"... ponderously pedantic pediments prevail ... good, clean fun in a bad, dirty world": New Zealand Architecture in the 1980s: a one day symposium

Friday 4th December 2009

ABSTRACTS

Kathy Dudding "The Wabi Sabi of the Asylum (film work in progress)"

The 1980s heralded the beginning of deinstitutionalisation of state psychiatric hospitals within the program of the "New Zealand Experiment." The hospitals were closed or partially closed and responsibility for the care of patients placed in their families and communities. In 1989, Wellington Area Health Board announced the partial closure of Porirua Hospital. Today the remains of the hospital's architecture stand as a testament to past ideas and attitudes towards treatment and containment.

My film *The Wabi Sabi of the Asylum* considers this architectural history of Porirua Hospital. The buildings and landscape are interrogated visually along the lines of the Japanese idea of "wabi sabi": "an aesthetic sensibility that finds a melancholy beauty in the impermanence of all things". Using my video camera in the manner of a documentary photographer taking stills, the detritus of the old hospital site is observed through a still frame, the only movement being patterns of light. This visual style intersects at the boundaries of architectural photography and video art.

One of the buildings designs focussed on in the film is the modernist villa, created by Government architects in the 1940s. Since the hospital closed, three of the five original buildings have been demolished. Like the patients they once housed, the two remaining villas are absent within New Zealand's modernist architectural history - “Out of sight, out of mind.” The film seeks to reinstate these villas in this history as well as reveal insights to resistance from the health authorities to their design. The film uses archival film to reinstate this history: two home movies of a cricket game on the grounds shot in different periods illustrate the transformation of the original flat roofs to sloped in response to leaks.

Post-deinstitutionalisation the only new buildings at the Porirua site are acute wards and a forensic unit. Nowadays it is very difficult to obtain admittance for treatment. The *Wabi Sabi of the Asylum* considers how in the absence of architecture and landscape as a therapeutic environment for mental health treatment, in particular depression, medication is now relied on. In considering the contemporary care of people with depression, the film meditates on the architecture of the past and the histories projected upon these traces to frame the question: are we now necessarily any more enlightened?

Duncan Joiner "Architecture Supernova: The Office of the Government Architect in the 1980s"

A stellar supernova burns brightly before it implodes and radiates energy throught its galaxy. The decade in which the office of the Government Architect ceased to exist was one in which it was highly influential on New Zealand architecture and reinforced its strong international reputation. It shone increasingly brightly before being extinguished in 1988.

In addition to designing dozens of buildings throughout the country during the 1980s, the Office of the Government Architect developed new approaches to seismic design, which were used in new buildings and which also made possible the retention of many historic or otherwise valued buildings. The Office also developed strong protocols for assessment, retention, and re-use of heritage buildings. Other influences developed in the Office of the Government Architect during that decade

include its world famous Post Occupancy Evaluation methods, participatory briefing, the research and information service provided to architects and the industry by Architectural Research and Development Unit (ARDU), and Buildspec which was the fore-runner of the now proprietary Masterspec.

During this period working relationships were developed with public and private environmental and design agencies in Britain, Australia, and North America, and the work of the Government Architect was exhibited at the RIBA. The Office was also fiscally and business savvy as evidenced by its work for the Public Expenditure Committee in the first half of the decade under the chairmanship of Hon Marylin Waring. It enthusiastically embraced commercialisation of public architecture and this ironically lead to its being extinguished.

The significance of these influences and their legacy for New Zealand architecture are described and discussed in this paper. The residual energy was powerful enough to establish, during a time of deep financial depression, what is now the successful international practice of Opus Architecture.

Kate Linzey "The Auckland School of Music, Post-Modernism & Nervous Laughter"

In 1984, the book-of-the-television-show *The Elegant Shed* was released by Otago University Press, and subsequently reviewed by Libby Farrelly in *NZ Architect* (1985) n. 2 (pp. 39-40). Declaring the cover "wholly seductive... glutinous sensuality," but its contents only "occasionally brilliant," Farrelly asks a lot of a not very big volume: to be "a definitive treatise on New Zealand's architecture." Though concluding that such a demand was "unspporting" Farrelly's persistent fear is that David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin lacked a "valiant idea."

The review included the plan of Hill, Manning, Mitchell Architects' design for the Auckland School of Music. Citing Mitchell's comment in *The Elegant Shed* that "there was no logical connection between the side of a grand piano and the shape of a noise deflecting wall," Farrelly warns that such arbitrary aesthetics condemns architecture to mere "applique."

Though "applique" is not, strictly speaking, collage, patching together is an apt description of the design process evident in the Music School plan. In their description of the design Hill, Manning, Mitchell Architects tauntingly declared that the project contains elements of "Baroque, Spanish Mission and Post-Modern" architecture (*NZ Architect* (1981) n. 5/6, pp. 1-3), and suggested that their transition from being "straight-line modernists" to "sensuous and baroque... [is] not unexpected in middle age."

This paper will discuss Manning & Mitchell's design of the Auckland Music School in the context of their own writings and seminal international texts on the post-modern architecture, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972) and *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966) by Robert Venturi et al. and Colin Rowe's *Collage City* (1978). I will argue that the hardest thing for architecture to bear/bare, especially New Zealand architecture, is a sense of humour.

Paul Litterick "Lifestyle, Heritage and Identity in New Zealand's Architectural Culture"

I will discuss how architecture was presented and received during the 1980s in the non-specialist print media: magazines and books intended for the general public. During the decade, both the magazine and book publishing industries enjoyed unprecedented growth. The magazine sector saw the dominance of the *New Zealand*

Listener challenged by new titles. Of these, *Auckland Metro* is the most interesting for architectural culture, since it published regular critiques (by the likes of Peter Shaw, Hamish Keith, David Mitchell and Pip Cheshire) of buildings and of town planning in Auckland. It also documented the rise and fall of the property developers, while arguing for the protection of historic buildings. Equally remarkable, though, is how *Metro*'s interest in the civic aspects of architecture waned during the middle of the decade, as it became less concerned with politics and more with 'lifestyle.' It emphasis shifts from public buildings to private houses, and discussion of these houses is centred more on the client than the architect. At the same time, individual architects are pictured as men (and sometimes women) of style, alongside fashion designers and hairdressers.

This movement towards lifestyle can be found in other publications of the period and represents a withdrawal from the public square to the private space. Architecture is represented less as a public concern and more as a personal desire - about finding the ideal home. This acquisitive and aspirational interest in architecture is represented most clearly in the *Trends* family of publications, but also in books of the period.

A contiguous development was a growing interest in historic buildings. These are shown both as desirable places to live, but also as representations of New Zealand identity. Old buildings also became an important aspect of New Zealand's tourist industry. One important part of this representation is in the work of art photographers, such as Robin Morrison and Laurence Aberhart.

Parallels obviously can be made with the political climate of the decade, with its emphasis on personal gain and the dismantling of the public sphere by privatisation and de-regulation. Equally apparent is the contradiction of New Zealand discovering its heritage at a time when the historic buildings of its cities were being demolished. During the decade, buildings, architects and architecture become totems of larger forces in New Zealand society: of a nostalgia for the recent past, of progress to a brighter future and of a rediscovery of collective identity.

Douglas Lloyd Jenkins "The Last New Building in Napier: Paris Magdalinos and the *UFS Dispensary building* (1987)"
This paper examines Paris Magdalinos' *UFS Dispensary building* (1987) arguing its claim for recognition as potentially the last new building ever built in Napier's CBD.

Romanian born and of Greek parentage Paris Magdalinos, arrived in New Zealand as a young refugee in 1953. Employed by the Ministry of Works' he went on study architecture at Auckland University. At 30 he set up in partnership with Len Hoogerbrug before establishing his own business, Paris Magdalinos Architects. In 1980 he had his first brush with the cancer that eventually claimed him (in 2008) and announced from that moment on "I really want to do architecture well." The UFS Dispensary is testament to that decision.

A superbly sophisticated example of a small scale post modern building, described by Peter Shaw as "more Art Deco than the original" – the *UFS Dispensary building* has long been the subject of widespread invective, used as an example of what "should not be repeated." In large part this attitude stemmed from the demolition of a 1930s building in the Spanish Mission style in preparation for the construction of UFS but also from the timing of the development, coinciding as it did with the emergence of the Art Deco Trust, a powerful, if amateur, player in determining the appearance of Napier's CBD.

By revisiting the controversy that surrounded the design and construction of the *UFS Dispensary building* this paper highlights the essential conflict that lies under the surface of Napier, Art Deco City while at the same time offering an alternative reading as to the origins of post-modern architecture.

Christine McCarthy "Bi-cultural architecture"
The 1980s appears to be the first time in New Zealand that bi-culturalism, a term first coined in Canada in 1940, became linked to New Zealand architecture. The 1980s was a period when the significance of Maori art and culture was increasingly apparent. Te Kohanga Reo was established in Wainuiomata in 1982, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* won the 1985 Booker Prize. The enormously successsful "Te Maori" exhibition, the first international exhibition of Maori taonga, opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1984, later touring New Zealand in 1986 renamed: "Te Maori: Te Hokinga mai. The Return home."

The cultural and political inevitabilities of the *Tangata Whenua* (1974) television series, the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal (1975), the Maori Land March (1975), the republication of Dick Scott's *The Parihaka Story* (1954) as *Ask that Mountain* (1975), the Bastion Point protests (1977-78), the occupation of Raglan Golf Course (1978), and the Springbok Tour (1981), meant that by the 1980s Pakeha and Maori were questioning their relative postions in New Zealand society.

In architecture the success of urban marae, the construction of institutional marae (e.g. Waipapa Marae, University of Auckland by Ivan Mercep, Jasmax, 1988), and the recognition of John Scott's Futuna Chapel as bi-cultural, twinned with a growing awareness of the asymmetrical privileging of Pakeha over Maori, would all contribute to a greater motivation for biculturalism in architecture. This paper examines the development of the use of the term "bicultural architecture" in New Zealand, and the architecture proposed as warranting it, during this period of New Zealand's history.

Bill McKay and Briar Green "The I in Architecture in the Eighties"
The 1980s may be seen internationally as the decade of Post Modernism, a movement that questioned meaning and the intentions behind many other architectural movements. But in New Zealand it seems that what was happening in the '80s may have had less to do with buildings; more to do with the issues and identity of the architect - although that too could be characterised as Post Modern.

This is seen in the early '80s in the extent to which architects took on issues that reflected not just their immediate role, but their personal identity and beliefs: issues of political and social responsibility including gender, race, cultural identity, apartheid, poverty, community, nuclear weapons and so on. Architects mounted protests, both legal and in the form of pickets, against the demolition of buildings. Architects wrestled with moral issues such as whether to work with certain clients such as developers.

The later half of the decade can be seen to be quite a contrast, but it still focused on the architect rather than the architecture. There emerged a who's who of architects that you might wish to choose to do your architecture, or guide your lifestyle. Architects had certainly been famous before in New Zealand, for example Athfield, just a few years earlier, but that was for architecture: now we saw celebrity. Pete Bossley appeared in a whiskey advertisement (and was censured for it by the NZIA), Noel Lane and Rick Priest appeared in a *Metro* magazine article: "Men of Style." Even the plethora of architecture publications in the '80s could be characterised as being personal views rather than being driven by academic or theoretical imperatives, notably Melling's writings and Mitchell's *Elegant Shed*.

This paper surveys these issues particularly through the eye of the Institute of Architect's publication. In a way this reflected the arc of the '80s, the role of the architect and the points of this paper as it went through a number of changes and morphed from journal to magazine.

Guy Marriage "Chase Corp: Force or Farce?"
During the 1980s, one company grew to symbolise New Zealand's unhealthy obsession with money. Chase Corp appeared as the pinnacle of the New Zealand dream – tall buildings, high finance, the sky was the limit. At last we were joining the big time. The mantra "Greed is Good" was taken to heart in New Zealand, by architects, developers, and much of the public – at least in Auckland and Wellington. Glittering towers of mirrored glass appeared weekly in the press, promising to change the face of the city for ever. The reality was different: poorly designed, badly built buildings were financed by shady deals, and heritage was destroyed casually, with little thought for the consequences. This paper will attempt to unravel some of the work undertaken by Chase Corp during the 1980s.

Gill Matthewson "Where were you in '82?"
A number of moves in the seventies had meant that more women than ever before were in architecture schools and by the eighties they were flooding into the profession. Over the decade their numbers quadrupled as women moved from the exception to the norm. But their impact was variable. This paper will try to tease out that impact from women-only practices to support groups to what they published to moves away from the profession.

Tyson Schmidt ""We don't have time for that carry-on anymore" – Protest and the construction of space at Waitangi in the 1980s"
The 6th of February is New Zealand's annual day of "cultural performance" *par excellence*. It is not a rememberance and reflection of what is undoubtedly this country's most important historical moment, but instead an enactment of contemporary understandings of the Treaty of Waitangi by both Maori and the Crown (McAllister 2007).

Architecturally this performance is played out at, and between, Te Tii marae and the Treaty grounds at Waitangi. The partnership between Maori and the Crown is spatially expressed each year by symbolically important rituals being conducted and protocols observed at each specific site. People gather, welcomes occur, addresses are given, entertainment provided, bridges crossed, debates take place, demands are made, and protests held. The actions of the various parties are frequently beamed into households by the television networks and reported in the national newspapers, leading to a national construction of space that represents current perceptions of cultural and race relations.

The 1980s saw a significant shift in the construction of Waitangi as space. Following the rise of the land rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Maori activists focussed their efforts on Waitangi and Waitangi Day more than ever before. The government responded by denying access to the Treaty grounds, then retreating from Waitangi celebrations, and then eventually returning by the end of the decade. Waitangi as space became a pawn in a political contest, and its place in the national psyche moved with each action and counter-action.

Mark Southcombe "Abstraction and Artifice"
This paper reflects on the architecture of the Wanganui Community Arts Centre 1989, and local, national and international contexts of its design and realisation. It

documents and records the project and its history. It advances a reading of the project and its critical aspirations based on personal experience, documentation and the characteristics of the architecture. Finally, with reference to Joan Kerr's essay of 1984 "Why Architects should not write Architectural History" and David Mitchell's *The Elegant Shed* of 1984, implications of an architect writing history of architecture are reflected on.

Linda Tyler "Shoulderpads and shagpile: architectural referencing in the television series *Gloss*"
Before Television New Zealand closed its drama department in 1988 and production became outsourced, 55 episodes of the memorable series *Gloss* had been made at Avalon in Lower Hutt. Screening between 1987 and 1990, the series was based on the experiences of writer Rosemary McLeod's years in the internecine world of women's magazines. Revolving around the machinations of fictional magazine editor and high priestess of fashion Maxine Redfern and her dynastic family, the series deployed architectural detail as readily as it did Liz Mitchell's costume designs in order to evoke an era of conspicuous consumption. Sumptuous production designs characterised the sets, with the interiors of the magazine *Gloss* itself remarkable for their evocation of glamour and glitz. Domestic spaces inhabited by the extraordinary characters conveyed materialism and superficiality through furnishings and design, doing much to contribute to the then-emerging characterisation of Aucklanders as immoral show-offs with poor value systems which has been the programme's enduring legacy. The trappings of success in a materialistic world included the worst excesses of postmodern architecture, it would seem. As the title song for the series went, "*It's the gilt off the gingerbread/The icing on the cake/It's monuments and mirrorglass/The city's on the make/Devil take the hindmost/So no one counts the cost/Such a sweet seduction/Glosssssssss.*"

Peter Wood "Who Plays the Monkey?, or, How Gerald Melling broke the Institute's Organ."
In late 1983 Gerald Melling replaced Gordon Moller as editor of the New Zealand Institute of Architects organ, *Architect New Zealand*. The appointment of Melling was not contentious, Moller was stepping aside after a lengthy term, and while Melling brought less architectural experience to the job he added serious weight as a noted writer and editor. Melling edited *New Zealand Architect* for 11 issues, from No. 4, 1983, through to issue No. 2, 1986, and, as the NZIA might have expected, the first issues under Melling's influence displayed a far greater degree of creative and editorial urgency than had been the case previously. Yet, the end, when it came, was sharp, with Melling being ejected from the role, and the Institute abandoning its long association to the journal.

During Melling's supervision *Architect New Zealand* entered into a brief period of critical commentary in which New Zealand's buildings were viewed as a responsible to a wider public, and accountable to that audience through criticism. In his first editorial Melling wrote of the need for openness where architects get things right, and an honest reflection on where they get them wrong. Unfortunately the principle audience for *New Zealand Architect*, New Zealand's architects, did not always feel quite so happy about discussing their failures. Indeed, in one key instance they felt compelled to defend their work through legal channels. In his 1985 end-of-year Wellington Bland Awards (Blatantly Limpwristed Acceptance of Nondescript Design) Melling erroneously named the architects responsible for the "Gross, overbearing, cheap and nasty" Control Data Building as Williams Developments. The architects, understandably perhaps, reacted immediately to what they perceived as a harmful association and demanded a retraction. One was offered, in the next issue, but it must be added that the sceptical tone of Melling's withdrawal, which involved

reiterating his condemnation of the Control Data Building, was not help by another mistaken attribution. The next issue, in which authorship was finally resolved, was to be Melling's last. Behind the print of the Bland Awards was a flurry of threats, legal and otherwise, which called into attention the financial responsibility held by the NZIA in the advent of legitimate claims of slander being upheld. The Institutes respince was two-fold. One the one hand the journal was legally separated from the Institute, and simultaneously a less critically engaged editor replaced Melling.

This paper reviews the editorial content of *New Zealand Architect* immediately prior to, during the period of, and subsequent to Gerald Melling's dismissal as editor. Attention is given to the circumstances of his acrimonious departure from this appointment, and the NZIA's subsequent dissolution of any legal relationship with the journal. In conclusion I suggest that since then the journals intellectual attention has been focused only on the successful activities of architects and has not seriously discussed wider issues regarding the social and public responsibilities of buildings, or architects. As Gerald Melling wrote in his first editorial, architects are seldom held to public account for their failures. Sadly, the Institute's response to one editors attempt to rectify this oversight set its own journal on a course of social disengagement from which it has never been able to recover.