UNFINISHED LANDSCAPES

How can an understanding of the New Zealand landscape as ‘unfinished’ inform New Zealand’s residential architecture in the 21st century?

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture with Creative Practice Component, the University of Auckland, New Zealand, 2018.
“In 2014, a cyclone cleared the forest, and the design team was charged with repairing and refinishing the house...

Updates were made to the buildings in anticipation of the site’s shifting landscape, which will become a forest again over time.”

*Architecture Record* on Bach With Two Roofs.

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"This is about architecture, not as a frozen expression in time, but as an evolving expression of life. A project with environmental considerations at heart and the stewardship of one of our depleting resources, the forest."²

World Architecture Festival citation for Bach With Two Roofs winning 2017 World Villa of the Year

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Being able to link back through the laboratories of Professors Andrew Barrie, Hidetoshi Ohno, Fumihiko Maki, Kenzo Tange, Kunio Maekawa to Le Corbusier feels quite special from New Zealand’s isolated position in the South Pacific. Acknowledgements of course start with the wonderful advice and skills of Andrew Barrie (supervisor) and Julia Gatley (co-supervisor) for encouraging a return to academic research.

Thankyou to Andrew Irving and ISA for the time, resources, and co-production of ISA work recognised in the signed Co-Production Form included in the Copyright, Approvals and Co-Production section of this thesis.

The work and research of architects who both practice and research have been enormously useful in establishing the methodology required to undertake this research, and link together what are often divergent disciplines in New Zealand. In particular:

Marlon Blackwell, of Marlon Blackwell Architects and the Fay Jones School of Architecture + Design at the University of Arkansas.

Peter Elliott, of Peter Elliott Architects and Monash University.

Mamoyo Kajjima, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of Atelier Bow-Wow and University of Tsukuba and Tokyo Institute of Technology respectively.

Koh Kitayama, of Koh Kitiyama + architecture WORKSHOP and Yokohama National University.

Peter Rich, of Peter Rich Architects, the 2015 RIBA International Fellowship recipient.

Dave Strachan, of SGA and Auckland’s Unitec School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture.

And Chris Barton, ISA and the 2017 and 2018 AD1 Ch-ch-ch-changes Masters Students for establishing a practice and research component all of our own.

Other advice, encouragement or sharing of ideas has been invaluable, including:

Owners of ISA projects
Clarke family
HMOA
Woo Min Lee
Sarosh Mulla
Aaron Paterson
Jon Rennie
John Storey
RTA Studio

But most of all my family, Genevieve, Bonita, Scarlett and Coco Plum who have put up with my own lack of lawn mowing.
“the nicest thing about living with the elegant inconveniences of the 19th century would have been that the motor-mower had not yet been invented.”

Eric Lee-Johnstone

Figure iii: Lawnmower.
Drawing by Jeremy Smith

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ABSTRACT

New Zealand originally was almost exclusively a forested landscape. However, as the last inhabitable place on earth to be inhabited, and with less than a quarter of its forests now remaining, it is also one of the world’s most rapidly formed and contemporary landscapes. The relationship of New Zealand architecture to landscape follows the successional theories brought by both Polynesians and Europeans, who, rather than inhabiting the forest, first cut and then built inside clearings and formed new landscapes. There architecture has stayed, repeatedly finishing the landscape, and notionally mowing a lawn around buildings, so they do not need to change. But deforestation often failed, and this thesis examines those landscapes where clearings were not controlled and are returning to the wild.

With New Zealand so recently inhabited, these failed, and “unfinished” landscapes can ultimately regress from clearing to a near-original forest. They have become critical to our indigenous ecosystems and increasingly attract holiday houses as the forests return. Architecture might contribute to conservation and safeguard these regressing landscapes, but it requires a different and iterative architectural model. This thesis suggests you cannot both continue building in clearings and allow a near-original forest to grow, not if you want to maintain a fit between architecture and landscape. In these shifting landscapes, we need to change approach from repeatedly finishing the landscape to iteratively finishing buildings.

This thesis examines precedents for change from Tokyo’s fast-changing and ‘forest-like’ city landscape, and from the author’s practice, and evaluates creative practice against key change versus time relationships. Unlike succession, regression is broadly predictable and generates opportunities for pre-emptive and reactive change on many different timescales. Change can be generational, maintenance or behavioral-led, be it in multi-year increments, yearly, seasonally, monthly, weekly, daily, or simply as often as possible. By knowing where to look, and how to position and prepare, buildings in shifting landscapes can be prompted to change as iteratively as possible, and remain unfinished like the landscape.

The answer is not about form, for every landscape and building is unique. Instead, buildings are encouraged to participate with shifting landscapes to maintain a fit, what this thesis terms “Soft Architecture.” Being soft leads to the unique situation of buildings eventually inhabiting near-original landscape, something unique to New Zealand, given its contemporary but unfinished landscapes. But with forests providing a metaphor for cities, the lessons extend to urban landscapes where New Zealand continues to build as it does in clearings. This thesis shows if we stop mowing the lawn around New Zealand architecture, buildings must become soft; being finished is finished.

Figure iv: Near-original New Zealand beech forest
Photograph Jeremy Smith
INTRODUCTION

SCHOLARLY MOTIVATIONS, AIMS, OBJECTIVES

The idea of exploring opportunities for architecture in unfinished landscapes developed from the experience of working in many different New Zealand landscapes over fifteen years. My practice, Irving Smith Architects, is based in Nelson, a provincial city surrounded by three national parks. Subsequently, I have regularly designed houses for unpopulated landscapes, including former farmlands abandoned after becoming uneconomic and visibly returning to native bush. These buildings established a fit with landscape and were highly acclaimed and published both within New Zealand and internationally.4

In 2007, I inherited a painting by Eric Lee-Johnstone, where the New Zealand landscape is recorded as unfinished. This idea sparked a review of my current and past projects in these landscapes, which suggested that my buildings relied on clearings rather than growing forests to establish a fit to the landscape. Placing buildings into a landscape that will not stay the same raises concerns for architecture, yet the published record noticeably excluded reference to these failed landscapes, focusing instead on the formation of new landscapes. Research into the extent of unfinished landscapes showed they played a vital role in conserving New Zealand’s unique ecosystems and habitats. A return to academic research after a 14 year hiatus and while running a growing practice with a young family was not easy, but the opportunity to critique and improve the practice of architecture in these shifting landscapes was too valuable to pass by.

The return has been beneficial to practice, as the list of accolades I have received during my thesis enrolment shows.5

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4 Before starting this thesis I had already won multiple national architecture awards in public and residential categories, more than twenty NZIA awards, New Zealand’s top timber design awards, had presented as a finalist at the World Architecture Festival in Barcelona, been a NZIA juror at New Zealand award level, lectured at the NZIA national conference, and been awarded Victoria University of Wellington’s Centennial Medal for post graduate achievement.

5 Between 2012 and 2018 my individual work received a further fifteen NZIA Architecture awards, including a finalist nomination for the New Zealand Architectural Medal (highest award in New Zealand architecture), two New Zealand Architecture Awards for Public Architecture, and a New Zealand Architecture Award for Alterations and Additions for the post-cyclone refinishing of Bach With Two Roofs which is to be awarded shortly after this thesis’ submission date. The refinishing of Bach With Two Roofs forms a significant part of this thesis’ creative practice component, and this also won 2017 World Villa of the Year (or House In The Landscape) at the World Architecture Festival in Berlin. In this time, I have also been highly commended at the World Architecture Festival in Singapore 2015 and a finalist in Singapore in 2013, 2014, represented New Zealand at the 2015 and 2018 Prague International Architecture Festivals, received a nomination for the German Architecture Prize, was awarded at the 2018 International Design Awards in America, as well as winning Best Awards, Property Council, Timber Design and magazine awards. I also judged the NZIA New Zealand Architecture Awards in 2015, at World Architecture Festivals in Singapore 2015, Berlin 2017, and Amsterdam 2018, and presented at the University of Auckland’s Fast Forward lecture series in 2017, and the 2014 NZIA Design Series. I have also written articles for Architecture New Zealand, co-authored a paper on the Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes course taught with Chris Barton at the 2018 Architectural Design Research conference in Sydney, and had work published in well over 100 publications, offSET Shed House has been published in over 30 countries on its own.
**Figure v:** Eric Lee-Johnstone’s painting Mahurangi 1945.
Photograph by Jeremy Smith
THESIS SCOPE / CONSTRAINTS

This thesis does not attempt to be an exhaustive study of the relationships between New Zealand architecture and landscape. Discussions focus on understanding the architectural implications of New Zealand's landscape being left 'unfinished' and 'shifting' without control as new forests regrow. Subsequently, this thesis does not investigate the role of either architecture or landscape change in European or Maori cultures generally, nor opportunities for architecture in plantation landscapes or even for structures to withstand falling trees. Instead with the majority of regressive landscapes in isolated locations, the methodology focuses on deriving a new model for residential architecture that prepares for the shift that unfinished landscapes will undergo.

The adventures of my Bach With Two Roofs project through a cyclone mid thesis and subsequent 'refinishing', presents a practical example of not just the need to shift models in unfinished landscapes, but physically what this new model might require.
Figure vi: Bach With Two Roofs precyclone 2008.
Photograph by Paul McCredie
TERMINOLOGY

Key terminology critical to the definition of scope and understanding within this research is outlined below, and defined in more detail in the literature review. The definition of landscape is inherently contestable, so terms like ‘natural’ or ‘native’ are avoided, and the focus is placed on originality and control.

Original / Wild / Non-original landscape
The original landscape becomes non-original landscape once inhabited. “There can” as Richard Hartshorne defines, “be only one landscape in any place: if man has not been there...; if man has entered the scene, the natural [or original] landscape is forever lost”6 (Section 1.1.1). But the space between the original and non-original landscape is not black and white. Hartshorne teases apart original and non-original landscape, through the control that inhabitation places on the landscape. Wild landscape is a grey area, it is not original, yet it is not simply non-original either. It has “been altered but not controlled by man”7 and can shift without inhabitation’s control to become near-original (Section 1.1.2).

Shifting / Changing Landscapes
When landscapes are not controlled, they shift of their own accord rather than change through inhabitation. Georges Descombes illustrates in wild landscapes “relationships cannot be precisely defined since everything is in a perpetual state of partial recovery and ruination”8 (Section 1.1.3).

Regression / Succession
The term succession describes the layers of change made to the landscape, where through “a succession of these landscapes... man express[es] his place in nature as a distinct agent of modification.”9 Landscape regression is distinct from succession by reversing the direction of change and shifting towards, rather than away from, original landscape. The literature positions landscape regression within succession by correcting any failure or regression of the landscape with further successional change. Without further change, wild landscapes can under the right conditions regress to a near-original landscape (Section 1.1.3).

Unfinished / Finished
A landscape constructed under succession can be described as finished upon completion. However when it fails or is only “partly formed”10 the landscape can be described as unfinished. Similarly, a building can be described as finished in relation to the landscape when it achieves a fit with the landscape, and unfinished when it does not (Section 1.2.4, Section1.4.1).

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7 Ibid,
Figure vii: Bach With Two Roofs the day after the cyclone, 2014.
Photograph by the owners
GENERAL INTRODUCTION / RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research question of this thesis is how can an understanding of the New Zealand landscape as ‘unfinished’ inform New Zealand’s residential architecture in the 21st century?

This thesis’ 5 chapters break this key question into the following sub-questions;

- What can be learnt from the existing literature relating to this topic?
- What can be learnt from existing design precedents exploring related ideas?
- To what extent were these lines of enquiry already embedded in my design practice?
- How might a new architectural methodology be established for these landscapes?
- How can my current design practice extend and exploit this thinking, both in rural and city landscapes?

Architecture in New Zealand has developed in clearings and remains in clearings through the way it is taught and legislated. The identification of a significant portion of New Zealand’s landscape as unfinished, shifting without the control exerted by inhabitation, and regressing to regrow new forest, presents an opportunity for the architectural profession to contribute to the conservation of unique ecosystems and habitats, but doing so requires a different architectural approach. This thesis investigates this opportunity, specifically with regard to relationships of change and time in relation to regressive rather than successional landscapes, both in terms of buildings as a whole and their elemental makeup.

This thesis aims to establish a methodology where buildings can maintain their fit with the landscape as the clearing regresses to a near-original forest. Sou Fujimoto and Florian Idenburg might critique “context” as just “one of many inspirations”, and question “architecture that solely relies on context to legitimize itself”.11 This thesis explores the relationship between architecture and landscape further, for architecture in New Zealand is yet to establish a fit with its forested landscape.

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Figure viii: Bach With Two Roofs after the cleanup, 2014.
Photograph by Jeremy Smith
METHODOLOGY / WRITING ON DESIGN RESEARCH

This thesis is undertaken with a creative architectural practice component, utilizing disciplinary methods for knowledge generation, analysis and reflection. The creative components illustrate theories but also develop new opportunities through text, graphs, models, sketches, drawings, prototypes, renders, diagrams, photographs, and ultimately, full-scale architecture.

It is no mistake the creative practice component utilizes both notional and constructed projects; concurrently undertaking practice and academic research allow each to inform the other. As the Acknowledgements section notes, architects who have both practice and academic research roles have been enormously useful in establishing the methodology required to undertake this research and link together what are often divergent disciplines in New Zealand. My projects undertaken many years before the thesis contribute, as do others from the thesis enrolment period. The thesis introduces more projects as the research continues, proof, as Phillip Morrison asserts, that "Understanding grows out of experience".12 Time is important to creative practice, and as Atelier Bow-Wow assert, this type of research "cannot be accomplished in a single project".13 Juhani Pallasmaa, whose writing is integral to understanding relationships between change and time in the precedents section, agrees. He suggests combining research and practice establishes "a dialectical tension between theory and design practice instead of a casual interdependence."14 Research affects practice, and practice affects research.

The approach follows research on creative practice by Richard Blythe in Jules Moloney et al’s Perspectives on Architectural Design Research,15 and Blythe and Leon Van Shaik, Jonathan Hill and Jane Rendell in Murray Fraser’s Design Research in Architecture: An Overview,16 which marry various design research methods from the work of some of those who are both researchers and practitioners. Within this broad field, Peter Downton and Van Schaik’s drawing from Rockmore’s epistemologically viewpoint where knowledge is created rather than discovered as objective truth is particularly influential in defining this thesis’ design research methodology. This idea is the basis of the successional theories presented in the literature review, where architecture results from shared understandings rather than social isolation,17 which has particular reference to New Zealand given its geographic and historical isolation. Epistemological discussions are as much process as an outcome. Rarely is there a single creative research path to be followed, for “designing is a way of inquiring, a way of providing knowing and knowledge; this means it is a way of researching”.18 The methodology is, therefore, a process of discovery, reflection, analysis, and improvement, or according to Atelier Bow-Wow, “transductive”.19

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19 Atorie, Bow-Wow from Post Bubble City, 9.
Figure ix: Bach With Two Roofs, 2017.
Photograph by Patrick Reynolds
Blythe’s advice to “ground the work of the practice within the community of the practitioner”\textsuperscript{20} is instrumental in narrowing this thesis to fields specifically of interest to my practice. The characterisation of a dynamic reflection model where the past is not fixed, but remains in flux, and becomes altered by each new project whether notional or real,\textsuperscript{21} parallels Fraser’s “two-fold movement”\textsuperscript{22} and helps establish the structure to this thesis’ creative practice components.

The methodology is therefore based on the practice of architecture being central to the development of architectural knowledge. The process includes the critical examination of theory and architectural works, and “both doing and reflexive”\textsuperscript{23} analysis of design work from the thesis period, but also work prior and in current practice. The six year, part-time enrolment period has been beneficial in allowing time to build and then change buildings, which is critical to answering the research question. I undertook creative continually through the thesis registration, and the thesis includes interpretive modelling of theoretical and notional design studies, constructed projects, exhibitions at the 2015 and 2018 Prague International Architecture Festivals, and work from the 2017 and 2018 Masters of Architecture (Professional) iterative design teaching program at The University of Auckland in collaboration with Chris Barton. The graphical representation of change against time, starts in the literature review and continues through the precedent buildings, case studies and design studies, and takes the creative research process outside purely architectural grounds. The process draws from James Corner’s placement of landscape urbanism into a reflexive methodology,\textsuperscript{24} with “field diagrams or maps describing the play of these forces... particularly useful instruments in furthering an understanding of... events and processes”\textsuperscript{25}. In this way, as Downton asserts, making becomes a “way of knowing”.\textsuperscript{26}

The 2015 Prague exhibition provides a reflecting point midway through the thesis and divides the creative design component into case studies of work constructed before 2015, and design studies (both notional and real) since that time. The exhibition followed the cyclone damage to Bach With Two Roofs but predated the building’s subsequent refinishing as part of Chapter 4’s design studies. I was the design director for all the practice work, and both case studies and design studies contribute to the creative practice component of this thesis. Case studies undertaken before the thesis enrolment period are excluded from the creative practice component, and some design studies are being, or are still to be constructed; Bach With Two Roofs spans the entire thesis enrolment period. A breakdown of projects is included in the introduction to Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{20} Blythe, “Ra 88: Knowledge and Design Practice Research,” 69.
\textsuperscript{22} Fraser, Design Research in Architecture : An Overview, 217.
\textsuperscript{23} Downton, Design Research, 98.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{26} Downton, Design Research, 98.
Figure x: Bach With Two Roofs in near-original landscape.
Drawing by Jeremy Smith over photograph by Patrick Reynolds
THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis comprises five chapters:

**Chapter 1 : Literature Review – “Theoretical Grounding”**

This chapter references current and historical theories of the landscape and introduces the terminology used within this thesis. The review includes placing the notions of landscape succession and regression specifically in relation to New Zealand's unfinished landscapes and identify a gap in the architectural literature. This chapter shows that the notion of developing architecture within landscape regression runs counter to both historical and current theory within New Zealand and global architecture. It presents representative building and landscape typologies to study regressive landscapes as a theoretical grounding to research in unfinished landscapes.

**Chapter 2 : Precedent Studies – “Changing Models”**

By reviewing precedents in the national and international published record, this chapter explores opportunities for new architectural models in New Zealand’s unfinished landscapes. I have visited most of the precedent buildings and analysed them to determine failings in the successional architectural processes currently in place, and compare potential models through graphic analysis to establish the opportunity to change methodologies. Four sections of text develop ideas for ‘finding’, ‘generating’, predicting’ and ‘preparing’ opportunities for buildings to change in relation to time, through precedents for temporal, adaptable, participating and unfinished models.

**Chapter 3 : Case Studies – “Finished Practice”**

This chapter reviews and graphically analyses my work before and concurrent with the first half of the thesis enrolment period. Reviewing case study buildings, including pre-cyclone Bach With Two Roofs, in relation to the key ideas formulated from the precedent studies questions if the key ideas of finding, generating, predicting and preparing opportunities for change are already apparent in my recent practice? Or do the demands of iteratively refinishing buildings mean past practice is finished? This introduces the notion of architecture being soft.

**Chapter 4 : Design Studies – “Unfinished Practice”**

This chapter develops and graphically analyses design studies (both theoretical and real) in relation to the precedent buildings and the review of my case study buildings. This includes Bach With Two Roofs, where a cyclone on April 21, 2014, caused three out of four trees to fall and damaged the buildings. Following repairs, I designed an alteration to refinish Bach With Two Roofs to its new post-cyclone landscape which was constructed and highlights a shift in models. I then notionally redesigned Bach With Two Roofs as Bach Without Roofs to develop *Soft Architecture* as a new architectural model for unfinished landscapes.

**Chapter 5 : Conclusion – “Soft Architecture”**

The concluding chapter reflects on the opportunity for *Soft Architecture* in New Zealand’s unfinished landscapes and prompts the testing of future practice in urban landscapes. The findings of design studios run with masters students at the University of Auckland and a follow up exhibition at the 2018 Prague International Architecture Festival, suggest areas for further research and ongoing iterative practice.
THE IMPORTANCE OF JAPANESE PRECEDENTS

While architectural precedents for building in New Zealand’s forests exist, their approach follows a successional methodology. Precedent approaches for change are predominantly found offshore, notably from American Wendell Berry and Swede Sverre Fehn in relation to inhabiting landscape, and from Tokyo in relation to time. Berry’s precedents relate to forests, Fehn’s to latent settings in the landscape, and parallels for both can be found in New Zealand’s unfinished landscapes. Comparison from city landscape is more theoretical and derives from what Florian Idenburg asserts is Tokyo’s “fundamental” and “systematic quest for progress – a perpetual, almost messianic, pursuit of the new”.27 With progress comes change, a “series of continuous flows” with an approach to change that means buildings are more regularly “adapted, developed, re-interpreted, and modified”.28 New Zealand buildings, by comparison, have stayed more or less in their clearing in the forest. Should contemporary Japanese architects find themselves in a clearing in a New Zealand forest, they might approach the question of change differently. “Influences”, as Idenburg asserts, “can come from anywhere.”29

Gunter Nitschke’s assertion of “time [being...] most valuable to people living in a large country with relatively few people”30 is applicable to New Zealand. Space, however, “is most appreciated by people living in a small country with a relatively large population”31 like Japan. Be it individual building elements for making a change during the day, or “daring schemes... for the creation of artificial land”,32 change, as Blaine Bromwell asserts, “resonates throughout Japanese art and architecture”33. Their landscapes, as Tom Heneghan illustrates, may be more “manicured”34 than New Zealand’s, but where the landscape cannot be controlled, they respond with an “experimental quickness”35 that Stan Allen and Idenburg link to Tokyo’s rise to becoming “the most populated urban conglomeration in the developed world”.36 There is no time or space for “a building’s elegant longevity”,37 as Heneghan sees in New Zealand, and even Japan’s most treasured buildings, like Ise Shrine, regularly undergo change.

Fumihiko Maki describes Tokyo as “reverting to a forest”,38 and this city changes with the speed of New Zealand’s regenerating forests. The techniques used to deal with this by Japanese architects provide a useful resource. So much so, I made field trips to Tokyo in November 2016 and January 2018 to experience and draw precedent from key Japanese buildings.

28 Ibid,68.
29 Ibid,73.
31 Ibid,35.
32 Ibid,
37 Heneghan, "Not as We Know It," 112.
PERSONAL PRACTICE

As discussed in the Methodology section above, this thesis includes both notional buildings and real buildings from my personal practice. Real projects have constraints, like budgets and timelines, which do not necessarily align with the academic questioning of specific relationships relating to this thesis’ research. They do, however, provide an opportunity to draw on specific parts of a project’s design in relation to key ideas in the thesis, and physically test relationships through the performance and practicality of constructed buildings in relation to unfinished landscapes.

My initial intention was to reflect in the thesis on my past practice in unfinished landscapes and test the architectural methodology through which I work by redesigning three award-winning houses in unfinished landscapes which fail to respond to their regressing landscapes. Analysing each house with its alternative design would allow different architectural methodologies to be reviewed and analysed in relation to my past approach. In what ways could their designs have been improved to enable change and maintain a fit with their regressing landscapes? The three projects identified to be redesigned were Kumutoto Bay, Cherry Bay Bach, and Bach With Two Roofs.

However, early in the thesis enrolment period, a cyclone destroyed the forest around Bach With Two Roofs and emphatically demonstrated the implications of landscapes shifting in relation to buildings. Bach With Two Roof’s, which had been carefully designed to inhabit a forest environment, now physically had to be changed to re-establish a fit with its new cleared landscape. The cyclone provided the opportunity to not just explore the re-design of the existing buildings in a new way, but to physically learn from their alteration works as part of the thesis’ creative practice component. The documentation and construction methodology, and in particular the elements used for change, could also contribute to the analysis of the buildings before and after the cyclone, and the development of a new architectural methodology.

Bach With Two Roofs, therefore, became the key case study project to this thesis, with an in-depth study of how its buildings changed prior to and post the cyclone in relation to the landscape shifting. As per the initial intent, its buildings were notionally redesigned in light of this thesis’ findings as the conclusion to the creative practice component to this thesis.

Cherry Bay Bach and Kumutoto Bay have subsequently been used as case studies to highlight specific approaches to past practice in unfinished landscapes but have not been redesigned.

I have discussed this thesis with the owners of practice projects which contribute to case studies and design studies.
The notion of unfinished landscapes and the relationship between buildings and regressive landscapes is not substantially addressed within the published record, either in New Zealand or globally. While New Zealand continues to protect its remaining native forests, and rarely builds in them, unfinished landscapes provide an opportunity to establish architecture in New Zealand’s near-original forest landscape. This question is not raised in the literature, and this thesis’ body of knowledge begins to fill this gap through design and critical writing as the original contribution of this thesis.

Growing demand for holiday houses in these failed farmlands means architects are increasingly designing buildings in these typically remote and privately owned landscapes. This thesis provides an important insight into how buildings can be sited within regressing landscapes and ultimately occupy a place within a near-original forest. Drawing context from these forests was missed by New Zealand’s settler inhabitants arriving, then cutting and building in clearings. In unfinished landscapes, architectural design cannot only explore New Zealand’s near-original context but develop alternative strategies for regressing landscapes and contribute to the conservation of native ecosystems. This might extend to urban landscapes, where New Zealand continues to build as it does in clearings.

This thesis focuses on New Zealand. However, at a broader scale, if buildings can prepare to participate with New Zealand’s regressing forests, then this new methodology also informs architecture in new forests. The world was once covered in ancient forests, 80 percent of which have been destroyed or degraded, 50 percent of that in the last 30 years, with agriculture the primary driver. However, more than 2 billion hectares of failing landscapes are available globally for afforestation, and where deforestation fails, forests are progressively increasing, as is seen in New Zealand. Due to centuries of successional change, the overseas landscapes no longer can regress to near-original landscape, but they can grow new forests. Current landscape theory encourages buildings to be adjacent to, and in clearings, rather than part of afforestation. An understanding of how to build within unfinished landscapes can guide us in dealing with future afforestation, and inform how architects around the world can design to inhibit further deforestation.

Figure xi: Village without Roofs (following).
Drawing by Jeremy Smith
