britain to do some symbolic defining of our national identity for us. Or, as those of you who have yourselves designed status buildings overseas may prefer, it showed that we were internationalist in our outlook and we wanted, even then, a “world-class” government building.

The story shows that Basil Spence didn't give a shit, and just flicked us the first thing he thought of when he got to the bottom of his martini. Or, the story reveals how inspiration works. Who doesn't love those Eureka moments most of all?

It shows an ignorance of the symbols of the nation: a beehive was merely a brand and, Ed Hillary notwithstanding, it has never resonated deeply with New Zealanders in the manner of, say a silver fern, or a kiwi with laser beams coming out of its eyes. Or a red peak, apparently.

Or perhaps Basil Spence intuited even then how confused we are about our national symbols, and that we needed a bit of a nudge. Perhaps he was simply performing the great role of the outsider, to speak to us a truth that we did not know for ourselves.

There's no right way to do things. Allocating architectural commissions or anything else. The best way is the way that gets the best outcomes: gives us the best building in the best environment, and grows us as a culture, which, you would hope, means that it strengthens local practice. No, we did not choose a local architect to design the nation's big house. But we did fill it with the work of local artists.

The Beehive is like the Sydney Opera House – a building that defies a nickname, by the way, which suggests there are limits to my theory. Both suggest that to get a great, distinctive building, you should break a few of the rules about what buildings are meant to be like, and when you do it you're going to be in for a fight.

Do we have that now? The spirit for the fight? I think we do. And do we have the skills to wage the fight?

I'm saying "we" because I believe it is all of us, me included. I came to live in Auckland nearly 12 years ago. I've been at Metro for eight years, the last five as editor. In 2007, I wrote in an essay that the city did not have a heart, and since then I have written time and again about the process of the city finding its heart. Yesterday was my first day in a newly created position of editor-at-large: it's a role that will allow me more time to advocate for a better Auckland, and I hope you know that I'm an advocate for design – architecture and all the other elements of urban design – to lead the process. What you make creates the places we live and work and play in, and more than that, what you make gives form to our dreams.

And I'm in it, tagging along with you, because I believe in all that and because when I write about it I get involved in debates about it with politicians, and all of that. And what I think right now is, we are not doing our job well enough.

The problem is this. We need to stand in the future. Imagine what it might be like – how awful, and how good, and what possibilities will exist for us to make it more of one than the other. And yet for most of us, probably all of you, most of the time, we stand resolutely in the present. Reality hems us in. The client, the budget, the site, the gap between what we imagine we can do and what we can really do.

That gap, by the way: I interviewed the Chinese artist Yang Fudong last week, just before his wonderful new show opened at the Auckland Art Gallery. His work is so aesthetically measured and exquisite, it's easy to think of as completely finished. I asked him what the hardest thing was, and he said: reconciling himself

to the gap between what he set out to make and what he ended up with. For him as for Leonardo da Vinci, a work of art is never finished, merely abandoned.

That's not the only gap. There's another one, between what we want to do and what we are able to persuade whoever is in charge to let us do. The biggest reality check is not usually the client, although I'm sure it often feels like that. Or the budget. It's the gap between our heart's desire and our ability to win those in charge to that desire.

I imagine half the people in the room, perhaps more, found themselves falling helplessly into this gap in 2009 when the competition for Queens Wharf was established. It was a case study in how not to do everything, wasn't it?

Badly conceived, pushed and pulled by politicians with agendas that had nothing to do with architecture and urban design, and who, in some cases, have never let ignorance undermine their own bullying certainty. Hijacked by the cruise-ship industry, badly promoted to the public. In the end, promulgated with so little good faith a winner was never even announced.

And one of the consequences was that architects found themselves removed from the public debate on the future of the wharf and the area around it. I think you guys are still dealing with the consequences of that, despite the wonderful work of so many of you since then, in our urban spaces, not only downtown but in the suburbs and outer town centres.

One of the great new things about Auckland is that Archimedia's Te Oro is in Glen Innes, not the city centre, and Mitchell Stout's Te Uru is in Titirangi, and Warren and Mahoney's MIT/railway station is in Manukau and Athfield's Devonport Library, though too good for some of the citizens of Devonport who have, astonishingly, complained, is over there not over here. Auckland isn't, and never has been, and never should be, all about the centre.

But, while the work is good, the discourse is limited, because after Queens Wharf, it feels like architects have been excluded. The lesson of Queens Wharf is that it's not enough to design. You, we, have to build a platform for the appreciation of design.

My father was still practising in Wellington during the 1980s when, for reasons of earthquake strengthening, the Gold Mile was largely rebuilt. He and his firm did none of it.

While Stephenson and Turner and other big companies put up their tower blocks on Lambton Quay and Featherston St and Manners St, my father and his partners – Bill Toomath, Jim Beard, Bill Alington, Graham Anderson – made do with educational contracts and some other government work, and built a lot of houses. And very lovely they were too, many of them.

For my father, rebuilding the world for humanity came down to this: you did it house by house. And my mother would say: You should be out there with those businessmen, playing golf.

But he was profoundly disinterested in any kind of sport, even when his own children were playing it. He belonged to no clubs and he avoided social engagements beyond a close circle of friends, who were all architects and the engineers they worked with, and their wives – who all, it seemed to me, liked him rather more than he liked them.

My mother, had she known of it, would have appreciated Thomas Edison for a different aphorism from my father's: "Everything comes to those who hustle while they wait."

But Dad did not know how to hustle and he certainly did not know how to influence the rebuilding of a city. For him, the gap between what he dreamed and what potential clients in downtown Wellington wanted was immense and unclosable.

You know, those beautiful greying cedar weatherboards notwithstanding, his favourite material – this is a predilection he shared with most architects of his generation – was probably concrete block. He was a brutalist, although I learned that term only later.

I shared the love. Unadorned concrete block walls have always looked lovely to me. And I think, now, that it was a remarkable thing those postwar architects did, to imbue such a brutal material with such sympathetic humanist value.

Dad's favourite building was probably Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp. Quiet, serene, sublime. Rustic. Unique and therefore surprising. It's aiming high, to be inspired by that and turn to concrete block to express your inspiration.

A man who does that is not going to find it easy to get the next contract to build a mirror-glass tower on Manners St. And yet he must. You must.

THE FOUR GREAT PROJECTS

I'm thinking now about how we close the gap. How we get the politicians, and the newspaper, and the public, and the officials who make so many of the decisions, and the companies that stand to make or lose so much money on the basis of how our world gets built, how we win all of them, or enough of them, to the grand cause.

Causes, actually, because I think there are four great projects in front of us.

I know, I'm given to melodrama, but I find it quite motivational to think of things worth doing in grandiloquent terms. We're building a city that's good and needs to be better, and for everyone professionally engaged with the built environment, I think that's an inescapable imperative.

You look at what we've been given, and then you look at what's been done to it, and there is a duty. You could call it a duty to atone, but you don't need to see it like that.

Auckland, the natural environmental, is inspirational: if you're working in it, don't you want to rise to its calling, measure yourself against it, honour it with your work? You can see it as the thing you contribute, or you can simply call it self-respect.

At any rate, building cities in which humans can thrive, that's what you as architects and I as a journalist who writes about it, that's what we're here for, isn't it?

There's so much to do.

1. THE INNER CITY

The City Rail Link, cut and covering its way block by block up Albert St, is going to disrupt everything, starting about now. Add the other major construction sites – upwards of 15 in the central city – and it's going to be chaos. This is fantastic. Disruption is the necessary prerequisite for people to think differently about how things can be. Yes, the street closures, traffic disruption and relocations of business do have the potential to create a kind of malicious fury that could play itself out in the council elections next year with disastrous consequences for urban design.

But they also have the potential to act as an impetus for Aucklanders to become excited about what's coming. They're an opportunity for experimentation – the trial of creative ad hoc solutions to problems: gantry walkways, anyone? Special public transport options for people in affected buildings? Temporary inner-city allotment gardens, the full separation of vehicle roads and pedestrian streets, and not just warnings but incentives to stop people bringing cars into the CBD. (Actually, I think we should stop talking about the "CBD", because that's not what it is any longer: the central city is home to tens of thousands of people now, not to mention the tertiary campuses, and it will have schools and therefore more children out and about before long too. Central city, not CBD, is what we say in Metro.)

The disruption up Albert St also has potential for the routes down Lorne St/ High St on one side and Federal St on the other to become much more popular and interesting pedestrian-focused boulevards. We should definitely take that chance.

And Queen St itself will be affected, so here's the chance to close blocks of that as well. Trials. Short-term. Pop up. Cheap and easy options. See what we can dream up that makes the city more fun and, in ways that it isn't now, also more functional. Because the big thing is: when they close part of Albert St, whichever part, if all that means is they put in temporary traffic rerouting, it's going to be miserable. For years. But if they take the chance to trial ways to make the city centre function well with fewer cars, then it's going to be thrilling.

It's the council that will get to decide, of course, along with that bastion of enlightenment, Auckland Transport. But they're not going to go wild all on their own. Every architect who's designing one of those new tower blocks, or renovating a bar, or doing anything inbetween, will be a part of it. Dare to dream, so the planning officers can.

2. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

What's the single most likely thing an Auckland architect could do to make him or herself genuinely famous? Apart from putting up an actual castle on a headland, that is. I'd say it's designing a complex with a thousand homes that works well and looks great and can be built for \$500 a square metre.

I know, jokes. But does it have to be a joke? This is one of the greatest needs we have in our built environment, isn't it? To design good homes that lots of people can afford to live in. I know about some of the difficulties: materials costs, shortage of builders who can work at scale, limitations on the supply chain, not least of that being limitations on the amount of prefabrication you can do, RMA and council approval processes... and most of you will know about these things far more intimately, and heartbreakingly, than me.

Yet this is the thing about architecture, isn't it? A generation came back from the war wanting to build a better world, and the next generation appropriated that impulse as its own, and then another generation realised that the 21st century would offer them very few of the sureties their forebears had taken and still take for granted, so they learned that a new set of values and skills would be required.

And yet... the world has not been made whole by the buildings in it.

Well, of course not. But how true today is the old complaint? You know, the public perception that architecture is devoted to luxury homes and, a fast-growing subset, luxury beach houses, and commercial buildings whose blandness means people don't notice them, or which have distinctive features that do get noticed, but only because they are widely disliked. Must be dispiriting.

It would be worse to be a dentist, I always think – every single customer, all day every day, hates being there, is frightened (with good reason) of pain, and hates you personally because you charge so much. None of those things, happily, is true of architects. No, wait.

The greatest failure in the world of architecture – which is subtly but importantly different from saying the greatest failure of architects – is that the population of a developed country like ours does not live, as a matter of course, in warm and dry homes. Yet change, profound change, is possible.

Music has adapted to new technologies, movies to an astonishing degree have done the same. Medicine, over the last 100 years, and really it's not even as long as that, has transformed public health. You probably want to argue that architecture has been transformative, that the reasons so many people live in homes that are not fit for them is not because of architecture.

Perhaps. It's not simple, I'll grant you that. But it strikes me that architecture, at least as it relates to the technologies available in the construction of domestic buildings, may be in much the same position as the internal combustion engine.

You know, invented 120 years ago and not much changed in any material respect since then. And now, as we know, it's right at the end of its life cycle. With apologies to all the car enthusiasts in the room – I know it's a thing, architects and their cars, though I have no idea why – your days as a devil-may-care driver on the public road are numbered.

But your days as an architect are not. Architects today, like vehicle manufacturers, have the opportunity to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. Homes that are lovely but are not mansions. Homes bunched together in ways that do not induce claustrophobia and hatred of one's neighbours; built in harmony with the environment and flexible enough for changing needs; warm and dry and long-lasting; and cheap. Scalable, to a really big number. And really cool.

My father was useless at this, by the way. The despair of his partners, I think I can say now, for the cost of his work, about which he cared less than the standards he set for himself in his own mind. The homes he created were beautiful, but they were definitely not scalable. The habitual expensiveness of his work posed problems for our own house, of course, because he could not really afford himself. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the syndrome.

So we installed the Batts – my god, what a job for a 12-year-old – and we painted the framing and sills, varnished the doors and the skirting – yes, we had wooden skirting to be varnished – and all the other beautiful wooden surfaces, and my father did the joinery, and we laid the lawn. And even when we moved in, it was as barely finished as a house can be and still be habitable.

He did not care, and nor did we. Our chicken coop was a hymn to open-plan family life, the physical manifestation of the idea that home is where the heart is, even if he personally made himself a study around the corner and out of the way.

It was an expression of hope and confidence and the pleasure to be found in fallibility: hope that we would all prosper as human beings by being together, emotionally and in every other way; confidence that a design-led solution was the right solution. And the pleasure of fallibility? As I mentioned, it was never finished, eventually only abandoned, and the fact of its being in a state of perpetual improvement gave my father immense satisfaction. It was bespoke. A thing well made, and I should mention that my dad was as good a carpenter as he was architect: his house expressed the singularity of his hand and heart and mind. All architects want that, at least once, I am sure.

But that's not really what architects are for. Or not all they are for. Scalable and cool: that's the true holy grail, isn't it? Well, I know, profitable as well, but if you get the other two done you know the money will follow.

It's worth the quest. Definitely worth the quest. Because hope and confidence, and the pleasure of being part of making something good: these are values everyone has the right to. So imagine, being the person who makes Albany a great place to live. Somebody has to.

Or Westgate Megaburb, or whatever the name is of that new town they're building out where highway 16 meets highway 18. Or Clendon Park, for that matter. Have you been to Clendon Park, way out in the Spartan southwest of the city? It has the cheapest property in Auckland and the greatest yield on investment. In other words, the houses are slums and the rents are too high. Clendon Park is a mission, if anyone is feeling missionary.

It's not just Auckland, of course. Building scalable and cool homes is one of the greatest challenges for everyone who creates the built environment, all over the world. In New Zealand terms, you could call it the Ian Athfield Legacy Challenge.

The greatest thing Ath ever did was the thing he didn't do – get his housing project built in Manila. Now, someone else in this country needs to wear the mantle: take it on themselves to create a brilliant design-and-build system to house the poor. That quite a lot of the not-poor will want to live in too. Of course, when I call it the Athfield Legacy, I don't mean it literally: these new homes really will need to be warm and dry.

3. THE TRANSPORT CORRIDORS AND THE TOWN CENTRES

I'm a fan of Mark Todd. The Ockham guy. It's not just because Ockham are sponsoring the NZ Book Awards, of which I'm a judge. I was a fan before that. But think about that for a moment: a property developer is the sponsor of our book awards – that's a cultural mashup right there worth getting excited about, if you ask me.

And yet, I'm not a fan of Mark Todd particularly because of the architecture. I don't think there's an Ockham building yet where you'd say, OMG, I get it now, we need heaps more of that. Apologies to any of his architects in the room, but good, yep, not yet great.

Why am I a fan of Mark Todd? Tell the truth, I know nothing about him. He might be an evil bastard. But in town-planning terms, he's one of the good guys. It's a great thing we've got going on in this town, that there are property developers who are good guys. His "exemplary apartment building" comp was brilliant, despite what that nutcase counselor Mike Lee thinks, and S3 Architects were a worthy winner.

And because there are developers like Mark Todd, in 10 years' time, in a streetscape like the top of Great North Rd, you're going to have a jumble of apartment blocks, reduced arterial traffic lanes, dedicated cycling lanes, separated parking, tramlines, plazas for cafes and kids' play parks and for the general perambulation of citizens, and a cinema, lots of shops, maybe another school.

And, yes, a Bunnings, but maybe they'll turn into good corporate citizens and build the new streetscape for us. And if you live there, or work there, or just want to ride over on your bike, you'll be able to enjoy one of the most spectacular sunsets in the city.

Ockham is only one of the property developers who will make that happen. Not just because of the buildings they'll put up, but because they will demand of council that, in return for buying into the vision of the Unitary Plan, the council will also genuinely buy into the plan itself, and reciprocate with planning procedures and incentives and whatever it takes to make the precinct work.

And here's the thing. The Unitary Plan is not a blueprint for hipsters to enjoy themselves in choice sites close to the city centre. That's a byproduct at best. It's a mechanism for the suburbs to get what they deserve. Vibrancy, choices for the citizens who live there. And for you guys, whether it's Great North Rd, Henderson, Panmure or Manukau or New Lynn, the opportunities are enormous – and the challenge, suddenly, is very real.

I listed some of the buildings earlier that are leading the way in this, and now New Lynn has risen up, and the question is, will it be magnificent or will it slump in on itself and become odd, and then sad, and then a travesty of what it should have been?

Think about Naenae, and Ernst Plischke. Scrape away the grime, and there's a graceful, human-scale town centre under there. But the grime runs so deep now, it's structural. It's not Plischke's fault Naenae turned into an urban wasteland. But what do you, what do we do, to stop that happening?

4. THE WATERFRONT

It beats me why Auckland is officially so proud of its waterfront. Well, it doesn't really. But it does surprise me that those who are so officially proud manage to get away with it. In my time in the city, the way I read it is: North Wharf was developed so the pressure would come off Quay St. I have almost nothing against North Wharf in itself. I like the Fearon Hay buildings, I like the integration with the water's edge an awful lot and I love that they left the railway tracks down.

Silo Park and the Gantry are great, and the stepped relationship of land and water at both the northeast and northwest corners of Wynyard have a potential that has still barely been touched. I saw a couple of dancers doing a show on a yacht, for people sitting on the Karanga Plaza steps, and it was funny and skilful and so much fun, but you'd expect there to be dozens of things like that.

On the other hand, I think the tram will remain ridiculous unless it's connected to Britomart, and, in a classic example of the Auckland spirit of "we had a good idea but we just didn't quite have the guts to do it properly", Jellicoe St allows cars through and even has bays for them to park in.

But, North Wharf good equals Quay St bad. The Cloud continues to sit there, unloved and increasingly unlovely. I'm sure Jasmax will be pleased to learn that I am not a heritage purist and I think we need more completely modern structures on the waterfront, although unlike Holcim and Ports of Auckland I'm not really thinking about breasts and nipples when I say that. But the Cloud has become extraordinarily difficult to use and therefore it is mostly empty, and that means it's in the way.

Shed 10 is terrific – I called it Auckland's building of the year back in 2013, and I haven't resiled from that at all. But it's a tease, isn't it? Great for festival crowds like the Street Food Fair a few weeks ago, great for special events like the America's Cup races, great for dinners and other functions upstairs, and yet as good as it is for what it does, it's also a reminder of what we don't have.

Every time I go in there, I think, wow, and I also think, where are the rest of them? Shed 11 is in storage and we need it back. Shed 10, along with the shed housing Jack Tar on North Wharf, is the reminder of what the waterfront of every self-respecting city with a harbour has lots of.

And we – well, they, the council and the government and the cruise ship operators and Ports of Auckland – have worked quite hard to ruin it with all the functional requirements entailed in it being a cruise ship terminal, including, most of all, that awful barren forecourt slash merry-go-round for taxis.

Queens Wharf, let's just say it's a work in progress. The pity of it, and the direct consequence of the development of North Wharf, is that the entire Quay St part of the waterfront precinct has been relegated to sometime/possibly-never status. So how about this for a project this summer – I'm sorry, I'm intolerably impatient – this summer, next summer. How about we just do this:

- No more cars parked up on Captain Cook and the cruise ships moved to Bledisloe. The cars, by the way: there is no Customs or Biosecurity or any other legal reason at all for them to be on the wharf. They're there because Ports of Auckland charges the car companies rent, which POAL wants to continue; and it's set at a level where that's just a slightly better deal for the companies than any of the alternatives.
- A summer concert series in the basin formed by Queen, Quay and Captain Cook, with the musicians on a barge and the audience on 3 sides. Rock music in all its glory, of course, but also the APO, and especially also opera. What else? Movies? Invent a new game where every Thursday night corporate teams have to knock each other off the barge with giant plastic hammers. Make it a Thing.
- Much more of the red fence opened up.
- The site of the Rainbow Warrior sinking turned into a big pop-up exhibition about climate change.

- Quay St traffic calmed and reduced, and pedestrian links out of Britomart pushed through to the water's edge.
- More Britomart transport centre connectivity. Sorry, just using a bit of jargon in case someone from Auckland Transport has snuck into the room. But honestly, we could be far better at encouraging people to catch trains and buses to go to events.

And when the cruise ships moved to Bledisloe, the cars should go, the other mixed freight should go and the containers should go. And all that should be paid for by leasing parts of the land.

Don't spend any money on it. Do it with traffic cones and a bit of planning for the cruise ships. Run it all the way through summer and into the Arts Festival, which is now annual and will come along in March. At the end of that, learn the lessons. Gigantic mistake? Nothing lost. Traffic and the trains great; concerts boring? Get better music. Too many nights too cold and windy? Pfff. This is Auckland. Not gonna happen.

It's impossible to think an ongoing Quay St Carnival couldn't be the start of something, and we need to have a start, because four years after Queens Wharf was opened and became the People's Wharf, it doesn't yet feel to me that we have started. By the way, I'm calling it The Quay to Summer. Geddit?

Then, stage two, spend the money. Not our money. The money we raise by levying developers who want to put up a couple of really tall tower blocks on the Quay St strip. Two beautiful buildings to stand as sentinels near the seaborne arrival point of our city. Spend the money to design all this up, make it a proper transformed waterfront.

And then, move the port. Now the thing about this is that the long-term future of the port – that's 50 years long – is, as you may know, currently being considered by the high-mindedly titled Port Future Study Consensus Working Group. Julie Stout is on it. A few other people who think similarly to Julie are also on it. But it's fraught.

I don't know what they're doing, because they have a code of silence. Julie's not supposed to talk about it. But remember this: the Ports of Auckland itself is well represented on the group, as is the shipping industry, the freight haulage industry, the Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturers Federation, the cruise-ship industry and several other outfits who don't want the port to be moved. Well organised, well funded, experienced at working together in the world of politics. The optimistic way to look at the Consensus Group is that it's a mechanism whereby people of character and vision may be able to achieve a paradigm shift in commercial thinking around the way the port and freight haulage help this city develop. Ba-boom.

That's the view I chose to take when I wrote about the port in Metro recently: aroused and enlightened by significant public opinion, officials of the council and port have a cunning and highly laudable strategy to secure the future of the Auckland port by orchestrating support for it to move, rather than condemning it to a life of endless political struggle. Because make no mistake, if it stays where it is that is exactly what will happen.

The cynical view is that the Consensus Group buys silence and time while POAL and their cronies work out how to jump-start their plan to push Bledisloe Wharf much further out into the harbour. Because they have not yet learned to lift their

horizons when trying to imagine the future and, remember, they have not yet abandoned the Bledisloe extension plan. On the contrary.

Julie needs our help. Or to put that another way, if we expect Urban Auckland and the mana whenua and Generation Zero and Stop Stealing Our Harbour and those councillors and MPs who do get it, to do this on their own, they will fail.

Or, to put that another way: the Consensus Group process provides the rest of us with an incentive and a mechanism to generate popular support for a decent, long-term outcome on the waterfront.

I suggested earlier that the biggest problem is the gap between the great dream of progress and the failure of the ambitious dreamers to win the decision-makers to their cause. This is the issue on which we can close that gap.

There's more. Part of what we need on the waterfront, and it's not something that can be started just with creativity and goodwill and a bunch of road cones, is a big brave building. I'm not going to say the "I" word. Well, maybe just once. "Iconic" has about as much resonance among architects as "passionate" does among people in my profession. They're both buzz words whose usual purpose is to rev us up, get us all excited by a Big Idea, but what they almost always signify is that the speaker has switched from thinking mode to slogan mode. And so the discourse gets derailed.

Which is a pity, because at heart slogans do have meaning. Passion has its place, and we do need big public buildings that stand for something greater than their own specific function.

Because the future of the waterfront can't be just bars and restaurants and picnic areas and playgrounds and concerts and luxury apartments, desirable as all those things are. It also needs something that gives it weight and heft. Something that helps legitimise the sense of importance we feel about place, and draws crowds, and uses the best location in the city to enable us to explore our own evolving culture. It's not the only thing we need, but it is an important part of what we need.

In fact, it could so easily be more than one thing: a pair of monumental wonder-venues, one on the Tank Farm and the other on the point of Freyberg Wharf, flanking those tall spires on Quay St I mentioned earlier, framing the city. Go on, why think merely big when you can think colossal?

A month ago I wrote about the port in Metro, and I'd like to read you just the end of that piece:

And then what? What happens to the land when the containers and the cars have gone? The possibilities are endless and, really, this is the last part of the puzzle. But sometimes it helps to imagine.

So, first, we could move the cruise ship berths from Queens Wharf (and Captain Cook, if that plan eventuates) to Bledisloe and Jellicoe. Create dedicated transport lanes for their provisioning and movement of passengers, so they're not mixed in with everything else, as happens now, ridiculously, on Queens Wharf.

Build a magnificent Museum of the Pacific devoted to migration stories and our relationship to the sea, reaching from deep history into the future, presented

with cutting-edge technology to offer visitors a series of thrillingly immersive experiences. Travel on a waka from Hawaiki. Crew an America's Cup yacht. Swim with whales. A triumph of entertainment and education, a showcase of the richness of our cultures and of our open-minded, open-hearted skills as technological and social leaders determined to embrace the future. This would be our Sydney Opera House and it would claim careers and swallow fortunes and be much, much harder than anyone brave enough to take it on ever thought. And it would be totally worth doing.

Also on the current port site: apartment blocks for the very wealthy. Of course. They'll fund other developments. And office buildings too. And parkland, canals and islands, a beach and a big range of recreation facilities. A hospitality sector with bars and restaurants. A stadium too. All of it, as a whole, designed to return an income to the city, because it's our waterfront. And woven all the way through it, a dedication to the idea that Auckland, finally, will honour the history and culture of the people who made the city possible, through their generosity with the land in the first place. Yes, the mana whenua.

It will take 50 years to build. The people who start it will die before it's finished. That's what long-term planning means. We have to do this.

You have to admit, it's a better dream – a better legacy – than giving Wellington a couple of pandas. And isn't that what this is all about? Architecture: the delight of humanity. It has a better claim than zoos.

I've got nothing against pandas, and I know animals provide architects with some of their most-fun clients – just ask Glamuzina Paterson and their giraffes. But if it turns out that gaping at pandas is all our society aspires to, then what? Even if you got the contract to design their enclosure, you know there wouldn't be half the happiness in it that my father, home from the war and full of hope, got from his chicken coop.

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