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Author	Leach, Andrew
Title	'The myth of the nation: Historiography of New Zealand architecture since 1907'
Date	2007
Source	<i>The State of the Nation: New Zealand's Centenary as a Dominion: 14th Annual Conference of the New Zealand Studies Association</i>

## The Myth of the Nation: Historiography of New Zealand Architecture since 1907

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The title of my paper is misleading, for it implies that the century since New Zealand became a Dominion has witnessed the evolution of a discussion on the nation's architectural history. This is only partly the case. As Douglas Lloyd Jenkin's recent anthology *New Dreamland* reminds us, there has (in that century) been a sustained reflection on and projection of what it "means" to practice architecture in New Zealand, a discourse that has more or less accounted for the history of that practice.<sup>1</sup> It has only been in the last three or four decades that something approaching a history of New Zealand architecture has been formalised outside the classrooms of schools of architecture and beyond the internal assessment procedures of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

The disciplinary structures of architecture itself make this problem muddier than it might be otherwise: the history of architecture has been thoroughly embedded in the architect's curriculum throughout the history of professional architectural education wherever it has been manifest, in New Zealand or elsewhere. A tendency to instrumentalise this history as providing motivations or justifications for architectural practice, conceptual levers to position buildings in relation to a canon, has continued to characterise New Zealand architecture long after many similar national architectural cultures developed historical and critical discourses to balance, and challenge, the uses made of history by architects. Indeed, Robin Skinner's recent work on architectural literature of the 1840s and 50s demonstrates that architects in New Zealand have long sensed the historicity of their practice, just as those monitoring that profession's development from Britain likewise understood the abstract implications of its establishment in the South Pacific colonies.<sup>2</sup>

The first book to attempt a synthetic account of New Zealand's architectural history was written by the architects John Stacpoole and Peter Beaven. In the introduction of their 1972 volume *Architecture: 1820-1970*, they note that 'remarkably little has been written about architecture in New Zealand, and what has been said about the early period, before the profession was organised, has often been based on misconceptions or later rationalisations of apparent incompatibilities.'<sup>3</sup> The format of their modest volume readily accepts the conflicts that lie scattered over New Zealand's architectural history while they themselves attempt to articulate the limits of what that history might include.

Several others followed in their wake, notably by Michael Fowler, Martin Hill and (again) John Stacpoole. Yet it is David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin's book, *The Elegant Shed* (of 1985) that occupies perhaps the most important place in the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Lloyd Jenkins (ed.), *New Dreamland: Writing New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Godwit, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Robin Skinner, "Representations of Architecture and New Zealand in London, 1841-60," PhD dissertation, University of Auckland, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> John Stacpoole & Peter Beaven, *Architecture 1820-1970* (Wellington: AH & AW Reed, 1972), 9.

historiography of a national architecture.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell and Chaplin sought both to document New Zealand's architectural history – which for them extended from high art to the quotidian – and to map it to a search for a mode of architecture particular to New Zealand, an idea that enjoyed a dramatic and popular resurgence in the wake of their book and Mitchell's television series. *The Elegant Shed* promoted a genealogy from “humble bach” to modernist experiments centred on Auckland in the 1940s and 50s, through to contemporary modernist-revival celebrations, such as you can find in any fresh copy of *Home and Entertaining* or *Urbis*. This line has become well rehearsed at all levels of New Zealand's architectural culture.

The fundamental work of Justine Clark and Paul Walker, in their *Looking for the Local* (2000), to extend further south the locus of the rhetorical marriage of nationalism to modernism has lent a firm scholarly basis to a broad desire to isolate the seeds of a modern New Zealand architectural identity.<sup>5</sup> As well, several faculty of the Auckland School of Architecture led research into the representation of local and indigeneous architectural forms in both popular and architectural media; likewise, several students of the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts, under the supervision of Ian Lochhead, made decisive contributions to the documentary architectural history of New Zealand. Lloyd Jenkins's efforts, as in his book *At Home* (2004), to share a more complicated view of New Zealand's modernist architectural history with a wider readership are unparalleled.<sup>6</sup>

And yet the broad tendency in New Zealand architectural culture is to dismiss the complexity introduced by these communities in favour of an ideology of national origins and a rehearsal of the values of local innovations against the odds. This desire mirrors much popular cultural commentary in New Zealand, and, in turn, the general outlook of any number of cultural settings that revel in the rhetoric of being, to quote Kipling, “exquisite apart”. That the popular architectural historiography of New Zealand has moved in this direction over the last two decades is understandable and certainly has been beneficial for expanding, for instance, the hitherto overlooked worth of post-War architecture – even if all but a handful of specialists follow a troublingly simplistic historiographical line. It is not, however, without its problems in the long-term practice of documenting and challenging the history of New Zealand architecture, and this criticism holds true both within the academy and beyond it to professional and general audiences.

To illustrate this point, I would like to recall Peter Wood's 2000 article, “The Bach: The Cultural History of a Local Typology”. Wood works backwards from the “bach” to a “birth of the nation” bound to an ANZAC myth firmly anchored at Gallipoli in order to argue alternative cultural starting points for determining an independent national architectural character.<sup>7</sup> He argues that the endurance of the bach as an architectural type, embedded in the cultural psyche, owes much to the extent to which it offers an index to a widely appreciated period of cultural adolescence in which the

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<sup>4</sup> David Mitchell & Gillian Chaplin, *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture since 1945* (Auckland & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Justine Clark & Paul Walker, *Looking for the Local: Architecture and the New Zealand Modern* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design* (Auckland: Godwit, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Wood, “The Bach: The Cultural History of a Local Typology,” *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 11, no. 1 (July 2000): 44-61.

First World War figures largely. While he claims that this offers the back a cultural relevance beyond architectural discourse he also entrenches the type by heaping national myth upon architectural. It stands for the values of industry, invention and isolation. As a model, it reinforces the New Zealand-ness of those architectures that build upon it, and it is on this axis that New Zealand's architectural historians are feeding a more problematic long-term phenomenon.

Charles Walker's centennial history of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, *Exquisite Apart*, is something of a love letter to these values. It is not the job of architects to question the histories handed down by academics, he writes in an introductory essay. 'Architecture is essentially about the future.'<sup>8</sup> Of the fifteen contributions that add up to a history of the architectural profession in the century since the founding of its Institute in 1905, only the first considers that century's first four decades. Sir Miles Warren's six-page essay announces that 'the period is best exemplified by three architects [Cecil Wood, William Gray Young and William Henry Gummer] whose work dominated each of their cities.'<sup>9</sup> While the book's content oversights are legion, its framing is more relevant to the points I wish to make. The Institute's former President Gordon Moller prefaces the book by writing that 'the architectural profession has responded [to New Zealand's development] by developing a unique language for the built form for this country, in the way we inhabit our buildings, towns and cities.' Language of this nature, I propose, has become an unchallenged closed-code, and speaks of the way that more research-driven historical writing has been lumped by architectural culture into two categories: one that supports myths, and is celebrated; and one that undermines them, which is ignored.

If, as Wood suggests, we should find in these values reflections of the Gallipoli legend, then we ought also to consider the trans-Tasman consequences of Gallipoli's feeding parallel (and often diverging) values in the two countries that celebrate them, rather than values we might understand as thoroughly interwoven. Few would speak of an Australasian spirit, but rather of characteristics firmly aligned with one nation or the other. In the same vein, few would lay claims for the origins of an Australasian architecture and yet it is precisely this concept – of an open cultural exchange preceding the maturity of either country with Australia's Federation in 1901 and New Zealand's new status as a Dominion in 1907 – that has been suppressed by the rise of a nationalist architectural historiography in both places.

Despite the various factors that render it sensible to differentiate between Australia and New Zealand as national cases, with their own histories, cultural specificities and historiographical imperatives, there is good reason why we might also turn back to a generously regional approach to their history. For example, are we well served by holding fast to the national differences between the nineteenth-century architectural histories of Australia and New Zealand? Are the differences between Dominion and Federation greater than the formerly colonial differences between, say, Tasmania and Queensland, or between New South Wales and Victoria? On both sides of the Tasman, architectural historians are generally lax in accounting for the apparently seamless movement between South Pacific colonies that distinguished the infant profession's history for many of the nineteenth century's most important architects. I

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<sup>8</sup> Walker (ed.), *Exquisite Apart*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Miles Warren, "The First Fifty Years" in Walker (ed.), *Exquisite Apart*, 16-27; quoting from pp. 18 & 246. The heavy level of illustration (the book's only asset) accounts for the other six pages.

wish to propose that we must grapple with a decidedly *anti*-national reality to a history that has been largely framed according to the values prized by the last two generations of architects and writers on architecture.

Perhaps one example will allow me to explain this better. The Treaty House in Waitangi was described by Frederick H Newman (who came to New Zealand from Austria in 1939) as ‘one of the best examples of New Zealand Architecture,’ writing in his 1952 essay “Social Factors in Architecture and their Implications for New Zealand.” Newman goes on to wonder why this building, both ‘full of tradition’ and ‘outstanding for its original treatment and beautiful proportions’ has not had ‘a greater influence on New Zealand domestic architecture.’<sup>10</sup> While its design was intended for the British Residency at the Bay of Islands, and while its broader historical importance is tightly bound to the foundations of New Zealand as a British Colony, some comments by Stacpoole and Beavan (returning to their book of 1972), illustrate the disquiet with which I accept the strong borders of New Zealand’s architectural history. The Treaty House is the first illustration of their book, under which they write:

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

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

The style of the house, colonial Georgian, was firmly established in New South Wales and is related to but distinguishable from the more picturesque Regency style. Colonial Georgian tends to be formal.<sup>11</sup>

Several recent architectural histories have mentioned this building in passing. Peter Shaw’s 1991 *New Zealand Architecture* does so, touching upon the building in a survey of early, but extant, buildings in New Zealand, noting its Sydney origins with architects Verge and Hallen, and describing the building’s disposition and composition. Shaw observes that the 1933 restoration of the building by Gummer and Page altered many of the details, replacing ‘much of the original building when they tidied up the whole structure,’ but that a 1989 conservation (ahead of the sesquicentenary) had attempted ‘to restore the Treaty House to something approximating its state at the time of the signing of New Zealand’s founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, on 6 February 1840.’<sup>12</sup> Terrance Hodgson’s 1990 *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* does so as well, although briefly and drawing explicitly upon Stacpoole and Beavan.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Shaw’s slender 1992 book *Waitangi* is the only instance where an historian has given the building and its setting any form of close attention.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Frederick H Newman, “Social Factors in Architecture and their Implications for New Zealand” (1952), in Leach, *Frederick H Newman: Lectures on Architecture* (Ghent: A&S Books, 2003), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Stacpoole & Beavan, *Architecture 1820-1970*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture from Polynesian Beginnings to 1990* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Terence Hodgson, *Looking at the Architecture of New Zealand* (Wellington: Grantham House, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Shaw, *Waitangi* (Napier: Cosmos, 1992).

My point is this: there are many reasons why we would position the Treaty House within the history of New Zealand architecture, even if it has the curious status of being under-studied within architectural culture (compared with Te Papa, for instance) and being one of the most common references to architecture within New Zealand historiography proper. However, we are obliged, I believe, to recognise that there is a clear distance between, on one hand, the rhetorical, instrumental and narrative function of this building in New Zealand history and, on the other, the facts of its commission, design, pre-fabrication, installation and subsequent alterations. I would not go so far as to call the Treaty House a work of Australian architecture, but I do believe that the terms under which Stacpoole and Beaven consider it are the closest that we can hope for to a history of the building unencumbered by the meaning it subsequently came to assume – the building as produced rather than as received. In other words, by presenting a summary of the facts – brief though it might be – Stacpoole and Beaven make an unambiguous observation as to the fluidity of architectural practices among the South Pacific British colonies in the early to middle nineteenth century.

These observations, to conclude, are simply examples of the more general challenges facing historians of architecture working in the present moment. If my gripe has here been the ready invocation of the myth of New Zealand's "nationality", it corresponds to any number of flimsy historical bases on which architectural culture – ranging from academic, to professional, to popular – builds solid edifices treating quick-sand as bedrock. The issue lies not in the speculation and referential freedom that marked history writing of the 1990s and persists in some quarters today, but in the way that it lends to the profession the tools with which to cloak itself in myths of its own devising. It is at the moment (now long since passed and thoroughly evidenced) that the profession needs this mire more than any kind of real contact with architecture's past that the discipline of architectural history has a problem.

Presented to "State of the Nation," 14<sup>th</sup> annual conference  
of the New Zealand Studies Association at Birkbeck College  
London, June 28, 2007