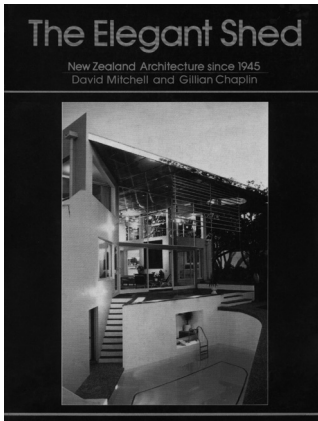


Five Houses

David Mitchell & Julie Stout



Gibbs House, Auckland (1984), on the cover of The Elegant Shed. Photo: Gillian Chaplin.

In 1984, the Gibbs House appeared, even to the author, to owe nothing to New Zealand architectural traditions. The owners wanted it like this, and their architect, David Mitchell (who had been brought up on the virtues of mid-Century Modern New Zealand timber construction and humanist values) enthusiastically obliged. Mitchell had already tried several times to re-invent the local architectural language (e.g., Walford House, Begg apartments project), but this project took it to a whole new level. When the house appeared on the cover of *The Architectural Review* (July 1987), Mitchell felt his internationalist disguise had been perfected. Yet that same journal also carried pictures of a shed-like corrugated iron house he had designed for an impecunious jeweller: the Preston house could only have come from the Antipodes. These two contemporaneous houses suggested the notion of “the elegant shed” (which was to become a book title). Importantly, though, it was not the shed that held particular interest, but rather the notion of elegance.

Heke Street House (1988-90), Auckland

While the Gibbs House was being built, Julie Stout was designing a timber house two doors down the road. The Baragwanath House had a vaulted garage with latticework sides, cantilevered timbers, and sliding louvred screens covering the windows. These elements acknowledged local precedent, as well as an apprenticeship in Cook, Hitchcock and Sargisson, and gave the architecture a ‘slatty’ and soft-edged skin.

As a student, Stout had designed a town house invaded by a water garden, which originated in the back yard. A little later she worked in Fiji, where she designed a pavilion house in a walled court. The house’s wall panels swung up to meet the top of the courtyard walls, modifying the size and enclosure of the pavilion.

The Heke St House was designed a little later by Stout and Mitchell, on a yacht in the South Pacific. The first designs brought together the featheriness and vaulting of Baragwanath, with the pole-and-tin structure of Preston, and the airiness of the Fijian pavilion. It was a romantic vision of Pacific life. The water garden was there from the start. Alas, back in New Zealand, the architects realised the limitations of the 290-square-metre site, overlooked on all sides except from the street, and trapped in a suburb of nineteenth-century worker housing. They looked more closely at the narrow, high, worker housing of the district, felt the winter gales, and started again. Eventually, the house was designed around a sequence of four rooms, blinkered like the old houses of Collingwood St. The most open room was a verandah above the street, with vines covering the street edge, followed by translucent roofing, then solid cover. The kitchen, built around the dining table, opened onto it, while the heart and hearth of the house were dark and central. The fourth room had to be the water garden – a flooded court,



to be contemplated, but not entered. To feather the edges and control the view, slatted screens on yacht rigging wire were suspended on each side of the street face, like ears on the face of a spaniel.

‘Otoporae’, House in the King Country (2002-2004)

The clients were lively, bright and physical. So was the site, perched above a great valley carved out of rhyolite, part forested, part farmed. “Touching the earth lightly” makes sense on the rock of Australia. In contrast, Māori and Pākehā are earth-movers. Mitchell/Stout decided to make shelter by digging in.

The design is based on the cross-section. One significant manoeuvre distinguishes it – the verandah is on the ‘wrong’ side: while the house looks outwards across the valley, the verandah looks inwards at the cut bank. The bank is retained by loose (and cheap) local rhyolite boulders and thereby seems to be part of the exterior. However, it is also enclosed by a translucent roof, aluminium shutters above the rock wall, and glass doors at each end. Is this inside or out? The goal was something akin to van Eyck’s “in-between realm”. Thus, this place is verandah, entry foyer (with front door) and access way all at once – the bike and the rug are equally at home here.

Left to right:

[frontal] Heke Street House (1988-90), Auckland, The cantilevering verandah from the street.

Photo: Simon Devitt. [diagonal]

The house from the street. Photo: Simon Devitt. [verandah]

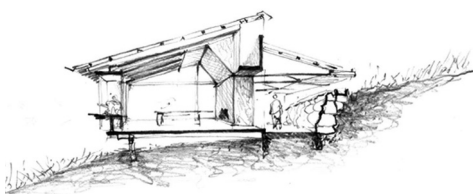
The verandah from the kitchen. Photo: Patrick Reynolds.

The fourth room - a courtyard of water. Photo: Mitchell/Stout.



Top: 'Otoporae', House in the King Country (2002-2004): The aluminium shutters open in fine weather. Photo: Patrick Reynolds

Left: Drawing by David Mitchell.
Right: The house from the entry path at night. Photo: Mitchell/Stout



Fishman House (2005-2008), Waiheke Island

One could find a source for this house in the tent fly slung between two tents, and that might help sustain myths of local origins. However, the inspiration came from a glimpse out of a bus window in Paraguay in 1974, which David Mitchell never forgot. He saw, just for a moment, a table in an open space between two rooms – a basic house, with a bread-oven smoking beside. In the Fishman House, this glimpse became the roofed space between two towers, table and fire in the middle, the private domains on either side.



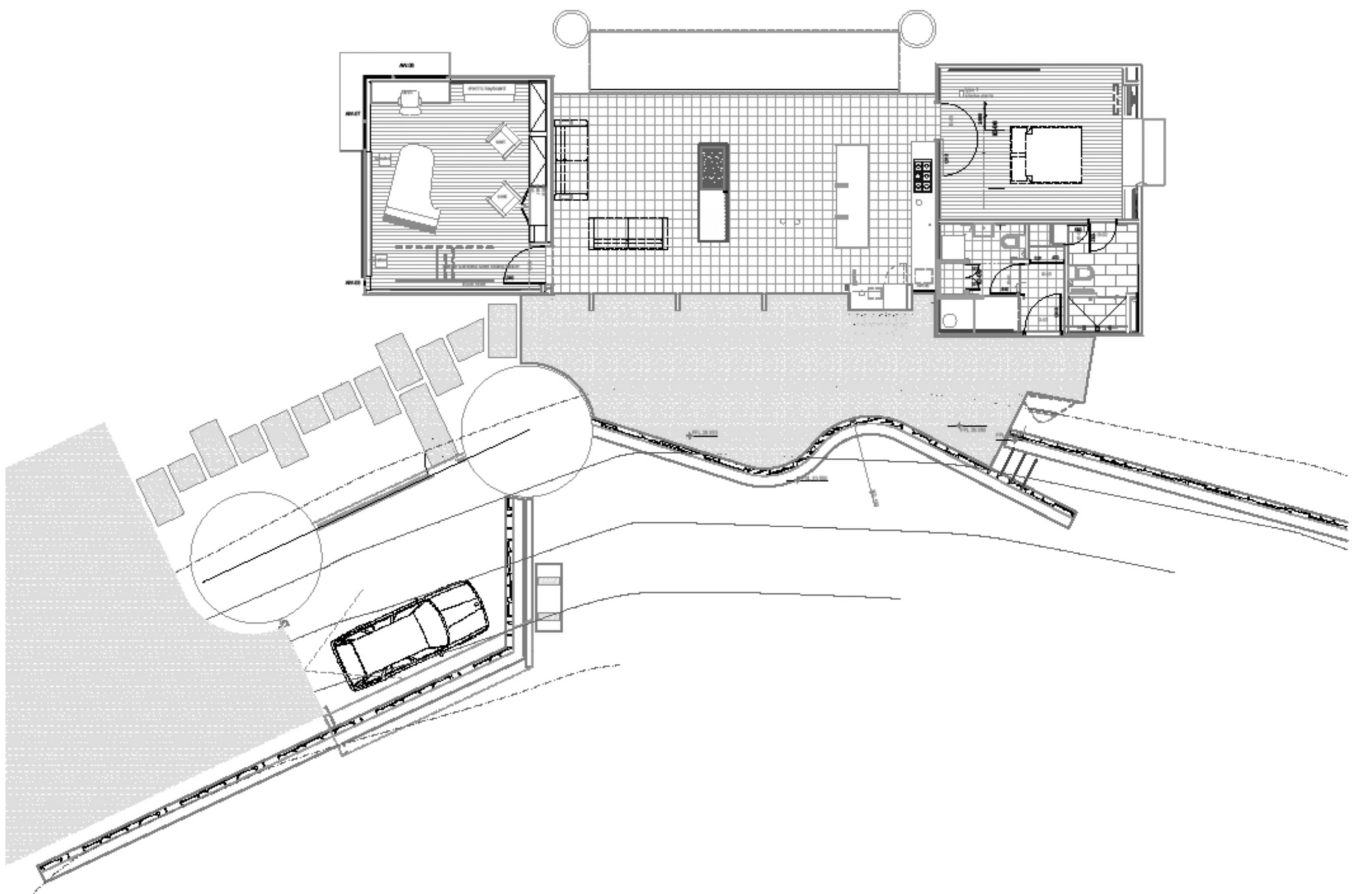
The house looks out to the Gulf- Photo: Patrick Reynolds



As architects, Mitchell/Stout look for what is distinctive and unusual in their clients. When the Fishmans asked for a room in which to think, read, play the piano and listen to music, they provided the key. With it, the panoramic views of the Hauraki Gulf (which the site indeed offers, but which too often have to substitute for architecture) could be left aside and, instead, Mitchell/Stout could make interior space. The result is a high, arched room, naturally lit down and along the edges of walls, with a heavy sound-insulating door which cuts the space off from the rest of the house.

left to right:
 Bedroom shutters open. Photo: Patrick Reynolds
 Music Room. Photo: Patrick Reynolds

The sleeping tower had to answer the call of the piano room, with its own odd shape. Upstairs it's a birds-nest of tiny bedrooms, precipitously glazed. The view is 'digitised' by lattice screens to different degrees: when the screens are open, the view is free at bed level. Closed, the screens cradle the sleepers on windy winter nights.



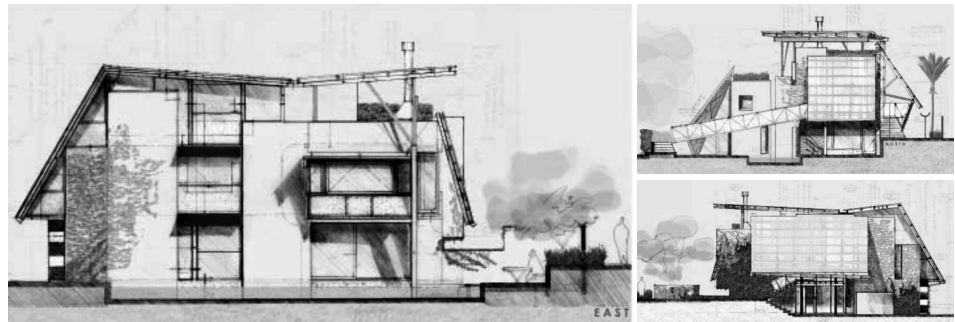
*Narrow Neck House (2005-2008),
Auckland. View from the street.
Photo: Lucas Doolan*



Narrow Neck House (2005-2008), Auckland

Like the earlier Unitec Landscape and Plant Science Staff Studies Building, the Narrow Neck House features precast concrete panels. Twenty-five years after the Gibbs house, Mitchell/Stout were again looking for a language outside the local residential, this time using materials common in industrial architecture because of their cost efficiency. The concrete came straight off the steel beds of the factory: 10-tonne panels, stripped and lifted in 24 hours. Other materials included precast rib flooring, covered in terracotta tiles from the North of the North Island. The translucent areas of wall and roof are single-skin corrugated fibre-glass. They were used in the design process to block unwanted views – the road, the neighbours, a house the architects don't like ... soon, there were big planes of it, leaning on the concrete, gleaming like ice-walls.

There is no reference here to the heritage housing of nearby Devonport – the design owes more to an excitement with the concrete fortifications of the local Fort Takapuna, the stormwater “houses” on the beach below the cliff, the tile-roofed bus shelters with bus-viewing ports carved out of their end walls. The ‘house’ is really a little village on 530 square metres of land, with a multi-functional studio, an apartment for Stout's mother, and a two-bedroom house for Mitchell and Stout. There is also a ramping bridge reaching for the beach, and another water garden. Once again, the relationship between inside and outside is an issue. ‘Living-dining-verandah’ was too obvious a set-up, and one already explored. Mitchell pitched for ‘living-verandah-dining’: going outside to the TV from the table. Stout put in a veto. And so ‘living-dining and a roof deck above’ prevailed. But will anyone make the trip to the roof from the comfort of the floor below? Time will tell.



*Elevations- top: Street side, mid: sea side,
bottom: neighbour side*