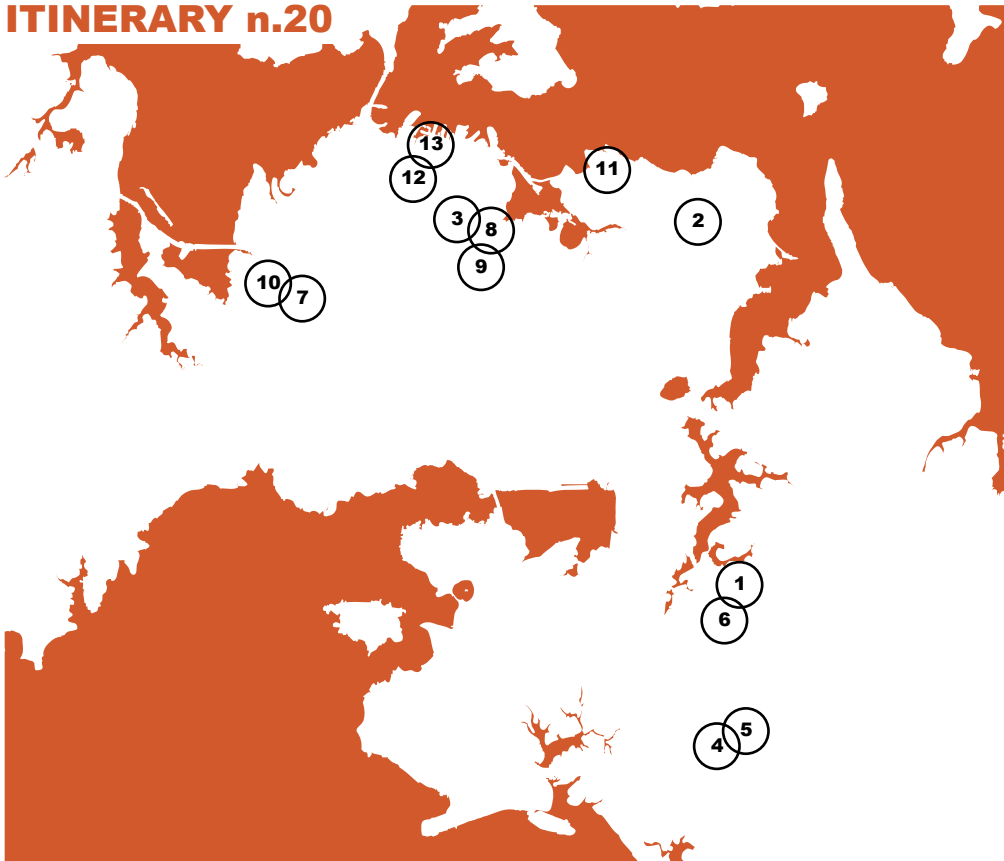


ITINERARY n.20



Rewi Thompson in Auckland

In his *Harvard Project on the City* book on China, Rem Koolhaas describes how skyscrapers in that country are designed by local architects working for tiny fees, often from laptops on kitchen tables. The astonishing thing, according to Koolhaas, is how closely these back-alley architects can mimic the designs turned out by their well-resourced, highly-paid American and European counterparts; the key difference is only the refinement of the details. A smaller scale “skill shock” can be experienced here in Godzone watching the reality TV series *Mitre Ten Dream Home*; the surprise is how effectively glue gun-toting suburbanites with Briscoes vouchers can reproduce the kinds of space produced by our local star architects. In Aotearoa of recent years, the distance between the leaders and the followers has narrowed considerably. Our current taste for neo-modernism has caused a marked deceleration in our architectural development. The result is that the spatial, structural, and programmatic approaches of many of our leading practitioners now differ only in relatively minor details from the pack; buildings that make big moves or tackle big issues are few and far between.

One of our real pace-setters has been Rewi Thompson, an architect responsible for some of the boldest buildings ever produced in New Zealand. Exploring what bi-culturalism means for architecture, Thompson describes his work as focussing on two things – land and people. Thompson has said of his projects, “Our architecture raises the issue of different cultural values and what is an appropriate architectural response to the site. In this sense the site or context of the work is the land but also the culture because the land is cultural. The land or site can be seen to be an emblem of these divergent expectations.” This divergence is seen clearly in the process through which Thompson’s buildings emerge, particularly in his many buildings intended to serve the Maori community. These projects emerge through the Maori system of reaching consensus; the result of community involvement and discussion, Thompson’s buildings become a focus of negotiation in which past history and future aspirations all have an impact. This holistic approach results in projects that serve needs far beyond simply housing the functions the building is intended to accommodate.

The connections Thompson’s work makes to land and culture are often through metaphor. Buildings and elements within them serve as analogies to or as mnemonics for such elements as topography, mythology, history, and male and female qualities. They transmit cultural values and tell stories that provide the context for the activities the buildings are designed to house. Puukenga, for example, includes a watercourse that reinstates a fresh-water spring once used by local Maori.

For Thompson, buildings exist less as objects crafted by an author, and more as part of an ongoing process. Although low budgets are often a key factor, this attitude is the source of Thompson’s audacious use of raw or untreated materials; rather than create the image of permanence, this work often appears unfinished or temporary. Thompson is content for his buildings to weather and age, an attitude which places his work in the Pacific tradition of periodic renewal of wooden buildings. For a profession that prizes slick resolution, the rawness of Thompson’s buildings is confronting, especially given the formal presence of his often sculptural compositions.

Thompson produced high-profile projects in quick succession through the 1980s and early-90s but in recent years has concentrated on teaching and consultation work. However, his recent competition successes - winning the City Mission project with Stevens Lawson, and being short-listed for Te Wero Bridge - signals a new flowering of his career. Thompson has described his work as a “response to the changing nature of New Zealand culture”; with our nation in greater flux than ever, we need him setting the pace again. *Andrew Barrie*

Biography:

Raised in Wellington, Rewi Thompson (of Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Raukawa descent) began his career in engineering. On completing a NZ Certificate of Engineering at Wellington Polytechnic, Thompson worked at Structon Group as a structural draughtsperson before transferring to Structon’s architecture department. He eventually left to study architecture at the University of Auckland. Thompson then worked for Structon in Auckland, but after registration established his own practice in 1983. Thompson rapidly rose to prominence – in 1986 he was invited to join a group of leading local practitioners (Ian Athfield, John Blair, and Roger Walker) on a lecture tour of the US arranged by Stanley Tigerman. Thompson has won numerous competitions and architectural awards including a UNESCO International Award for a housing scheme designed for urban Maori. In 2002, Thompson was appointed Adjunct Professor at Auckland University’s School of Architecture. He has also served as Māori design consultant for numerous projects, including new educational, correctional, and health facilities.

1

1984

Ngāti Otara Marae
Cnr Gilbert & Otara Rds., Otara



Standing on the edge of a large and well-used reserve, this marae consists of a whare nui (meeting house) and a narrow block containing toilets and other services. Although its exterior is unadorned by carvings, the whare nui is crisply detailed in concrete, laminated timber, and ply. Despite this simple construction, the building's sharp edges and clear geometry give it a strong presence. The whare's side walls splay outwards slightly, and the entry and windows on the front façade have been arranged in a dramatic geometric design – intended to emphasize the sense of transition, this arrangement is especially bold given that it departs from the usual asymmetric composition of door and window. See *Landscape* (NZILA) Autumn/Winter 1988.

2

1985

Thompson House
Southern Cross Rd,
Kohimarama



In their review of NZ's top 50 homes, Bill Mackay and Douglas Lloyd Jenkins wrote: "This house... is a staunch example of what Rewi Thompson is all about. It's different from every other house in the country in its sculptural presence and simplicity of silhouette. Yet it conceals a glazed light-filled side turned to the bush-clad slope behind. It's quite a simple house, with a living room and sleeping level raised above the garage, but also ambiguous. It challenges us to figure out how it might work, and we're forced to consider alternatives to how people might live and notions of appropriate materials, weathering and finishing." See *NZ Home & Entertaining* Dec/Jan 2000.

3

1986

Temporary Outdoor Pulpit
Auckland Domain, City



Designed for Pope John Paul II's 48-hour visit to New Zealand, this canopy and stage was installed for an outdoor mass held at the Auckland Domain. The platform was an abstracted canoe form, and the canopy above was composed as two wing-like planes. Ross Jenner wrote of this structure: "The canopy anticipates a strong figurative line in Thompson's work. It evokes the *kotuku* (white heron), a rare bird hailed as the bearer of good news, a theme common in myths and provided by the tribe from the ... Thames region, who hosted the Pope and commissioned Thompson." The altar is now in Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell. See *Lotus* 105 (June 2000).

4

1986-89

Boehringer Ingelheim
Office & Warehouse
47 Druces Road, Wiri



Built for a multinational pharmaceuticals firm, this project stands on a corner site on the border between industrial and residential zones. This duality is manifested in the arrangement of timber-clad walls to road frontages and concrete walls to the boundaries. The brief called for roughly equal amounts of office and warehouse space. Reflecting this division, access is achieved via a diagonal courtyard that bisects the structure, introducing light and greenery to heart of the building. The project won a CHH Award (1989) and an NZIA Branch Award (1990), and is now occupied by Raukura Hauora O Tainui, a Maori health provider. See *Architecture NZ* Nov/Dec 1989 & May/June 1990.

5

1986-89

State Houses
Laurelia Place, Wiri



Designed for the Housing Corporation, Thompson broke from the suburban pattern with a collection of highly sculptural buildings - a long metal-clad shed with an undulating roof containing semi-detached units, and bach-like detached houses that float over the slope. The site was to be replanted with native species indigenous to the area. The palette of raw materials – fibrolite, ply, tanalised timber, metal – suffered from abuse, and the planting was never carried out, leaving the elevated houses somewhat stranded. Astonishingly, the buildings were recently removed from the site. If you're in the area, check out Manning Mitchell's state housing in Rata Vine Drive (1987). Ironically, this development shows the value of planting - while the vivid colour schemes are gone, the now mature trees give the neighbourhood charm. See *Architecture NZ* July/Aug 1989.

6

1987

Otara Town Centre
East Tamaki Road, Otara



Commissioned by Manukau City Council to revitalise this vandal-prone 1960s shopping mall, Thompson was asked to create an identity for the place that more closely reflected the predominantly Maori and Polynesian character of the area. The image of a fish was selected for the project, which Thompson realised as a series of canopies. The strongly Pacific-inflected decoration of the structures was controlled by the local community and carried out by local artists – the lower level concrete elements were painted and lashed with ropes. See *Architecture NZ* Sept/Oct 1993.

7

1991

Puukenga, UNITEC
Carrington Rd, Mt. Albert



The Puukenga, which translates as "centre" or "focus", serves as the home of Unitec's Maori studies program. It consists of a series of metal-clad teaching pods plugged into a large wooden whare-form that contains common space and administration facilities. Created from a palette of raw materials (galvanized steel, particle board, unpainted timber), the building unfolds as a complex narrative involving an internal watercourse, carved structural elements, and lights arranged in the pattern of constellations. The facility was built by Unitec apprentices, and some deficiencies in crafting mean the building is now showing its age. The building won an NZIA Branch Award in 1995. See *Architecture NZ* May/June 1992 and Mar/Apr 1994.

8

2003-

Auckland Museum Exhibitions
The Auckland Domain, Parnell



Thompson has produced a number of exhibitions for the Museum in recent years. *Te Kakano* (2003) is the Pacific People Information Center, located in the Museum's Maori Gallery. Within a sinuous translucent glass screen, Thompson created a sunken research and reading area for visitors. In the *Natural History Information Centre* (2006), bookshelves and other furniture suggest geological formations. The *Ko Tawa* exhibition (2005) presented a selection of items from the collection of taonga gathered by Captain Gilbert Mair, a key supporter of Maori in the North Island around the turn of the century. Designed as a traveling exhibit, the installation toured New Zealand and Sydney. The *Ancient Worlds* exhibition (2007) was placed in one of the Noel Lane-designed concrete-walled galleries, and includes the Museum's Egyptian mummy!

9

2001

Olympic Park War Memorial
Cnr Broadway & Davis Cres.
Newmarket



Produced in collaboration with landscape architects Isthmus, this memorial is part of a long-running project that will renovate much of the streetscape in the Newmarket precinct. Located in Olympic Park, a small green zone beside the roundabout on Broadway, Thompson designed a collection of red granite stelae that include a number of plaques commemorating the local soldiers lost in the First and Second World Wars. Originally placed in a memorial archway in 1924, these plaques were added to after WWII and have been relocated several times before finding a home in Thompson's crisply detailed but appropriately solemn design.

10

2003-06

Maori Mental Health Unit,
Mason Clinic
Carrington Road, Pt. Chevalier



Located on the UNITEC campus, the Mason Clinic was created in response to a government inquiry into the care of mentally ill offenders. Designed in collaboration with Maunsell (working previously as Meritec), the three-building facility accommodates secure residential accommodation, community buildings, meeting spaces, dining areas and intensive care areas planned on a Maori village concept. The complex is organized around a courtyard planted with natives and centred on a rock fountain that circulates water creating a symbol of cleansing and healing. Both architecture and methods of care are part of a holistic design that implements a radically new treatment model.

11

2005

Papakainga 2030
Bastion Point, Orakei



Thompson has said, "Sustainability is not just about buildings, it's all about people issues as well... If you look at the old papakainga developments, that was a whole system of family support - from identity, closeness to resources, strategy, safety, and so on. There has to be an appreciation of what that means longer-term - in terms of education, health, cultural focus, recreation, and so on. It's complex." Designed for Ngati Whatua o Orakei on land recently returned to the tribe, Thompson's scheme is a strategic plan that includes native planting, restores wildlife ecologies, and is intended to be 100% sustainable by the year 2030. To protect the open green space, the buildings are higher-density: four-storey, family-based cluster housing that defines enclosed courtyards for communal activities.

12

2006-

City Mission
Hobson Street, City

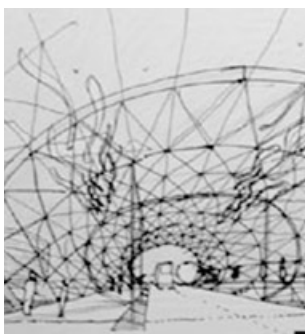


Designed as part of a competition-winning team that included Thompson, Stevens Lawson Architects, local clergy, and a property developer, this project is to include a courtyard area, a community centre, café and facilities for neighboring St Matthew's church. Facilities for the City Mission include a homeless centre, targeted housing, offices, a library, workshops, as well as health and recreational facilities. All this is housed in a miniature cityscape of primarily vertical forms with steeply pitched roofs that both reflect and defer to St Matthew's neo-gothic language. The project has now progressed to Resource Consent stage.

13

2007

Te Wero Bridge
Quay Street West, City



Submitted to a competition run by the Auckland City Council, this project was for a movable bridge to span across the entrance to the Viaduct Harbour from Quay St West to the tank farm. Thompson's scheme used the idea of a hinaki (eel trap) to create a dynamic structural frame through which the roadway passed. Thompson completed the second stage of the competition with Warren & Mahoney and Holmes Consulting, but a scheme by Hyder Consulting, Denton Corker Marshall, and Kenneth Grubb was eventually declared the winner. In the face of a cost blowout and the general economic crisis, the project has been put on hold.

Other Addresses:

Ruapoutaka Marae (1987)
90-106 Line Road, Glen Innes
Tucked in behind Tibor Donner's Glen Innes Public Library, this very urban marae complex includes a series of pre-fabs as well as Thompson's warehau nui.

Auckland Regional Council Office (1990)
21 Pitt Street, Auckland
Thompson was responsible the foyer of this JASMaD-produced building, but only fragments now remain. See *NZ Home & Building* Oct./Nov. 1990.

Population Sciences Complex UoA Tamaki Campus (2004)
Morrin Road, Glen Innes
Thompson served as Cultural design consultant on this Architectus project.

Mental Health Centre (1995)
Middlemore Hospital, Hopsital Rd, Otahuhu
Produced in conjunction with Worley Consultants.



Ruapoutaka Marae, 1987

Elsewhere:

Capital Discovery Place ('88)
City-to-Sea Bridge (1990)
Civic Square, Wellington
CDP was designed in collaboration with Athfield Architects, and the bridge with John Gray and artists Paratene Matchitt. See *Architecture NZ* May/June 1998.

Māori Studies Facility (1993)
Tairāwhiti Polytechnic Palmerston Road, Gisborne

Wishart House (1996)
Signal Station Road, Omāpere, Hokianga
The house received a Tasman Architectural Award in 1999. See *Interstices* 3 (1995) and *Architecture NZ* Nov./Dec. 1999.

Excite (1996)
1 Grantham Street, Hamilton
Excite stands for *Explorations in Science and Technology*, and first opened in 1992 as a temporary exhibition at the Waikato Museum. It proved so popular there, that it was temporarily reinstalled in another location, until a purpose-built facility was constructed next to the Museum.

Rangiatea Church (2003)
33 Te Rauparaha Street, Otaki
Thompson was part of a team that reconstructed the church following the 1995 fire.

Sources:

Except where noted, the photographs are by Andrew Barrie; the drawings are courtesy Rewi Thompson Architects Ltd. Many thanks to Rewi for his help in preparing this guide. Thompson's work has been widely published in journals, both local and international, as well as being included in our recent architectural histories - one of his student projects was even featured in Mitchell and Chaplin's *The Elegant Shed* (Auckland: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984). Perhaps the best sources on Thompson are two long profiles: "Rewi Thompson Architect" in *Transition* no. 47 (1995), and Ross Jenner's "The Experience of Rewi Thompson: A Crossroads in New Zealand" in *Lotus* no. 105 (June 2000). See also Deidre Brown's essay, "Instituting Bi-culturalism", in Charles Walker's *Exquisite Apart* (Auckland: NZIA, 2005), "Profile: Rewi Thompson" in *NZ Home & Building* Aug/Sept 1986, and "Rewi Thompson: Four Projects" in *Architectural Design* vol. 68, (July/Aug 1998). Thompson's text on the nature of Maori architecture is worth seeking out: "Maori Architecture - A Myth" in *NZ Architect* No. 2, 1987. The story of the US lecture tour by Athfield, Walker, Blair and Thompson is told in *NZ Home & Building* June/July 1986 and *NZ Architect* No 1. 1987.