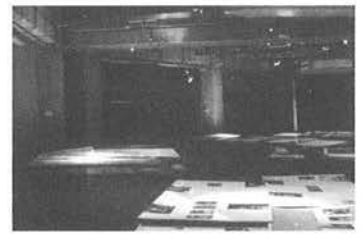


**ROUND TABLE
CONNECTIONS: THE HOUSE IN THE AUCKLAND SCENE**

Mike Austin



The exhibition *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene* was shown at the Auckland University School of Architecture during August, after a successful opening at Wanganui. The exhibition mounted by G4 (the fourth generation) was in some ways a watershed and a marker, being an aesthetic and theoretical proposition that the architecture of Auckland can be found in the thin layer of suburban housing. This was implied in the title and the layout of the exhibition. The exhibition was accompanied by a substantial catalogue, with essays by Emeritus Professor Peter Bartlett, Dr John Dickson and Dr Bechir Kenzari. To coincide with the show in Auckland G4 organised a round table discussion evening.

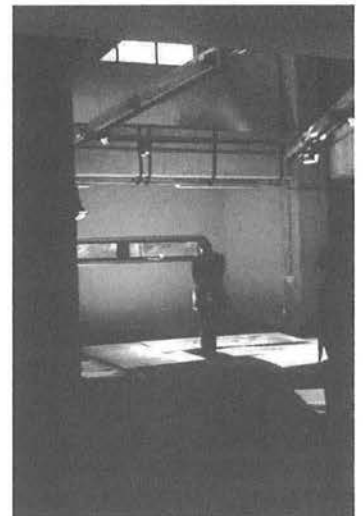
The spatial and temporal architecture of the discussion characterised what followed, with two members of G4 (Simon Twose and Mahendra Daji) in the middle and two Professors (Peter Bartlett and John Hunt) bookending a panel of architects (Marshal Cook, Patrick Clifford, Rewi Thompson and Tony Van Raat). The only woman on the panel, Felicity Wallace, made a late entrance and squeezed herself in behind the men.

This arrangement is all too familiar, as were the panellists' comments. All sorts of answers were provided, but it was not apparent what the questions might possibly be. There was some discussion about thinness and surface (ideas proposed by Twose), but the talk moved onto the standard areas of identity and landscape with some minor squabbles and old positions being staked out. Jasmax, who supported the evening, lamented in a fax to G4 the "propensity for New Zealand architects to talk to anything but the point."¹

The evening proceeded in the usual desultory fashion until a member of the audience, Bill McKay, raised an issue that he had already spelt out in a letter to *Art New Zealand*, to the effect that the catalogue "... is a text that focuses on Auckland architecture yet ignores half of it."² The other half is the "... concurrent, now nearly forgotten school of thought that produced houses that were cool, geometric, sophisticated and international in style." McKay provides a list: "Robin Simpson, Tibor Donner, Henry Kulka, Vladimir Cacala, Brenner Group and Milan Mrkusich, Bill Harsnape (sic), Mark-Brown Fairhead, Rigby Mullan, Kenneth Albert, Neville Price and many others ..."³

It turns out that many of these had been mentioned in the catalogue, and there are various names that haven't made it onto McKay's list. In other words the list produces all sorts of new eliminations (just for example women, Polynesians, government architects, builders, engineers, English expatriates, American expatriates, South Islanders), each of which could be argued for as a neglected exclusion, and each of which could become a new research topic. The list is never wide enough.

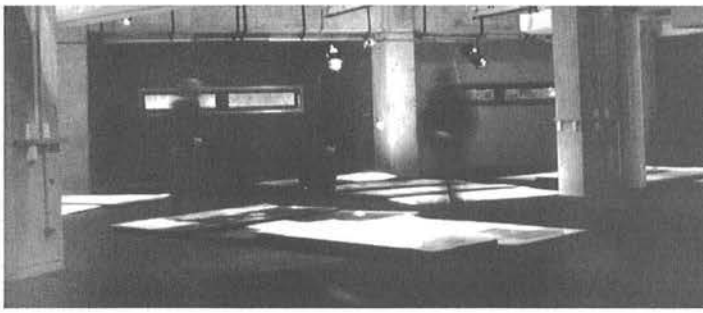
McKay suggested that "G4 don't make connections—they are retreading the same old story."⁴ McKay proposed another narrative, but even as he states it there is an immediate fragmentation. Clearly there is not just one other position, as McKay claimed when he said that there is "... a new generation of architectural historians actually interested in unearthing the history of Modernism in New Zealand."⁵ However, the names he mentioned (Peter Shaw, Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins, Dr Paul Walker, Justine Clark and Julia Gatley) are, and in various ways, writing the establishment history; but, more importantly, there is no longer any possibility of there being a singular history. Nor was the history of New Zealand Modernism the subject of the exhibition. It



Note

All images are of *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene* exhibition held at The School of Architecture, Property and Planning, The University of Auckland, 1999. Photographs provided by G4 Exhibiting Unit.

1. Pip Cheshire in a fax to G4, 22 August 99.
2. Bill McKay, "Letters," *Art New Zealand* no. 92 (Spring 1999): 82.
3. McKay, 82.
4. McKay, 82.
5. McKay, 82.



was, however, an aspect of the essays in the catalogue; and of which Schulz says in review that John Dickson “steals the show with his sustained attack on Modernism’s carnivorous soul, a critique which manages to be both whimsical and authoritative.”⁶ The categorical significance of modernism is not established and there are many stories yet to be told.

At the round table McKay accused the panel of being in collusion in their ignoring of this other tradition. Dickson (as a member of the audience) then claimed that McKay’s analysis was correct, but his conclusion was wrong. The panel was actually in deep disagreement. Perhaps they were in agreement to not expose their disagreements. The disagreement would of course be as to who makes it onto the list, and therefore into the canon of New Zealand Modernism. McKay and Dickson were in agreement that something was being suppressed, but what is it? Is suppression rather than connection the condition of Auckland architecture?

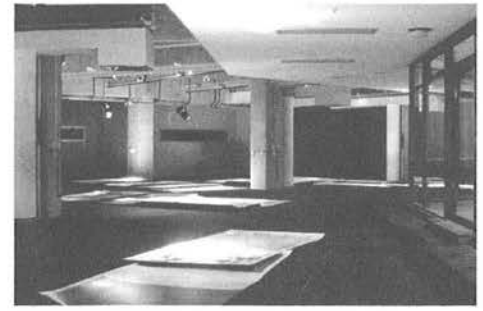
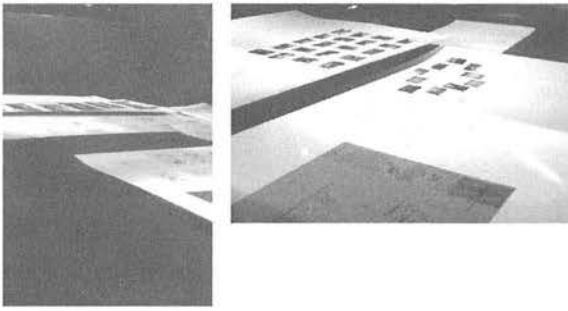
This suppression produces the post-colonial cringe where we remain dependent upon the metropolis but at the very same time despise this dependence. This ambivalence about the metropolis is the colonial condition. The bogey of the international has its own little history here. International architecture was the world professed by Charles Light and Cyril Knight, who came from the metropolitan arena to the Auckland University School of Architecture and who, the mythology goes, suppressed members of “The Group” following their attempts as students to unseat Light. But it isn’t that simple because Light didn’t seem to support the refugee modernists and internationalists either. The suppression of The Group has perhaps led to the suppression now by The Group’s descendants who made up the discussion panel. (More research to be done.)

The discussion evening was characterised by a mean spiritedness that was described by Schultz as notably absent from the exhibition and catalogue, “... where writers no longer labour at the task of self-promotion but work to deepen and enrich the exhibition’s detail.”⁷ The panel did not subject the exhibition or the catalogue to any examination. Instead discussion was in absentia—about what wasn’t done. This seemed to lead to the old idea that Auckland is interesting because of what it isn’t. That Auckland is characterised by lack is not a new notion, and Light himself once proposed that the Auckland School didn’t have any ideology. The right wing namesake of the round table also claims to be free of ideology and it might be suggested that both groups are involved in promoting self interest in the guise of discussion and suppressing other points of view.

Perhaps what is being suppressed is work? The suppression is about the work of others, whether it is the mounting of the exhibition by G4, the academic work of the catalogue, design work by local architects or commentary and criticism such as McKay’s. Intellectual architectural work is not taken seriously. There is no critical environment that supports and challenges the work of the best architects. At the “Derrida Downunder” conference at Auckland University a few days later, Stephen Turner spoke of the impossibility of making theory in peripheral non-metropolitan space.

6. Derek Schulz, “G4 in Wanganui Making Connections,” *Art New Zealand* no. 91 (Winter 1999): 51.

7. Schulz, 51.



However to claim that this is a totally New Zealand condition is to fall into the very hole that the panel dug for themselves. The same dismissive behaviour can be observed in New York (where there is perhaps more passion because the stakes are higher), and it has been noted in Japan that Japanese architects (for example Tange and Isozaki) are ignored locally when they become international figures. Nevertheless local criticism has a certain lack of generosity and *ad hominem* argument that some have blamed on the Auckland University School of Architecture.

McKay suggests that the exhibition catalogue provides material for an assessment of the Auckland School to be written. Certainly this author is far too implicated to make any evaluation. Two observations can perhaps be permitted. Firstly, that everyone who spoke on the evening was a graduate of the Auckland School; and secondly, during much of the period in question this was the only School of Architecture in the country. We teachers in the school hear all sorts of versions about whether the school is the best or worst in the University, New Zealand, or the world.⁸ What we suspect that it hovers closer to the middle of this continuum than most critics acknowledge and this very mediocrity is a hazard seldom discussed.

McKay claims, "Two out of three texts in this publication are pleasant reading ..." Is the third unpleasant and which are the two selected for faint praise? A clue is given by mention of "... the parade of teachers through the Auckland School of Architecture."⁹ The third essay, by Kenzari, the only figure who is not a graduate, although he is a teacher, of the Auckland School, is characterised by its concentration on theoretical issues. So what is being suppressed here? Is it that McKay is complicit with the suppression of international theory?

Certainly, the local names who have an international reputation (Plischke, Wigley) do not enter local discussion except at the margins of the academy. McKay speaks of "... those who know the breadth of Modern architecture out there in the suburbs of Auckland" for whom "[t]he production is a real disappointment."¹⁰ But this call for broad coverage is the very absence of research and theory, and is instead the stuff of data collection and survey, summarised by McKay's claim that "... we do not have a representative survey of 'the house in the Auckland scene.'" "Breadth" does not give theoretical leverage on the notion of the house and the proposition of layered thinness that is the value of the contribution of G4.

This exhibition and its title opened some theoretical propositions for discussion. The house, Auckland and the scenographic have had much written about them but these issues were not theoretically examined in the catalogue. The scenographic (which has such a difficult time in architectural theory) was mentioned by Dickson when he talked about "the extraordinary scenographic achievements of Enid Blyton."¹¹ Schulz, citing this comment, refers to Dickson's "deft sceptical [sic] spirit, committed to both seriousness of purpose and the lightest and most personal of touches."¹² A quality lacking in the round table discussion.

8. Schulz claims that "The Auckland house that marks a homage to the elegance, freshness and wide erudition characteristic of the University of Auckland School of Architecture, from which all are graduates, the work of its students bearing testimony to one of the most progressive passionate and indigenous of our university faculties." Schulz, 51.

9. McKay speaks of the parade of teachers but Brown, Toy, Middleton and Porsolt, to mention only those named by Bartlett, had very different views about architecture. McKay, 82. Peter Bartlett, "The Mid-Century Modern House in Auckland 1960-1990," in *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene* (Auckland: G4 Exhibitions Unit, 1998), 13.

10. McKay, 82.

11. John Dickson, "Architectural Modernism in New Zealand 1960-1990," in *Connections: The House in the Auckland Scene*, 37.

12. Schulz, 51.