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## An Insular Continent?

*Australia and New Zealand, Propositive Regionalism*



Aerial view of Queenstown, in South Island, New Zealand

**The architecture of the fifth continent reflects the vitality of youth, and its adaptation to climate generates an identity without complexes.**

INSULARITY IS A matter of degree. Both 'insular' and 'peninsular' derive from the Latin 'insula', meaning 'island'. Spain (a peninsula) is geographically isolated from Europe by the Pyrenees, and for many years the country was ideologically isolated from modern democratic Europe. Even so, modern architecture in Spain flourished throughout the 20th century, as it did in geographically (though not ideologically) isolated Australia. And during this period, as in Australia, Spanish architecture expressed distinctive regional characteristics. Local circumstances, different in Barcelona and Madrid, for example, have shaped the contemporary architecture of those two cities differently. In much the same way, circumstances local to Brisbane have made its contemporary architecture different from that of Sydney or Melbourne. The task of this essay is not only to identify representative examples of 'Australian' (or 'New Zealand') contemporary

architecture but also to explain how these architectural manifestations of insularity and regionalism arise and thrive in an age of cultural globalisation.

### Global Influences

The spires of the Anglican Cathedral of St John's in Brisbane, Australia, were finally completed only in 2009. The last Gothic-style cathedral in the world was finished. Begun 120 years previously, it had been one of numerous cathedrals the Anglican church began building around the world in the latter half of the 19th century. That was at the moment that globalisation began.

Cultural globalisation is now understood as a process of homogenisation. Driven by communications technology and the worldwide marketing of western cultural industries, the global domination of American culture has occurred at the expense of traditional, regional diversity.



Aerial view of Sydney, capital of the state of New South Wales, with the bridge and the Sydney Opera House in the background

The British roots of the architecture produced in Oceania have blended in with the local features, leading to the creation of the 'schools' of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane in Australia, and also to that of New Zealand.



Separated from one another by vast distances, the four main cities of Oceania have in common a remote location with respect to the central areas of cultural production, compatible with a close relationship

with them since colonial times, at the end of the 19th century. The ideas and the people have travelled from the 'empires', and on the road the global trends have adapted to the local ways, weather and techniques.



Aerial view of Melbourne, capital of the state of Victoria and second city of Australia

However, in the late 19th century, it was not America but the British Empire that was at its apotheosis – its trade, ideals and culture were dominant – and the Gothic Revival designs of British architects were built (or copied) around the English-speaking world. Gothic cathedrals that might have been built by master masons in late-medieval England and France arrived, like a fleet of retro alien space ships, on all the pink bits of the globe: in the British colonial cities of Africa, India, North America, Australia and the Pacific islands.

But there were local anomalies. Instead of the austere white Caen limestone used in many of the Gothic cathedrals of northern France and in England, the abutments to the west front of St John's in Brisbane are built in local sandstone, generally deep mauve in colour but riotously interspersed with pastel pinks, blues, greens and yellows. In Wellington, New Zealand, the imperative of local circumstance was even more extreme. In 1865, the Reverend Frederick Thatcher built St Paul's, a 'Gothic' cathedral constructed entirely from New Zealand native timbers. Internally, the exposed stud framing and curving 'Gothic' trusses reveal the naturally finished interior face of the Kauri pine boards that clad the cathedral exterior. Externally, the spire is Gothic inspired, but the overall composition of the building – a conglomeration of small gable-roofed units – belongs formally to the tiny timber-clad vernacular cottages built by English colonists, to which they made many ad hoc additions.

Cultural globalisation arrived in Australia and the south Pacific in the late 19th century, and it persists to this day in an ever-increasingly aggressive form. As Paul Ricoeur noted more than 40 years ago: "Everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or

aluminium atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda." But while our television programs and movies have been progressively stripped of local content and flavour, our architecture has largely resisted the homogenising pressures of universalisation, and it retains its local identity.

Why should this be? An answer lies in the 19th-century mauve-coloured sandstone and Kauri pine cathedrals. Unlike movies, where rolls of film can be transported from cinemas in one country to cinemas in another, buildings do not arrive from some other place complete. They arrive as ideas. And so it was in the 19th century when designs for Gothic Revival cathedrals were transported from England to its colonies.

When those ideas arrived codified in drawings, locally-trained craftsmen working with local materials necessarily adjusted them to suit local circumstances (resulting

in the colourful and very un-Gothic red mauve abutments of St John's in Brisbane). In the case of St Paul's in Wellington, the adjustments were far more extreme. The Reverend Thatcher (who was an architect as well as being an Anglican minister) responded to local circumstances by recasting the heavy masonry construction of Gothic cathedral architecture in lightweight timber.

Those involved in the commissioning, designing and building of Anglican cathedrals in the late 19th century were collectively engaged in promoting the globalisation of the Anglican Communion. They enlisted the emblematic power of Gothic Revival architecture to give authority to the 'Englishness' of their cause. But in choosing to do this, they soon encountered (and had to resolve) the tensions exposed by the practice of Gothic Revival architecture in distant, new world colonies. They found themselves



Aerial view of Brisbane, capital of the state of Queensland and third city of the country



The Sydney School, marked by the adaptation to the city's mild, almost Mediterranean climate, found in Leslie Wilkinson, in the 1930s, its first 'master'. Glenn Murcutt is the best representative of a characteristic way of

building that 'lightly touches the ground', pays heed to details and to orientation, and uses frameworks of steel and large glass surfaces. Functionalism sensitive to context, better known as 'Sydney Minimalism'.

participating in what Michel Foucault identified in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as a 'discourse'.

### A Plural Discourse

In respect of Foucault's concept of discourse, Roy Landau noted: "We learn and inform through making statements in a discourse. To take part in a discourse there is no requirement for debate... architectural discourse has a scope which involves words and objects... and such objects may be projects as well as built artefacts... The scope of the architectural discourse is not bounded by words... Contributions



FJMT, School of Information Technology, Sydney (2009)

to architectural discourse... take place through many sorts of exchanges which involve different sorts of actors far beyond the community of architectural designers... Patrons of architecture... professional, cultural, and educational institutions... journals and the media... the critic, historian, and writer... (even craftsmen)... all possess the... capacity for making and shaping architectural discourse."

Foucault's concept of discourse is important because it sidesteps the Eurocentricity of many architectural historians and the preoccupation with antecedents, precedents and influences. Some architects of the early 20th century – for example, Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles Rennie Mackintosh – were viewed by Pevsner and Giedion as precursors of modernism; while others – like the Greene brothers – went unnoticed until the 1950s and were then pigeonholed as craftsmen designers of Californian timber bungalows. And there are also architects – such as the Australian Robin Dods – who still remain largely unknown.

Yet these five architects – all born within two years of each other (1868-1870) – were simultaneously engaged not in some as yet to be defined Modern Movement but in what they would have understood to be the Arts and Crafts discourse. And while each worked locally for local clients with local needs – using local craftsmen working local materials, and in the local climate and landscape – there was nothing insular about their practice, and they did not work in isolation. All five were working within a well-defined tradition theorised by Ruskin, Morris, Thoreau, Lethaby and others. Dods, the geographically most isolated of this group, had trained in Edinburgh and corresponded with his life-long friend the Scottish Arts and Crafts architect, Robert Lorimer. Even in Australia Dods did not work



I. Moore, Kings Lane residential complex in Darlinghurst, Sydney (2003)

alone: the local Arts and Crafts discourse included cultural societies, patrons, clients, artists, architects, furniture makers and other craftspeople – to the extent that it was recognisably an 'Australian' Arts and Crafts movement using Australian materials and Australian motifs.

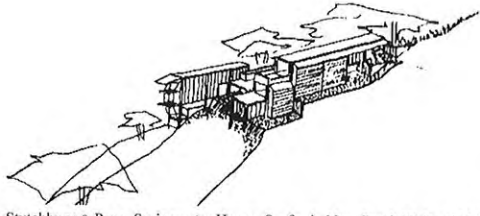
Rather than British sources, Mackintosh and Lorimer turned to Scottish vernacular antecedents to guide their practice, and when Dods returned to Brisbane in 1896, he developed an Arts and Crafts practice that drew on the local Queensland vernacular. Robert Riddel, his biographer, notes that "his domestic work adopted many local techniques in wood, but had a sophisticated discipline and a common-sense response to climate which were radically new."

### Residential Regionalism

There are parallels between the Australian Arts and Crafts discourse that Dods participated in 100 years ago and the various tendencies to be observed in contemporary Australian and New Zealand architecture. These tendencies are also framed as discourses that have both international and local constituents. Like the earlier Australian Arts and Crafts movement, they are discernibly Australian (or New Zealand) too; though with one important difference: they are much more regional. There is a Brisbane School, a Sydney School, a Melbourne School and a New Zealand School. In the smaller cities and in the less inhabited regions of Australia and New Zealand, there seem to be other, emerging, regional schools, but the density of building in those places is still too low for this to be verified. (As Harwell Hamilton Harris, one of the earliest commentators on regionalism observed more than 50 years ago, "To express regionalism architecturally it is necessary that there be building – preferably a lot of building at one time.")

Where regional schools can be discerned,





Stutchbury & Pape, Springwater House, Seaforth, New South Wales (2005)

in the local discourses that fuel them are present the exemplars of earlier architects as well as buildings just completed; the lessons of respected teachers; the memory of vernacular traditions; the imperatives of climate and local constructional practices and materials; the voice of the home-grown architectural media; and generational interactions. In these discourses, the force of the native contributions far outweighs the impact of foreign influences; and the past is always present, shaping the future.

Most Australians and New Zealanders live in freestanding houses located in sprawling suburbs that spread out from city centres. They have no tradition of urbanism in the European sense; social housing is largely non-existent; infrastructure tends to be utilitarian; and commercial buildings have historically followed North American models. So it should not be surprising that throughout the 20th century, it is the house that has been the locus of most architectural experimentation. With considerable economy, the house addresses most of the major questions of architecture, whether social, aesthetic, typological, technological, environmental or philosophical. And so it is in the design of houses, rather than larger commissions, that the emerging architectural tendencies of the region are best observed.

### Sydney, the First City

Aesthetically (and geographically), the Sydney School falls between two extremes: Melbourne and Brisbane. It is a coastal city with a benign warm temperate, almost Mediterranean climate. During the 1920s and 1930s, Leslie Wilkinson, then Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney, used his forceful personality and pedagogical position to push for a climatically appropriate architecture, one that merged the Neo-Classical details of Australia's colonial heritage with Mediterranean building forms. He built

a few beautiful demonstrations; but his students were more excited by the abstracted forms of the Bauhaus. Nevertheless, they did heed his lessons on the importance of the climate in shaping architecture, incorporating climatic sensitivity into their functionalist credo. Climatically-responsive design still shapes the architecture of the Sydney School, as does the architecture of functionalism, which is now more readily recognised as Sydney Minimalism.

From the late 1940s, other young Australian architects began designing houses based on Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses. For them, the appeal

of these houses of Wright's lay not only in their low-cost construction using brick and timber (both readily available in Australia), but also in their 'natural' settings and climatic responsiveness. This interest in Wright's 'organic' philosophy and practice occurred at a moment when Australian artists and architects were becoming sensitised to the wild beauty of the Australian bush, previously denigrated. Architects working with small budgets discovered that their Usonian experiments were suited to the affordable building sites amongst the gums and sandstone outcrops on the steep sides of



Glenn Murcutt, Simpson Lee House, Mt. Wilson, Sydney (1994)





Peter McIntyre, sketch for an A-Frame House, Melbourne (1955)

The school of Melbourne, a city of changing weather located 1,000 km south of Sydney, is characterized by a plastic and formalist approach in which the building is treated as a sculpture, unrelated to the exterior. Two figures,

the intellectual of experimentation Robin Boyd and the iconoclast and theater designer Peter Corrigan, have promoted an architecture of 'skin and bones' in which the surface captures all the attention.



Edmond & Corrigan, Lux House Extension, Caulfield, Victoria (2005)

the ravine-like chases that drain down into Sydney Harbour. In the early 1960s, the next generation of young architects (returning from the obligatory trip overseas and their stop-over to work in London), drew parallels between the New Brutalism they encountered in England and the now well-established Sydney Usonian tradition. From these two sources, they developed a hybrid Nuts and Berries aesthetic based on finely-detailed, exposed brickwork and timber framing. This interest in beautifully crafted timber construction (frequently combined with elegantly detailed steel structural members) continues to flourish in Sydney.

Of all the contemporary Sydney architects, one stands out: Glenn Murcutt. His work unifies into a single aesthetic Sydney's two contrasting tendencies: the machine-like, stripped precision of functionalism and the hand-crafted materiality of the Nuts and Berries School. Through the examples of his work and his teaching, this sole practitioner has made a significant contribution to the Sydney architectural discourse (and to other discourses around the world). Everywhere the environmental rationality of his designs, their formal clarity and their sensitive engagement with sites are recognised and

admired. Significantly, the lyrical tectonics of the work depends on a very high standard of detailing that is now emulated (and even surpassed) by many other Sydney architects. The obvious pleasure they take in fine detailing has become a hallmark of the Sydney School.

The Sydney School, as an identifiable architectural aesthetic, is not solely restricted to the design of houses. Even so, most buildings in the public realm are only distinguished from similar buildings to be encountered anywhere else by the fineness of their detailing. There are exceptions. And these are buildings that, although frequently modest in scale, treat the interior ground plane as an extension of the public realm, dissolving the barriers between inside and out.

### Melbourne, Forms and Surfaces

In Sydney's temperate climate, the wall plane opens up to the world outside: interior space becomes external, with only the slightest sense of threshold, and the architecture of the interior segues so seamlessly into the architecture of the exterior that they are one. Located nearly 1,000 kilometres further south, Melbourne has a climate that is more continental. Summers can be scorchingly hot and

winters frosty and wet; and the weather on any day can be highly erratic (as Melburnians explain: 'four seasons in one day'). Traditionally, houses in Melbourne have a heavyweight shell of protective, insulating masonry. Although lightweight contemporary materials can now provide the necessary protection, the concept of the house as a sealed box remains. When inside and outside are experienced as separate realms, the architecture of the interior frequently becomes divorced from that of the exterior. The result is an architecture of skin and bones: of surface and concealed supporting structure. Architectural form-making becomes a plastic art: building-sized sculpture into which program and structure are inserted.

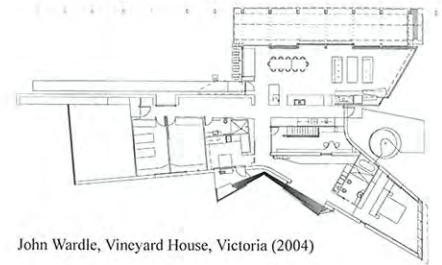
This interest in an architecture of the surface begins in the 1930s when modernism first arrived in Melbourne as streamlined moderne. It was not until the late 1940s when Robin Boyd (a member of a distinguished artistic dynasty in Australia) began writing weekly newspaper articles on modern domestic architecture that the more analytical approach of functionalism began to take hold. Boyd was highly influential. He attacked the ugliness of suburbia, publishing several books on the necessity of a modern Australian architecture; designed experimental houses; curated exhibitions on contemporary architecture; and lectured in the School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. Boyd's architectural experiments extended to building type, structure, materials, and program. In the 1950s they inspired young architects like Peter McIntyre to undertake even riskier architectural experiments in formal and structural expressionism.

The quasi-intellectual environment of avant-garde experimentation that Boyd and his followers established still persists as a significant component of the Melbourne architectural discourse. In the 1960s it





ARM, Melbourne Recital Centre (2008)



John Wardle, Vineyard House, Victoria (2004)

provided the context in which the young Peter Corrigan thrived. Corrigan, architect, theatre designer, charismatic teacher, theorist, and iconoclast, had gone to Yale in America in the late 1960s to test his ideas about complexity and contradiction in architecture and the ugly beauty of suburbia with its uncharted iconography. His architecture had a theatrical, dream-like quality. Colliding, distorted geometric fragments of plan and section were loosely sequenced along a circulation route; and the building surfaces festooned with vulgar motifs from the suburban domestic landscape inhabited by ordinary working people. The work was an attack on the modernist canon: on its well-mannered formalism and its abandonment of a social program (and on Boyd, who despised suburban taste).

Why didn't Sydney produce a Corrigan? From the time of Federation in 1901 until the 1970s, Melbourne was the commercial, cultural and intellectual centre of Australia. In the 1950s and 1960s it was home to the debate on the nation's social conscience. Melbourne architects were intimately engaged in this discourse; it supported the social agenda underlying Corrigan's interest in the ugly beauty of suburbia, his enquiry into its iconography, and his iconoclastic architectural populism that envisaged an architecture of the people.

Corrigan's followers revelled in his populist iconoclasm. However, lacking his ideological perspective and visual genius, they turned to football, religion and consumerism for their story lines and resorted to abusing photocopiers to disturb their plans and elevations, until CAD came along and opened the way to fractal geometry, warped planes, structural skins and other modes of digital dreaming. There is an architecture of skin and bones, of digitally-derived plastic form, and of surface. Unusually, the conventional pattern of first testing ideas through the design of

houses before moving onto larger projects was reversed. It is only in the last few years that there has been a proliferation of houses based on the sealed box, digitalised formalism that now characterises much of the Melbourne School.

And where is Melbourne's Murcutt? There isn't one: climate was never such a part of the Melbourne discourse as it was in Sydney. Thanks to Wilkinson and functionalism, Murcutt (and many other Sydney architects) continue to be engaged in a discourse that enables them to theorise the architectural dimensions of climate. In contrast, most Melbourne

architects have accepted the inside/outside duality of their architecture without question, and – unconstrained by the need to express functionalist, climatic considerations – they have been free to develop an architecture of sculptural form and surface.

### **Brisbane, the Light Tradition**

In Brisbane, 1,200 kilometres north of Sydney in south-east Queensland, the subtropical coastal climate is central to the way of life: people spend a lot of time outdoors. In summer, cool breezes off the ocean are a welcome respite to the humidity

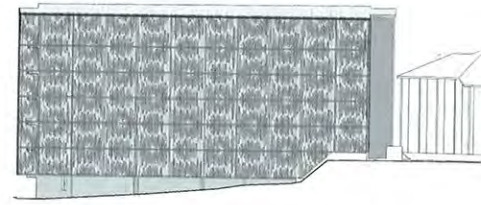


McBride Charles Ryan, Klein Bottle House, Melbourne (2007)

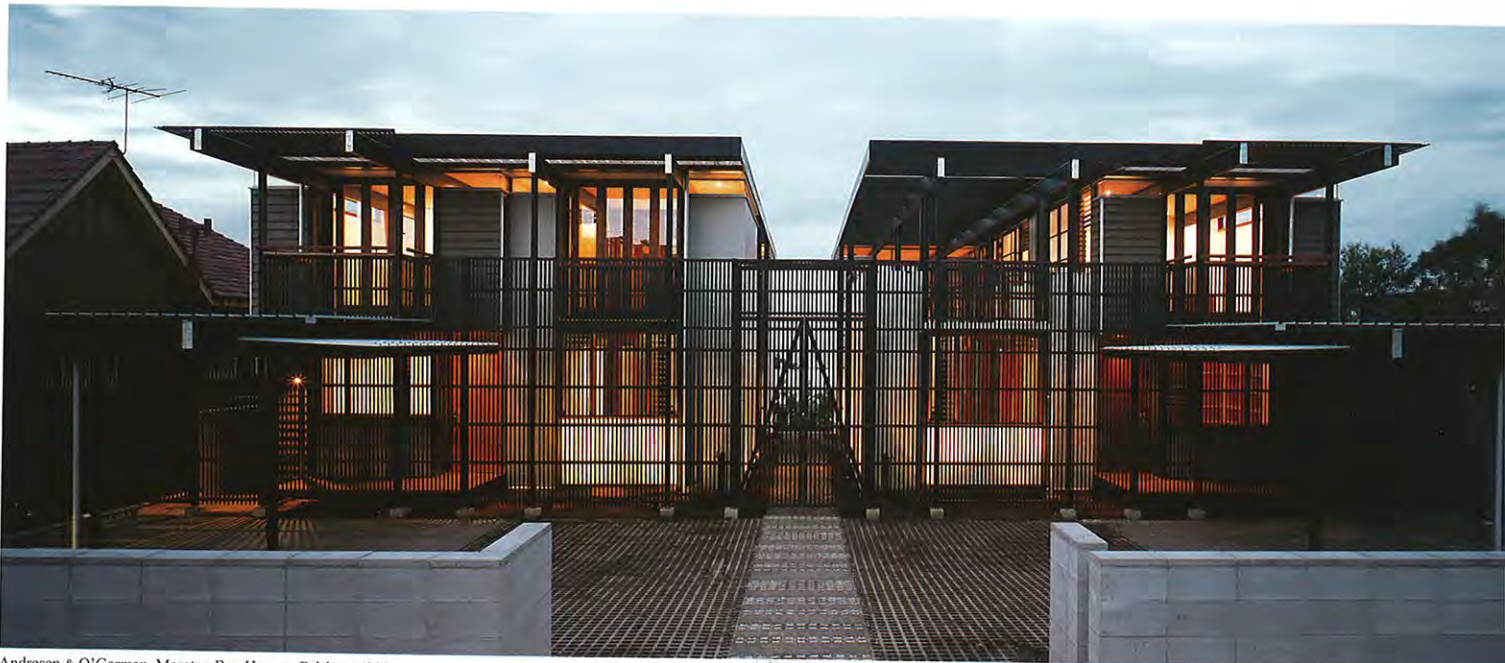


The subtropical climate of Brisbane, 1,200 km north of Sydney, is central to the city's way of life. Relatively far from Melbourne and Sydney, this distance has helped to create a tightly-woven and active cultural

community. Andresen & O'Gorman have introduced lightweight construction, inspired by local tradition and adapted to the climate, paying very special attention to the design of the exteriors.



m3architecture, High School, Brisbane (2008)



Andresen & O'Gorman, Moreton Bay Houses, Brisbane (2000)

and heat. In winter, a warm place in the sun is a delight. Since the beginning of European settlement, the best buildings have been finely-tuned machines designed to ameliorate the climatic extremes. By the late 19th century, a vernacular architecture had evolved peculiar to the region: timber-framed, raised off the uneven ground on timber posts (called 'stumps'), surrounded by deep shaded verandahs, and crowned with an all-enveloping roof.

Until the recent advent of cheap air fares, Brisbane was geographically (and culturally) isolated from Sydney and Melbourne. Viewed from afar as an economic and artistic backwater, Brisbane allowed architects to be largely left to their own devices. This insularity excluded them from the architectural discourses of Sydney and Melbourne. However, it did not inhibit the development of a local discourse or its fertilisation with ideas from abroad, which happened in the late-1940s when European functionalism, Wright's Usonian organic architecture and

the Californian Case Study houses arrived in Brisbane almost simultaneously.

Isolation can be an effective cultural condenser. Although below the radar of the Sydney/Melbourne axis, Brisbane's artists, architects, authors and academics were a culturally active and mutually supportive community. In the 1950s, a period of intense architectural experimentation began (and it continues). The climate was a given, lightweight timber construction a tradition, and bush blocks the only affordable sites. Architects soon discovered that flat roofs, though much admired (they were 'modern'), leaked in the heavy sub-monsoonal downpours, so in the 1960s architects, led by John Dalton, began incorporating into their designs the pitched roofs observed in the Queensland vernacular.

Architecture students also began looking at the vernacular. In the process they discovered the Arts and Crafts houses of Robin Dods. From Dods they learned that the vernacular could be adapted and abstracted. They took particular notice

of the detailing of lightweight timber construction based on the use of Queensland hardwoods, and expressed all the framing members. Once in practice, they built a lot of houses. By the late-1980s a 'thin' timber-framed architecture was rapidly evolving. As in the vernacular, walls were frequently lined on one side only; very fine timber batten screens were used both as sun and rain shields; whole walls were detailed to slide away; interior space merged with exterior space, and in time 'outdoor' rooms became part of the vocabulary. Cross-ventilation, effective sun-shading and correct solar orientation were as fundamental to the design process as foundations were to the building.

At the University of Queensland, Brit Andresen and Peter O'Gorman were influential. They introduced the current generation of young architects to the theory and practice of a lightweight Queensland architecture. They taught the poetics of space, place and type and the detailing of Queensland hardwoods in the design studio and demonstrated their ideas in the field



with the houses they built. Many of the architects they mentored have made the transition from designing lightweight timber houses to major public buildings – changing materials, technologies and scale – without compromising the expressive open engagement with place and climate that characterises the architecture of the region.

### **New Zealand, a Double Heritage**

If the emotional heartland of Australia is its sweeping plains of sunburnt bush, then for New Zealand it is its precipitous hillsides of cool misty rainforest. Climatically these are very different countries. Both were settled by British colonists (often fiercely resisted by the native people: the Maoris were Polynesians who arrived in New Zealand about 1,000 years ago; and the Australian Aborigines were a stone age people who

arrived more than 60,000 years ago). In each country, 19th-century European settlers developed vernacular houses based on memories of ‘home’ adapted to the local climate and building materials.

In the cooler, wetter climate of New Zealand there was little need to shade external walls, so eaves – let alone verandahs – were not essential (however, steep roof pitches helped shed the rain). Houses were built with the local timber: beautiful softwoods used for framing, cladding, floors and furniture. With pioneer/settler economy, houses were initially built with few rooms (often quite small, as softwood construction limited spans). With the flexibility that timber framing permits and with no existing eaves to get in the way, additions could be made as required. The New Zealand



Richard Kirk, Highgate House, Brisbane (2007)

vernacular house is an accretive assemblage of small-scale, gabled- and hipped-roofed units. This compositional tactic of accretive assemblage lingers in the collective architectural consciousness, as does lightweight timber framing.

Just as there are imagined cultural tensions and rivalries between Sydney and Melbourne architects, so there are in New Zealand between architects in Auckland and Wellington. The reality is more a matter of the regional differences that arise from the insularity of geographical separation (some 500 kilometres); from two distinct types of patronage (private in Auckland, the country’s centre of commerce; public in Wellington, its centre of governance); and from Wellington’s cooler, wetter climate. As in Australia, there is also a similarly forgotten third city, Christchurch,



Lindsay & Kerry Clare (Architectus), Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2004)





Ian Athfield, Buck House, Te Mata Estate, New Zealand (1980)

on the South Island, with its own regional architectural identity.

While Auckland can claim the first full-time architecture school (1925), in 1946 Wellington established the earliest cultural organisation, the Architecture Centre, which in turn founded the first architecture school in Wellington and the first town planning school in New Zealand. The modernist debate appears to have taken hold in New Zealand by the mid-1930s. In Auckland in the 1940s and 1950s, Vernon Brown (a charismatic practitioner/teacher) built a series of houses using the local lightweight timber framing tradition. The stripped modernist forms were functionally planned for solar access and cross-ventilation. Their timber weatherboard cladding was treated with black creosote and offset by white painted industrial steel windows. Brown's 'black' houses

are remembered in several contemporary 'black' houses.

In New Zealand, a relatively young country with a population of only 4 million and the tensions of a bi-cultural heritage, national identity is an issue. The existential longing to know their place in the world that New Zealanders experience usually finds expression through sport. However, there are many cultural manifestations of this condition as well, including some that are architectural. In even the most contemporary work there are echoes of the vernacular tradition, the references to the architectural pioneers of modernism, and to the 'bach'. The traditional bach (as in 'bachelor') is a holiday house, usually no more than a skillion-roofed shed improvised from found or abandoned materials. They were frequently squats built beside remote beaches and rivers

or in the bush on land with no clear title. The poetics of the siting of these little buildings and their anarchical, make-do informality have given baches a special place in the New Zealand national identity.

### Peripheral Culture Complex

A characteristic of provincial societies is cultural cringe, a sense of cultural insecurity that grows with distance from the perceived centre. It often leads to an uncritical eclecticism, as the latest fashions picked up from European magazines are regurgitated under the guise of avant-garde mystique. Under constant pressure from consumerism, the novelty of newness quickly wears off, and a new cycle of plunder and regurgitation begins.

The result is an architectural version of the cultural universalisation that Paul



Modern Architecture Partners, Breamtail House, Northland, New Zealand (2005)





Vernon Brown, Haigh House, Auckland, New Zealand (1942)

The national identity of New Zealand, a young country of four million inhabitants, is based on two cultures, the colonial and the native (the Maoris and the Australian Aborigines). The two main cities, Auckland and

Wellington, have schools of architecture to which modernity arrived in the 1930s, with figures like Vernon Brown, whose wood houses, simple as the traditional *bach*, still influence the younger generations of architects.

Ricoeur referred to (“the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminium atrocities,” and so on). There is an alienating placelessness about many buildings. Air-conditioned to seal them from the world outside, and with twisted, multi-faceted forms clad with cheap Chinese facade systems, they could be almost anywhere. There are, however, signs of resistance to these practices, which Kenneth Frampton has identified as Critical Regionalism. Critical Regionalism is a self-aware form of local practice that prospers when the architects of a region are sufficiently self-confident to participate in the global discourses that engage them from outside while remaining in tune with place: its climate, materials, technologies and traditions.

Frampton notes that no one has expressed this idea of Critical Regionalism more forcefully than Harwell Hamilton Harris, who in an address to the North West Regional Council of the AIA in Oregon in 1954 said: “Opposed to the Regionalism of Restriction is... the Regionalism of Liberation. This is the manifestation of a region that is especially in tune with the emerging thought of the time. We call such a manifestation ‘regional’ only because it has not yet emerged elsewhere. It is the genius of this region to be more than ordinarily aware and more than ordinarily free. Its virtue is that it has significance for the world outside itself. To express this regionalism architecturally it is necessary that there be building – preferably a lot of building at one time. Only so can the expression be sufficiently general, sufficiently varied, sufficiently forceful to capture people’s imaginations and provide a friendly climate long enough for a new school of design to develop.”

Peter Robb in his book *Midnight in Sicily* anecdotally touches on this ‘Regionalism of Liberation’. Robb remembers Vincenzo, an architecture student in Palermo, “who

would have given anything to work with Murcutt.” Robb describes why. “Moving inland into the hills of Sicily, where the villas are bigger, more costly and solid, the new houses look more and more like dreadful fortified bunkers. As they are. There is no grimmer or more palpable expression of the social ethos in Sicily... [The houses] are the ultimate expression of fear and mistrust of your neighbours. Thinking this now... I saw the amazing appeal the Australian houses of Glenn Murcutt must have had for the student Vincenzo, sitting so airily and lightly and modestly on the earth, minimal, essential and open to the world around them. From Sicily such houses seem models or dreams of another world, another way of living, and seeing this, I realized as I hadn’t earlier the politics of Vincenzo’s enthusiasm.”

When Robb speaks of Glenn Murcutt’s houses as “sitting so airily and lightly and modestly on the earth, minimal, essential and open to the world around them...models or dreams of another world, another way of living”, he might equally have been speaking of a multitude of houses by any number of architects in Australia and New Zealand. Many of these houses are constructed from materials Murcutt does not use, and most of them do not rise to the formal clarity he achieves, nor are they such finely tuned climatic machines. However, they all exhibit an airy openness, a tectonic lightness, and an engagement with the landscape that identify them as members of a new school of design that has become “sufficiently general, sufficiently varied, sufficiently forceful to capture people’s imaginations” around the world.



Moller Architects, Orua Bay House, New Zealand (2007)