

## I Claudius: A nostalgically-charged evaluation of Claude Megson's heyday in the 1970s

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**ABSTRACT:** Along with Ian Athfield and Roger Walker, Claude Megson emerged in the early 1970s as an idiosyncratic architectural iconoclast utterly committed to the New Zealand house. However, Megson's legacy has taken a different course to his compatriots. Unlike Athfield and Walker, Megson had no literary champion to promote his significance (it might be said he had his own voice for that). Moreover, his relatively early death in 1994 curtailed his architectural activity but there was little indication in his work by then that he would either continue to reinvent his approach to housing in the manner of Walker, or grow his scope and scale of his work like Athfield. By the mid 1970s Megson had formed a rigid approach to domestic work that underpinned – and probably limited – his activities as an architect and architectural educator. His certainty on this matter also polarised opinion on his personality. You were obliged to be either with or against Claude, and this dialectical distinction has not endeared him to researchers. In this paper I wish then to evaluate the historical significance of Megson in three interlocking parts. The first concerns his personal mythology as an architect hero in the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright (a narrative that real estate agents are quick to promote his work). The second part is found in an analysis of his actual houses from this period with particular attention given to his masters' dissertation. The final aspect I wish to weave through is his presence as a dominant personality, but a rather marginal teacher, at the Auckland School of Architecture into the 1980s. This will not be a particularly scholarly or academic appraisal. In keeping with the complexities and paradoxes that underpinned Megson's character, what I hope to do here is to provide a sketch for further scholarship on one of New Zealand's most intriguing architects.

In 1972 the Dowse Art Gallery in Lower Hutt opened *New Romantics in Building*, an exhibition on the work of five of New Zealand's most progressive architects. Associated by their use of asymmetry and "picturesque massing"<sup>1</sup> Ian Athfield, Roger Walker, Peter Beaven, John Scott and Claude Megson were identified as the key representatives of an emergent architectural nationalism that had shrugged off any stigma associated to parochial influences. Against the ideological dogma of international modernism the New Romantics turned to playful expressiveness that took such rural influences as farm cottages, whare and shearing sheds as

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<sup>1</sup> Gatley "Domestic Architecture" p 4.

their references. In reality the architects selected were remarkable as much for their divergent as their common architectural values. Nonetheless the Dowse exhibition declared the seventies the decade in which New Zealand architecture cast off its cultural cringe.

To different degrees the career of each of the five was determined in the 1970s. Athfield anchored his reputation in 1975-76 with his win in an international competition for a housing project in the Philippines, and ended the decade with the maturity of the Buck House, Hawkes Bay. Conversely, Roger Walker began the period with the Wellington Club (1969-1972) to peak with Park Mews

(1974) and the Britton House (1977), after which his work began to suffer for its increasingly commercial servitude.<sup>2</sup> Beaven took yet another path as the late modernist brilliance of his 1960s projects gave way to a self-conscious fascination with the Cantabrian gothic of Benjamin Mountfort that would increasingly flirt with post-modernism in the 1980s. John Scott in turn holds a particularly rarified status, even amongst this group,

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing Roger Walker has been awarded the New Zealand Institute of Architects highest individual honour, the NZIA Gold Medal. In the introduction to the citation they write "Few figures in the history of New Zealand architecture are as synonymous with a place and time as is Roger Walker with Wellington in the Sixties and Seventies." "2016 Gold Medal: Roger Walker" np.

partly for his prominence as a Māori architect, and partly for the celebrated Chapel of Futuna that had received the NZIA Gold Medal in 1968. His most notably building of the 1970s must now be considered the largely ignored Aniwaniwa Visitor Centre (Urewera National Park Headquarters, 1974–76) whose prominence and claimed importance has never greater than at the point of its demolition in September this year. Appearing in 1972 it was inevitable that the *New Romantics in Building* exhibition would draw its representatives from the prior decade; Beaven and Scott had notable buildings to their names while Athfield and Walker had appeared as talented designers in notable practices (the former with Structon Group and the later in Calder Fowler and Styles).

Megson was the exception in this class. His reputation was established on a small number of Auckland houses, particularly the Jopling House, which was recognized with an NZIA Branch Award in 1965, and especially the Wong House, which the NZIA rewarded with a Bronze Medal in 1969.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent notable houses prior to the Dowse exhibition included

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<sup>3</sup> At this time the Bronze Medal was the highest award for domestic work made by the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

a residence for painter Milan Mrkusich (1969), the German Townhouses (1970), Cocker Flats (1970) and culminated in the geometric Wright-esque Barr House (1972). Each project displayed a sophisticated arrangement of interlocking cells whose spatial relationships have been catalogued by Giles Reid as variations on four formal principles; diagonally organised views and movement, landscape context, visual domestic symbolism, and ritual socialisation. But it is the emotional impact of Megson's houses that cannot be underestimated. His colleague at Auckland University, John Dickson, has described his experience of the Norris House (1973) in transcendent terms, lingering in the light of the fireplace he recalls "floating out of the picture plane, looking back at this scene" in an aesthetic ecstasy he compares to an image of Vermeer, the Villa Savoy or a scene from a Beaton film.<sup>4</sup>

However, historians have been more reticent. In *The Elegant Shed*<sup>5</sup> of 1984 David Mitchell could find little to say on Megson despite working together in the School of Architecture, and in *A History of New Zealand*

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<sup>4</sup> Dickson "Claude Megson and his Architecture" p 35.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell *The Elegant Shed* p 35.

*Architecture* Peter Shaw makes mention of Megson only as an example of a reaction against modernism at the end of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

The sense here is that, for all his early brilliance, by the time of his elevation as a *New Romantic* in 1972 Megson's thinking had calcified to a degree that would not beset the other four for a few more years. Consequentially, he has been described as being, by the 1980s, "an architect doggerly following an architectural direction out of step with contemporary concerns."<sup>7</sup> When he died of cancer in 1994 he was 57, had completed only about 40 buildings (of which 11 had received design awards). Megson's popular legacy amongst New Zealand's architectural fraternity owes more to his 30 years teaching at the Auckland University School of Architecture than any obviously significant buildings.

### **Megson as Teacher**

It was in his capacity as a teacher that I encountered him in 1989. Or, if I am honest, avoided him. As a first-year student I saw Megson's reputation as that of an impatient

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<sup>6</sup> Shaw *A History of New Zealand Architecture* p 168.

<sup>7</sup> "Megson in Auckland" np.

autocratic in the model of a nineteenth-century drawing room Master. I used the Auckland School's medley approach to studio offerings to determine a path through my degree that avoid him as a design instructor. But while it was possible to avoid Megson in this capacity there was no way to avoid his personality in the confines of the studio. His presence was, if not palpable, then certainly prevailing as he stalked his students at their desks relentlessly. To be one of Claude's students (it seemed from the outside) was to be part conscripted into an elite military squad led by a mad vainglorious commander. It would have come as no surprise to hear one of them claim to love the smell of graphite in the morning. Gossip followed as a natural consequence. One story might exist only as a parable to Claude's approach to design teaching, but it is worth retelling for that reason alone. It was whispered that one particularly harried student with an unfailing ability to disappoint was caught after hours by Megson as they began to trace one of his house plans in desperation. Peering at the preliminary lines just starting to emerge Megson is reported as saying "good, carry on," leaving the student in a sublime fug of anxiety and euphoria.

It was impossible not collect at least one anecdote involving Claude. Mine occurred a late-night re-entry to studio that found the space empty, bar Claude bent over a put-upon student on the far side of the room. In a voice typically exceeding the volume necessary for individual communication I heard Claude say to said student; "If you can't design, COPY" - and then the kicker - "... and if you have to copy THEN COPY PROPERLY!"

I use that anecdote often and not just to highlight the dark old days of studio. There is, it now seems to me, an essential truth in this criticism. Few students are naturally gifted designers, and it is an all too frequently demonstrated ignorance of architecture students that they confuse influence with a violated artistic integrity. The problem in Megson's emphasis on this point is that by "influence" he meant the influence of Claude Megson (see previous anecdote).

### **The House**

While I fled the heat of Megson's studio instruction I was nonetheless attracted to his flame sufficiently to undertake both of his lecture-based elective offerings. Of *The House* I recall little tangible content. Lectures consisted of two slide projectors throwing an immense number of images onto the screen in

what may or may not have been a planned exercise in visual overload (by the rudimentary standards of the day). All the while Claude spoke over the top in a monotone, evoking gilded summer days, heritage rose gardens and the power of the stately manor. He also had a particular penchant for turning off all the theatre lighting and then angling the lectern reading light up under his chin so that his head bobbed in front of us a messianic decapitation lamenting the loss of the English gentry's house.

A clue to how Megson approached lectures can be found in a Study Paper he produced in 1981. This small essay titled "The Search for Spatial Meaning that Clarifies & Enriches Human Existence" begins with the sub-title "Lecture Ten: Ritual, Image and Action," and presents itself as having been extracted from his course on the house. It is an essay short in both length and demonstrable content, but not evocation. Of winter he writes:

... on cold nights there is no substitute for a fire, with or without friends. The low light quality, glowing and flickering, dancing images around the alcove, snug, warm and feeling protected by the solid enclosing walls. The magic of substance changing to a felt non-substance, warmth, along with a constantly changing mural of

burning cinders on the fireback makes the fireplace a symbolic place.<sup>8</sup>

And so it continues with references to childhood games, mulled wine, warm baths, and, as far as the standards of scholarly writing allow, the art of love making. It is less an academic paper than a vivid painting in the pigments of Gaston Bachelard and Carl Jung.<sup>9</sup>

### **Composition, Scale and Proportion.**

Of the other elective Claude offered I have even less recollection. Perhaps my attendance was less than satisfactory, but the content, delivery and examination of *Composition, Scale and Proportion* have left no obvious register. The course description offers little help. The emphasis on syntactic and semantic relationships is consistent with an interest in linguistic and semiotic interpretations in architectural design theory that had gained prominence in the work of Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour and Robert Venturi with the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972. Developments in syntactic and semantic design theory in the 1970s heralded the age of architectural post-modernism that

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<sup>8</sup> Megson "The Search for Spatial Meaning" p 3.

<sup>9</sup> The Study Paper gives as the bibliography only Bachelard *Poetics of Space* and Jung *Man and His Symbols*.

would dominate building aesthetics for better or - probably more often - worse, in the 1980s.

Proof that *Composition, Scale and Proportion* did have some kind of positive impact on me can be found in the course material I kept: Megson's notes for the first lecture and three essay readings. It isn't much, but it is a start. The Introductory lecture was titled "The Constructive Eye" and consists of five pages of short evocative statements loosely addressing visual perception and spatial symbolism. The notes end, "Memory is a flower which only opens fully in the kingdom of heaven, when the eye is eternally innocent,"<sup>10</sup> which is terrifically evocative until it we consider that Megson lifted it without citation from English war poet and art historian Herbert Read's childhood autobiography *The Innocent Eye*.<sup>11</sup> However I am disinclined to see this as plagiarism but more the efforts of an unscholarly writer who saw himself sufficiently in the words of others that he might consider them exactly what he would have said. Nonetheless it does mean that the

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<sup>10</sup> Megson "Introductory Lecture" np.

<sup>11</sup> Read *The Innocent Eye*. Originally a Freudian Read transferred his intellectual commitment to Carl Jung, becoming the editor-in-chief of Jung's collected works in English.

entire lecture document has to be viewed as having questionable authorship. This needs to be kept in mind when reading what I find to be the most important paragraph:

The sense of proportion is inherent in the experience of perception. By continuity, a series of steps, lead the observer from the smaller to the larger units and knits the whole structure together, establishing a united hierarchy. On observation of a pattern as a whole, judgement relies on the strength and directions of the tensions experienced – the hidden structure. In geometrical complicated compositions, instead of piecemeal figuring out, the perceiving mind can fully realise the whole by rely on the field of interacting forces. It is these interacting forces that we call proportions, the relatedness of the parts to the whole, its comprehension.<sup>12</sup>

The thinking here is the work of Rudolf Arnheim, particularly his major work *Art and Visual Perception*, but it is the clarity of purpose here I want to emphasise. Proportion and perception are intrinsically associated compositional elements but which are not necessarily important to an observer, who needs only to be cognisant of the parts so long as a geometric whole exists.

If we transpose this into architecture it can be interpreted as a statement for the separation

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<sup>12</sup> Megson "Introductory Lecture" np.

of experience and design. That is to say, the architect needs to have a conceptual whole— a gestalt in the terminology of Arnheim – in mind when designing, but someone moving through the resultant building should be satisfied with an exposure to the architectural parts as they perceive them.

Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* is listed on Megson's General Reading recommendation for the course, with attention being made of his section on "grouping." Architectural writers consist of Venturi,<sup>13</sup> and Bloomer and Moore,<sup>14</sup> but the greater part of this short list consists, as we might expect, of essays on proportion with a bias toward Gyorgy Kepes.<sup>15</sup>

However, the four articles I kept are drawn from a series published by the RIBA journal *The Architect* on architectural geometry in 1986.<sup>16</sup> One, by Peter F Smith, specifically addressed harmonic proportion, while the other three by Richard Padovan were an attempt to make

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<sup>13</sup> Venturi *Complexity and Contradiction*.

<sup>14</sup> Bloomer & Moore *Body, Memory and Architecture*.

<sup>15</sup> Kepes *Language of Vision*.

<sup>16</sup> See Smith "Extending the Idea of Proportion" and Padovan "A Necessary Instrument?", "Measuring and Counting" and "Theory and Practice."

contemporary relevance of the geometric theories of Dominican monk and architect Dom Van der Laan. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the influence of these essays on Megson's work, but it is worth repeating an observation made by David Goldblatt in a review of a later book by Smith: for Peter F Smith proportion does not suffer the individuality of taste.<sup>17</sup> The golden rectangle, for example, he considers an enduring absolute of proportional harmony. In "Extending the Idea of Proportion" he writes: "We have an intuitive capacity to "weigh-up" elements in a building or a painting and counterbalance them to test for an aesthetically pleasing result."<sup>18</sup>

The interesting implication here is that Megson shared with Smith and Padovan an increasingly anachronistic conviction that harmonic proportion was not only important to architectural composition, but absolutely essential to successful architecture. If this is what he meant I do not remember it being stated so clearly. But more to the point, there does not seem to be evidence that he addressed his studio instruction with

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<sup>17</sup> Goldblatt "Review" pp 300-302.

<sup>18</sup> Smith "Extending the Idea of Proportion" p 48.

anything like the geometric specific-ness necessary to link contemporary practice to the principles of Palladio.<sup>19</sup>

In practice, in studio, Megson's pedagogic approach was almost the opposite. Students were expected to work in plan resolving a design. Megson's visit to their desk would invariably consist of him modifying the drawing in freehand and then issuing an instruction to the student to lay another tracing sheet over the top and to keep going until his next visit.<sup>20</sup> Any notion proportion and architecture might be explicitly forged on the drawing board does not appear to be the case. His studio teaching is probably the most important contributing factor in Megson's reputation as a genius. Architecture appeared under the weight of his pencil with complete certainty as though from the eye, rather than the brain, which is why it is necessary to consider his Masters thesis.

### **Formal Aspects of House**

Megson completed his Diploma in

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<sup>19</sup> Palladio stands as a touch stone for the work of Smith, but similarly Megson is described as having loved the work of Palladio. See Susan Nielsen-Kay in "Shine-on, Bright-Star" p 120.

<sup>20</sup> O'Sullivan, Pers. Comm.

Architecture at Auckland University in 1963 and by 1969 was teaching in the school and undertaking a Masters in Architecture, which culminated in the presentation of his thesis "Formal Aspects of House: A Philosophical Discourse on the Family House in Auckland," in 1970.<sup>21</sup> It is worth immediately noting that neither of these are obviously likely strategies for a young architect who has been compared to Frank Lloyd Wright in aspiration.<sup>22</sup>

In title Megson's dissertation addresses the formal requirements of the design of houses in Auckland. Organisationally, the thesis is in two distinct parts with first providing a breakdown for the various activities of a house, and in the second part Megson used examples from his own houses to provide illustrations of successful realisations. However, under examination, it is far less convincing. Part one reads as a polemical

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<sup>21</sup> Megson *Formal Aspects*.

<sup>22</sup> While a Masters Degree is the standard culmination of a professional architectural students, this is a recent development. The University of Auckland's first MArch graduates were Arthur Marshall and Russell Walden, in 1964. By 1970 Megson was one of only 11 MArch (Architecture) degrees issued by the University, of which three others were faculty staff (Cam McClean, Tony Watkins and Peter Middleton all presented their dissertations in 1967).

petition for the place of elevated ritual in everyday domestic life, while in part two Megson takes his interpretation of these as a proof of success. It is also a problem of time that Megson's views on domesticity have aged badly. Take, for example, his view on household errands:

Any chore can be made more tolerable by skilfully and accurately planning so that its performance may be more easily and speedily performed, in an environment so delightful that its onerous quality becomes diluted.<sup>23</sup>

It is an argument for functionalism tempered by ritual in which the efficient daily life might be raised to symbolic standards. In taking this argument forward Megson referred to his own projects for evidence, particularly the Jopling House, which received an NZIA Branch Award in 1965, and the Wong House, which had been singled out for the NZIA's highest award for housing, the Bronze Medal, in 1969. Both houses consist of complex cellular networks featuring constant negotiations of domestic ritual and pattern, but elevated architecturally by the architect's formal skill and attention to massing, light, materials, circulation and sight lines. However, for all that, Megson remains

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<sup>23</sup> Megson "Formal Aspects" p 70.

remarkably mute on specific architectural direction. A whole is "articulated with broken angular roof shapes," the dining room is "given character by the hinged panels," the "master bedroom" is "withdrawn, enclosed, and secluded" in contrast to the "gay, lively, and bright" bedroom of the child.<sup>24</sup> Evocation is evident, but he is less forthcoming on actual methodologies for considering, coordinating and composing these spaces. Once more we find here the central absence of a design methodology. Frequently in Megson's work the bridge between theory and practice is never visible for the fog of rhetoric that rolls across his harbour.

However, if his thesis proved nothing else it certainly showed Megson to be a talented designer of sophisticated houses, and, in a not insignificant way, his thesis predicted the recent advent of practice-based design research in architecture schools. But it is the bombastic text that defines his writing and, as anyone who has ever been in the presence of Megson will remember, the nuance of prejudice that pervades his thesis in "real-life" quickly became overt sexism. Where he alludes to making chores more tolerable he

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<sup>24</sup> Megson "Formal Aspects" p 219.

means this to be the work of women, so any "efficiencies" are still shackled to gender. I can offer an odd defense for Megson in that he was also something of a purloiner and was not so great an author of his own rhetoric as it may at first seem. Responsibility for the intellectual component of his thesis owes much more to Robert Woods Kennedy and his magnum opus, *The House and the Art of its Design*, of 1953.

### **The House and the Art of its Design**

The name Robert Woods Kennedy is one that has slipped from our present-day architectural consciousness but some gauge of his significance can be gleaned from the acknowledgements he provides in *The House* by references to Pietro Belluschi, William Wilson Wurster, the Guggenheim Foundation<sup>25</sup> and the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. Such links identify Kennedy as a part of the American northwest regional style architects of the post-war period. Moreover, the institutional affiliation

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<sup>25</sup> Kennedy received a 1948 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award for study in the field of architecture, planning and design. Other Guggenheim recipients Memorial Foundation recipients in this field include Lewis Mumford and Gyorgy Kepes, both of whom Kennedy refers to in *The House*.

consolidates his position as an intellectual member. *The House* was a systematic analysis of the social and cultural norms that defined the American suburban house in the early post-war period but as such it also iterated the bigotries found in a house of that type. Lewis Mumford considered *The House* a "much-needed book,"<sup>26</sup> but a more measured critique by Buford Junker<sup>27</sup> considered it to be less a title on designing than a polemic for and of the value of establishing social science based patterns that might underpin, but in no direct way realise, a design.<sup>28</sup> At best, Kennedy provides a functionalist expression for a sociologically-based observation of "economy of physical movement."<sup>29</sup> Take, by way of illustration, his advice on housework:

Any chore, no matter how burdensome, can be made more tolerable in two ways. It can be planned for so skillfully and accurately that its performance is made physically easy and speedy. It can take place in an environment so delightful that its onerous quality becomes diluted.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mumford "The Sky Line"

<sup>27</sup> Junker "*The House*" pp 94-95.

<sup>28</sup> In this Junker connects Kennedy's thinking to Irving Rosow. Rosow was a sociologist now best known for his pioneering research on housing for the elderly. See Rosow *Socialization to Old Age*.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy *The House* p 144.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy *The House* p 278.

Like Megson after him, for Kennedy the sanctity of the family home was fortified by prevailing social roles whose gendered assumptions were veiled behind a language of efficiency and utility. Kennedy's work might have had a more notable impact beyond the 1950s had he had a more progressive attitude towards the cultural biases and privileges that provided the foundation for his domestic organisations. Which is a nice way of saying *The House* assumes American domesticity as the domain of nuclear WASP families where men are Bread-Winners, woman Home-Makers, and parental guidance is provided by Dr Spock.

To take another taste of Kennedy's condescending brand of misogyny: "Housework" he writes:

... cooking, and child care are the primary responsibility of women. But houses are designed by men. That is why, perhaps, women's essential problems are so often ignored. Furthermore, the lady client sitting across the desk from her gentleman architect, bedecked in the symbols of her glass – her accent, clothes, and manners – obscures the basic female who will have to cope with the house he plans.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time husbands come home

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<sup>31</sup> Kennedy *The House* p 35.

"somewhat disappointed with the world" to find their wives "tired and disgusted with housework and child care"<sup>32</sup> (the first page has a lengthy "paraphrasing" of no less an authority on the sacred home than Caesar). There is a cultural expansiveness to Kennedy's argument that draws upon such sources as abstract painting, traditional Japanese houses, Jungian psychology and contemporary architectural examples, but within a few pages it is apparent that his relentless categorization of the house is rooted in narrow middle-class assumptions.

The weaknesses are epitomized where he contrasts photographs of a house of his own design. On the one side he has an image of the house "as the magazine readers see it" and against this he provides four more photographs recording, in his view, "the same house as the owners and their friends see it." In the first the exterior of a pristine modern bungalow is framed in its immediate landscape but devoid of all human occupation - bar the implication of occupation provided by two empty deck chairs. The second sequence is cropped to these chairs but features the home's occupants. In one a man

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<sup>32</sup> Kennedy *The House* p 45.

and a woman are engaged in conversation, in another two men recline. Three of the four photographs feature dirty children - perhaps to labour the point that family life is chaotic? All, it probably goes without saying, are white. It is an ironic twist that Kennedy's name has survived not for his writing but as the designer of the kitchen Julia Child made famous in a series of televised cooking shows in the 1970s. In the example of the Child kitchen the clarity of storage, accessibility and efficiency has a sociological basis but beyond its bourgeois status and celebrity association it offers little to advance principles established by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in the Frankfurt Kitchen for Ernst May's New Frankfurt housing project of 1926. The most telling design consideration was the decision to set the countertops higher than usual at 38" to accommodate Child's 6'2" height, and which may well have done much to make Child's stature optically acceptable as that of a normal housewife rather than a woman who had spent the war years working in the fledgling CIA.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, it is too easy to dwell on the social

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<sup>33</sup> Childs served in the Office of Strategic Services, the fore runner of the Central Intelligence Agency.

presumption that determines Kennedy's writing. The reality of 1950s American architecture was, generally speaking, white, masculine, elite and privileged.<sup>34</sup> That does not excuse Kennedy but it does provide context for his views, and a reason for his present-day obscurity. The same excuse cannot be made for Megson writing in 1970.

### **Megson as Teacher**

In his teaching, as with his thesis, Megson flitted between extremes, drawing aspiration from highly a ritualized metaphysics of the home, while simultaneously proving the veracity of his emotional rhetoric with *fait accompli* proof of his own buildings. Viewed from this distance, it is as though Megson willfully ignored explaining the relationship between idea and realization, between theory and practice, that is the design process. Because of this there is a tendency to interpret

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<sup>34</sup> In the architectural world of this period there were exceptions but they were rare and tended to operate either on the outside or with a male companion. Catherine Bauer, wife of William Wilson Wurster, offered a more responsible and nuanced interpretation of social housing. Anne Tyng was largely invisible behind the figure of Louis Kahn, and while Denise Scott Brown stood next to Robert Venturi she nonetheless has been treated as an inferior figure. See Brown "Room at the Top?"



Megson as a creative genius, particularly in the manner of one of his heroes, Frank Lloyd Wright. Like Wright, Megson was not beyond treating his design talent as an internal and quasi-divine activity:

I prepare myself to receive them – a ritual; listen to music upstairs let them fill my kind, and when they are there, I draw, and bring them out.<sup>35</sup>

As an exercise in aura and bravado comparing one's design methodology to a spiritual visitation is par for the course. Real estate agents, of course, love this kind of talk as it adds to a property a quality of uniqueness to which value can be applied, but many who were taught by Megson discuss his influence in terms of reverence.

I will take just one example from a "comments" adjunct to Peter Cresswell's website homage to Megson.<sup>36</sup> This follows a well-illustrated account of Megson's own house that began life as the home of one of Megson's teachers, Prof. Richard Toy. Writes Richard Farrow:

Always when I look at Claude's work I gasp at his skill,

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<sup>35</sup> Megson quoted, Dickson "Claude Megson and his Architecture" p 37.

<sup>36</sup> *The Claude Megson Blog* n.p.

passion and abilities. Every house he designed had a unique and powerful narrative. This man was a driven genius. It was a fantastic privilege to have been his student, a worker in his studio, on several of his building sites.<sup>37</sup>

This is, I suspect, exactly the view Megson wanted the world to hold, that architectural talent was a pre-ordained virtue destined to remain elusive from even his most ardent disciples. But what does that say of his decision to devote such a significant part of his professional life to the University? How can we interpret his teaching as a genuine commitment to the education of a new generation of architects when he seemed so determined to withhold specific instruction? He provided an answer, or sorts, himself when he reflected that his philosophy as a teacher:

"is to lead and inspire by example and demonstration, giving an interpretation of the disciplines and skills associated with the craft of architecture."<sup>38</sup>

Example and demonstration certainly have their place in both teaching and practice, but they also need to be available to explanation,

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<sup>37</sup> Farrow "Yes, you can buy Claude Megson's house ..." np.

<sup>38</sup> Megson quoted, Bartlett "Shine on, Bright Star" p 118.

criticism, and critique if they are to be proven. Likewise, a house may be an example of an architect's work, and a demonstration of their skill, but this in no way accounts for its "becoming." Mere faith in the ability of an individual architect does little more than mystify a reputation, which is why I want to turn to a short examination of a Megson house plan.

### **The Persian Rug**

Claude, if we are to trust Tony Watkin's view on this, began his working life as a gardener, and his relationship with architecture may well have begun in the garden of Reginald Ford which he cared after for a number of years.<sup>39</sup> This is a compelling origin mythology for an architect whose frame of architectural reference was inevitably nature.<sup>40</sup> It is a matter of fact that Claude worked part-time in the office of Gummer and Ford while a student, entering full employment with the firm upon completing his studies. And his relationship with the older Ford appears a genuine mentorship (John Dickson recalls Megson's

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<sup>39</sup> Watkins "Claude Megson: Utopian Idealist" p 46.

<sup>40</sup> "He talked about architecture as a symbol of a harmonious relationship with nature and God, and of buildings engaging their settings of earth, water and sky." Carnachan in "Shine on, Bright Star" p 116.

love for the threadbare Persian rugs gifted by Ford<sup>41</sup>). This might seem a trivial point but, in the plan I am about to discuss, Persian rugs play a significant role.

Before then it is necessary to declare the provenance of this drawing under autopsy. Megson continued to be a presence in the School of Architecture studios even when his cancer was well advanced, and when he died, in 1994, I was a PhD student with an office on the same corridor. I was therefore well placed to walk past when the contents of Megson's office were being dumped. From the thousands of slides, I salvaged a small number of images of Megson's own drawings and have had them since. It is from this modest collection of reproductions that I have selected this plan but it suffers for having been severed from its intention. I think there three reasons to believe Megson drew it for himself. The first is that the plan contains a drawing board, complete with T-square and set-square, in a room that is labelled "study." It seems to me to be an unlikely scenario that Megson had been commissioned by an architect. Secondly, the bedroom contains a chair described as "old rocker." Such familiarity

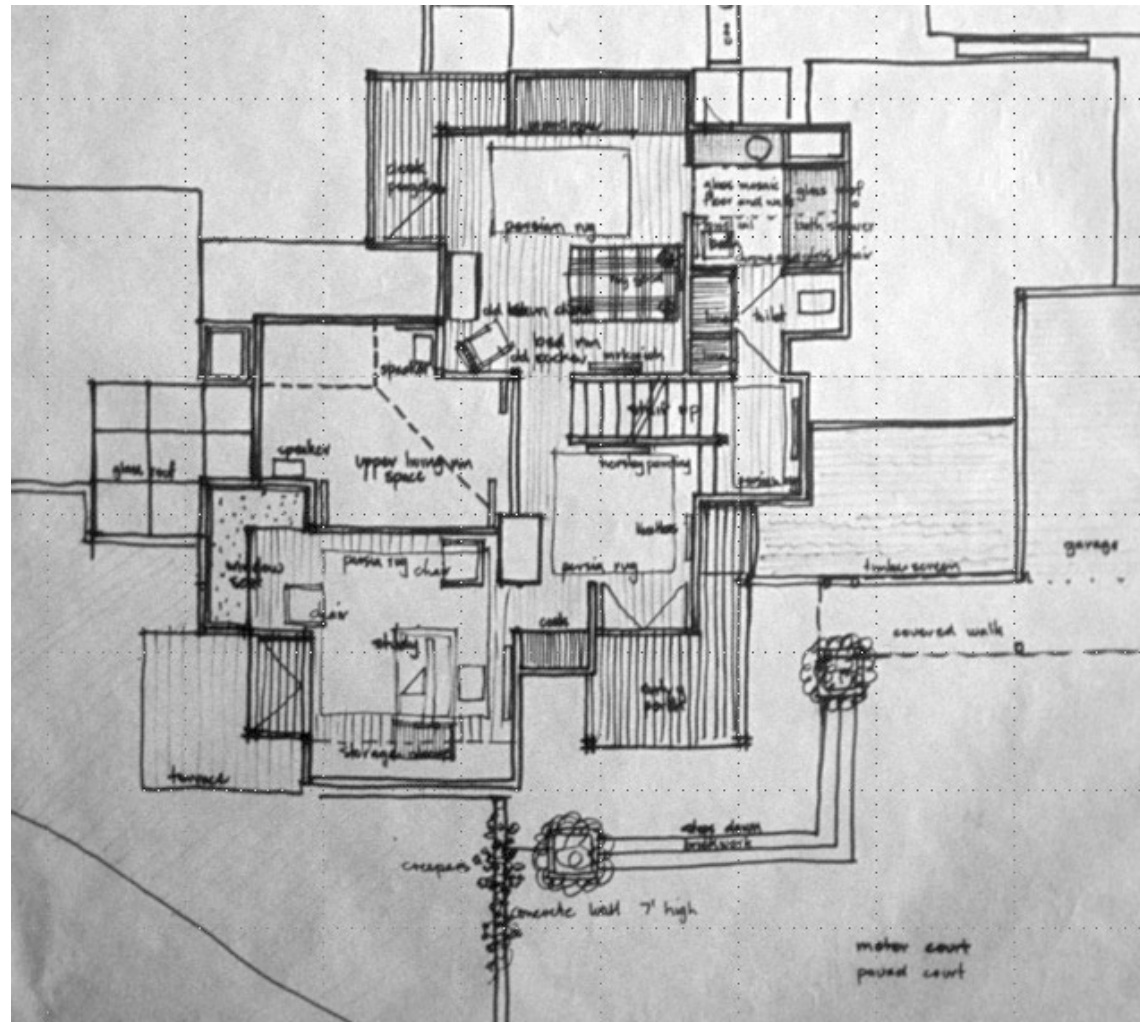


Figure 1: Unidentified house plan by Claude Megson (author's collection)

with an item of furniture also speaks of a personal project. And then there are the Persian rugs, all four of them. The study

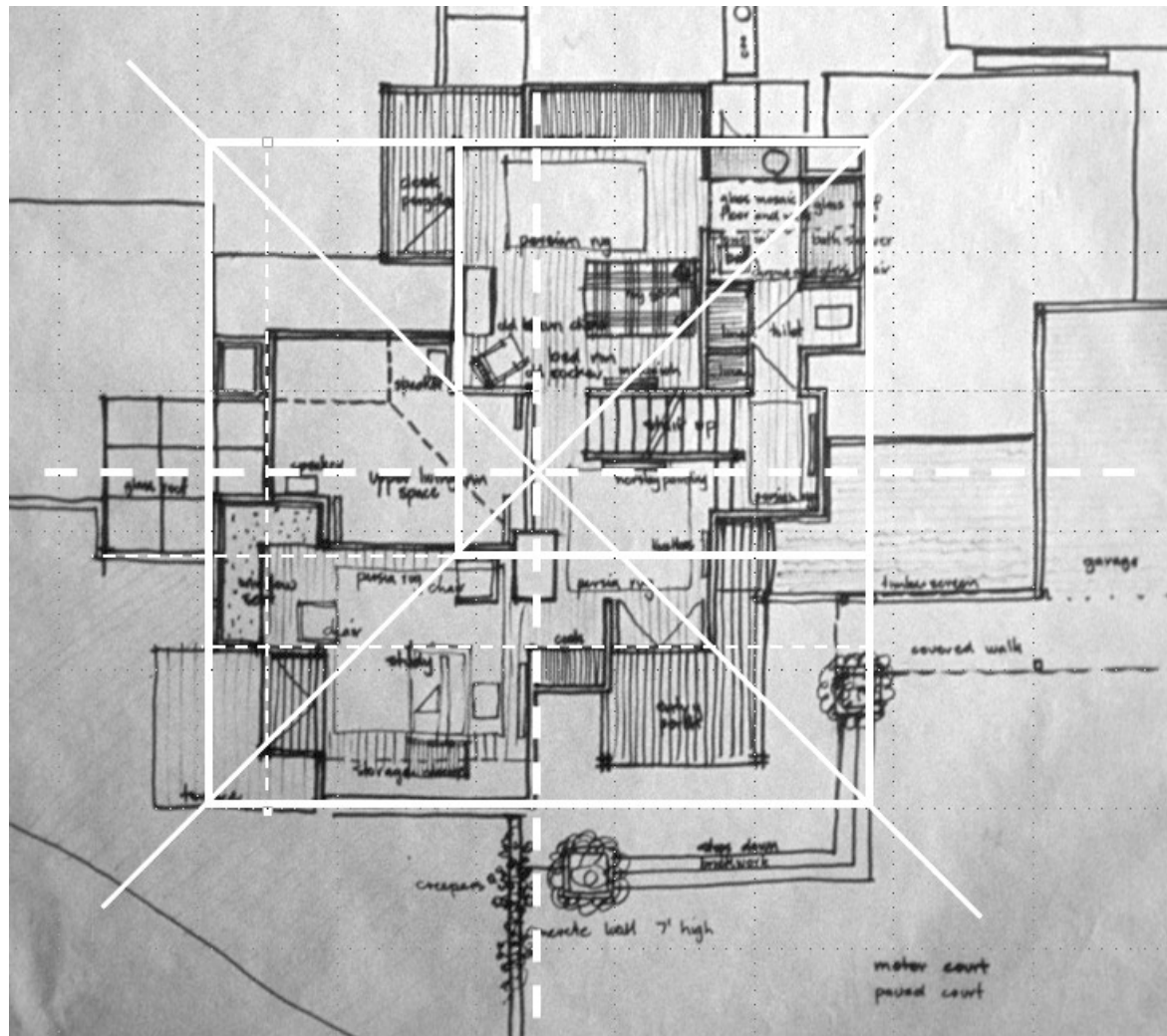
contains a large square rug (to go with the T-square and set-square?), a second and third are found around the stair landings, and a

<sup>41</sup> Dickson in "Shine on, Bright Star" p 118.

fourth holds a prominent place in the bedroom. Moreover, the bedroom rug also holds a particular clarity in the drawing as a clean rectangle in a drawing that is busy. So, I will proceed with caution but with some confidence that this project was of particular importance to Megson and thus might reveal some geometric bridging that is so far missing.

Overall this plan is very consistent with the characterization of Megson's houses as sets of interlocking cells. Here the clearest of these cells is the bedroom which is a perfect square. As the plan moves out from the bedroom the geometric clarity of the cells becomes less obvious but the principle of interlocking regular units remains. From this we can take some confidence that, at this level at least, Megson sees the bedroom as the key to this level of the house.

The other squares visible are two of the Persian rugs, and here things get interesting. The smaller of these is that one off the stairs. If a centre-line is dropped off the bedroom geometry this provides an alignment for the left-hand edge of the rug. If I add a diagonal bisector moving from top right to bottom left through the rug this line intersects with the T-



**Figure 2:** Unidentified house plan by Claude Megson annotated to show static square geometry (author's collection)

square edge placed on the centre-line of the study drawing board.

At this point it is necessary to admit the risks

of serendipitously locating "meaningful" geometrical patterns. It seems to me to be somewhat fateful that a correlation between the bedroom cell and the landing rug might be found against the drawing board. I could add the fact that this alignment also includes the bottom edge of the regular square of the study rug. Taken individually the veracity of these alignments are easily undermined by limits of accuracy. So my point here is not to insist that Megson placed the drawing board in a geometric relationship with the bedroom, only to allow that he might have seen in the drawing an opportunity of relationships made possible by the geometric practice of drawing.

So, to continue boldly on this risky path. There are two lines to the T-square. The top drawing edge is, I have suggested, a diagonal alignment to between the two square rugs and the bedroom cell centre-line. The second line of the T-square, the lower edge, can be returned vertically to find the left-hand edge of the bedroom. I would add that a T-square, as a movable object, is not a reliable alignment point in a building. But it is powerful symbolic element to find in a drawing that might be determined by geometry, so I find it difficult to dismiss outright the fact that the top edge of the T-square provides a datum

through the centre of the study rug extending outwards to define the envelope edge of the window seat on the left, and the wall of the room containing the small rug to the right.

This datum is the clue to the cubic bias behind the entire composition. A 45° bisector can be extended through this corner to intersect with horizontal and vertical projects off the bedroom ensuite. Reflecting the resultant right-angle triangle across the bisector creates an encompassing square that should be considered the primary cubic polygon for the entire composition. This conclusion can be shown by drawing horizontal and vertical centre-lines through the intersection of the diagonals. This produces secondary squares that in turn define a number of key formal elements. These include the right-hand exterior wall to the study, the processional centre-line through the left side deck, the end of the bedroom deck and, tellingly, the top edge of the landing rug.

Here the plan reveals an underlying orthogonal construction of articulate complexity but it is not one that speaks of a higher geometry beyond the ability of a talented architect. With that statement made I want to point out an anomaly concerning the

Persian rugs. Whereas the axial reading I have made makes sense of the two square rugs it simultaneously undermines the formal integrity of the two rectangular rugs by truncating their shapes.

It would be tempting to dismiss this as an irrelevant detail were we not to consider that the proportions of the bedroom rug are those of the golden rectangle. Moreover, if a square is added to this rug to break its geometry down to square and rectangle components a curiosity appears with the plan's composition centre-line now dissecting the entrance to the bedroom and evoking a proportional parallel between this end of the rug and the lower chimney as it passes through the floor, which is itself shown to correspond to the golden ratio.

At the same time where the horizontal compositional centre-line truncates the landing rug a third golden rectangle is produced whose upper points have a projected relationship to the bedroom rug. Dissecting this rug into its constituent square and rectangle parts then provides a new horizontal datum that locates an outside wall, the stair edge, and the module for the left-hand deck grid.

This set of relationships is, I think, far more than coincidental but it needs explaining as a methodological practice. The pragmatic attributes of the house begin as a dissected square into which secondary and tertiary squares are added and then edited to produce the interlocking cellular network Megson has been praised for. But at exactly the same time Megson is also applying the ratio of the golden mean as a proportional system for the ritualistic elements in the plan. This is why the golden rectangle appears in the shape of the chimney (fire), bedroom rug (retreat), drawing board (creativity), the stair landing (pause and view) and, of course, especially the bath (cleansing). Each occurrence is an example of a sanctified domestic activity that is being elevated beyond the ordinary through the contrast of a stable geometry (the grid) with a dynamic geometry (the golden ratio).

### Conclusion

If it is the case that Megson utilized the golden ratio to geometrically determine the complex plans he was known for, this in no way undermines the architectural integrity of those works. Indeed, if anything, it might actually heighten his reputation as a renegade architect walking his own path. So the profundity here

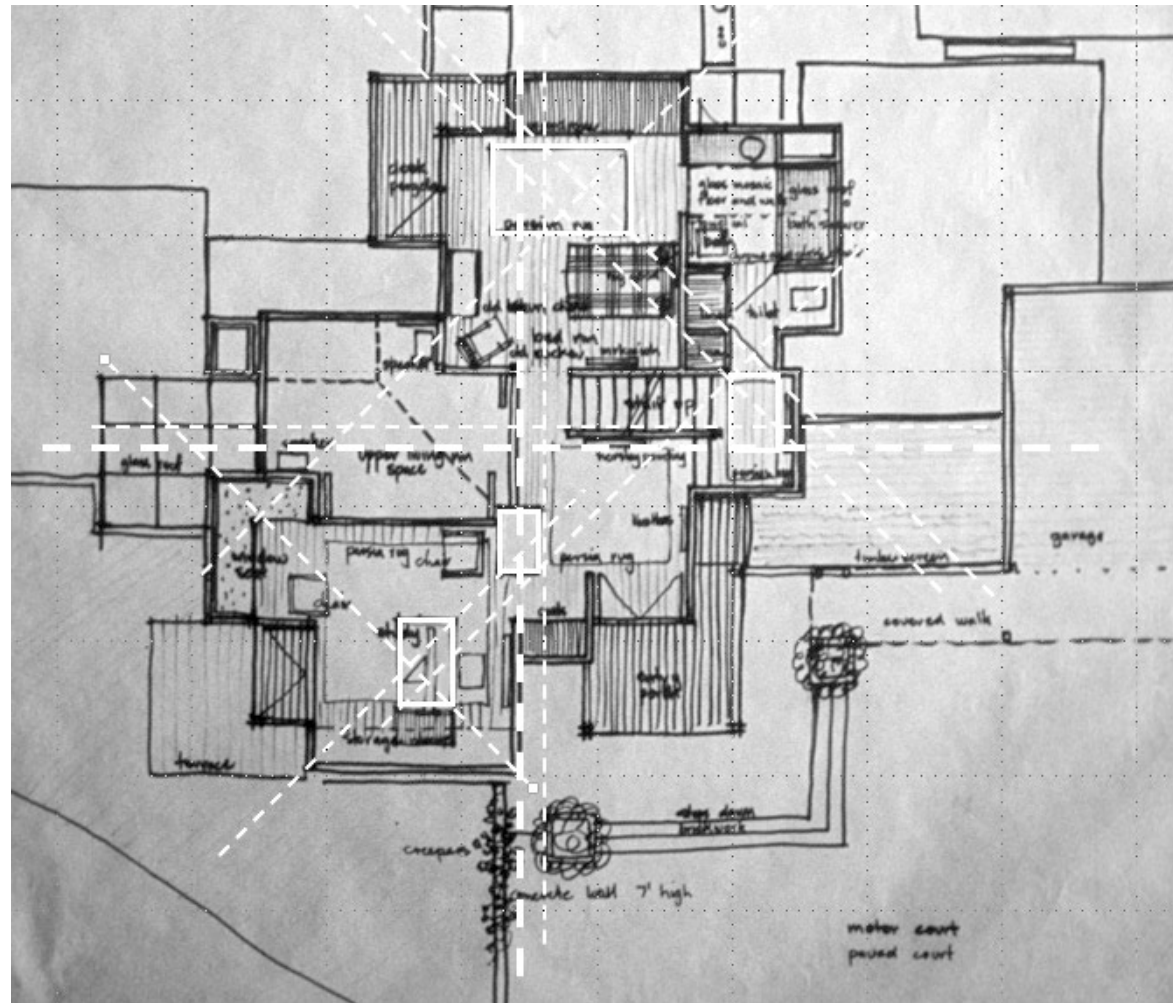


Figure 3: Unidentified house plan by Claude Megson annotated to show dynamic golden geometry (author's collection)

is not that Megson used proportional geometry, but that he never declared so. But having said that neither was he particularly

secretive. In the courses, *The House and Composition, Scale and Proportion*, Megson offered the pieces: the first provided a

psychological road map to the social organisation of houses, and the second explored a set of tools for the physical arrangement. This is not to deny Megson his own particular brilliance in wielding these tools, nor the other architectural elements at play, but in these two courses Megson obliquely presented a methodological framework for domestic architecture. The skill in the plan I have discussed - and perhaps all of Megson's best work - is a geometric dialogue between prosaic and sacred interpretations of house. The significance of this is that it is dialogue based, and building specific. To discuss architecture academically isolates it from the both the prosaic and the sacred attributes of a house. Viewed retrospectively, Megson addressed this by laying out the various pieces that made up his architecture, but he stepped back from explaining his own method for assembly. He led students to geometric waters but at the last step not only let them decide if they wanted to drink, he allowed for the likely possibility they would not know the water was there. With all this in mind I think it is time to separate Megson from the other New Romantics and recast him as the architect he really was – an Old Romantic.

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