

# The Myth of the Nation

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The search for a mode of architecture particular to New Zealand has been much prized for as long as architects have been building there, but it enjoyed a dramatic and popular resurgence in the wake of David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin's 1984 book, *The Elegant Shed*. The nationalist genealogy – from “humble bach” to the experiments of Group Construction, Group Architects and their offspring, to contemporary modernist-revival celebrations – became well-rehearsed at all levels of New Zealand's architectural culture and was, at least until recently, firmly embedded in Auckland's two schools of architecture, and in Wellington's since the end of the 1990s.

The fundamental work of Justine Clark and Paul Walker, in *Looking for the Local* (2000), to extend further south the locus of the rhetorical marriage of nationalism to modernism, and to historicize the Architectural Centre's one-time selection of New Zealand's exemplary modern architecture, has lent a firm scholarly basis to a broad desire to isolate the seeds of a modern New Zealand architectural identity. So too have Douglas Lloyd Jenkins' unparalleled efforts to share a more complicated view of New Zealand's modernist architectural history with a wider readership, most notably in his *At Home* (2004), but also in the anthology *New Dreamland* (2005), and his articles in the *New Zealand Listener*.

Nevertheless, the broad tendency in New Zealand architectural culture is to dismiss this complexity in favour of a search for national origins, and for local innovations within international phenomena: a desire that 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 “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 and urban planning, even if all but a handful of specialists follow a troublingly simplistic historiographical line, such as we find in the centennial history publication of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, edited by Charles Walker (2005). However, in the long-term practice of documenting and challenging the history of New Zealand architecture, it is not without its problems; this criticism holds true both within the academy and beyond it to professional and general audiences.

Peter Wood, in his article, “The Bach: The Cultural History of a Local Typology” (2000), works backwards from the “bach” – as the small holiday house in New Zealand is called – to a “birth of the nation” bound tightly to the ANZAC myth, anchored at Gallipoli, in order to argue alternative, cultural starting points for determining an independent, national, architectural character.<sup>1</sup> For Wood, the endurance of the bach as an architectural type owes much to the extent to which it is historically embedded in a widely appreciated period of cultural adolescence – in which the First World War figures largely. While Wood’s explicit line of argument is that the broader context of the bach’s emergence after New Zealand’s participation in an Imperial war, under an independent Australasian banner, lends the history of this typology a relevance beyond architectural discourse – an admirable and important observation – he also entrenches the type by heaping national myth upon architectural.

Wood’s typically speculative and instrumental approach to his topic does not, generally speaking, undermine the argument he advances for an “indigenous architectural nationalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand” (Walker, 2005: 246). He tells us what we want to hear: that the bach, as an architectural type, is more rooted than we imagined in the national psyche – a mentality that privileges industry, invention and isolation. For this, the bach is a perfect fit. As such, it acquires authority as an autochthonous architectural typology – and here I write both of Wood’s analysis, as well as the popular uptake of this idea – which, in turn, reinforces the New Zealand-ness of those architectures that build upon it. In this sense, if Wood’s essay is not wholly inventive, neither is it as damaging to the broader goals of architectural historiography – the slow filtering of evidence as a gradual test of historical narrative – as the knee-jerk, ill-informed invocations of this “moment” by professional discourse, as it cashes in on the values that Wood, and others, supply to it.

Few, beyond the profession, would disagree that Charles Walker’s volume functions appallingly as a history of *100 Years of New Zealand Architecture*: a love letter, largely written in an obscurantist prose, from the institutional bastion of architectural practice to the myths that, like a moat, surround it.<sup>2</sup> It is not the job of architects to question the histories handed down by academics, Walker writes in his introductory essay: “Architecture is essentially about the future” (Walker, 2005: 12). Yet, with no effort whatsoever, the structure of Walker’s book belies the projective underpinnings of architectural practice, negating those aspects of its history that fail to conform to present day values. Of the fifteen chapters that add up to a history of the architectural profession in the century since the founding of its Institute, only the first considers that century’s first four decades. This six-page contribution by Sir Miles Warren, “one of New Zealand’s greatest architects” (Walker, 2005: 246), 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” (Warren, 2005: 18).<sup>3</sup> Among institutional histories, the book is atypical, precisely for refusing to offer a history of the NZIA’s foundations, not to mention its smaller oversights: setting aside the once-close relationships of architects and planners; or considering the role of the profession in setting up the early twentieth century infrastructure of the country’s towns and cities – libraries, court-houses, schools, and so on. Indeed, to be generous, those values represented by Walker’s history belong squarely in 2005, and epitomize the mechanisms described more generally above. The Institute’s former president Gordon Moller prefaces the book

1. The argument was widely tested in a nationwide lecture tour with Jeremy Treadwell in 1999, sponsored by Unitec and the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

2. For published reviews of this book, see Clark (2005) and Jenner (2005).

3. The heavy level of illustration (the book’s only asset) accounts for the other six pages.

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.” That this language is an unchallenged closed-code is a fault of decades’ worth of academic historiography being lumped into two categories: that which supports myths, and is celebrated; and that which undermines them, and is ignored.

Queenstown architect, Ed Elliott, recently suggested in *Architecture New Zealand* (2007) that the bach myth had run its course. However, immediately, he turned to another architectural type, reinforcing the same simplistic qualities associated with the bach. Treating this “replacement” – back country huts – under the same terms as the bach brings the kinds of correspondences between cultural value and architectural type directly back to the task of “reforming” the origins of New Zealand architecture. He writes of “these stunning little gems ... that take an architect back to the basics of Architecture. Pure forms, the essence of practicality, built with a limited palette of materials (that is, with whatever could be carted in), and with an absolute minimum of adornment” (Elliott, 2007: 93). Of course, in searching out its origins and floating the contenders for those examples, types, forms and materials (not to mention “spirit”) that would satisfy the local architectural profession’s thirst for histories easily absorbed – a thirst too often treated by extremely simplified forms of the academic architectural historiography to which the profession pays scant attention – the problem remains the same.

In his recent novel *Underground*, Queenslander Andrew McGahan (2006) describes the sinister, reactionary motives that are rarely far behind those forms of historiography that seek identity in moments of rupture, while ignoring both the conflicts inevitably found in “uniqueness”, and the continuities that can exceed the event. McGahan’s observations float to the surface of a novel that is both too cynical and too silly to take seriously. However, his underlying unease with the readiness with which a national culture – in this case a dystopic forecast of a right-wing Australia – can translate instances of national differentiation into moments of national formation, and thus into the range of measures that, on both sides of the Tasman, determine whether or not one can boast the simple hard-headedness and ingenuity of the ANZAC spirit, is pertinent to this issue.

Of course, the legends of Gallipoli feed 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, rather of characteristics firmly aligned with one nation or the other. In the same vein, few would lay claim 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 (Australia with its Federation in 1901; New Zealand with its new status as a Dominion in 1907), and of New Zealand as one of a number of interdependent British colonies in the South Pacific – 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 and cultural specificities, there is good reason to turn back to a generously regional approach to their history. Does anyone really believe that what have become the national differences between the architectural histories of Australia and New

Zealand are greater than the formerly colonial differences between, say, Tasmania and Queensland, or New South Wales and Victoria (Australia's infra-national version of the more celebrated trans-Tasman rivalry)? The number of migrant architects travelling back and forth across the Tasman might be more than ever before, but the apparently seamless movement between South Pacific colonies that distinguished the profession's history for many of the nineteenth century's most important architects – which is not even to factor in the relationship of the Australian and New Zealand colonies to London – describes a decidedly *anti-national* reality to a history that has been sectioned off to suit later twentieth century narratives.

To conclude, these observations are simply examples of the more general challenges facing historians of architecture working in the present moment. My topic here has been the myth of New Zealand's "nationality", but it corresponds to any number of flimsy historical bases on which architectural culture – academic, professional and popular – builds solid edifices that, to invoke a well-worn idea, treat quick-sand as bedrock. The issue does not lie in the speculation and referential freedom that marked history writing of the 1990s, and persists in some quarters today, but in the way it lends the profession the tools with which to dig itself deeper and deeper into a mire of rhetoric and fables. It is at the very 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 we have a problem.

## References

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