Problems in the Historiography of New Zealand Architecture

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The writing of New Zealand’s architectural history is a project that has developed only in recent decades. New Zealand’s architectural culture has never been silent in matters of self-reflection and criticism, yet this attention has always held contemporary architecture somehow in question. As Douglas Lloyd Jenkins’ anthology New Dreamland (2005) reminds us, there has long been a sustained reflection on and projection of what it ‘means’ to practice architecture in New Zealand.¹ Robin Skinner’s research into the nineteenth-century British perception of architecture in New Zealand, demonstrates that issues raised by new building at the furthest reach of the Empire helped clarify how Britain projected itself in its colonies, and thereby went some way to establish the lines along which New Zealand’s architectural identity would reach maturity.² Indeed, from its instigation with first colonial contacts, through and beyond the 1970s, when the first history of New Zealand’s architecture appeared, up to the present moment, the discourse on those principles governing and guiding architectural production has tended to account for the history and patrimony of that architecture.

I argue that one can find two approaches to history writing within New Zealand’s architectural culture. The first is applied to the task of addressing the reconciliation of aesthetic, cultural and technological dimensions of problems inherent to contemporary architecture in any given moment. Issues of what, when and where to build are rarely determined by architects, but the question of ‘how’ has been present throughout the history of New Zealand architecture and implicit in any instance of asking ‘why’. Within that history the answer rests, both currently and historically, upon considerations drawn from
outside of architecture, whether social, cultural, religious, moral, economic or technological. That they can also be historical brings us to a second take on New Zealand architecture’s historiography, and architectural historiography in general.

If history can act as an authority for the way that architecture has been and continues to be conceived and realised, to what extent can those who rely on that authority be assured of its fidelity to the past? The fact of historical plurality is hardly novel, and it is not my intention to suggest that one history or another holds an unequivocal claim on the truth of the past. My assertion, rather, is that the tendency of architecture to draw authority from history relies upon a collapsing of history as a representation, and the past as a multivalent truth, which has lead to substantial misunderstandings about New Zealand’s architectural past, its historical values and the lessons it holds for contemporary practioners.\(^3\) This action confuses complexity with clarity. The second kind of architectural historiography undermines the reduction of the past into abstractions and lessons. In advocating this latter approach to the study of New Zealand’s architectural history, I allow that both kinds of historiography are necessary, that neither exists in any pure form, and that these conditions make the conceptual problem of how to read and write this history more complicated than it might initially seem to be. Invoking historical authority is an intellectually legitimate move for architecture, but in so doing, it should be openly accountable to the rigours of historical research. The natural coincidence of instrumental and critical historiographical objectives in New Zealand architectural culture is a problem that this article will therefore attempt to parse.\(^4\)

One site worth further investigation in this respect is the home of the architect’s intellectual and historical formation – the professional school of architecture. Currently, New Zealand has three such schools, at the University of Auckland, Unitec and Victoria University of Wellington; several other institutions with varying degrees of informality and proximity to the architecture profession have shared aspects of this formation. The organisation of architectural history
in the academe, relative to architecture as a professional course of study, makes the historiographical problem outlined above less clear. The history of architecture has to one extent or another been embedded in the architect’s curriculum throughout the history of professional architectural education wherever it has been manifest, in New Zealand or elsewhere. In the classroom, architectural history provides models, motivations or rationales for architectural practice; its authority positions buildings relative to a canon and to historical trajectories. In New Zealand, this is most obviously manifest in the function assigned to local and regional architectural history, in order to address the category of ‘New Zealand architecture’.

This does not always result in unhealthy reductions. The first book to attempt a synthetic account of New Zealand’s architectural history was written by the architects John Stacpoole and Peter Beaver. In the introduction to their 1972 volume Architecture: 1820–1970, they note that “remarkably little has been written about architecture in New Zealand, and what has been said about the early period, before the profession was organised, has often been based on misconceptions or later rationalisations of apparent incompatibilities”.

The format of their modest volume readily accepts the conflicts that lie scattered across the field, while they themselves attempt to articulate what the history of New Zealand architecture might include. Their book is interesting for its scope, which includes work from domestic through to commercial scale, public and industrial architecture, and for its structural insistence on letting presentation of the work itself convey a properly diverse sense of New Zealand’s architecture, rather than placing a thesis ahead of the examples. Its organisation into blocks of time, while corresponding to common historical periodisations, keeps an ultimate synthesis of the material at arm’s length.

The most important survey to follow Stacpoole and Beaver’s example was Peter Shaw’s New Zealand Architecture (1991), which marked the beginning of a post-sesquicentennial proliferation of studies on the subject. In contrast to its earlier counterpart, Shaw’s thematic treatment of many of the same examples covered by Stacpoole
and Beaven quickly translates into an argument for the value of this history, relative to New Zealand's wider cultural maturity, as noted in 1990. Stacpoole and Beaven's *Architecture* is comparatively short and idiosyncratic in its selections and analyses. And as with Shaw's *New Zealand Architecture*, Stacpoole and Beaven reflect the mood of the era in which the book was written. Their comments belie the urgency with which they (all) sense the need to preserve historically significant buildings. The structure of *Architecture* reflects the recent and messy divorce between architecture and planning professions, which significantly narrowed the field of architectural history in this instance to exclude the city and its formal development. Yet despite their firm views on what belongs to architecture and what does not, Stacpoole and Beaven's volume remains one of the most generous predicates for determining the scope of the historiography of New Zealand's architecture.

This generosity has rarely been matched in subsequent contributions to the field. Besides a few notable exceptions, such as Ian Lochhead's *A Dream of Spires* (1999), Justine Clark and Paul Walker's *Looking for the Local* (2000), and Douglas Lloyd Jenkins's *At Home* (2004), many of these studies are modest in scope and perspective. They tend to investigate minor instances in detail, the significance of which is rarely returned to the macrocosmic problems of New Zealand's architectural history: scope, structure, analytical framework and utility, to name a few. The most substantial body of scholarship that addresses the complexity of New Zealand's architectural history is almost invisible outside academic circles. It remains locked into the academic environments of graduate and postgraduate research and in papers delivered to conferences such as those of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) or the annual conference on New Zealand's architectural history held by the Centre for Building Performance Research at Victoria University of Wellington. The proceedings of neither annual event enjoy extended circulation beyond their respective attendees, which demonstrates how the level of the
research presented is at odds with a mainstream appreciation of the nation’s architectural history.8

Over this, one other book has cast a particularly long shadow. While several histories, more limited in ambition than Stacpoole and Heaven’s Architecture, followed into the 1970s – books by Stacpoole himself, Michael Fowler and Martin Hill – David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin attempted in The Elegant Shed (1985), to explain the historical bases of New Zealand’s architecture.9 Many writers, like Skinner, Clark and Walker and Lloyd-Jenkins, mentioned above, have already described the project of this book and its effect on subsequent thinking about New Zealand architecture. For the purposes of this article, however, one aspect is noteworthy. More than any other volume published before the end of the 1990s, it firmly occupies a janus-faced position between assessment and instruction. Mitchell and Chaplin sought both to document New Zealand’s architectural history – which for them extended from the everyday to high art, and in that order – and to match it to a search for a corpus of architectural values particular, if not unique, to New Zealand. In the wake of the modern movement’s tendency towards internationalism, and in reaction to the increasingly bleak production of the Government Architect’s Office of the Ministry of Works and Development, their account of New Zealand architecture enjoyed great popularity with professional, academic and popular audiences.

The Elegant Shed promoted a genealogy from ‘humble bach’ to modernist experiments centred on Auckland in the 1940s and 1950s. They borrowed this genealogy from an earlier generation, who had set it up and ensured its cultural currency prior to the 1980s.10 The idea of domestic New Zealand modern architecture following the values of the rustic simplicity embedded in beach and lakeside dwellings, had widespread cultural appeal. In subsequent years, and anchored firmly to The Elegant Shed, this line became well rehearsed at all levels of New Zealand’s architectural culture, and lay close to the surface of the modernist revival of the 1990s and 2000s and its critical and historical armature.
A rhetoric of bloody-minded simplicity, integration of building and nature, and ‘can-do’ assertiveness, found its way to a central place in the post-rationalisation and promotion of architectural works. This included both professional media, like the New Zealand Institute of Architects’ (NZIA) journal *Architecture New Zealand* (as it is now called), and in such popular expressions of these values as the numerous home, garden, property sales and renovation shows that have filled up television listings in the last decade. This suggests that the articulation of these values in this influential architectural history, resonated strongly with cultural expressions outside architecture. That rugged colonial hardiness might be invoked to defend the design of a multi-million dollar investment property might seem incredulous, but it nevertheless forms part of this same larger historiographical problem through which New Zealand’s architectural history and historiography lend a vocabulary, imperative and justification to contemporary architecture.

Concurrent with these developments in this popular and professional uptake of these instrumentalised historical abstractions, the history of New Zealand’s modern architecture has been the subject of a substantial body of academic research. Two important studies of New Zealand’s modernist architectural history have acted to undermine the broad strokes that many read into *The Elegant Shed*, while seeking to account for a home-grown modernist tradition within the wide range of influences on the development of the nation’s modern architecture. Clark and Walker, in their *Looking for the Local*, find alternate and complementary seeds of a national architectural modernism, looking to Wellington’s Architectural Centre’s efforts to describe New Zealand’s modern architecture in terms compatible with the Centre’s membership. The rhetorical claim upon a home grown pragmatism is there, but heavily tempered by a wider, more complex web of influences including the diverse set of European and British trained architects, who alongside New Zealanders in private architectural practice, found in the Centre a cultural focus, and in the public service a professional platform for their ideas.
Where Clark and Walker begin from a limited case study to consider the state of post-war architectural discourse in New Zealand, Lloyd Jenkins’ *At Home* systematically casts a generous net over the theme of dwelling in the twentieth-century, encompassing the histories of architecture, the interior, and art and craft in order to bring together a number of divergent strands of those histories. Lloyd Jenkins’s account is no less nationalist than Mitchell’s, but it shares a more complicated view of New Zealand’s modernist architectural history. Importantly, he distinguishes between “a history of the work of individual architects” and “of the culture of domestic architecture” in order to surpass contemporary architecture’s influence over the history and historiography of architecture. 11 “New Zealand history has been written without reference to architecture”, he writes, “but the inverse is equally true: the history of New Zealand architecture has been written without reference to the wider culture of New Zealand”. 12 In a similar way to Stacpoole and Beaven, he tries to resist a tendency for narrative, in favour of a multiform account of the period. Within this multiformity he finds cause to defend a national history of the ‘progressive home’, its buildings and contents.

These two books represent a substantial effort on the part of academic architectural historians to set aside those ‘myths’ born of shady historiography and ready adaptation to contemporary polemical needs on the part of the architectural profession and architectural culture. A healthy number of architectural historians and their postgraduate students throughout the country have either directly, or indirectly, tackled the foundations of the hut in the wilderness as a model for New Zealand’s architecture, as well as other targets that sustain a similar degree of historiographical reduction. Indeed, the above mentioned forums, in which academic architectural historians discuss their research, overwhelmingly privilege complexity over such simplicity, echoing broader values in the humanities worldwide.

The tendency in New Zealand architectural culture is nevertheless to dismiss the eddies introduced by academics, into the steady currents of a national architectural folklore, upheld by an ideology of national
origins and a rehearsal of the values of local innovations against the odds. This desire mirrors much popular cultural commentary in New Zealand, and, in turn, the general outlook of any number of cultural settings that revel in the rhetoric of being ‘exquisite, apart’, to invoke a formulation of Rudyard Kipling’s, called into service for the NZIA centennial in 2005. That the popular architectural historiography of New Zealand has moved in this direction over the last two decades is understandable, and certainly has been beneficial in expanding, for instance, the hitherto overlooked worth of post-war architecture and the figures involved in its production and promotion. It is not, however, without problems in the long-term practice of documenting and examining the history of New Zealand architecture. The balance between its benefits and costs has yet to be calculated.

To illustrate one of these costs, I would like to recall some of the premises of Peter Wood’s 2000 article, ‘The Bach: The Cultural History of a Local Typology’.

Wood works backwards from the ‘bach’ to a ‘birth of the nation’, bound to an ANZAC myth firmly anchored at Gallipoli, in order to argue alternative cultural starting points for determining an independent national architectural character. He argues that the endurance of the bach as an architectural type, embedded in the cultural psyche, owes much to the extent to which it offers an index to a widely appreciated period of cultural adolescence, in which the First World War figures largely. While he claims that this endows the bach with a cultural relevance beyond architectural discourse, he also entrenches the hut-type by compounding architectural and national myths. In both spheres, the bach stands for industry, invention and fine isolation.

I wish to make two comments on this essay as a symptom of a broader association maintained by contemporary architectural culture. Firstly, Wood appears to breathe new life into an account of indigenous architectural values, at a moment where they intersected the strong tendency in architecture internationally, towards the renewal of modernist formalism and planning. He describes a local rationale for pursuing international architectural fashions. As an argument
that has gained movement independent of Wood’s presentation, it legitimises a form of local practice which has currency international. Along with a materials palette that reinforces the locality of new architecture in New Zealand, Wood’s cultural buttressing endorses the specificity of the work in relation to its ‘place’. Secondly, by weaving the architectural and cultural history of New Zealand into a single tableau, Wood’s ‘The Bach’ reinforces the New Zealand-ness of those architectures that build upon that abstract prototype, providing historiographical justification and direction for present-day architectural design. It advances the substantive content of *The Elegant Shed*, as well as developing the mechanisms by which history is introduced and maintained as an instrument in the architect’s toolbox. It is on this basis that my disquiet about this line of argument rests, since where Wood fully understands its limitations and implications, he joins company with many who do not.

Many of the authors writing in Charles Walker’s anthology *Exquisite Apart*, celebrating the NZIA centennial, perhaps stand for this latter kind of writer. It is not the job of architects to question the histories handed down by academics, Walker (both an academic and an architect) writes in an introductory essay: “Architecture is essentially about the future.” Walker is quite right: architectural historians are in the better position to inform the profession about its past. But ought professional exigencies inform their work? The book has been subject to such widespread criticism that I will make just one observation on the book’s framework – which after all was as much the work of an advisory panel constituting senior members of the profession, as it was the editor’s. It is coloured by the sentiment that New Zealand’s architects had found a way of building that reflected the unique setting of their work, and that this expressed the historical necessity of making do well. This reflects the endurance of those values that (many of the same) architects extracted and deployed from *The Elegant Shed* in the 1980s and 1990s. It represents a code for architectural value which has become inaccessible beyond architecture, except on aesthetic bases. It relies on precisely the
kind of connections which Wood (following Mitchell, Shaw and others) makes, and on the international currency of those very forms. However good this contemporary architecture might be, it currently lacks the rigour that would otherwise hold the language and premises of architectural criticism and history accountable to the past, both as that which it purports to represent and as that which it purports to inject with new relevance. This form of architectural history, by adopting as its own the imperatives of architecture’s projective arms, will ultimately fail to serve architectural culture because it will retard invention on the part of architects.

If indeed this is the case, then one way to test the valency of local and nationalist values in contemporary architectural culture would be to remove, or at least problematise, the category of ‘nation’, and to see what happens to New Zealand’s architectural history when there is an admission of the political and cultural reality of this history prior to the turn of the twentieth-century. In the nineteenth-century, New Zealand was one of a number of British colonies taking part in a cultural exchange across colonial borders and also with Britain. Few historians on either side of the Tasman have attempted such a reading, and indeed the architectural history of one country hardly figures in that of the other – an analysis that works whether one is flying east or west.15

Nation, in this sense, is an invention of the twentieth-century, attended by a rhetorical apparatus refined in the years since Australia’s Federation in 1901, and both countries’ new status as Dominions in 1907. If, as Wood suggests, New Zealanders should appreciate in the architectural values explored above reflections of the values underpinning the Gallipoli legend, then we might also consider the trans-Tasman consequences of Gallipoli’s feeding of parallel histories, upheld by parallel value-systems, in the two countries that celebrate them. In matters of culture and artistic production, few would speak of an Australasian spirit in which these values are interwoven, but rather of characteristics firmly aligned with one nation or the other. In the same vein, few would lay claims for the origins of an
Australasian architecture, and yet it is precisely this concept that has been unequivocally set aside by the rise of a nationalist architectural historiography in both places, and by the search for the roots of a national modernist idiom for the respective architectures of Australia and New Zealand.

Despite the various factors which make it sensible to differentiate between Australia and New Zealand as national cases, with their own histories, cultural specificities and historiographical imperatives, there is good reason why there might also be the need to turn back to a generously regional approach to their history. For example, is it practical to hold fast to the national differences between the nineteenth-century architectural histories of Australia and New Zealand? Are the differences between the two modern dominions greater than the formerly colonial differences between, say, Tasmania and Queensland, or between New South Wales and Victoria? On both sides of the Tasman, architectural historians are generally lax in accounting for the apparently seamless movement between South Pacific colonies that distinguished the infant profession’s history for many of the nineteenth-century’s most important architects. I wish to propose that we must grapple with a decidedly anti-national reality to a history that has been largely framed according to the values prized by the last two generations of architects and writers on architecture. By setting aside the ideology and rhetoric of New Zealand’s modern architecture and its propagation, in order to test their worth through a practice of critical historiography, there can be a judgement of the extent to which one value or another is indeed proper to that history.

An example might make this claim clearer. The Treaty House in Waitangi was described by Frederick H. Newman (who came to New Zealand from Austria in 1939) as “one of the best examples of New Zealand Architecture”, writing in his 1952 essay ‘Social Factors in Architecture and their Implications for New Zealand’. Newman goes on to wonder why this building, both “full of tradition” and “outstanding for its original treatment and beautiful proportions” has not had “a greater influence on New Zealand domestic architecture”.16
While its design was intended for the British Residency at the Bay of Islands, and while its broader historical importance is tightly bound to the foundations of New Zealand as a British Colony, the facts of its production are not straightforward. The Treaty House is the first illustration of Stacpoole and Beaven’s book, under which they write:

Before its restoration in the 1930s the Treaty House appeared rather less grand than it does today. It is, however, the first building in New Zealand known to have been designed by an architect.

John Verge, the architect of Elizabeth Bay house in Sydney, was approached by James Busby in 1832 for plans for a house to serve as the British Residence at the Bay of Islands. Only the front part of the house was then built, the wings being added later, and considerable doubt exists as to the extent to which Ambrose Hallen, Colonial Architect in New South Wales, altered Verge’s plans.

The style of the house, colonial Georgian, was firmly established in New South Wales and is related to but distinguishable from the more picturesque Regency style. Colonial Georgian tends to be formal.17

Several recent architectural histories have mentioned this building in passing. Terence Hodgson’s Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand (1990), treats the building lightly, briefly and explicitly drawing upon Stacpoole and Beaven.18 Peter Shaw’s New Zealand Architecture (1991), does so too, touching upon the building in a survey of early, but extant, buildings in New Zealand, noting its Sydney origins with architects Verge and Hallen, and describing the building’s disposition and composition. Shaw observes that the 1933 restoration of the building by Gummer and Page altered many of the details, replacing “much of the original building when they tidied up the whole structure”, but that a 1989 conservation (ahead of the sesquicentenary) had attempted “to restore the Treaty House to
something approximating its state at the time of the singing of New Zealand’s founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, on 6 February 1840”.19 The following year, Shaw published a slender volume entitled *Waitangi* (1992), and this undervalued work of architectural history is the only instance of the building being made subject to any form of close attention.20 It sites the building at the centre of a complicated web of cultural, colonial, artistic and architectural enquiries that concern both the history of the building’s production, its subsequent life as an artefact and its place in New Zealand’s trajectory as a colony and a nation from 1840 onwards.

There are many reasons why there should be a positioning of the Treaty House within the history of New Zealand architecture, even if it has the curious status of being under-studied within architectural culture and being one of the most recognisable buildings in the country. I believe there is an allegation, however, to recognise that there is a clear distance between the rhetorical, instrumental and narrative function of this building in New Zealand history and the facts of its commission, design, pre-fabrication, installation and subsequent alterations. I would not go so far as to call the Treaty House a work of Australian architecture simply because of its historical relationship to the *œuvre* of John Verge, but I do believe that the terms under which Stacpoole and Beaven consider it are the closest that can be hoped for to a history of the building, unencumbered by the meaning it subsequently came to assume – the building as produced rather than as received. In other words, by presenting a summary of the facts – brief though it might be – Stacpoole and Beaven make an unambiguous observation as to the fluidity of architectural practices among the South Pacific British colonies, in the early to middle nineteenth century.

These observations, to conclude, are simply examples of the more general challenges facing historians of architecture working in and on New Zealand at the present moment. If the ‘problems’ to which my title alludes concern the ready invocation of the myth of New Zealand’s nationality, they correspond to any number of instances
where flimsy historiography of the subject has allowed architectural culture - ranging from academic, to professional, to popular - to build solid edifices upon a quick-sand treated as bedrock. The issue lies not in the speculation and referential freedom that marked history writing of the 1990s, and persists in some quarters today, but in the way that it readily lends to the profession the tools with which to cloak itself in myths of its own devising, rather than holding architectural culture more insistently to a higher standard of historiography. Teasing out the terms and implications of these ‘problems’ might lead to a more open discussion and greater attempts to circumvent their impact on New Zealand’s architectural historiography.

Notes
4. This issue was present in Italian debates on architectural historiography which I have documented in *Manfredo Tafuri: Choosing History* (Ghent: A&S Books, 2007). In this book, I treat these distinctions and their cultural implications at some length.
8. A sketch of the kind of research presented at the annual SAHANZ conferences can be found in the ‘Introduction’ to Andrew Leach, Antony Mouls and Nicole Sully (eds), *Shifting Views: Selected Essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2008): ix–xvii.


10. This evolution is the subject of Robin Skinner’s paper ‘The Whare in the Bush: A Twentieth Century Tradition’ to the session ‘A Regional Practice: 25 Years of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand’, at the 61st annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 2008.


12. Ibid.


