

Architecture Inspired by New Zealand

Amanda Hyde de Kretser and David Sullivan

Review by Paul Walker

Amanda Hyde de Kretser and David Sullivan; photographs by Judith Holtebrinck, *Architecture Inspired by New Zealand* (Auckland: Mint Publishing, 2006).



The premise of this book is that the relationship between house and landscape in New Zealand warrants investigation and critical assessment. The words of Mike Austin are cited at the top of the foreword: “It is a step forward to have a discussion about houses that attempts to be analytic and precise about the relationship of the building to the site”. How could anyone disagree? However, this book barely begins such a discussion. It is certainly neither analytic nor precise. Rather, what it does is to present a series of houses – mostly trophy houses in the current 50s-modernism-on-steroids style du jour – each in relation to its landscape setting. What landscape actually seems to mean here, would in other contexts be called ‘scenery’. *Architecture Inspired by New Zealand* is a coffee-table book in the scenic New Zealand genre, distinct from the rest of its type because there are images of houses interpolated into the fore- or mid-ground in most of the photographs.

This cross-over of genres – between glossy tourist pap and glossy shelter rag – might have been interesting. Some provocative disjunctions could be imagined: photoshopped ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots, both inverting and updating the procedure of Repton’s Red Books, so we could see if the landscape looked better with or without the architectural ‘improvement’. Perhaps perforations around each photograph would have allowed an interactive reader to decide which they wanted: the house or the land, shelter magazine or coffee table scenic album.

However, the problem with this book is that those responsible for it do not seem to be aware that they are dealing with genres, consolidated myths, etcetera. All this twenty-five years after Francis Pound’s book, *Frames on the Land*, so persuasively showed that New Zealanders look at their country through eyes conditioned, not by the local landscape and its physical attributes, but rather by a placeless panorama of clichés. In *Architecture Inspired by New Zealand*, this is most apparent in the landscape photograph that begins each section, and the breathlessly inane introductory text that follows. Thus, Queenstown is introduced by a panoramic image of lake, tussocky hillsides, mountains, clouds and sky, with the town itself seen as a distant fragment in the extreme right of the image. (This happens to be the only image in the whole book that includes anything remotely like a town: ‘landscape’ here is never urban.) Then we are told that the town perches “precariously on the banks of crystal clear Lake Wakatipu”, and that its “picturesque scenery is framed by spectacular mountain ranges”, rising at “a seemingly vertical angle out of the deep blue water”. Meanwhile, Wanaka has “towering mountains”, is “blessed with a continental climate”, and is characterized by “glistening white peaks in winter, kaleidoscopic wild flowers of spring,

summer's scorched brown high country and rows of luminous golden poplars in autumn". And so on. It is as if the copy (attributed to David Sullivan), as much as the architecture, has sought to return to the 1950s.

However, the houses themselves are, of course, more knowing than this. We might be alarmed by what the architecture of the contemporary house in New Zealand implies when presented like this, en masse. New Zealand architects, the images seem to say, work for clients with lots of money and in most cases with no apparent individuality or identity: they have no children, no pets, no elderly parents, no disabilities, no books, no ugly heirlooms, no weirdness, no mess, no taste – except that bought by the metre according to the prevailing dictates of *Home and Entertaining* and *Vogue Living*. Further, we know that, at present, they prefer fifties modernism built as if budgets don't matter. However, this is probably more the message of the pictures, and of how the houses have been dressed to be pictured. Actually, there are many interesting buildings here: the houses designed by Felicity Wallace, Hugh Tennant, Christopher Kelly and Mitchell & Stout, for example, all manage to reach through the clichéd manner in which they are presented to suggest that something is going on in New Zealand domestic architecture beyond an uncritical reverence for Neutra. And two of the houses actually entail a complete transformation of the landscape, into what is known as a garden: Ron Sang's Brake house in Titirangi (the only one in the book which has had any opportunity to weather) is shown surrounded by spring magnolia bloom; and a Waikato house by Nicholas Stevens and Gary Lawson treats the landscape as artifice, including an affectedly 'natural' arrangement of bromeliads and cycads in its swimming pool hall. There is even a reminder, in the form of a house by Melling Morse in a patch of Wellington bush, that architectural quality can be achieved in modestly scaled buildings on modest sites.

Each of the houses comes with a second text, that is presumably meant to deliver the analysis and precision that Austin's words lead the reader to expect. This material is authored by Amanda Hyde de Kretser. In each case, she has linked the design of the house to some landscape or site related line of inquiry or activity in design culture. Some of the suggested lines of thought are rather extraordinary, preposterous even. We are told that Felicity Wallace's approach to the design of a house at Wakatipu is an "architectural response" to the mountains around; this comment, banal as it is, is prefaced by a short discursus on what Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin in turn said about mountains and architecture 150 years ago. This takes up a quarter of the brief textual space Hyde de Kretser has to work with, and her point seems to be that neither Viollet-le-Duc nor Ruskin apply in this case, as if the average reader might have erroneously thought that they did. Or this, of a house at Lake Hayes: "Like the Romans, who believed that the landscape was to be observed rather than entered, this house defines a viewing platform outside and a picture window inside, through which its occupants can command the view". Huh? However, in Hyde de Kretser's brief essays there is at least the sense that things are being tried out. It is a pity the book did not give more scope for this: the foreword discloses that she did not even have an opportunity to visit the houses (or the landscapes). This is a little like trying to read a book – the thought crossed my mind – without bothering to turn its pages.