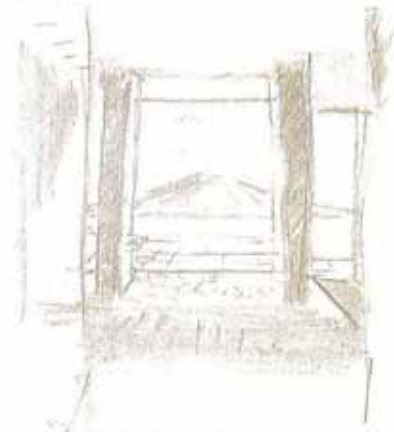


Architecture without disguise

In the Congreve House, space, form and materials unite to create a sensuous experience with an intriguing psychological resonance.

ATRICK REYNOLDS



MY SECOND VISIT TO THE CONGREVE house had a clandestine motive, concealed by the ostensible purpose of photography. In the few weeks since my initial visit, the architecture of this place had gently invaded my consciousness to the extent that I imagined I had been acquainted with the house, and its inner life, for much longer than the two hours of my first encounter. It seemed appropriate that I should conceal this sense of familiarity, particularly as I had not yet met its owners.

The sense of anticipation was insistent, and reminded me of the time I detoured across southern France to revisit the Cistercian monastery of Le Thoronet. And yet the lack of any apparent connection between these architectures perplexed me. A designer's stratagem suggested itself – leave perplexity to age awhile in the bottle, and attend first to the immediate and the obvious.

What is immediately obvious about Robin and Erika Congreve's house is that it

Congreve House
Takapuna, Auckland
 Architect
Pip Cheshire, Jasmx Architects

7,8,9 From the courtyard, the Rangitoto view is a narrow glimpse seen through the house itself, and along the courtyard's northern and southern edges.

10,11 Four massive concrete columns which frame the Rangitoto view mark a room within a room in the living area.

emphasised that the architect's concern is still with an integration of architecture and setting – but now the setting becomes integrated into a new (ie designed) spatial context which is itself a clear response to that setting. In this way an assertive architecture becomes possible, legitimised by the philosophical premise that "strong landscapes demand strong buildings, so that the power of each is magnified".⁹

Cheshire's response was to place the cube of the house towards the front of the site, extensively glazed in the direction of Rangitoto (the Congreves admit to an obsession with this view). A carefully modelled facade appears to strike up a dialogue with the object of its focus. A cliff-edge water pool with concealed outer rim invites the gaze to bounce off its surface to the island beyond, and a sitting terrace has been carefully set down into the front lawn to avoid interruption of any kind. A



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tongue-like loggia at the northeast corner of the house curls gently in the direction of the upper Rangitoto channel – an inflection with obvious sources in the work of Snozzi. All these are gestures of inhabitation of an appropriately abstract kind, unsullied by the portable barbecue and all the other accoutrements of outdoor living.

Outdoor living is far more invitingly provided for at the other end of the site, in a courtyard which is surely one of the most evocative outdoor spaces in this part of the world. Here Cheshire works themes of enclosure, depth and outlook into an experience which is simultaneously memorable, familiar and unique. The

Rangitoto view is now no longer a panorama, but a narrow glimpse seen through the house itself, along both northern (pool) and southern (colonnade) edges of the courtyard. The southern edge marks an axis of movement through the house from distant water, across land (first natural and then re-formed as house and courtyard) and culminating in an upwards inflection (via stairway and aerofoil canopy) to the sky.

Apart from the loggia at the northeast corner of the house and the cantilevered slab which serves as a balcony to the main bedroom, nowhere do the formal gestures of Cheshire's architecture reach out to Rangitoto (at an early stage various arms were considered but rejected). Rather, Rangitoto is invited into the house by the axial spine about which the plan has been organised (but hardly ordered). The architect has consciously decided not to align this spine with the summit of the island, and so one's first view of Rangitoto from within the house is of a narrow slice somewhere through its mid slopes. The idea of slicing Rangitoto is encountered more literally at the entry, where a number of cross sectional profiles of the island are represented as horizontal stiffening bars to the glass front door. Early sketches show



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4 house models itself upon the work of these Ticino architects, but refers to them to illustrate a philosophical and aesthetic position. This position has been simply stated by Livio Vacchini (for whose work, along with that of fellow Ticinese Luigi Snozzi, Cheshire declares an admiration). Vacchini observes that in architecture, although variety is perfectly legitimate, it must not be forgotten that the "one" precedes the "multiple".¹ This is particularly so in the case of the individual house.

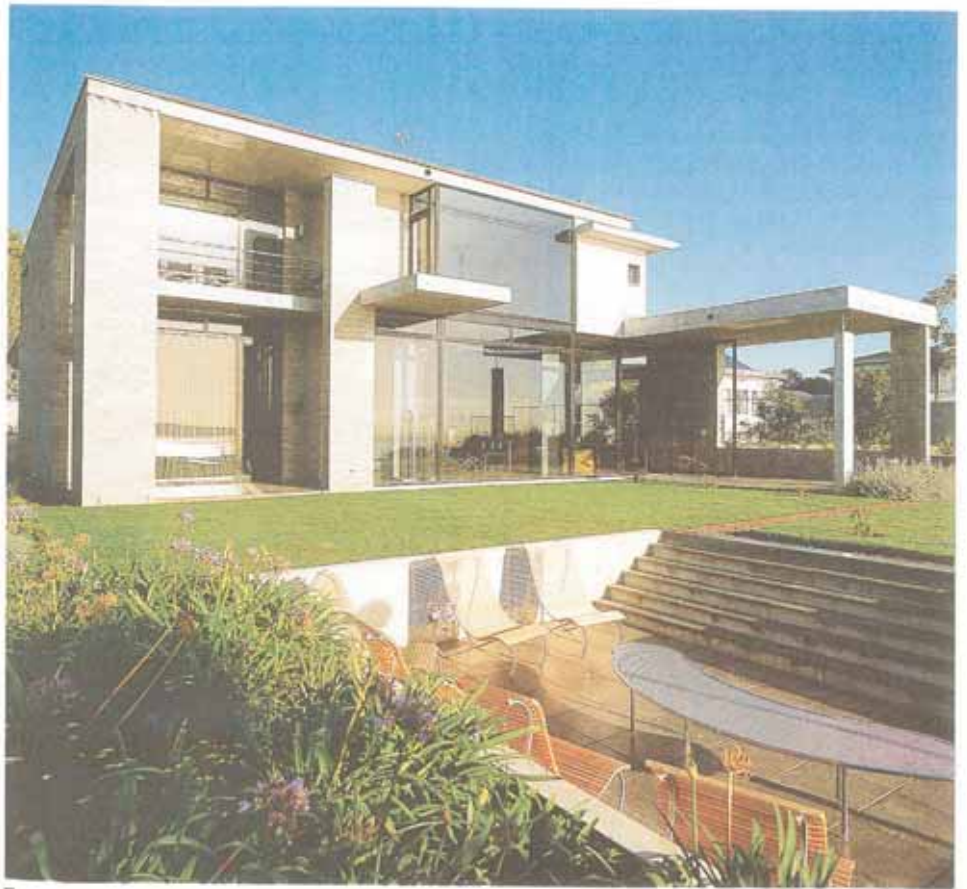
But the Congreve house alludes to more than the architecture of Italian neo-rationalism (the so-called *Tendenza* movement) as it has developed in southern Switzerland. The influences of Louis Kahn and Corbusier are present also – the latter via his Ahmadabad projects in particular – while the pool house pays homage to the studies of the Dutch painter van Doesburg (founder of the *De Stijl* movement) and architect van Eesteren, upon which Gerrit Rietveld based his now famous Schroeder house. But each of these modernist sources is no more than an individual thread in a fabric of inspiration upon which architect and clients have together established and developed their project. This fabric can be sensed only by experiencing the architecture directly.

Standing outside the walls and within the public domain, this experience is of an abstract and sculptural architecture which speaks of the sheer mass and materiality of its concrete construction (Cheshire seems to delight in knowing that the house weighs 2200 tonnes but being vague about its total floor area). This kind of architecture needs the pocket park alongside it, but cannot be accused of

4 Incisions in the south-eastern corner leave its primary form intact.

5 The carefully modelled eastern facade appears to strike up a dialogue with the object of its focus, Rangitoto.

6 The Congreve house's compositional strategy alludes to houses by the "*Tendenza*" architects, such as this Grignoli-designed house in Ticino, southern Switzerland.



5 dominating it. Conversely it could also be argued that the park (which has no more legal status than that of a road reserve) may one day need the house – not merely as an elegant edge but perhaps to ensure its future as an open ground. For it is inconceivable that an architecture which so clearly responds to the public domain could be concealed by (unknown) future development of the reserve.

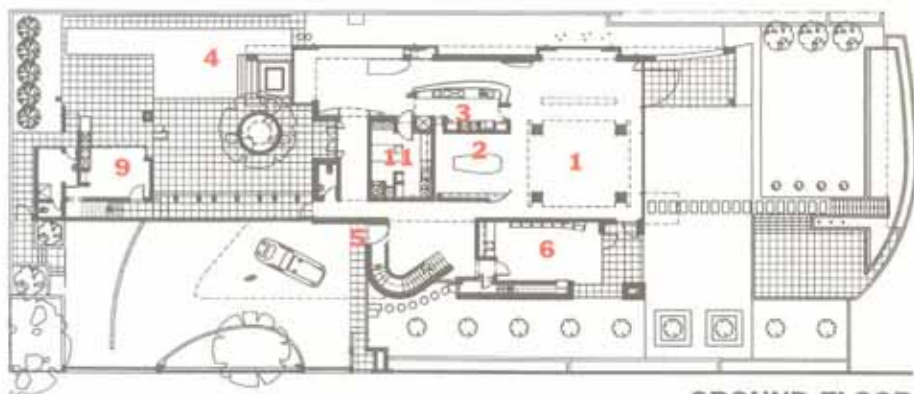
Figuring strongly in the fabric of inspiration is the house's cliff-edge setting. Cheshire has not allowed the architecture to become a mere exercise in contextualism – the making of deferential gestures to a powerful context. It is in this regard that the Ticino precedent makes its most significant contribution. Luigi Snozzi has stated: "The real problem is not the insertion of a building into the environment, but rather the creation of a new environment."² Lest this stance be misinterpreted as arrogance, it should be ▶



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FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

12,13 The experience of being drawn from entry towards the light and view, and laterally from untamed Rangitoto channel to tamed courtyard pool, is visceral rather than cerebral.

14 In the protective lee of the house, the poolhouse dematerialises its volume as a free composition of horizontal and vertical planes.

15 The simplicity of the plan draws attention to the tactile and material qualities of the elements that define each space.



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Palladio) terms "the necessary room".

Despite the subtleties of the plan, its simplicity ensures that scenographic effects (which so often tempt the architect of the large house) are avoided in favour of architectural qualities. Attention is drawn directly to the tactile and material qualities of the elements that define each space. Thus acoustic ceiling panels are slung beneath the slab soffit with their supporting structure visible at the edges. Some working surfaces (for example the counter top in the dining area and the treads of the main staircase) have been polished to reveal the aggregate (and even reinforcing steel), and to distinguish them from adjacent concrete brickwork. The kitchen bench with canopy above floats free from the primary structure. And the built-in cabinet in the study has been faced with horizontal timber fins that slide over the brick wall as an independent element.

By these means the primary structure of the house as finished surface asserts itself in every space. This has required rigorous standards of workmanship, and the development of apparently effortless detailing (for example where glazing frames meet floors and walls). In this country there are few architects willing to subject themselves to such rigour, and Cheshire willingly concedes that an

(almost life threatening) obsessiveness was necessary. He recounts a moment when standing at the cliff edge and looking back on an all-but-completed architecture, he experienced the acceptability of some kind of personal annihilation.

Remembered with more humour is the occasion when architect, client and contractor apprehensively inspected a soffit to the first floor slab, heavily stained with rust – the result of a week of rain that had delayed the concrete pour. The soffit was to be the finished ceiling and the question which hovered beneath the newly exposed surface was: how might the offending stains be removed? It was decided that the stains in fact gave no offence. Not so where rust marks had spread down concrete brick walls. An acid wash was found to solve this problem, but this etched the surface to highlight the fine aggregate of the bricks. Thus all the brick surfaces had to be so treated. Fortunately, removing the surface skin of cement has given the surfaces a silvery quality. Cheshire's decision to use bricks rather than concrete blocks followed from his observation that whereas a wall made from individual concrete blocks is perceived as just that, the smaller size of the brick allows the wall to be read as a textured surface, thus helping to establish a stronger architectural presence. But available bricks

were of unacceptable proportions, and after contemplating the use of Italian bricks (and even the notion of employing Japanese expertise to complete the house entirely in in-situ concrete), an agreement was reached with a local manufacturer to make new bricks to Cheshire's specifications.

Although no time limits were placed on the contractors, construction was completed within a year and the owners were in occupancy for Christmas dinner. Anticipating the pressure to maintain quality in the construction process, Cheshire recalled an account by Australian architect Glenn Murcutt of how he meets all involved in the building process at the start of construction to explain his hopes for the project. Cheshire staged a similar meeting, speaking from a truck deck, with the aid of a model of the building. He still views this as an important step in cementing a good relationship with those on site, and as a way of explaining in advance why he would be "difficult" about (for example) placing ladders against the brick walls, and other common practices. The message was underlined when Jim Dawson (technical director from Jasmax) had the first two concrete brick walls taken down and rebuilt.

But however much confidence the clients had in the architect, the experience of standing in a damp, acrow-prop filled ▶

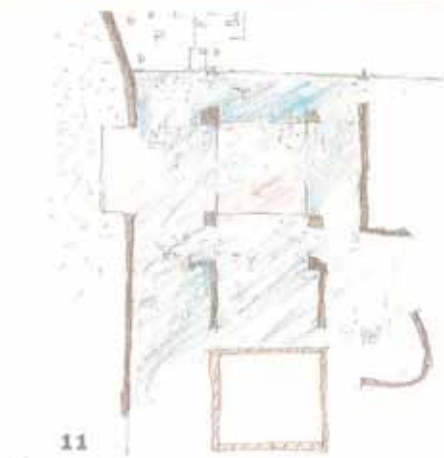


JOHN PETTIT

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the architect's concern to particularise the Rangitoto view by placing elements between the observer and the view. Significant amongst these elements are the four massive concrete columns which mark an aedicular space (room within a room) within the living area and which frame the Rangitoto view as one enters this area. The view from the three-sided enclosure of the dining room is similarly mediated in a planning configuration which recalls the megaron scheme of antiquity. Thus the architecture enables occupants to establish a unique relationship with the view. In doing so, one is held within spaces of remarkably commodious proportions. The aedicular space, for example, measures approximately six metres square, situated within a space of nine by 11 metres, and with a height approaching four metres. Sitting here, one feels directly in touch with the architecture. Yet this part of the house (and its extension into the dining space) has already been the setting for an operatic recital with 180 guests.

This progression of elementary space types, from the powerfully enclosed and dimly lit entry hall, to the aedicular sitting space and the bay-form dining room, announces a plan organised with disarming simplicity and directness. In this regard it is



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like Tendenza architecture, in contrast to Robert Venturi's approach, in which collage-like compositions celebrate "complexity and contradiction" in order to respond to the multifarious contents of the modern world, and point towards an informal and often additive compositional approach – the architecture of the "decorated shed" – with which we are familiar in this country.

The simplicity and directness of the Congreve plan is not the result of some *a priori* moral stance on the part of either architect or client, but rather the outcome of a painstaking process of collaborative development by both. All agree that the decision not to rush the design made

possible a highly successful layout from all points of view. Erika Congreve recalls the contradictory nature of their brief: plenty of walls (for the hanging of paintings), plenty of glass, and a preference for open planning. The latter was the result of living in a New York loft-type apartment, although Cheshire was quick to realise that an "open plan" would be unresponsive to the variety of activities and occasions which the house would be expected to support.

However, an open planning strategy has been used to link formal living with kitchen and family areas, in a simple progression from east to west. A full height folding and sliding screen made up of several curved panels effectively separates kitchen from formal living.

That such a sober plan (it could be the plan of a much smaller house), set between uniform floor and ceiling planes, should have resulted in such an inviting sequence of spaces is intriguing. And as if in response to cerebral intrigue, Cheshire has offered architectural intrigue, for example with a fleeting glimpse of the workings of the kitchen seen from the entry hall via floor to ceiling gashes in the dining room walls; or the secret staircase from an upper level bedroom which allows its occupant to emerge discreetly from the shadows into ▶

Congreve House
Takapuna, Auckland
Architect
Pip Cheshire, Jasmx Architects

the formal entry hall, or even more discreetly (via a carefully disguised concrete brick faced exterior door) to exit into the night.

But perhaps the greatest intrigue of the plan is visceral rather than cerebral – the experience of being drawn from entry towards the light and view, and in moving laterally to become caught up in the current of space that courses along the northern edge of the plan between the untamed Rangitoto channel (first captured by the loggia-like terrace) and the tamed water that defines the northern edge of the rear courtyard. Not until one follows this course into the glazed projection of the family area do the courtyard and poolhouse reveal their secrets. And in the protective lee of the house itself, the poolhouse is able to dematerialise its volume as a free composition of horizontal and vertical planes, establishing axes that address the house, the courtyard, and at an upper level the public domain.

Thus that part of the architecture first glimpsed from the public approach is the last to be discovered by the visitor. Only those acquainted with the house are aware that a short passageway links front door to the family room and courtyard. Protecting this access from the more formal parts of the house is what Cheshire (following



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 Architect
Pip Cheshire, Jasmx Architects

1,2 Articulated walls hint at the tripartite architectural scheme (house, courtyard and poolhouse) beyond.

3 Without imposing itself on the neighbouring road reserve or hiding behind a mute boundary wall, the architecture presents a striking composition of rectilinear and free-form elements.



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is not the definitive New Zealand house. Pip Cheshire speaks of a preoccupation from the outset with an architecture of massiveness, permanence, bruteness – not to cause a change, but to mark a change which has to do with a country now more certain about its place in the world, an acknowledgement of multiple heritages, strong landforms and clear convictions – already apparent in other art forms, but yet to leave a mark upon architecture.

Once a permanent occupation of the

land becomes conceivable, then so too does architecture as a conscious exercise in object-making. This idea has been seized upon by Cheshire and uncompromisingly pursued. And it is as a permanent object that the house presents itself to public gaze.

As it approaches the site, Winscombe Street rises gently towards the Takapuna cliff edge and terminates as a reserve the size of a residential lot, while the road turns sharply right parallel to the cliff, becoming Seacliffe Avenue. The reserve's northern edge abuts the house site, and provides a domain from which the house's public face can be viewed.

Without imposing itself upon the reserve, the architecture presents a striking composition of rectilinear and free form elements – all in concrete – as an edge to this pocket park. In the hands of a lesser architect, this edge might simply have been privatised with a mute boundary wall, but Cheshire's skilful articulations acknowledge both public and private conditions, and achieve a resultant sense of urbanity while satisfying suburban building height and setback constraints.

This edge has been articulated by two offset walls – one belonging to the house itself, the other (set further back) defining the southern edge of a north facing courtyard to the rear of the house and continued to become a belvedere lookout with pool house at court level below. These two east-west walls are linked by a return

wall from which floats the hull-like entry canopy. This wall curves in plan at its external corner, marking the curvature of the main staircase within. These walls disclose something of the tripartite architectural scheme (house, courtyard and poolhouse-belvedere) which lies beyond. (A fourth element – the garage – shares a basement with a plantroom and a small movie theatre.)

But this is not simply an architecture of walls, for the monolithic form of the house also asserts itself. This cubic volume has been partially exposed by incisions made in its outside shell, for example where the curve of the staircase wall slices obliquely through, creating the opportunity for a vertical strip of glazing which lights the entry hall. Glass walls and an upper bedroom balcony are also revealed through incisions which leave the southeast corner of the primary form of the house intact as a giant box section column. Although largely unfamiliar in this country, it is a compositional strategy which has been explored and honed to a fine pitch in the Ticino region of southern Switzerland, where since the 1960s there has been a remarkable flowering of architecture in which powerful sculptural presences match an equally powerful landscape.

Best known of the Ticino architects is Mario Botta. While it is true that Cheshire has closely studied Botta's extensive use of concrete brickwork (including the twisted course motif which caps the Congreve house), the compositional strategy at work here is better illustrated by reference to such Ticino houses as Flora Ruchat's own house, or the Tamborini house by Grignoli and Panzeri. I do not suggest that the Congreve

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concrete box watching the progress of rust stains, and attempting to reconcile this with the home that had grown in their imaginations during six years of discussion and design development, must have been nerve-racking. Completed and inhabited, the building nowhere reveals signs of a loss of nerve by either architect or owners. The result is an architecture without disguise of any kind, in which space, form and material unite to create a purely sensuous experience which (to use Colin Wilson's telling phrase) achieves a "psychological resonance for which there is no ready explanation."

Architecture's potential to achieve such resonance is obviously a pressing matter to Cheshire. He recalls his experience of visiting Corbusier's pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp in these terms and speaks of architecture's potential to engage us directly via the manipulation of space and material. This potential, he argues, is "always at the table of architecture but not often spoken to".

If Colin Wilson's view is accepted, then our collective reticence is due not to any lack of conviction that these are important matters, but rather to the lack of a ready explanation. Wilson's own explanation, explored in his recent book, is based on the idea of a body-language: a pre-verbal language of the senses that taps the roots of the imagination. The idea of such a language is not new (Geoffrey Scott alluded to it for example, in *The Architecture of Humanism*, published in 1914), although Wilson's treatment of the idea is. Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Adrian Stokes, Wilson argues for a language based on the experience (and associated feeling) of being enveloped or exposed, or on the threshold between these. He proposes that "architecture is the organisation of such experiences into spatial 'figures' which match the operational and ritual patterns of a building".

These spatial figures include the totally enclosed room; the room without a ceiling (or courtyard); the room within a room (or aedicule); the room with one or more walls removed (for example the bay-form and the loggia); and the threshold or place of pause, looking two ways between outer and inner.



The proportioning and sequential relationship of such figures becomes crucial, since it will govern the way in which these two extremes (of envelopment and exposure) are conveyed to us. Wilson observes that even in excellent buildings one or other of these conditions usually predominates, but he agrees with Stokes that it is uniquely the role of the masterpiece to make possible the simultaneous experience of being inside and outside, of envelopment and detachment, of oneness and separateness.¹

Entering the enclosed volume of the Thoronet abbey through a single defensive doorway, crossing the church to the colonnaded cloister around an open courtyard, climbing the stone staircase to the monks' dormitory, stepping onto the terrace alongside the dormitory and viewing the courtyard below and the hills of Provence beyond, registering the careful proportions and sequence of the spatial figures of this architecture, is a personal recollection which has linked itself directly with the visceral charge of the Congreve house.² But the magic of both experiences may be more fully understood in terms of the propositions of Colin Wilson and Adrian Stokes.

In the numerous sketchbooks that Pip Cheshire filled during the genesis of the design, one finds drawings which clearly depict the spatial figures that Wilson speaks of. According to Cheshire, the purpose of these conceptual sketches was "to keep me honest" – to ensure no loss of intention or nerve – while working in the gap between the idea and its execution. Other sketches hint at his compulsion to offer a condensed potent architectural experience at every turn. My favourite is the drawing which shows a precarious

descent by wicker basket to the beach below, with the house as a secure refuge on the cliff top above – a delicious mix of levity and gravity that would doubtless be well received by Adrian Stokes himself.

But perhaps more to the point, 18 months after that momentous Christmas dinner, how do the owners experience their house? "Exciting, yet peaceful, almost meditative." Opposite conditions, but experienced simultaneously, suggesting that this place is, by Stokes' definition, something of a masterpiece. It is this prospect which marks the Congreve house as a most unusual and significant achievement in New Zealand architecture.

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