

Villa:

From Heritage to Contemporary by Patrick Reynolds, Jeremy Salmond, and Jeremy Hansen

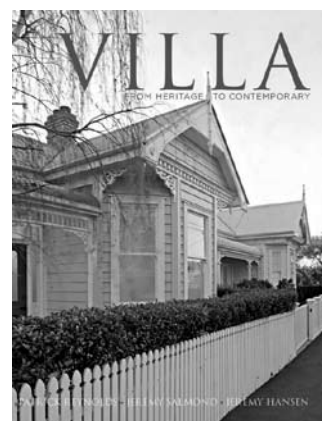
Review by Bill McKay

At first sight this book is rather like the contemporary villa: large and lovely to look at, but more expensive than you would think. And, as with any open home, a casual leafing through its pages had me pondering if it were really for me. But reading it has won me over in much the same way as the authors characterise the villa: for its “combination of charm and utility”.

Villa: From Heritage to Contemporary has three authors, each contributing a substantial section. Patrick Reynolds, instigator of the project, has contributed all of the photographs, but it is his short-but-spirited introduction that gets the book off to an excellent start. He manages in a couple of entertaining pages to encompass key aspects of the villa that the book explores, as well as charting the trajectory of his life from boyhood in a modernist “anti-villa” to acceptance of fate as an architectural photographer living in a villa alteration in Auckland’s western bays.

Jeremy Salmond is of course one of our preeminent heritage architects. Like the others he starts his text *The Villa: 1860 - 1910* with a little autobiography, the kind of thing that can veer towards the nostalgic and sentimental in a context such as this. Luckily, once he gets into what he knows, he produces a very smart and readable essay. This is probably the best summation of the development of the villa that I have come across: he traces it stylistically, as Italianate architecture in the dress of Gothic Revival, but also socially, through its appeal to a better way of life and through the mechanics of early Antipodean city development. He comes up with the most accurate definition I’ve heard so far of the difference between a large cottage and a small villa: any house that can’t be “dismissed as a mere cottage” becomes “entitled almost by default to be called a villa”, something that still holds true in the Auckland property market today.

Salmond’s essay is quite well illustrated with a balance of period and contemporary images; after all, too many pictures of contemporary villas can leave one feeling rather enervated, an exercise akin to leafing through the Homes for Sale section of the Saturday paper. It is always good to see period information as well, such as this sale notice from 1846:



Reynolds, P., Salmond, J. and Hansen, J. (2009). *Villa: From Heritage to Contemporary*. Auckland: Random House.

... superior Clover Paddock... Garden and well stocked Orchard in rear... Dwelling House (newly built of best materials) ...four spacious rooms, handsome Verandah Front. A detached kitchen, well fitted up, an Outhouse; Coach House and Stabling for Four Horses; a Well of Water; an Aviary, and sixteen double Bee-Hives: with every other requisite for a Gentleman's family.

I knew Epsom was desirable but never quite realised it was literally the land of milk and honey. But advertisements such as this do give a good sense of how some lived and to me there should be little difference between a social history and an architectural history; an appreciation of architecture is hollow without context.

Salmond also addresses the important evolution of the villa from the earlier Victorian residence described above, sedate on its large section, to the later products of a kitset cornucopia that spewed out lines of houses cheek by jowl on Auckland's inner city streets. This description of our pretty streets may seem harsh, but bear in mind that the villa and its clutter of contents are the output, as both Reynolds and Salmond make clear, of Victorian capitalism allied with industrialisation. This process involved the pitiless exploitation of local resources, land speculation and the beginning of the consumer society we know so well today. The Kauri Milling Company alone, on the shores of Freeman's Bay, churned out 139 million metres of timber from 1898 on, disemboweling the centuries-old kauri forests of Northland and the Waikato to produce cold and drafty houses closing the Victorian family. And these Auckland streets were the equivalent of the stucco acres of housing we now see in Botany Downs, houses for new immigrants or those climbing the social ladder, anxious to impress the neighbours.

Salmond also briefly discusses the interior design of villas and the extent to which there are regional styles; interestingly, the faceted (as opposed to square) bay villa is "essentially an Auckland style". This is an improvement on previous books on the subject as well as a reflection on the subtleties of Salmond's knowledge (as one would expect since the first villa he lived in was in Gore). He is at his most arch when he comes to discussion of the contemporary villa and the phases of "villafication" ("plague of aluminium windows sweeps the land", ceilings are lowered with new "wonder materials of the age: Pinex and Gib") and how gentrification leads through an increase in property values to the pressure to replace neighbourhood housing such as the villa. "The growth of towns is not unlike an onion," he says, "it makes one weep at times."

Although brief for a book of this size, this section of the book is very well-rounded in its appreciation of the villa not just as an architectural form, but through consideration of its social and economic context as well; after all villas were the "building blocks of late 19th century towns" and now occupy architecturally contestable chunks of the inner city landscape. Salmond addresses the issue of whether or not the typical villa requires "open heart surgery" for modern needs or whether alterations can be conducted in a more conservative manner aligned with period style. He comes down on the side of "good design" (who doesn't?) but it's an easy answer in relation to the villa. These houses have always been flexible and adaptable from the interior through to the backyard and with the street façade left intact to shore up the character of the neighbourhood; a compromise of sorts keeps most of the people happy most of the time.

This is explored in the next section, *The Villa Today*, primarily through Patrick Reynolds' photographs and Jeremy Hansen's short texts on the "diversity of modern day occupation". This is where the book takes on more of the characteristics of coffee table tome rather than useful reference; something mainly for dipping into. Hansen, editor of *Home NZ* magazine, makes an affable tour guide but his several short pieces on various villa do-ups can be relentlessly positive after a while. He does enthusiasm well but when he allows himself to muse, his prose matches more the tone of Reynolds' photography. These images are a long way from the cheerful portrayals found in the real estate world: they have an introspective quality that draws you in. It is ironic that the villa, with its original layers of strict social hierarchy, in which a visitor would never get beyond the hallway arch or drawing room, is now opened up for inspection. We are invited to poke our noses deep into the detail and detritus of how people live. Certainly the most interesting are those in which the villa is background; it becomes merely a cave in which we peruse the collections of mainly creative types. The habitations of Lloyd Jenkins and Wells, and Knox and Ward, certainly have nothing to do with the accepted niceties of interior design as retailed in the lifestyle magazines. Reynolds' images aren't prurient, though, nor are they excessively styled, though they are posed. They are of people like us at home in their environment, and except for the more modern intimacy, are reminiscent of the period photographs also presented in the book.

Perhaps this is the success of the villa. Beyond the fairly uniform façade these houses can be occupied in myriad ways and indulge one's idiosyncrasies. As these three authors maintain, although the fancy frontage is beguiling, that is not the primary appeal of the villa to them. It is the scale, simplicity and flexibility (and flimsy construction!) which allow us to make of them what we want. This has maintained their appeal and survival into the modern era, beyond the street appearance that preoccupies planners and real estate agents.

This book does not aim to be the definitive word on the villa, a history or critical analysis. It sets out to be a "generous tribute" and it achieves just that: it is a smart, intelligent and enthusiastic guide and, like any tour, has a little something for everyone. Would I recommend it to someone who has acquired a villa and is keen to restore it "properly"? It could do them good. This is not a book for the doctrinaire; it is quite the opposite. As Reynolds puts it "a villa-like book, rambling, generous, textured, every room off the hall another possibility for surprise".