David Mitchell

Three Conversations

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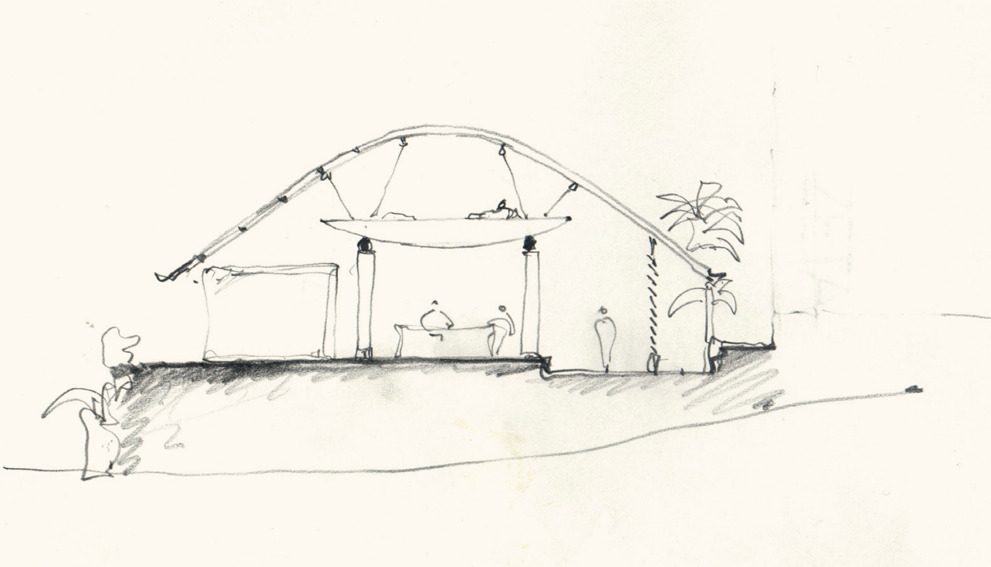


Early sketch for the Mitchell-Stout House in Freemans Bay, Auckland. Drawing: Julie Stout

Introduction

David Mitchell, one of the most respected figures in New Zealand architecture, died in Auckland on 26 April, 2018, at the age of 77. He was the architect of some of the most acclaimed New Zealand buildings of the later twentieth century, an influential teacher at the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning and an articulate commentator on New Zealand architecture. His achievements were recognised by the award, in 2005, of the New Zealand Institute of Architects' Gold Medal, and his ability acknowledged by his selection, in 2014, as creative director of New Zealand's first-ever national exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

David grew up in the Waikato town of Morrinsville, attended Hamilton Boys' High School and graduated from the University of Auckland's School of Architecture in the early 1960s. He later returned to the School, working as a lecturer from 1972-87; he was a big personality in one of the liveliest periods in the School's hundred-year history – a time of experiment and disputation that, from the perspective of the contemporary academy, seems more than a little anarchic.

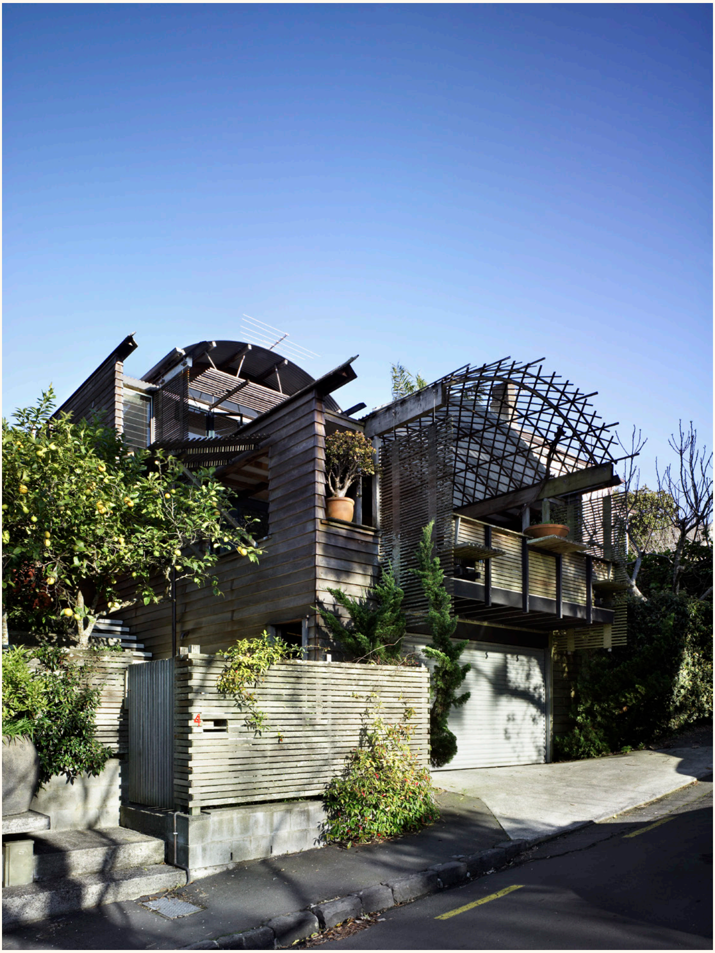
While he was teaching, David continued in practice. He formed a productive architectural partnership with Peter Hill and Jack Manning; their projects included buildings on the Epsom campus of the Auckland Teachers Training College. The successor practice Manning Mitchell designed Northcote Library / Civic Building (1982) buildings at Epsom Girls Grammar School (1986), and state houses at Wiri, South Auckland (1985). The best-known product of the partnership was the University of Auckland Music School (1985), which received an Enduring Architecture Award in the 2013 New Zealand Architecture Awards.

David was the designer of two of the most significant late-twentieth century Auckland, and New Zealand houses, the First Gibbs House in Judges Bay (1983) and the Mitchell-Stout House in Freemans Bay (1990). The latter house was designed with Julie Stout, David's partner in life and architecture for the last three decades of his life. With Julie, David designed the Second Gibbs House in Orakei (1991) and other significant buildings followed, including New Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery (1995), Unitec Landscape & Plant Sciences Department Building (2003), Tauranga Art

Gallery (2005), and Lopdell House Redevelopment and Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery (2014). The Auckland architecture community was rather surprised when David and Julie left their Freemans Bay House for the new home they designed at Narrow Neck (2008), on Auckland's North Shore (although probably not as surprised as their new neighbours).

There was a lot more besides: master-planning on the Auckland waterfront; civic advocacy (David and Julie were always unafraid to stick their heads up above the parapet); writing (including the much-cited 1984 book, *The Elegant Shed*); sailing throughout the Pacific (an experience which fed David's 2014 Venice Architecture exhibition, *Last, Loneliest, Loveliest*.) And talking, which David did so well. David's words are worth anthologising; in the meantime, here are three interviews, conducted over the course of a decade from 2005, that illustrate part of his story (which of course is entwined with that of Julie Stout), and, I hope, suggest his spirit.

John Walsh
May 2018



Mitchell-Stout House (1990),
Freemans Bay, Auckland.
Photograph: Lucas K. Doolan

01

In 2005, David Mitchell received the New Zealand Institute of Architects' premier award, the Gold Medal for career achievement. To mark the occasion Tony van Raat interviewed David about his work, and life; this excerpt is from that interview, which was published in *Architecture NZ*, November/December 2005.

Tony van Raat: Why did you become an architect, David?

David Mitchell: Probably because I wasn't really good enough at anything else. It's a common answer, I know. I had tried to be a painter, then I started playing my violin very seriously but I wondered whether I quite had it in me. Then I decided on architecture, having been horrified by my father's suggestions of law and medicine. I kind of fell into it. I heard a talk by [British architectural historian] Nikolaus Pevsner and thought 'God, this is alright'. It combined a lot of things. So, I left Morrinsville and went to the Auckland School. I was pretty raw, but I got through somehow or other.

Who impressed you at the School?

Bill Wilson was immediately impressive, and Vernon Brown and Peter Middleton were also impressive. Vernon was a tyrannical old bastard and scared the hell out of me, but he knew he could draw and he knew he could do a building so it gave him a certain authority. Peter Middleton was very intelligent, well read, thoughtful. He was unusual in New Zealand – a person who embraced suburbia and lots of out-of-fashion things.

What was the legacy of the post-War generation of students?

Well, the School didn't exist really before the war and the crowd that came back after the war were sophisticates. There were only 28 of them, I think, in the first gang – the famous Group and all that crowd. We weren't there much later – '59 was my first year – and the Group were alive and kicking and doing buildings round town. They were deeply influential.

Can one be a good architect without being broadly educated?

There are people who are intuitive and not intellectual. They draw in the same way that other people kick a football. But at the highest levels I suspect there has got to be a fair amount of other stuff – thoughtfulness and awareness of history, and of what's going on. Architecture is about a lot of stuff and I don't think you can go a long way on very little. I've always felt rather anxious about the fact that I was theoretically ill-prepared. I simply don't keep pace with architectural theory, although at times I've tried. There is possibly no-one who is a practising architect who does. The concerns are different, and it's very hard to do, and I've often felt a bit bad about that – I don't know why.

You later returned to the School as a staff member, and taught for a long time.

Yeah, 15 years, from 1972 to 1987. When I first got a job at the school I was teaching environmental control. It's the only way that I got in there. I had to teach this bloody subject which was basically plumbing and drainage and that became very little plumbing and drainage because actually plumbing and drainage is easy to teach. I became very interested in the thermal performance of buildings, and how, in buildings, you move about according to the season and time of year. This is still with me. That's how teaching will affect you – something you never intended to teach, you find yourself interested in. You read Reyner Banham's *Architecture of The Well-Tempered Environment* and then you look up a lot of dreary texts on thermal issues. You end up adjusting your buildings as a result and, years later, are slightly horrified to see people who were once students of yours design buildings that stare at the western sun with fully glazed walls.

Why did you write *The Elegant Shed*?

I had been teaching and I'd found it impossible to lecture in a subject again and again – I think anyone who has done it knows why. Also, nearly all of my teaching was part time. It was hard – you have two things running at once and that's always hard to sustain. I had the vacations in which I could do other things, and because the work of contemporary New Zealand architects was something I naturally knew about, it was an easy subject for me to move into. So I lectured in the subject and then found out about what was going on in the country. Students did exercises for me – I had them thrashing around the town digging up eccentrics.

Who impressed you in your early career?

I always thought John Scott was damn good. When I was a student I went to see John and Miles Warren. Miles was incredibly generous. Something that I don't think I've confessed to – certainly not to Miles – but at the time I was the student representative on the committee for the Student Union building in Auckland. I kind of opposed the idea that Miles should get the job. I had pushed for the hiring of Le Corbusier. I thought we needed Corb and I've always thought that he would have taken the job, too, at that time in his career. He would have introduced us to something that very much surprised us.

That's not to say that Miles is not a very good architect. I was very impressed by Christchurch College and by his own office building, and thought Dorset Street Flats were excellent. In fact, I was pretty impressed by most of what he did, and also by Peter Beaven's Lyttelton Tunnel building. In my early days those things were strong, the architecture felt very vibrant, and John Scott's Futuna Chapel was terrific.

What has been your relationship with your architectural peers?

Well, I've been in partnership with Peter Hill, Jack Manning and now with Julie Stout for the last 15 years. And I've had a fine eye for talent – Pete Bossley, Noel Lane, Julie Stout, Diana Stiles, Bill McKay, Miriam White, Brendan McFarlane, Gill Matthewson, Ginny Pedlow, and a lot of other talented people have worked with me. My partners have always been good friends. Relationships differ because they're made at different times of your life, and of course it's different with me and Julie – it’s not two jokers sort of grating against each other.

I really enjoy working with other architects. Architecture is a very co-operative activity. I also think a certain confidence is involved in being able to say, ‘Well, what we say is so and so’, without feeling as though it was a half-witted idea, or that you had to get it across at the cost of someone else’s idea. In large projects like city planning that’s really important.

What’s it like working with a business partner who’s also the partner in your personal life?

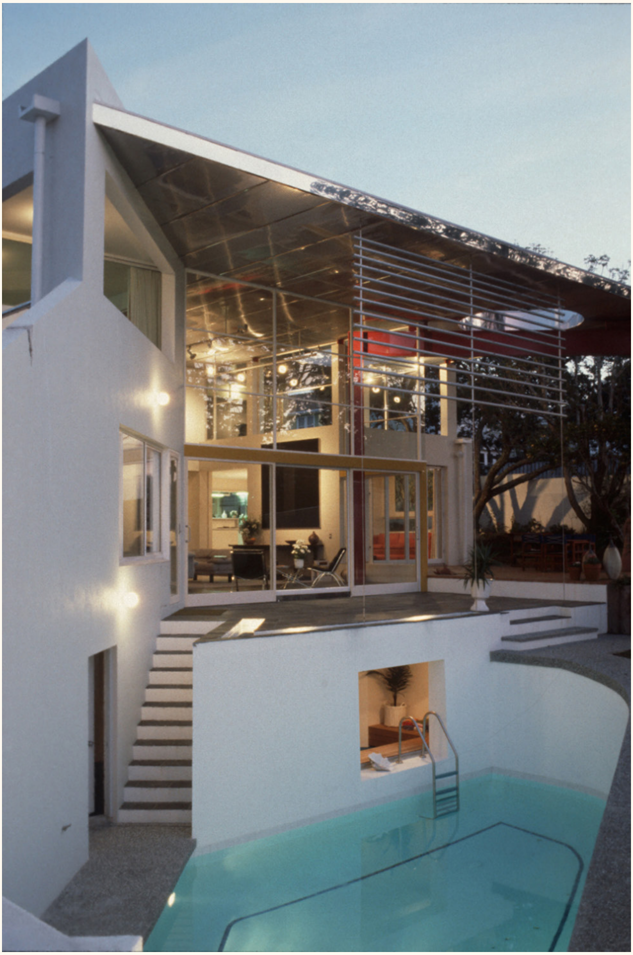
Well, I reckon it’s great – wouldn’t you? We see things very similarly, but Julie has a gentle subtlety of eye that’s often a notch ahead of mine. The lovely thing about doing architecture with a confidant is how you can say ‘Is the stair too long? Is the door too close? Does the design soar?’ and they pitch their answer perfectly.

Also, love helps. In general.

Do you bring work home?

We do, but it’s not usually work that’s related to the office. Julie does a lot with urban issues groups and that has to be done at home. I like reading and if I have to write something I write it at home. Sometimes I draw at home but I try not to, because you get invaded by it and you can’t go to sleep at night. It’s a damn good idea not to bring work home, but that said, we’ve done a lot of work – for instance on houses for ourselves – on the boat.

That’s another part of your life. How important has sailing and traveling been?



First Gibbs House (1983), Judge's Bay, Auckland. The photograph was used on the cover of *The Elegant Shed* (1984).

Very. But sailing round the world is no holiday. It's an intense, all-consuming job. A vivid, magnificent and painful experience. On the way, we have seen utterly unpredicted wonders, like the magnificent unsung architecture of the Pacific.

The architect and critic Giles Reid has lamented your absence from New Zealand for much of the 1990s. How do you see that time in terms of your career?

First, you need to know we have often had very little work. There's a big difference between getting noticed by the profession and winning prizes, and actually getting the next job. In 1990 we had just finished our house and Jenny and Alan Gibbs' second house [in Orakei]. We had very little to go on with and were also reeling from the destruction of Auckland in the Eighties. We thought 'Let's get the hell out of here'. We were adventurers. Sail straight out from Auckland for 24 hours and you'll catch the wondrous calm of a clean horizon.

We were never just sailors. We wrote and drew. In Hong Kong we worked in really big offices. Lived on the boat in a New Territories bay, got in the dinghy, changed under the yacht club into pressed clothes, caught the minibus and the underground, came out in towering Wan Chai, and went into the office.

But no charm there. To get a job at all was a feat. I was past 50, but the English boss was so wowed that I had a building on the cover of *AR* he couldn't help himself. Everyone is a worker-ant in Hong Kong, and the thunder of the city conceals the crappy architecture. I'd ring Julie on Friday night at 6.20 and say, 'Has anyone left your office yet? Let's go'. At North Point I'd step out of the train, wave, see her get in. It was my daily thrill.

What has changed in the way you have worked over the past 30 years? Is there any difference in what you're trying to do now?

Probably not. It's all about art as far as I'm concerned. It seems to me that when you've finished with all the functional tasks – the practicalities in which you can have a fine time – to touch people with a building is what it's about. To do that is very difficult. At Ronchamp I cried – how could you not? The thing which you'd known about, you'd thought about, and then you're in the presence of – what a building! I've thought my entire life that Le Corbusier was the greatest architect of the last hundred years. I've seen quite a few of his buildings, including his mother's house by the shores of Lake Geneva, as humble a building as any New Zealand architect would ever do, and I've enjoyed them all.

I suppose I'm a modernist, but I don't define myself. It doesn't help, because it forces you to behave in a way that's been predetermined by a set of conditions that someone else wrote. Other people can look and say they can see modernism there. It's a bit like the question of whether I'm a regionalist. It's not a concern of mine, really.

Should there be a project to discover a 'New Zealand architecture'?

There have been times when I was interested in that. It was certainly a project of The Group, who were my teachers, but it fairly rapidly became not a project in my mind. By the end of *The Elegant Shed* I wasn't particularly concerned whether there was a New Zealand architecture or not. I now think its slightly damaging to pursue it because it produces self-conscious stylised responses to situations. I think it's better for an architect simply to operate unselfconsciously and let someone else decide whether they distinguish something typically of the country.

You've long had a strong interest in the wider context that your buildings inhabit, which in most cases is the city. What do you have to say about New Zealand cities, and about Auckland in particular?

I've slowly realised that Auckland is a special case. It's tougher than the other New Zealand cities. I still love the place because I love the spirit of Auckland. I love the ease of it – the beach and the sea and the gentle stuff, and I even like the suburban spread of it, but as an urban scene it's dismal. The downtown was much better in the Fifties. A great number of Edwardian buildings have been pulled down, trams have disappeared, and if you look at old photographs of the main area it was a damn sight livelier than it is now. So I think the city should be the subject of most of our attention.

The profession of architecture must start taking some responsibility for the city. What happens all too often is that developers are blamed. The Council is regarded as weak, or town planning rules are inadequate, or whatever, but most of the buildings in town have been done by registered architects and they're not being done by the best architects. The best architects tend to be more dangerous. Developers tend to be scared of them because they're pushier and they stretch the limits. They're sometimes more expensive, too.

Could you talk briefly about the buildings you have designed that mean most to you?

To favour one building is to do a disservice to the rest, of course. And to their owners. A 1972 house in wood and Fibro for my father and his wife in Te Awamutu was the first sign I might have a future in architecture. Then I did half a dozen houses for a great client – my varsity friend Andy Begg.

Northcote Library gave me some cred in the public arena, and the Music School with Jack Manning helped. Public buildings are always a special pleasure to work on. Loyal clients like the Gibbs and Farmers lured us back to Auckland with the New Gallery and some big houses in the Nineties. Recently I've been working on big public planning and urban design projects with other architects and consultants. I think the work a group of us did for the Auckland Waterfront Advisory Group was good and publicly important, even though publishing our plans has been blocked by Ports of Auckland.

Are you tempted to teach again?

I'm not tempted to teach continuously. I don't mind doing it occasionally.

Well, you've done your share. You've done plenty.

I've done a bit.

Tony van Raat headed the Unitec School of Architecture for 15 years from 2002; in 2014 and 2016 he was the commissioner of the New Zealand exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Following page: Narrow Neck House
(2008), North Shore, Auckland.
Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

02

In 2008 not long after David Mitchell and Julie Stout had moved into a house they had designed at Narrow Neck, on Auckland's North Shore, John Walsh interviewed them for a book on architects' own houses. This excerpt is taken from that book, *Home Work* [Random House, 2008].

John Walsh: I remember asking you about your plans for this house years ago, David. You and Julie were living in your house in Freemans Bay / Ponsonby, one of the best New Zealand town houses of the last 20 years. You said you were going to do something quite different – something tough, not pretty, made of concrete, on the other side of the harbour.

David Mitchell: If you're going to shift, as an architect, you've got to make a substantial change. You can't do the same house again. But I was very nervous about the North Shore. All those blonde chicks in Takapuna and the guys in suits with no ties. What was the story, Julie?

Julie Stout: We had been looking for a site because we realised we needed a project after not having a boat.

DM: We sold the boat. We were desperate for some coast. We believed we had to get a bach like everybody else, by the sea.

JS: So we ransacked the coastline of greater Auckland.

DM: Waiheke, everywhere. Couldn't afford any of it.

JS: Julian Mitchell, David's son, saw the Narrow Neck site, and urged us to look. By chance, a little later Julian and David started designing a house two doors up the road. We drove over to look at the site, and I stood on this old garage to look at the view. I looked out and thought, 'My God,' and then I saw our bit of grass and I had an epiphany. Here, I could see the rest of my life playing out. So, I convinced David …

DM: To bid excessively.

Did you have to be persuaded away from Ponsonby, David?

DM: I was very anxious that Ponsonby was sufficiently long in my blood that I'd have trouble leaving, but I also knew from having travelled a lot that you don't actually miss places. You miss people. And I found that that was what happened when we came here – I didn't miss Ponsonby one jot. I discovered that what I'd come here for, which was essentially the beach and that piece of water through which every ship has to pass to get into Auckland, was terrifically rewarding, and the walk to the ferry was very pleasant, too, and the ferry ride.

Also, we thought we could house Julie's mother nearby, which wasn't easily done in Freemans Bay. We always had that in mind when we were looking for somewhere else.

So you found a site on the North Shore, by the beach, looking at Rangitoto, and when you came to design the house you didn't want to repeat yourselves.

JS: Although, having said that, we did spend a lot of time trying to repeat ourselves. For a year or so, we were still trying to replicate the Freemans Bay house in some way.

DM: I had another thing in my head – a brief moment in Paraguay in a bus, in 1973 or something. I looked out and saw a peasant farm house. There was a hip roof spanning two square rooms with an open space between them with a table and a kerosene lamp, and I thought, 'God, that's good'. I did a drawing of it through the bus window. I thought separating the living space from the dining space by a deck was a demanding but interesting thing to do. Julie would have none of the idea that we walk out into the cold to try and go over to the other room to watch TV and sit by the fire.

JS: It wasn't that so much. It was the shading of the dining space, and the house was going to be timber at that stage, and also David was insisting on this poky little bedroom that we went upstairs to …

DM: So we were in complete disagreement about a number of things.

Is that how you work together?

JS: One of us will put something up and the other one will say, 'Oh, that's interesting, let me work with that for a bit', or they'll say, 'That's ridiculous'.

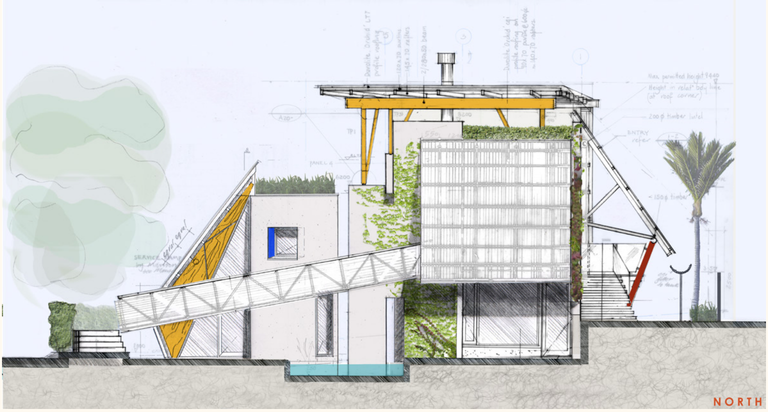
DM: If the pair of us is working together at some point we come to an agreement that the form seems to be heading a certain way. But we were having a lot of trouble with this. We realised we were playing back into memory.

JS: We weren't taking a big enough leap. We were looking at materials, though. After using pre-cast panels on a building at Unitec we became more interested in concrete as a more robust way of building than we were used to. That flicked us out of that other model, really, because it allowed us to create the ground floor flat for my mother.

DM: The question was, can you live upstairs? We decided to have a roof deck and to make it in concrete. We knew we had to step sideways from where we'd been. If you're stuck on something it's always because you're hanging on to something that you have to let go.

This is a very unusual house, especially for this part of Auckland. Devonport is just down the road, and it is cute to the point of being twee.

DM: We wouldn't have dared operate within the historic area. Actually, around here, it's a bit of a dog's breakfast, architecturally. I don't mind a bit of a dog's breakfast. We were aware we were bumping the scale fairly hard, but we also believe that densifying parts of the city, including the edges near the sea, is a good thing to do. Everybody wants to preserve what they've got, but there's a good case for people living closer together down near the beach. So there was a drive to develop the site to the maximum. We decided to put the studio on as well, and then to live in it while the house was


Duralite 'Orchid' LT7 profile roofing
120x70 purlins
145x70 rafters
2/280x50 beam
Duralite 'Orchid' cgi profile roofing on 90x70 purlins @ 600 c/c
140x70 rafters
Max. permitted height 9440
Height in relat. bdy line (at roof corner)
200ϕ timber lintel
ENTRY refer
150ϕ timber
TP1
PANEL 4
6200
8200
NORTH

North elevation of Narrow Neck House. Drawing by Mitchell Stout Architects built. ‘The Love Shack’, that was what it was on the drawings.

JS: The studio is a work space, but it’s also a place where people can come and stay without being caught up in the house.

DM: A different kind of generational house was possible. There are quite a lot of people for whom an arrangement like this might be good.

There’s no way you could come to this house and not think it’s an architect’s house.

DM: No, you’d have to have been an architect to do it. We’re happy about taking risks. Take the great big sloping ski ramps. The idea for them started when we were dealing with the normal things you deal with, like height in relation to boundary. We’d designed a sort of Stonehenge, now we had to wrap it. We didn’t have much height to play with anyway, and then we began putting things on the building – a bit of verandah at the front, and a bit of balustrade up on the top, and in the floor between us we didn’t particularly want to look at the neighbours. We realised we could take that great sheet of ice down the face of the house and do all three jobs in one hit. It’s not ‘just draw something’. I think ‘just draw something’ is dim-witted fantasy stuff. I don’t have any time for it.

This concrete house becomes something else at its edges, where wood supports plastic.

DM: You couldn’t use steel because the house is right by the sea. We knew we were going to have to use wood – we used fairly chunky wood because we had some pretty beefy bits of concrete around. It’s a belief of mine, maybe an obsession, that you should make things out of stuff around you, not out of a whole lot of fancy stuff from Europe, and I'm also drawn to the stuff they make factories out of, rather than the stuff they make houses out of. Stuff like concrete and plastic. Nothing has been done to the surface of the concrete in this house.

You're not big fans of decoration?

DM: There's nothing wrong with it, and ever since Herzog and de Meuron came along, it's rather important that you do do it, but I'm not too good at it. Julie is better at it.

Let's talk about what you can see from the top, the prospect that brought you here.

DM: Rangitoto is phenomenally present. I mean, it seems obvious, but it's no more obvious than Mt Fuji in Japan. It is immaculate and it is fantastic, and so we hooked the plan to align with it in the middle as you went up the stair. That's the only skewed manoeuvre in the whole business, I suppose, but it produced an immense amount of technical shuffling and struggle which made me wonder if it was necessary. Yet that slight skew in the plan and that shell-like stair unfolding as it goes up is probably the essential driving thing in the design.

JM: The island is almost like a sun dial. It charts the path of the sun through the year – in the middle of winter, the sun rises just in that right hand cup, the outer crater.

But in this house the view is not only gained from the top.

DM: In the studio there's a little window that's angled, and it looks to the lighthouse in the channel. When you're sitting in bed, if you don't pull the curtain across, you can just see the lighthouse winking at night. I've had as much pleasure from looking at that distant few square feet of sea as from all of the view from the top deck.

What do visitors make of the house?

DM: Some people say they think it's absolutely beautiful. A woman was saying that who lives in a brick-and-tile unit down the way. I wouldn't have imagined someone owning a house like that even wanting to have a look at this place, except out of curiosity about how on earth anyone could live in it. There were quite a lot of discussions in the street when it was being built. When we were living in the studio we'd see people arguing about where the front door might be.

Many of the interior spaces don't declare themselves as rooms, in the traditional manner.

JS: I think we do quite mobile spaces. There's very much a circuit around this house. You go down the ramp and you're off to the studio and then you go out the back door of the studio and you're round to the flat. It's a bit like a slot car set: we're all on it somewhere calling out 'Where are you?' and, 'I'm here', and 'Where's here?'

DM: The ramp is about getting to the beach. We had to have the ramp because we had to touch the closest point of the site to the beach and still feel as though we hadn't quite left the house.

Is there anything else you want to say about the house?

JS: To come back to your opening gambit, it's not a pretty house.

DM: In the sense that the Freemans Bay house was picturesque. There was an interesting thing said by the American architect

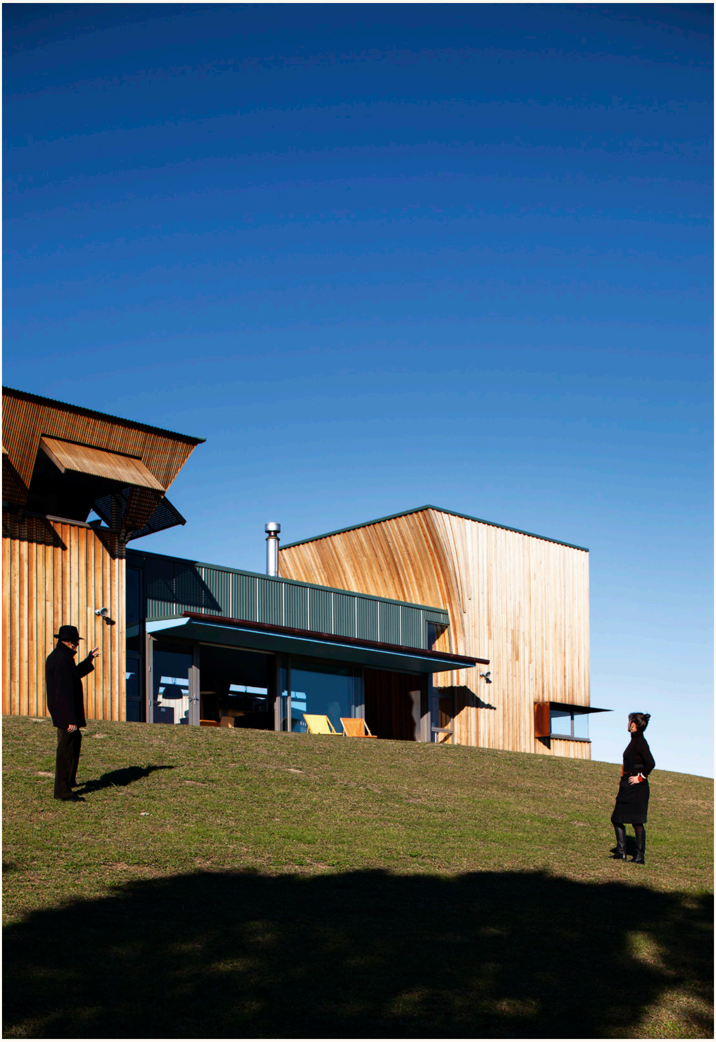
Charles Renfro which he came here. He said this was a hand-drawn house – the detailing is not the kind of detailing that you do on a computer, and I hadn't really ever thought of it like that. We've done houses on the computer but we've also done houses partly on the computer and partly hand drawn. It's quite hard to make one-off craft details on the computer. It's much easier to draw them by hand, and therefore perhaps the two techniques lead to different kinds of buildings.

By way, are you still boatless?

JS: Some friends saw our tragic plight and said please share half our boat.

DM: We did that before we got the house together, and it took the heat off terrifically. We went for our first sail and thought, 'Oh bugger the bach idea – why have a bach?'

John Walsh is the communications manager of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, and the author of several books on New Zealand architecture.



David Mitchell and Julie Stout
at the Waiheke Island House (2009).
Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

03

In 2014, David Mitchell led the creative team that produced the inaugural New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale. In this excerpt from the exhibition catalogue David discusses with John Walsh the proposition that, if anything distinguishes New Zealand's modern architecture, it is a Pacific provenance.

John Walsh: Rem Koolhaas's Biennale theme, 'Absorbing Modernity: 1914 to 2014', prompts exhibition creators to respond to the ubiquity and homogeneity of modern architecture. The suggestion seems to be that the location of architecture is becoming irrelevant. There's no escape from modernity.

David Mitchell: Koolhaas is generally right, of course. Anyone who travels notices that, more and more, things seem to be the same. However, the story of modernity in New Zealand is complicated. New Zealand architecture was very slow to move to modernism. For example, the neo-Classical Auckland War Memorial Museum dates from 1929, the same year as Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona

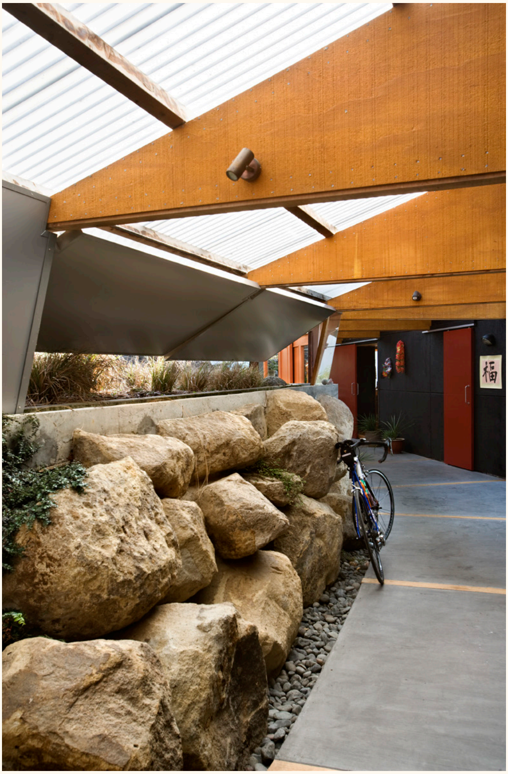
Pavilion. For much of last century we were carrying a lot of British imperial baggage. We've slowly shucked that off. Also, the relations between Māori and Europeans in New Zealand are now richer and far more interwoven than they were. Increasingly, we've become aware of the strain of architecture which spent 3,000 years travelling, like language, with the people who settled the Pacific and who arrived in New Zealand about 750 years ago. Their architecture was in their DNA.

The Pacific has a great architectural tradition, although hardly anyone honours it, and it has continued over the past century in South-east Asia and Japan. In New Zealand, we architects were unwittingly influenced by the Pacific tradition in the 1950s and '60s because we were so captivated by what the Japanese did. Now, I think, we consciously reference the Pacific tradition, which is essentially a post-and-beam and panel infill way of building that is thoroughly non-European.

What was happening in the country's architecture in the middle of last century, when British imperialism was expiring and the International Style was dominant?

Architects were self-consciously seeking 'New Zealandness' and finding it, ironically, in Japan and Scandinavia. I don't think we worry about that much anymore. We're more concerned with the language of architecture, and we're not too worried about where it comes from. At the same time, we're aware there's a Pacific tradition we can turn to if we want.

Even allowing for the post-colonial concern with national identity the mid-century interest in Japanese architecture in a Eurocentric Western outpost seems surprising.



Otoparae House (2005),
King Country.
Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

Following page: Detail
of the Waiheke House.
Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

It's very hard not to be interested in Japanese architecture if you're half an architect. When I started architecture school the Japanese were trying to work out how to absorb their traditions in the creation of new architecture. Architects like Kenzo Tange and Kunio Maekawa were making concrete buildings that looked, almost, as though they were made of wood. In New Zealand Peter Beaven, who had been to Japan and was captivated by its architecture, did exactly the same thing with the Lyttelton Road Tunnel Administration Building [1964] in Christchurch.

I don't think there has been a time in my life when Japanese architecture hasn't been interesting. Because Japanese culture allows a kind of single-mindedness that's not easily tolerated in New Zealand, Japanese architects can be very clear in their intentions. There are heroic qualities to Japanese architecture that have generally been absent in New Zealand.

The pragmatic tradition is very strong among New Zealand architects. Showing how you make buildings is a big thing here, and the explicitness of making is also a defining characteristic of Pacific architecture. The simplest buildings in the Pacific, which are made of logs or bamboo and lashing, are very clear in their assembly. Of course, legibility was also important to the New Brutalists in Britain, and you can see their influence in the work of Sir Miles Warren in Christchurch in the 1960s. Miles made a great play of how he put his buildings together, articulating every joint, which is a fabricator's way of looking at architecture.

Consciousness of Pacific architecture is stronger in some parts of New Zealand than others?

It's stronger in the north than it is in the south, that is, the closer you get to the Pacific Islands. In Auckland, over the past 40 years, there is a lineage of architects who have been interested in a Pacific way of architecture. People will say the climate is easy in Auckland and you can have roofed verandas and a lighter architecture. But I think architecture is far more influenced by habit than physical function. Functionalism is a cultural idea. People do things because architecture is language and they carry it and they hang on to it as long as they can, just as the Māori brought Pacific ways of building, and just as European New Zealanders hung on to British patterns.

I think there's a Pacific quality to many aspects of New Zealand's life. You can see it in the way we use our weekends, for example, and in our relatively confident relationship with the natural world. The ocean is out there, and most of us are not very far from it, and it's a long, long way to anywhere else. Regardless of the state of information technology, a sense of remoteness or isolation is built into people.

Down at the end of the world, things can seem ephemeral and transient, as fragile and impermanent as much Pacific architecture.

There are some ironies in this, and one of them is that timber houses fared better than brick houses in the recent earthquakes in Christchurch. This is a pattern in many New Zealand disasters. I live in a three-storey house made of precast concrete and I can tell you that when we had a small earthquake last year, and I happened to be lying on my bed, my mind sprang to the glued bolts in the walls that help hold the concrete floors up. After the Christchurch earthquakes flexibility and resilience became compelling goals in building.

The desire to make resilient buildings, or buildings that are more resilient than they were, will last some time, at least until the next seismic theory comes along. Permanence is an important issue. Most people imagine their house to be more permanent than them, and there are probably good psychological reasons for wanting to believe this. One of the results of impermanence is an absence of record. This perhaps is why Pacific architecture has been given little attention. Most of it has either rotted or been blown away or eaten by insects. This happens to most timber architecture, with notable exceptions like some of the major shrines in Japan which have been rebuilt in their original image for hundreds of years.

You’re a sailor and you’ve sailed in the Pacific. How did that experience affect you?

It had a big influence on me. Mike Austin had long spoken about Pacific architecture and I was aware of it, and I knew about the anthropologists who had tracked people across the Pacific. But in 1988 Julie Stout and I sailed to the Pacific Islands that are close to us – Tonga and Fiji and Vanuatu and New Caledonia – and we saw and went into buildings that are Pacific buildings, made of sticks and thatch. We liked them, they were architecturally interesting to us. It was intriguing to find, for example, that the Melanesians, in Fiji and Vanuatu, kept the sun out – their houses are really dark – whereas the Polynesians, in Samoa and Tonga, built more open pavilions of the fale kind.

The second time we went away, for nearly all of the 1990s, we sailed to many more islands. Some of them were big islands, like Borneo and the Philippines, where large numbers of people live in fragile bamboo and timber houses. The Pacific is a richer architectural area than we'd imagined. You can go and look at houses that are built in much the same way across most of the Pacific Islands – traditional houses – and reflect that there are ancient metal engravings showing houses very like these, that were built long ago. The engravings last, the buildings decay.

The Pacific tradition extended a long way. South-east Asia has wonderful saddle-roofed houses. We saw them on Indonesian islands like Sumatra and Sulawesi. These houses are obviously genetically related. What's fundamental to this architecture is the steep-roofed, thatched, panel-and-beam way of building.

Can you connect this tradition to modern-era architecture in New Zealand? Can you identify the elements of a fusion architecture?

I know it's difficult, and perhaps dangerous, to draw lines, but a sort of crossing-over happened early in European settlement. Rangiatea church [Otaki, 1851] was like a Māori meeting house and also like an English church. A century later, Richard Toy's All Saints church [Auckland, 1959] looks like a meeting house. John Scott's drawings show that Futuna Chapel [Wellington, 1961] was a transformation of church and meeting house forms. At a certain point, the influences on people are so complex that you can't pin them down easily.

Was the house in Freemans Bay [1990], which Julie Stout and you designed for yourselves, influenced by your journeys through the Pacific Islands?

Oh yes! Julie and I designed the original version of that house when we were on our boat in Fiji in 1988. That version was extremely open. It had a roll-over roof and a mezzanine on poles because we'd become aware of this Pacific way of doing things. We got back and saw a site with two buildings overlooking it at almost point-blank range on the side boundaries and realised our design was completely hopeless. The site was in an inner-city neighbourhood of nineteenth century houses which were in fact wooden modifications of European terraced housing, with gaps between houses, introduced so that fire didn't jump across.

In the 1960s New Zealand architects started to join houses together again. That didn't really happen until after Sir Miles Warren designed the Dorset Street Flats in Christchurch [1957]. Twenty years later, Marshall Cook designed some very influential town-houses in Auckland. And I suppose Julie and I saw the Freemans Bay House within those historic frameworks, once we'd got rid of our ridiculously romantic notion of what a Pacific house might be in Auckland. The Group Architects also influenced Julie and me, as they influenced, directly or indirectly, many Auckland architects. There was a clear structure and intellectual rigour in much of the Group's work, which still appeals.

Pacific architecture is timber architecture. Are you a timber architect?

Initially I was, because generally timber is cheaper. In the 1960s when a house was designed for a plumber or school teacher on a government loan, with one bathroom and two bedrooms in 80 square metres, then it was made of wood. Later, I designed bigger buildings for much richer people, with different experiences of the world, who expected different kinds of buildings – more permanent buildings. These buildings tended to be made out of stuff that can last a long time – concrete and reinforced blockwork and steel.

Koolhaas's theme, 'Absorbing modernity', must resonate with you, because this is what you must have been doing over the course of a long career.

I grew up as a confirmed modernist. I've been influenced by so many things, and after about 50 years it's pretty hard to remember what they all were. I loved everything Le Corbusier built, and I still do. That kind of influence doesn't evaporate. You study all those buildings, you visit dozens of them, but their impression becomes overlaid by other architecture. Pacific architecture was probably, in my case, an overlay. I wasn't thinking about it when I was young. I was perhaps thinking about it when I was 40, and since then it has become more interesting to me as internationalisation or globalisation has become more pronounced.

Has the Pacific itself become more interesting to you?

I have vivid memories of sailing big distances to small islands and finding wonderful people who couldn't understand what an architect does. I remember trying to explain the job to someone on a little island off the tail end of Papua New Guinea. This man had built three houses and I'd never built any. There was just a way of doing it, to him For most people in New Zealand there's just a vernacular way of building, too. It's not my way, I'm aware of that.

The issue of absorption raises the question of resistance. Architects have always had to reconcile universal principles with local circumstances and local tastes. How far should an architect float with the current flow?

I think your architectural responses have to be authentic in terms of your experience. That's the most important issue – does it ring true? The difficulty with architectural fashions is that they are instantly entrancing but often shallow. They enable you to step into the moment but perhaps not far into anything else. There's a kind of authenticity, or something that rings true to your experiences, that is about as much as you can hope for. That, and the experiences of your clients. You're constantly looking into your clients to find something that distinguishes them from other people. You're hunting for the things that might give you a breakthrough.

I don't have any belief that I'm running any kind of moral cause in any of this. If someone comes along and says they want a building made of bricks, I'll design them a building made of bricks. Architects will do damn near anything. I'm just looking for a chance to do something that hooks me.

Is the lightweight Pacific tradition compatible with urbanism?

I think so, but it might be a different kind of urbanism. There are some intensely dense areas of the world built in lightweight construction. One thinks of the outskirts of Manila and other places in South-east Asia where people build on poles in the sea, which is cheaper than anything else they can do because they don't own land. Fire used to be the problem with timber structures but fire-fighting tools such as sprinklers have got better. Timber construction and density are no longer incompatible. We can now design multi-storey timber buildings because we think we can stop the fire before it gets far into the wood.

You would think that Auckland, a city of harbours and inlets and beaches, would be, in its way, as suited for water-borne habitation as Venice.

I think it would be, and it's a shame we don't have more of it. We find it impossible to declaim. Letting the sea in costs money, and it only gives you water, as financiers see it. It doesn't give you a mortgageable asset. I believe the Tank Farm area on the Auckland waterfront should have some major declamations. Tongues of the sea should reach in to Victoria Park, which once was harbour.

Do you think you might be willing a Pacific architecture into being?

Well, advocating for its influence, anyway. There are no guarantees that it is a tradition that will continue, but I hope it does. It's not entirely ours, that's the other enriching aspect of it, just as European architecture doesn't belong only to Europe.

You talk about the Pacific gaze. A sea view is a prized asset anywhere, but there is something melancholy about the permanent contemplation of the horizon.

We sometimes have trouble designing enough windows for houses that have a terrific sea view, because architecture is not made out of a view. It's concerned with the relationship between you and the view, and with interior space, which is what the view can endanger. One result of this is that architects have increasingly tried to make on coastal sites an alternative world that is contained. For example, on Matarangi beach on the Coromandel Peninsula, we designed a house [Matarangi House, 2005] with a courtyard on the landward

side, and now along the way are more courtyards, some more enclosed than ours, and in some ways more useful. What's happening is an architectural conversation about how you live in this type of coastal place, which has shifted the emphasis from the view to more complex issues.

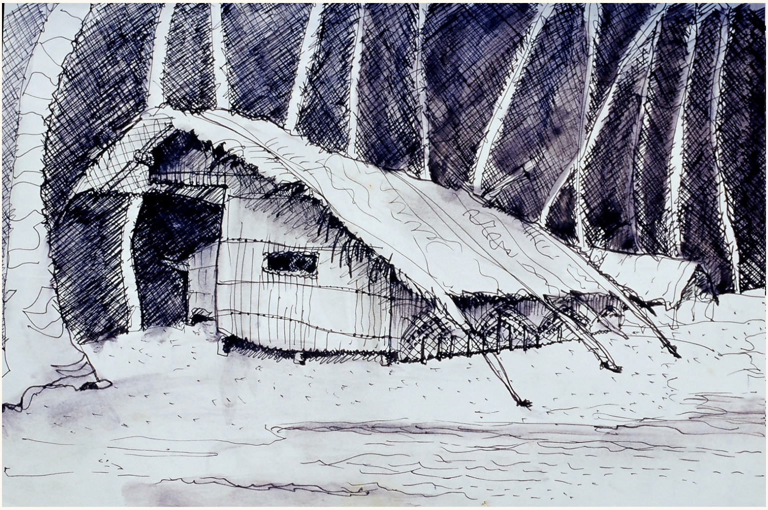
Do you see yourself as a Pacific architect?

I certainly see myself as an architect from the South Pacific. I see myself as a New Zealand architect, no question. I don't think that living here, and all the influences from Le Corbusier to sailing a boat, has made me the same as a European architect. I would be a bit uncomfortable trying to operate in Italy, and in most European cities, to be honest.

Are you optimistic about New Zealand architecture?

Of course. It's hard to impress me, though. This might just happen to everybody as they get older. Young architects are always eager to be first out of the blocks. I don't see particular value in that anymore, and I do see a lot of boring repetition. But, hell, talent is born every day.

Previous page: Matarangi House (2006), Coromandel. Photograph: Patrick Reynolds



Leo’s House, Nimoa Island, Louisiade archipelago, Papua New Guinea. Drawing by David Mitchell, 1993

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