

## Once upon a time in Venice: The Invention of New Zealand Architecture at the 1991 Mostra di Architettura di Venezia

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**ABSTRACT:** There is little in the history of New Zealand that might resonate against measures of architecture established and perpetuated by Euro-centric socio-cultural development. And yet, in 1991, the University of Auckland was judged to have the world's best school of architecture. The circumstances of this recognition followed the Venice Biennale of Architecture that year when, for the first and only time, 43 select architecture programmes were invited to present themselves in open competition in the *Corderie dell'Arsenale*. The Auckland contribution was an elegant free-standing screen accompanied by a small selection of provocative instrumental drawings, and within the agenda set by the Biennale director, Francesco Dal Co, a claim could indeed have been made that, with this win, New Zealand, at that time, possessed the most eminent School of Architecture in the World. With hindsight the Venice Prize presented a high-takes paradox for New Zealand architecture. Superficially it offered a weighty endorsement for the pedagogic and disciplinary practices of the Auckland School, especially those associated with discursive modes of technical drawing. However, it did so at precisely the moment in history when these modes of representation were declining in the face of digital developments. But this hasn't hindered repeated attempts to duplicate the success in 1991. With this paper I will re-visit The Venice Prize, and subsequent Venetian visitations, with critical attention turned to teasing out some of trials that accompanied these presentations. In particular, thought will be given to how the narrative for New Zealand architecture presented in 1991 has become a prevailing New Zealand architectural mythology, and I will argue that each return to Venice since 1991 has entrenched this narrative as an ever-regressive account of global marginalisation, fragmentation and isolation.

There is little in the history of New Zealand that might resonate with measures of architecture established and perpetuated by Euro-centric socio-cultural development. And yet, in 1991, the University of Auckland was judged to have the world's best school of architecture. The circumstances of this recognition followed the Venice Biennale of Architecture that year when, for the first and only time, 43 select architecture programmes were invited to present themselves in open competition in the *Corderie dell'Arsenale*. The Auckland contribution was an elegant free-standing screen accompanied by a small selection of provocative instrumental drawings, and within the agenda set by the Biennale director, Francesco Dal Co, a claim

could indeed have been made that with this win New Zealand, at that time, possessed the most eminent school of architecture in the world. As Andrew Barrie would write in the centenary anniversary publication for the Auckland Architecture School:

this award ranked among the most important moments of international recognition received by New Zealand at that time, and boosted the School's standing both internationally and with the local profession.<sup>1</sup>

But with hindsight the Venice Prize presented a high-stakes paradox for New Zealand architecture. Superficially it offered a weighty endorsement for the pedagogic and

disciplinary practices of the Auckland School, especially those associated with discursive modes of technical drawing. However, it did so at precisely the moment in history when these modes of representation were declining in the face of digital developments. Moreover, it also set in motion a relationship that saw New Zealand architects return to exhibit in Italy again in 1996, 2012, 2014 and 2016, drawn, I would go so far to say, like a moth to a lightbulb. With this paper I will re-visit the 1991 prize-winning installation in Venice, and the subsequent 1996 exhibition, in Milan, turning my attention to the themes that accompanied these presentations. In particular, thought will be given to how the narrative for architecture presented in 1991

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<sup>1</sup> Barrie "Architecture to a Fault" p 116.

has become a prevailing New Zealand architectural mythology.

For background, the Venice Biennale is sometimes referred to as the "Olympics" of the architectural world, and so it can be easy to forget that the architecture event is but one in an assemblage of creative fields that flock to this part of Italy every two years. Art, music, dance, cinema, theatre and furniture all have their Biennale moments under the moniker La Biennale di Venezia. Of the architectural version, there are two common denominators of the Biennales: Venice, and a contrived argumentative manifesto. The first under Paolo Portoghesi heralded the arrival of post-modernism (1980), attention on the Islamic world (1982), the future of Venetian locations (1985), "the architect-seismographer" (1996), and so on.

The first Art Biennale dates back to 1895. Music, theatre and cinema were added in the 1930s, but architecture was a later arrival, beginning only in 1980 with the 1st International Architecture Exhibition.<sup>2</sup> The director of this debut was Portoghesi, and under his tenure the historic manufacturing

building, Corderie dell'Arsenale, become an exhibition site of La Biennale.<sup>3</sup> Portoghesi's credentials for this inaugural role were impeccable. Not only was he a prominent architect, he was also dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Rome (1968-78), and editor of the journal *Controspazio* (1969-83), and it was Portoghesi who set a thematic structure for the Architecture Biennale. However, in a radical departure from this approach, the appointed 1991 director, Francesco Dal Co, decided against a theme. It was, as Van Gerrewey has drolly observed, as if Dal Co wanted the 1991 biennale to be about architecture.<sup>4</sup> This was to be the first year in which the pavilions in the Giardini would be filled with exhibitions independently curated by figures appointed by the countries represented.

A provocative theme serves to galvanise and unite an international architectural community. Dal Co might well have wanted the biennale to be about "architecture" but exhibitors sought to fill the thematic vacuum he created with expressions of nationalism. But it is never this simple. The by-product was

an unofficial competition between attending countries to showcase their national identity through architecture.

For some, this realisation was not all bad. Geert Bekaert described it positively as "the ball of architects," and proclaimed it in terms of maturity as architecture no longer felt the insecurity of needing the crutch of "concept."<sup>5</sup> But this "non-concept" theme of competition took on a more diffident tone in the exhibition dedicated to showcasing the work of Schools of Architecture from around the world. The setting in the 330m Arsenale Corderie passage afforded each of the 43 invited schools an identical bay in which they could display what they saw as their unique working methods and approaches. For many of the schools participating, this opportunity extended a presence that their homelands had already established in the biennale. But for China, Australia, and New Zealand, the Arsenale showcase was to be their nation's biennale debut.<sup>6</sup> For all these schools, but perhaps especially the inauguration efforts of the named three, competition defined their efforts as they sought to substantiate their

<sup>2</sup> "La Biennale di Venezia History 1895-2019" np.

<sup>3</sup> "Arsenale" np.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gerrewey "The 1991 Architecture Biennale" p 43.

<sup>5</sup> Bekaert "Het bal van de architecten" np.

<sup>6</sup> Van Gerrewey "The 1991 Architecture Biennale" p 45.

pedagogic, nationalistic and creative voices.

History holds that the winner of the Arsenale competition was the University of Auckland team (the NZIA promotion document on the 2014 exhibition acknowledges the Auckland victory emphatically, stating that "in 1991 the University of Auckland School of Architecture beat 42 other international student teams to win the Exhibitions Venice Prize"<sup>7</sup>). Executed by a committed and extraordinary team of architectural talent, the Auckland School installation was a profoundly poetic gesture. A limited number of discursive drawings occupied the back wall. The feature of the project was a freestanding wall built in timber but whose construction was only alluded to, thanks to the faintly translucent tissue skin that enveloped it. In a dance with the wall the Auckland students had executed a large architectural drawing over the entire floor of their allotted space. Describing their efforts, Auckland School academic, Michael Linzey, wrote of the weight of the Corderie's past as being "haunted" by the ropes that enabled Venetian naval power and political ambition. Lightness, fragility and delicacy, he proposed,

were the tools necessary for historic disengagement.<sup>8</sup> Superficially, at least, this would seem to be exactly what those involved delivered; an elegant, seemingly weightless "glowing cloud-like fragment"<sup>9</sup> accompanied by drawings whose fine lines, be they on paper or the stone floor, would seem destined to inevitable erasure.

Yet Linzey titled his account "Architecture to a Fault." To understand this, it needs to be explained that the design for the timber framing veiled behind tissue paper was derived by juxtaposing elements of standard New Zealand timber framing guidelines (NZS3604) with a traditional Polynesian nautical stick map. In this contrast of systems Linzey saw a remapping of dissonant orders and mutual misconstruings and misconceptions that produce a "deep grinding energy ... like a seismic fault line."<sup>10</sup>

Another member of the participating Biennale team, Helene Furján, evoked a similarly poetic theme when she described the Venice installation as a souvenir of a South Seas paradise where:

The white cloud of Aotearoa is at the same time the pure white of a white mythology: the blinding glare of the tabula rasa, the clean screen, of orderly, white tissue cladding signifying the unrepresentable, blank landscape that, like C. D. Freidrich's painting, *Wayfarer Above a Sea of Cloud*, attests to the colonial desire to "discover" that there is nothing (already) there.<sup>11</sup>

To what extent a casual observer might have recognised any of this is not the point here. This was written for an audience back in New Zealand. One that in all likelihood had not, and would not, see the work first hand, but for whom questions of uncertainty define(d) architectural practice.

In a candid comment to the *New Zealand Herald*, in 2009, Barrie reflected that the success of the Auckland School in Venice perhaps owed something to naivety:

We went along thinking we'd be the real hillbillies, but as it was our first time I think we over-achieved. Winning by exhibiting a range of student work came as quite a shock. I think we treated it all far more seriously than some northern hemisphere schools.<sup>12</sup>

But should we be so innocent in separating hillbilly status from success? Could it be that the Auckland School won because they were

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<sup>7</sup> "New Zealand at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale"

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<sup>8</sup> Linzey "Architecture to a Fault" pp 78-79.

<sup>9</sup> Linzey "Architecture to a Fault" p 78.

<sup>10</sup> Linzey "Architecture to a Fault" pp 78-79.

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<sup>11</sup> Furján "Crossed Lines" p 193.

<sup>12</sup> Hart "A Career in Architecture" p 1.

hillbillies, celebrated for their guilelessness? As Harkins has written, the "hillbilly" is a stereotype with two states; one a negative model of backward and violent isolationists, and the other a positive version celebrating independence and self-reliant individuals.<sup>13</sup> It may well be that the Auckland School arrived in the shadow of the former and left in the glow of the latter.

On this matter I would return to the Furján quote I used previously to point out a curious error. On the matter of Freidrich's painting, *Wayfarer Above a Sea of Cloud*, the title she gives is wrong. It is, in fact, *Wayfarer above a Sea of Fog*. This is an example of the kind of innocent mistake that often slipped through in the pre-Google-check era, and it would be grievous to dwell on it as a criticism of Furján's essay. But at the same time, the very guilelessness of this slip identifies it as having agency. It is - dare I say it? - a hillbilly parapraxia that says more in its error than the correct epithet would have revealed as clouds become a curiously vital leitmotif of New Zealand representations in Italy. Furján wills a parallel between the billowy box-kite of the Corderie instillation and the existential scene

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<sup>13</sup> Harkins *Hillbilly* p 111.

in Freidrich's painting to establish a common emblematic romanticism across distance.

But the word "cloud" carries its own hillbilly duality. We might "aim for the sky" as a noble ambition, but to have one's "head in the clouds" is a judgmental criticism. Every cloud is said to have a silver lining, but to cloud an issue is to obfuscate it. So, I think we should take Furján's slip as a slip of truth about how we want New Zealand architecture to be portrayed internationally, with all the paradox this entails.

Similarly, when Mitchell built New Zealand's 2014 biennale entry around Kipling's phrase "last, loneliest, loveliest," he failed to observe that in that author's only fictional writing conjuring New Zealand, "One Lady at Wairaki," he makes mention of steam drifting in "clouds across a pool"<sup>14</sup> as though to remind a reader that, in New Zealand, clouds are just as likely to rise from a volatile fractured earth as they are to appear in the sky.

The NZIA's 2016 Venice entry too made analogous reference to clouds, evoking them along with water, landscape, forest, buildings

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<sup>14</sup> Kipling "One Lady at Wairaki" np.

and furniture as an example of multiple readings on offer. But the actual exhibition installation, with its voluminous "islands" suspended on a near-invisible line, effortlessly conjured a firmament so that to experience the work was to float with amongst clouds.

Furján promoted "clouds" as a motif of the 1991 exhibition, and I would suggest that this notion crept into the NZIA's National displays at Venice in 2014 and 2016. However, there was nothing subtle about its use as an organising principle for yet another Venetian display. For their participation in the 2012 Biennale, Simon Twose and Andrew Barrie named their work "Familial Clouds." The premise behind their display of paper models and cut-out people was the creation of an architectural lineage peculiar to Twose and Barrie, however when reviewing the work Tom Daniell made much more of the cleverness of the architects in getting the work there at all:

Twose and Barrie fabricated most of the installation in Wellington and Auckland, then, like George Jetson's flying car, folded it into a parcel that weighed less than a kilo and carried it in their hand luggage to Venice. In both its content and method, the installation is an ingenious demonstration of the kind of nimble, unpretentious approach that can enable a small, often overlooked Pacific nation to participate in a global

discourse.<sup>15</sup>

I don't think Daniell meant this observation as anything other than a compliment, but it is one that plays into national mythologies of the practical and self-reliance New Zealander who, in the words of Samuel Butler, seems, "far better adapted to develop and maintain ... the physical than the intellectual nature."<sup>16</sup> Like clouds, the names of Twose and Barrie float through New Zealand representations in Italy. In particular, Twose has participated in Venice Biennale no less than four times<sup>17</sup> throughout which allusions to clouds are prominent.

The exhibition I want to turn to now is the one composing the New Zealand Section of the XIX *Triennale di Milano*, 1996. Unlike the Venice Biennale, the Milan Triennale was established with architecture as a foundational element, probably due to the industrial emphasis in the curation. Of the

<sup>15</sup> Daniell "Familial Clouds" p 123.

<sup>16</sup> Butler *A first year in Canterbury settlement* p 50.

<sup>17</sup> "2018 Architecture: Time Space Existence" (26 May - 25 November 2018); "2016 Architecture: Time Space Existence" (28 May - 27 November 2016); "2012 Architecture: Traces of Centuries & Future Steps" (29 August - 25 November 2012)

two events, Milan should be the more important for architecture, but it would seem that the wider mandate of the Venice Biennale to include art and music etc., has tended to lend to it greater cultural esteem. Before I turn my attention to Milan fully, I think it is worth pondering that original invitation Venice, in 1991.

The circumstances that lead Francesco Dal Co to first considering the Auckland School for inclusion are lost to time, but it is, I think, valuable to wonder if the visibility of the Auckland School had been raised in the years prior to 1991 by the rising academic career of Auckland alumni Mark Wigley.

Wigley's emergence on the international scene is a story of talent, ability and determination, but it also contains a narrative of isolation and distance worth recounting. After what has been described to me as a somewhat lacklustre undergraduate performance, Wigley began a Masters of Architecture which, under the guidance of Michael Austin, was upgraded to doctoral research addressing the architectural implications of the philosophical theory of deconstruction. This, in turn, was examined by Peter Eisenman, who shortly thereafter was asked by Philip

Johnson for the name of a person to co-curate an exhibition called *Deconstructivism* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. By then Wigley had begun an appointment at Princeton University, but the MOMA exhibition secured his reputation as an intellectual star. That he originated from a relatively unknown architecture school in the south of the Pacific only reinforced his presentation as a product of exceptionalism, but this nonetheless lent to Auckland a certain cachet.

Without Wigley, Auckland may well never have made it to a shortlist decided by Dal Co. This proposition is highly speculative, but it is not supposition to track the narrative of the 1991 installation back, in important part, to Wigley.

To further understand this connection, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of a six-part television series that appeared on New Zealand screens in 1984. Echoing the iconoclastic re-imagining of architectural history found in the work of American Robert Venturi, and Australian Robin Boyd, Auckland architect David Mitchell re-evaluated New Zealand's buildings with highly personal, subjective and idiosyncratic

insight. The outcome was not without flaws, and it certainly was not "history" in a way that Nikolaus Pevsner would recognise it, but Mitchell was able to produce an indigenous account of architecture in New Zealand that needn't draw its value from references to Europe. Such was the success of the television series that a book soon followed from which the themes of regional difference and individual genius become normalised.

Mitchell made it acceptable to think of New Zealand as having a discrete local architecture worth discussing. At this point it is important to understand that Mitchell was still teaching at the Auckland School of Architecture, among whose student members was a certain Mark Wigley. However, this is not to say Wigley was an acolyte or adherent of Mitchell's views. It was far more significant of Mitchell's work that he made it permissible to construct New Zealand's architectural history as a dynamic conversation, and this Wigley took to heart in the years between completing his doctorate and leaving the country.

Wigley completed his PhD studies in 1986 and by 1987 had already embarked on a career in New York, beginning with work in the Office of Peter Eisenman and soon leading to an

appointment in the School of Architecture at Princeton University. 1988 saw his international profile amplified with MOMA's *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition, and its accompanying monograph. In the small window between his studies ending, and his academic life in America beginning, Wigley embarked on a short but prolific reflection on New Zealand architecture. The substantive component of this activity was the contribution of three episodes to the television arts programme *Kaleidoscope*, and two pithy essays for the journal *Architecture New Zealand*.

Of the *Kaleidoscope* shows it is impossible not to draw a relationship with Mitchell's earlier *The Elegant Shed*. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the latter could have been conceived without the success of the former. But where Mitchell approached New Zealand's architecture with an equal measure of personal reflection and romantic optimism, Wigley offered a far more argumentative view from which his categorisation of New Zealand's buildings as mostly "mediocre mush" received popular coverage.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Debate a Goal for Architect" p 1; "Most N.Z. architecture "mediocre mush"" p 5.

The focus of Wigley's analysis was not the large towns and centres, but the provincial hinterland "... where New Zealand meets the outside world – its frontiers, if you like."<sup>19</sup> It so happens that the locations of significance he identified in two of the *Kaleidoscope* episodes are also tourist resorts. As a taste of Wigley's contrary approach, we can look to his treatment of the Bay of Islands where he contrasted Russell with Paihia; the antagonistic view that the brash commercialism of the latter was a better expression of our venal colonial past than the twee historic recreations of the former. It might be observed that this kind of thinking reflected his commitment to the philosophical practices of Jacques Derrida, but it may equally be the case that Wigley felt New Zealanders were in need of some protein derived from the meat of sacred cows. I should also acknowledge, as Wigley does, that in tackling tourist towns he chose places where New Zealand meets the outside world, but we might also see that this phrasing as a clumsy way of saying that these are places whose existence is defined by the way the outside world meets New Zealand. This semantic distinction, I would suggest, says

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<sup>19</sup> "Most N.Z. architecture "mediocre mush"" p 5.

something important about Wigley's identity as a New Zealander.

On the selection of Wigley as a presenter for the show, the programme director, Roger Price, categorised his frankness as an essential quality to the success of the endeavour, writing: "A number of people in the architectural world have misgivings about the quality of work produced here ... but will definitely not say so publicly."<sup>20</sup>

Forthright iconoclastic thinking is a signature of Wigley's intellectual productivity, but we should also remember that, by the time the *Kaleidoscope* shows were screened, Wigley had already relocated to North America, and in reviews he was described as an "expatriate," so his proximity to any flak his outspokenness might have generated was more than mitigated by his distance – geographically and culturally – from these shores.

In Wigley's first episode for *Kaleidoscope* he pays a debt to David Mitchell with opening credits that have the camera wafting through the 1984 Gibbs House, by Mitchell, while a

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<sup>20</sup> Roger Price quoted, "Most N.Z. architecture "mediocre mush"" p 5.

voice-over quotes the NZIA Award citation for the project:

This is a house of exceptional architectural quality, which will almost certainly become an important historical reference point in the development of the New Zealand house.<sup>21</sup>

For Wigley there is more to the Gibbs House than a culmination to Mitchell's own development. Wigley venerates it as the ground-zero where New Zealand architecture finally crossed from parochial insecurity to international maturity, he goes on to suggest that not many New Zealand architects were up to this challenge.

Up to now the architectural profession in New Zealand has had its head in the sand and it has been very reluctant to join the world, unlike the clients. Each of the clients in the houses we looked at are worldly people. They obviously live in New Zealand, but in their mind they are living in the world.<sup>22</sup>

Of the houses that Wigley visits in support of his case one stands out here as the work of Ross Jenner, at that time an academic staff member of the Auckland Architecture School, and a name which will reappears in this essay. It is important to observe that alongside the

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<sup>21</sup> "Auckland houses" np.

<sup>22</sup> "Auckland Houses" at 16'50"

*Kaleidoscope* episodes, Wigley also wrote two significant essays for *Architecture New Zealand*. In the first of these we find a developed reading of the Jenner House.

In the televised discussion Wigley widened the importance of Jenner's consciously worldly and intellectual house to give tangible expression to our insistence on reading a house as a building regardless of intention, but in print he is able to construct a longer argument that alludes to a more pervasive and menacing resistance to such values, so he is able to use it to say:

It is precisely such resistance to architecture in New Zealand that establishes the identity of New Zealand "architecture." This identity is not rooted in a New Zealand tradition. Having torn up our deep roots (as we tore up the bush to produce the pasture that this house surveys) and repressed those that maintained theirs, the identity of a (non-Maori) New Zealand architecture can only be a negative one; an (anti) tradition established by a certain resistance to the foreign. Consequently, close reading can never appear in this journal. What identifies New Zealand architecture is precisely its resistance to close reading; its avoidance of the analysis of the quotations of the foreign it is forced to make.<sup>23</sup>

In Wigley's writing around this period the word "precisely" invariably appears as a

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<sup>23</sup> Wigley "The Generic New Zealand House" p 31.

curtain-raiser to a statement of slippery paradox, and here it appears twice. Read innocently the claim that New Zealand's architecture can be defined by its resistance to influence and criticism might be interpreted as a stand for utilitarian pragmatism such as that example found in the mythologised encounter between Nikolaus Pevsner and Bill Toomath over a carport post in Lower Hutt:

There seems time and again not to have been enough money or enough skill amongst the craftsmen to finish the detailing elegantly. However, to my great interest, one of the best of your young architects answered back, very politely and respectfully, but indicating that I was really concerning myself with irrelevancies and that perhaps a vigorous young country ought to call a spade a spade and a four-inch timber post a four-inch timber post. Maybe he was right, maybe that robustness which strikes me as a little raw will one day be a valid expression of the New Zealand version of 20th century architecture.<sup>24</sup>

"Raw" and "robust," youth and vitality? How are these anything more than the patient platitudes of the old to the indiscretions of an ignorant youngster, and Wigley doubles-down on Pevsner's theme as he places an aesthetic of pragmatism against intellectual practice.

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<sup>24</sup> Pevsner "New Architecture and New Art" p 264.

Wigley's second essay of this period, also from the 1986 pages of *Architecture New Zealand* accompanied the results of another competition, this time one asking for designs intended to stimulate architectural debate. As one of the judges - along with art historian Francis Pound and Ross Jenner - Wigley posited what stands as a documentary to their debate. In it he argues very strongly that New Zealand, seen around the world as a paradise, is indeed a Garden of Eden and as a consequence needs to work very hard to keep architecture out least it corrupt our programme of "building." This he links to Kenneth Frampton through the notion of the *tabula rasa* of modernization, the clean slate "placelessness" where regional identity is eradicated. The regional identity of New Zealand, he writes, "is precisely that of *tabula rasa*"<sup>25</sup> and he concludes:

The "architectural" world in New Zealand is poised. It can keep its head buried in the sand in order to continue to offer the architectural world a false sense of security by resisting debate and protecting the good name of building. Or it can participate in the global debate by identifying the species of snake that contaminates the purity of these absolutely isolated oceanic islands.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wigley "Paradise Lost and Found" p 45.

<sup>26</sup> Wigley "Paradise Lost and Found" p 45.

The problem that arises here is one of expression. Wigley evokes Frampton's *tabula rasa* as a criticism and warning of the cost of isolationism, but it presents as an image both figurative and literal. As architects we were then hyper-sensitive to the idea of the *tabula rasa* as it so perfectly found its material manifestation in the empty white page that originated all architectural drawing in those days.

It is generally agreed that the philosophical conception of the *tabula rasa* can be attributed to John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>27</sup> Locke does not actually use this exact phrase, but where he writes of the mind at birth being a blank slate, we find the idealisation for a world where shape arrives from without.<sup>28</sup> Writing against Locke, Gottfried Leibniz would argue that the human soul, rather than a blank page to be imprinted upon, should be better understood as a block of unhewn marble from which (in the principle usually attributed to Michelangelo) the hidden internal form will be revealed. Putting philosophical implications aside, we can find in Locke and Leibniz's differing

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<sup>27</sup> Duschinsky "Tabula Rasa and Human Nature" p 509.

<sup>28</sup> Locke *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.



positions a curious bipartisan parallel in the invention of a New Zealand architectural narrative where a debate between innate and imposed patterns is played out.

With Wigley we have versions of emptiness, be that *tabula rasa*, the Garden of Eden, or as though the blankness of an empty page. It is this archetype I would suggest that underpins the actual work that was presented by the Auckland student team in Venice in 1991, with its emphasis on lightness, paper and sticks. Yet the literature of the 1991 installation, while acknowledging sources found in Polynesian mobility (especially the nautical stick map), was one steeped in rhetoric of weight and tectonic movement.

This problem was even greater in 1996. From a technical standpoint the Milan Triennale was a far more ambitious undertaking than the Venice Biennale. Where the earlier effort benefited from the constraints of the Corderie, and the brief of the competition, in Milan, the Auckland team also carried the reputational weight of their Venice win. However, against this, they also benefited for the actual experience in the people involved. Of those who participated in 1991, along with Twose and Barrie, Milan brought together once more

Ross Jenner, Michael Linzey, Kerry Morrow and Glenn Watt. Not unexpectedly then, the approach for Milan followed that one established in Venice. This entailed erecting the pre-fabricated installation, and the dissemination of accompanying statements. But most telling, the self-consciously intellectual complexity of the Venice installation was less evident at Milan where a more singular sculptural expression dominated. If I could once more describe Venice as a hillbilly triumph, Milan was an altogether more diffident affair muted by a loss of innocence, and fuelled on ambition that speaks more of petite bourgeois aspirations.

The dominant centrepiece was an over-scaled strip of crumpled paper – appearing much like a discarded till receipt - that was described by Jenner in his accompany essay as "a complex surface of negotiation, which bears the signs of strife and laceration."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, and unlike the Venice installation, the Milan work was brought back to New Zealand where it was exhibited in the Auckland Art Gallery.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 95.

<sup>30</sup> The exhibition was held from 16 August - 29 September 1996. "Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki Exhibition History" p 81.

For Milan, Jenner was the project Commissioner, with his colleague from the School of Architecture, Kerry Morrow, acting as the Project Manager. Preparing the work was a group effort divided between the "realisation" team composed of graduates, some of whom had a direction involvement with the Venice entry, and a model-making team composed mostly of students.

Where, as in Venice, it could be said that Linzey assumed the intellectual voice of the work, in Milan, Jenner assumed this role. In an essay for the RMIT-based academic journal, *Transitions*, Jenner noted of the 1996 Milan Triennale that it: "came as a sequel to the Department's prize-winning entry to an exhibition of architectural schools at the 1991 Venice Biennale."<sup>31</sup> And it certainly seemed the case at the time that Milan was an attempt to re-invigorate the international momentum established in Venice, and by many of the same people. However, in other important ways, the motivations behind the Triennale were explicitly distanced from those of the Biennale. If the first was a sincere attempt by an individual architecture school to perform without embarrassment in a prominent

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<sup>31</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 95.

competition, the second was a far more self-conscious strategy to present an architectural version of New Zealand nationhood with all the artifice that implies.

Taking the phrase "[t]he land appeared as uneven as a piece of crumpled paper"<sup>32</sup> (offered by Sydney Parkinson, the first European artist to visit New Zealand), Jenner issues colonial evidence to synthesise surface and topography as essential qualities of New Zealandness, but in truth the juxtaposing of paper and land via the written word had been the prominent focus of painter Colin McCahon for many years. But more telling is Jenner's admission that Parkinson is not writing an impression of New Zealand, but one of Tahiti.<sup>33</sup>

Jenner is sufficiently intent on willing a parallel between surfaces that Pacific specificity is abandoned. At the same time propelling this association is a genuine attempt to intimately conflate land, people and architecture of New Zealand through the singular image of the Treaty of Waitangi. As he writes:

The exhibition is laid out as images and marks on a vastly enlarged and crinkled piece of paper, a complex surface of negotiation that bears signs of strife and laceration, like earth scarred and skin tattooed with marks of identity. Its crinkles are a sign of contestation between the cultures signatory to the Treaty of Waitangi on a surface of projection where plans and documents are imagined, drawn, signed and laid over a site or the land.<sup>34</sup>

Jenner, I think, is making a case for deriving New Zealand's architecture as an article of an external imposition that is necessary to find order and shape. This is a case for treating New Zealand as an architectural *tabula rasa*, and yet Jenner goes on to explicitly deny this by arguing against the clean slate:

it is not an attempt to begin again, nor a colonial clean slate, erased and blank only through forgetfulness of what has been written, providing a mere effect of origin but an attempt to elaborate and interrogate that blankness to which it is so difficult to make things stick.<sup>35</sup>

The problem here concerns how we reconcile a paradox between the practice and the theory of the Milan work, particularly concerning indigeneity. The Treaty of Waitangi, by recognising a relationship between an arriving

people and an indigenous people, acknowledges the role of innate principles. If a New Zealand architecture is to emerge then it must be a product of values that include pre-existing conditions. With hindsight this seems a reasonable recognition, and it tackles the weakness in Wigley's *tabula rasa* model that he ignored indigenous occupation. In emphasising the relationship between peoples, and focusing on the image and law of a written documentation – paper, treaty and word – Jenner simultaneously suggests that identity cannot exist outside a legal framework, which is an influence which arrives from without. This, I contend, presents a reversal of the intellectual position maintained in Venice where metaphors of morphology posit geology as an innate condition waiting to be revealed by architectural activity.

The conclusion to this is a surprising inconsistent presentation of architectural New Zealand. At the Venice Biennale the intellectual rhetoric made a case, innocently following Leibnitz, for an innate identity quite literally drawn out of the geological foundations of the country. This creative expression extended Wigley's idealisation of New Zealand into a sculptural presence. With

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<sup>32</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 95.

<sup>33</sup> Parkinson *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas* p 13.

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<sup>34</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 96.

<sup>35</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 94.

its sources in Polynesian navigation and allusions to clouds, the 1991 Installation iterated a highly romantic version of New Zealand's architecture as a possible product of trans-Pacific mobility, if not European imposition.

At the 1996 Triennale this narrative was reversed. The argumentative emphasis on culture, as composed in the essay by Jenner, made a Lockean case for a blank slate demanding some imposed architecture as necessary. As he writes,

[t]he task of ordering, mapping, and bringing to the level of cultural visibility is an intimate part of the colonial universalisation of productive and habitable space that is now under question.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, at exactly the same time, the creative expression, with its evocation of landscape, flesh and tattoo, sought to locate its origins as being from within, as innate and essential and waiting to be revealed.

What I am suggesting here is that, between Venice in 1991, and Milan in 1996, a systemic narrative reversal took place. In 1991 New Zealand was promoted as intellectually innate

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<sup>36</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 94.

but creatively blank, while in 1996 a contrary position is presented with intellectual case being imposed and the creative act becoming innate. While many individuals worked across both projects there were differences in place that could be counted as contributing factors for such a reversal, including the fundamental difference in representational responsibility between the two events (an institutional mandate for Venice, and a national one for Milan). And we can add to these the desire for the latter to not appear as a version of the former. As Jenner would transparently declare:

The whole thing is a piece of graphic design taken into three dimensions. Whereas the School's Venice exhibition arose from a loom formed of two languages of construction mapped through a cloudiness out onto the surface, now that attempt was made to work with the pure surface, paper, crumpled and crinked [sic] which would also denote the surface of land and flesh incised.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, to fully accept the possibility of such a complete reversal I think we need to look for some larger influence at work. Helpfully, I don't think we need search far. In any discussion of New Zealand architecture in the 1990s, the elephant in the room is Te Papa, the National Museum of New Zealand. And

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<sup>37</sup> Jenner "Milan Triennale" p 95.

yet, like dark matter operating in the universe, it remains frustratingly invisible despite its influence. This is not to be an essay on Te Papa, but it is necessary to place the 1991 Venice Biennale into a period in which the weight of a new national museum would only increase, and especially so where key personalities of the Italian exhibitions were involved.

Te Papa is sometimes described as an idea of the 1970s, that was designed in the 1980s, and then built in the 1990s. That simplifies the complexities surrounding the project, but in its essence this is not so far from the truth. For the purposes of this essay, Te Papa begins with the competition call for design concepts and practice credentials, in 1989, and concludes with its opening in February 1998. These dates, you will note, sit comfortably alongside the Italian exhibition years. What this suggests is that both the Venice and Milan installations took place at a time when questions concerning the relationship between New Zealand's national identity and its architecture have never been greater. We might also note that the two exhibitions occupy counter positions in this debate, with Venice approaching Te Papa's inception, and Milan nearing its termination.

Added to this timing, many figures crossed between the projects. For example, Ross Jenner, whose house so enamoured by Mark Wigley in the *Kaleidoscope* episode, and who participated at both Venice and Milan, was part of a consortium named *Architecti*, who made the second stage of the competition for Te Papa. Similarly, Rewi Thompson, who featured as a student in Mitchell's *The Elegant Shed*, and who Jenner identified for his importance in Milan, was a key element of a Te Papa competition entry, in partnership with Ian Athfield and Frank Gehry (which, infamously, did not make the second stage). Up to now I have not mentioned John Hunt, who was a senior academic of Architecture at Auckland throughout the 1990s, who was also the chair of the Te Papa competition judging panel. And then there is Michael Linzey, who, as a member of the project team, wrote the critical statement for the Venice work, and who would later, as a critic, write the most erudite analysis of Te Papa. I would also note that among the 39 submissions archived by Te Papa is one, which includes Mark Wigley's New York City room-mate, Thomas Leeser (Sinclair Leeser Rizzi Partnership). If we were to map this period as a genealogy, we might indeed worry that it had become a bit incestuous.

The final design contract, as we all know, was awarded to Jasmx Group, and although much could be, and indeed has been, written on this decision, I think it fair-minded to acknowledge that a strength of their proposal was that their national narrative was easily grasped. Here bi-culturalism is found in the geometric clash of curve (Māori) and grid (Pākehā) in the plan that produced a left-over void the architects classified as "cleavage,"<sup>38</sup> and into which was eventually located a gargantuan reproduction of the Treaty of Waitangi. While the large formal forms drew their influence from the geological motions that organised New Zealand's physical shape,<sup>39</sup> what is important to me is that their attempt to reconcile (however unwittingly) the views of Locke and Leibniz as a design derivation based in the influence of culture (imposed), or one found as a product of land (innate). This, I would repeat, presents an incompatible origin narrative, and it may well underlie the hesitation many have in acknowledging the limited architectural success of Te Papa.

The risk of a systemic contradiction had been

forewarned by Mike Austin, who is himself an important actor in this for his influence at the Auckland School (he supervised Wigley's PhD), and for his participation as a consultant to Jasmx team in their developed design. For the journal *Fabrications*, in 1991, he described the problem for colonial city thusly:

In our ceaseless search for models, we find that we are not like other decolonized societies where the majority culture is indigenous, nor are we (although we often like to pretend otherwise) like the great ex-colonial continents of America and Australia. The tangata whenua (literally "people of the land," i.e., indigenous people) population in New Zealand continue to be blamed for confusing any simple directions, analyses or visions for the country, and have incidentally become the spokespeople for the environmental protection of the country. But neither can we Pakeha easily quarry these indigenous traditions for our meanings without striking questions of appropriation.<sup>40</sup>

Well in advance of Te Papa's final design, Austin forewarns of a risk of failure if we blithely seek convenient answers to complex cultural questions, and on this it is all too easy to criticise Te Papa's compromises, as many have done.<sup>41</sup>

This is where Linzey offered an exceedingly

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<sup>38</sup> Bossley "Te Papa" p 14.

<sup>39</sup> Bossley "Te Papa" p 14.

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<sup>40</sup> Austin "Notes on the Colonial City" pp 41-42.

<sup>41</sup> Kent "Museum of New Zealand" pp 84-85.

perceptive observation on the ambiguity of the design principles at play by arguing that architectural metaphors are not stable. Echoing a sentiment we have already heard from Wigley, Linzey writes of Te Papa that it can be thought of as "the place where New Zealander's meet foreign tourists"<sup>42</sup> just as easily as it might be considered to be "architecturally organised by the metaphor of faultline."<sup>43</sup> Playing with this further he writes that "[w]e can say, "The concept of mountain building is analogous to the intention of nation building".<sup>44</sup>

Reflecting in 2007 on this matter he goes further to summarize the significance of Te Papa in this statement:

The meaning of the monumental fault-line that is referenced by the basalt wall at Te Papa is now thoroughly embedded in the popular and architectural apprehension of the building. It tracks a certain shift in political outlook, which seems to have taken place in New Zealand since 1998. Our attitudes to colonial and neo-colonial bellicosity and acceptances of differences shared and contested by tangata tiriti and tangata whenua seem to have developed into a slightly different kind of culture in New Zealand. One might be tempted to conclude that the fault-line metaphor at Te Papa

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<sup>42</sup> Linzey "On the Name Te Papa" p 478.

<sup>43</sup> Linzey "On the Name Te Papa" p 477.

<sup>44</sup> Linzey "On the Name Te Papa" p 478.

actually contributed something to this change in the cultural landscape and the attitudes of most New Zealanders.<sup>45</sup>

The reason for an extended quote so late in this essay is that it makes two pertinent points for me. The first, derived from Linzey's argument, is that meaning in architecture is not stable, and therefore using architecture as an article of nation building is to accept - to over use a phrase - "faulting" as a consequence. My second reason is less noble. This quote serves to evidence how deductive discourse on a national architecture became, and how insular the voices of debate were. This is not a criticism of Linzey, but it is a criticism of architectural criticism itself in a small country so determined to see itself as an outsider on the inside, as the example of "winning" in 1991 so proved.

To end I would like to balance Linzey's quote on Te Papa with one from Furján, on the 1991 Venice installation, where she writes of it:

It is a tenuous ethereal thing, like the tattered white ghost of a cloak, a "white mythology" drawn across the surface of building, the silent cloud of unknowing, which averts its face from the fault as it floats gracefully

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<sup>45</sup> Linzey "A Fault-Line at Te Papa" p 80.

over the shaky surface of the ground.<sup>46</sup>

Peering at the coarse black and white photographs that are my only tangible connection to this work, I can, perhaps, make out the poetic emanation described here. I might even misread the year and see into this description the intent behind Milan. But a far more pertinent evocation, I feel, is found by seeing in this description a facsimile of the Treaty of Waitangi displayed in our national museum.

So, I would leave you with three versions of architectural identity to ponder. The first, an eloquent display of shadow puppetry in a disused rope factory in Venice. The second, a thread of shredded document in a vault in Milan. And the third, an over-scaled reproduction of a rat nibbled bi-cultural contract hanging in the cleavage of Te Papa.

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<sup>46</sup> Furján "Crossed Lines" p 198.

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