



## Mitchell Stout House, Auckland, 1991

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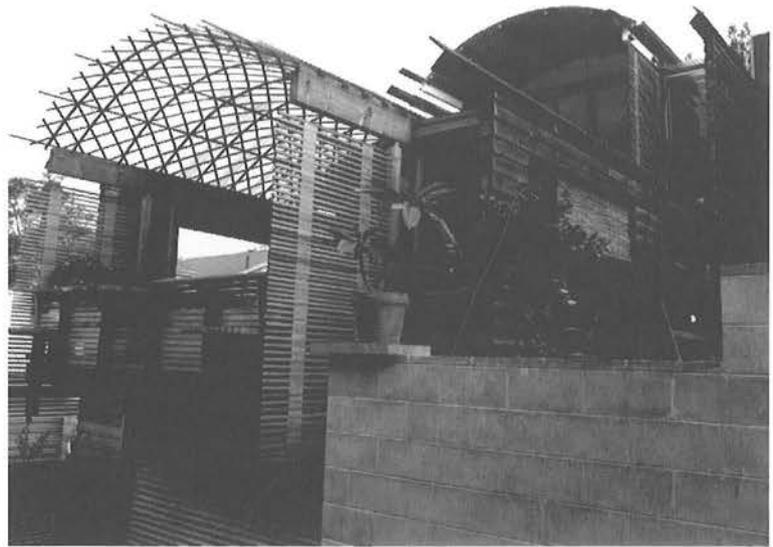


This work is a collaboration coloured by cooperation and compromise, confused by issues of age and gender. Ideas of sources and authority are undermined and obscured by the weft and weave of initiation and response. The classical architectural language of symmetry and axuality constructed as a series of self contained spaces hierarchically ordered from major to minor, interior to exterior, is used in this house by Julie Stout and David Mitchell. However the classical, reliant on an orderly categorisation, is undermined by ambiguous boundaries, a layering and leaving that creates a building unsettled by constant restless adjustments. Restless adjustments that are both combative and pleasurable, and lead to consideration of the picturesque.

“It may come as a surprise to realise that the Picturesque is not about the inherent virtues of roughness, irregularity, and abrupt variation, but about their contribution to a larger composition. Its motivation is to keep things alive by

mixing in the marginal qualities, to maintain vividness, to resist the tendency for systematic application of any form of selection to become despotic.”<sup>1</sup>

Recent re-readings of the picturesque emphasise its complexities and possibilities, including its connections to political theories—connections that have been repressed.<sup>2</sup> The political returns in this house in its resistance to consumption, its refusal of the fashionable and its rereading of the indigenous. It is also



part of the picturesque in its involvement in ambiguity, deferral of completion and its multiplicity of views.



To call this house picturesque in its external form and in its undecidable interiors further suggests the importance of its relationship to landscape or “nature”.<sup>3</sup> But here the stability of the natural is as subject to doubt as the classical. The grounding of the house in nature is complicated by an absence of ground. The ground is covered with building, pool, entry steps, an introduced garden and even a beach. It is then reconstructed in a shell path, container boxes, clay dishes of soil; so that while the project acknowledges the impossibility of the ground (the often

repeated baseless, fissured and riddled nature of contemporary existence) it deals with the issue by covering it. The house floats above the ground.

The relationship of the house to the street has neither the discreetness of the urban house nor the openness of the suburban. It is a country house in the city; a country house treating its setting as landscape almost as if it were the only house in Freemans Bay sitting in its own tiny gully.<sup>4</sup> The site is both overlaid and revealed. The floor levels reflect the landforms as they step down from front to back and are dished across the site mirroring the gully. There is no sense of past occupation of the site except that the house adheres to subdivision patterns of street frontage alignment.

The open front of the house cannot accommodate the entry from the street and the paradoxical closure that this implies. Instead a tapering entry staircase, covering the contours beneath, slides up the side of the house stopping at a plywood wall five degrees off a right angle, leading to the door. The wall is diagonally slashed as if a fallen shadow drawn on an elevation. The slash points to the door; overhead is a canopy supported on a tapered angled beam on a central column.

Jennifer Bloomer commenting on Piranesi's plan of the *Collegio* suggests that the "apparatus" of the plan is not made apparent through an approach by way of conventional geometry but is rather revealed "by sliding in along the path of the inscribing or incising tool, sliding through a tear in the old curtains in the back of the theater ..."<sup>5</sup>

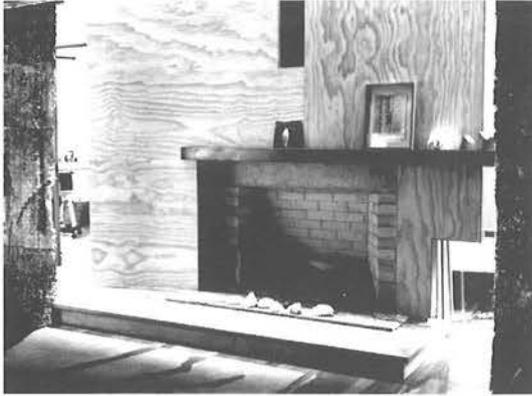
Sliding in through this tear there is an immediate engagement with the ambiguous boundaries of the house, the double wall that envelopes the central space. Called a "living room" this room seems to suggest the possibility of all living being contained in a single space, a place to lie, with fire, water and a cooling breeze. Other rooms surround and open off this

central space which, embedded within, organises the house. The room occupies an entire level on its own; you step up and down from it to other spaces. It is separated from the rest of the house by lintels over the many openings in its walls. This room, however, as in Piranesi's *Collegio* "... is an equivocal center that does not perform its traditional duty of stabilizing the structure. It is an eccentric center"<sup>6</sup>

A rug sits squarely in the middle attempting to repress the restless passage of the body in movement that the house in its oblique approaches and intricate ornament (picturesque qualities) sets up. The wall surfaces resist closure with openings at the corners. Two plywood structures on either side of the room refuse to align with the walls; set at diverging angles they also deny correspondence across the space. The plywood box that is part of the entry wall is pierced giving a view, partially blocked, onto the stairs. There is unaccounted for space within the wall and parts of the wall are curiously thickened. The central space can also leak out through a floor level window. Even the divan refuses to align with the containing walls.

Darkly internal, the exterior of the enclosing walls of the central room have been given a rough black external finish. The space, however, does not open directly to the outside. It is an interior space and unusual in a New Zealand house where, generally, the only interior space is the passage or hall. These are circulation spaces and the same is true of this central space. It is a centre as circulation; as Bois writes of the *Collegio*, "The center is a thoroughfare, i.e., an indifferent place with no other identity than the one conferred on it by the passers-by, a non place that exists only by the experience of time and motion that the stroller may make of it."<sup>7</sup>

But the issue of interiority is not straightforward in the Stout Mitchell house. The fireplace, displaced from the conventional central position, is outside the living room and beyond it.



It denies its fiery qualities -it is surrounded by timber and has a down-pipe running down through the chimney which is itself split. The fireplace refuses the usual comforts; warmth is whisked up through "the gap".<sup>8</sup>

The gap according to Bloomer is the site of architecture and in this house the gap is between and both inside and outside—the seemingly endless architectural desire to make the outside habitable and



dissolve the inside. In this unsettling of the usual demarcation between inside and out, the gaps become a vulnerable point of the house; there is an attempt to construct a non existence with plastic roofing and louvres. The wind can blow through the louvres—this is the negative detail at building scale. This gap between inside and outside is also between the classical and the domestic.

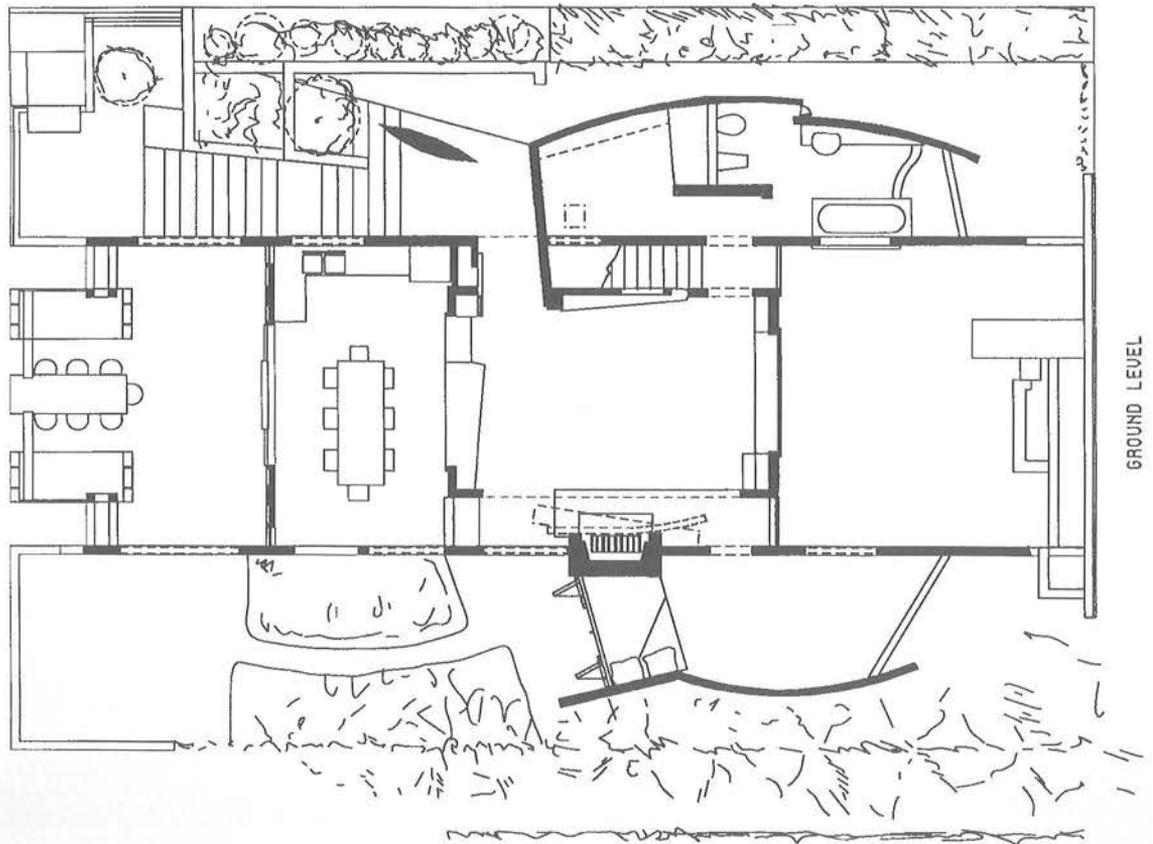
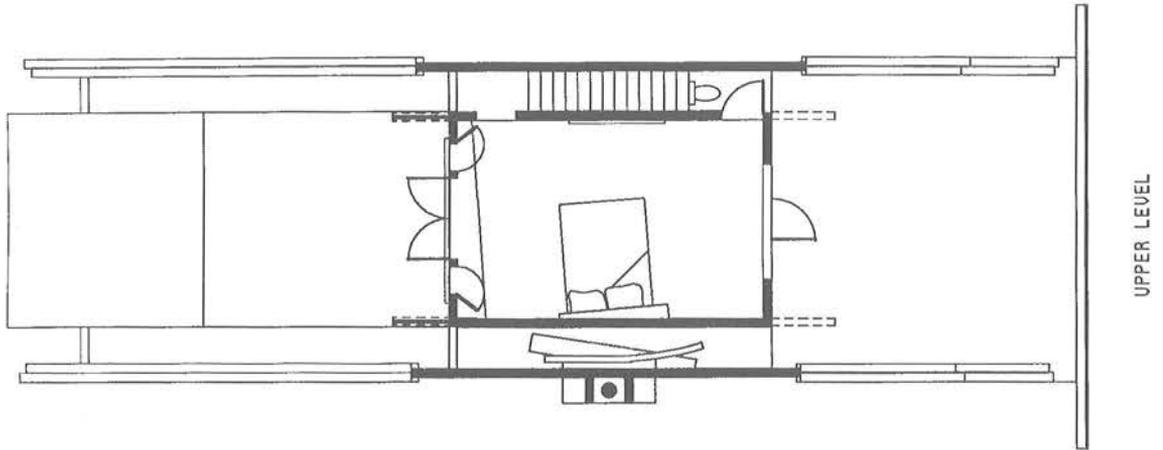


Domesticity is cleared away from the central space making an empty interior so that the rooms beyond the gap (the add-ons or wings) contain the expansive aspects of domesticity; objects, clothes, laundry, ablutions and visitors. These wings are cast outside the house which is insulated from these potential contaminants by the gap. The wings are both joined and detached, they bulge from the pressure of their domestic interiors and exclude the few remaining pieces of site. It is a house that in its doubled efforts to contain ends up being unable to contain.

It has, built-in, the possibility of its own unravelling. The roof bulges into the barrel vault which is peeled back. A skeletal network protrudes from under translucent corrugations which slip from under corrugated steel so that a possibility of further peeling back is suggested. The central space is not protected in this direction by the insulating qualities of the gaps; the unravelling could go from end to end. The gaps have their ends and beginnings in the water garden. The house, like a hydro dam, holds back and contains the water that might stream through and down the slope. The picture making tendency of the central space slices the water view into frames with a guillotine window (a big double hung with concrete counterweights), a technical (but hardly technological) solution. Framed as in a picture we are to look out to, but not to go into, this south side water garden containing sensuous dreamy possibilities both proffered and withheld. The bath opens onto the pool in a play of cold against hot water. The water is used to manipulate the light in the house and activates the picturesque<sup>9</sup> In the other direction the house is itself a frame that constructs, through its absent front wall, its own interior as part of the view through the trees to the city.

The house is swept through by this axis that starts at the source, the cubist waterfall (oddly non symmetrical) proceeds over the contours of the land to the bush and city to Rangitoto beyond and ultimately the openness of the Pacific. Sweeping the central space free of

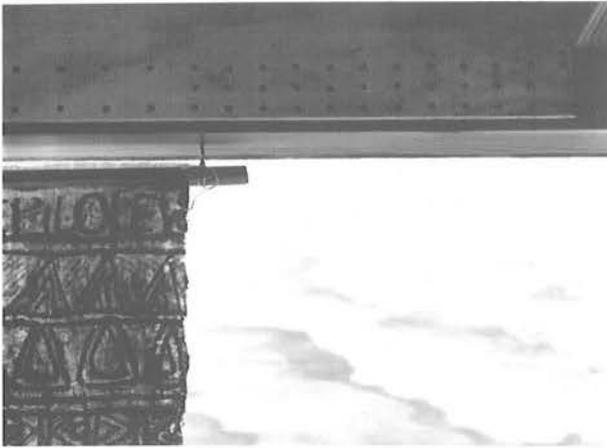




containment, this ruthless, rigorous and symmetrical axis is determined by the street layout of the city. The passage of spaces is also the passageway of a suburban house, the hall that splits the house. The suburban pattern repeats in the vertical dimension from cars in the basement to bed in the attic- familiar and ordinary. Which is to say that it is an ordinary New Zealand house with its deck to the street and the view and its public and private separations. It uses ordinary materials too. But the materials are never treated as ordinary; there is a sparseness, a lack of indulgence, a care in the details that raises the building out of the ordinary.<sup>10</sup> The extraordinary is combined with a beguiling accidental look that tells us that this is all artifice.<sup>11</sup>

Artifice is fundamental to the picturesque. The Mitchell Stout house is not a rustic house though it bears touches of that tradition with its creosote and unfinished ends to timber. Instead it is considered, deliberate and highly controlled. Everywhere the house is dependent on or indebted to nature ('natural' finished timbers, polished plywood, shadows and light). Most unnatural treatments construct its nature; water contained in a concrete box fountain, selective breeding of goldfish, a shell path miles from the sea and a sprouting ponga fence sustained with rubber hosing, all construct a vision of paradise.

Paradise is also a Pacific myth. There are Pacific references everywhere; hanging screens, rattan blinds, printed fabrics, and woven mats. These claim to be decorative rather than structural but the Pacific is not that easily categorised. The spatial and material organisation of the house is very Pacific; the empty pavilion, the separation of functions, the timber structure, the swelling forms. Consequently what is structural and what is decorative remains in doubt. For instance the central space in the Stout Mitchell house is structured ornamentally with a weaving of walls and gaps, interiors and exteriors. Fine cloths sway between the gap and the space and slant across the face of the bench. Nailing patterns on plywood beams are structural yet decorative. There is a decorative fineness both ornamental



and structural that makes the space complex and multiple and reaches into the rest of the house. The almost geodesic trellis over the deck pretends to be structural (it holds up the plastic roofing) but is also decorative.

Extension is prevalent; hanging timber screens shimmer and flap in the breeze and extend the walls out into space; a constant movement past the moment of contemplation and appropriation. The complex spatial wanderings initiated in the gaps are elaborated with ornament and fray the serene picture making of the spatial sequence.<sup>12</sup> This house is a building about extension and openness woven together in an intricate play of light and timber with varieties of timber and treatments of timber; overlaid, meshed, stretched and filleted. The rough and ordinary is woven with the polished and refined; the tyranny of structure dissolves in detail. Layers of light timber blur the axial system.

The power of classical centrality and axuality is constantly ameliorated and undermined but not avoided.<sup>13</sup> Here there might be a dialogue between the Pacific and the classical, a dialogue of questionable equivalence, certainly the “planimetric choice” of axuality is undermined by its own dependence on hierarchy of structure and ornament which the deeply decorative design dissolves. The Stout Mitchell House resounds with the internal upheavals of the picturesque.

**Notes:**

- 1            Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 27.
- 2            For example see Sidney K Robinson, “The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment”, in Marco

Diani and Catherine Ingraham, *Restructuring Architectural Theory* (Evanston Illinois, 1989), p. 74; and Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara", in Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Joan Copjec (eds.), *October The First Decade 1976 - 1986* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 364 .

- 3 "Nature and the conventions of classical culture each served as foundations for stable, authoritative, aesthetic constructions. The appeal to such sanctioned sources may be argued in terms that seem to set up a contradiction between nature and convention, but neither is willing to replace its claims of absolute reliability by a recognition of its self-referential construction. Mixture itself can be proposed as stable, optimal condition only by seeing its prevention of homogenisation as a constant that lies behind obvious changes. Such a continuous reframing of the phenomenon as whole becomes a part serves to overcome the inertia of certainty." Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 21-22.
- 4 The picturesque, according to Bois, operates "not to force nature but to reveal "capacities" of the site while magnifying their variety and singularity." Bois, op. cit.
- 5 Jennifer Bloomer, "Towards Desiring Architecture", in Andrea Khan (ed.), *Drawing Building Text* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 62.
- 6 Ibid., p. 48.
- 7 Bois also suggests that Piranesi "foreshadows the space of all modern sculpture ... one of passage and displacement from the centre." Bois, op. cit.
- 8 "A third image is the gap between boundaries, the place where the edge of things comes close to touching. The place of architecture seems to be here in these places (as well as in its conventional disciplinary capsule, which rather sheepishly embeds itself in an imagined wall between art and science). This architecture is not disciplinary, but interdisciplinary. It seeps out of its capsule and bleeds into the interstices, ..." Bloomer , op. cit., p. 56.
- 9 Also Le Corbusier about whom Bois says: "Le Corbusier, as his vocabulary shows, again takes up the idea of the picturesque, and tries to imagine what a picturesque architecture might be." Bois, op. cit.
- 10 This is less so in the wings which have conventional building details and which make one aware how refined and sophisticated the house is in its construction.
- 11 "For the picturesque is above all a struggle against the reduction 'of all terrains to the flatness of a sheet of paper.'" Bois op. cit.
- 12 "The struggle to avoid tyranny and system by habitually injecting "roughness, irregularity and abrupt variation..."", Robinson, 1989, p. 78.

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"The *Collegio*, then, constitutes a kind of gigantic question mark on the meaning of architectural composition: the "clarity" of the planimetric choice is subtly eroded by the process with which the various parts engage in mutual dialogue; the single space secretly undermines the laws to which it pretends to subject itself. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 31.

