



## A House in the West.

Bill McKay

"East and West mean nothing to us here," Odysseus told his men when they landed at Aeaëa, the home of Circe. "Where the sun is rising from when he comes to light the world and where he is sinking we do not know."<sup>1</sup> And half a turn of the globe away on our own little stretch of island, on this isthmus at the narrowest neck of the country, do you think we would not know where in the world we were? Our site is near the end of the alphabet, Waterview, West Auckland, the piece of land under the W on the map. One can see the last stroke of that W in the stairway veering down to the water on a lava flow from the extinct volcano, that once ran down to the sea on a path the street now follows to the shore of a tidal lagoon. Sometimes there is water here when the last spit of the Pacific creeps up through the mangroves to this westernmost bit of the isthmus shore, looking out over one last rim of hazy hills to the Tasman Sea. The thinnest bit of the country, one can walk from ocean shore to shore, the sun rises from one sea, sets in the other. Portage country.

The tides make this lagoon seem primal, flooding and draining to its own rhythm disconnected from our days, the rhythm of the moon. The tides seem to recreate the original separation of sea from shore, the emerging land and emerging life in the thrust of mangrove pneumatophores from the mud.

Prompted by the woman's long held dream of Egypt these West Auckland mangroves conjure western history's beginning in Nile mud. These landscapes seeming opposite, antipodean, are not so far apart—New Zealand soldiers were shipped there twice—the man's namesake is under Egyptian sand. McCahon appealed to Egypt or something there when he saw "... perhaps an Egyptian god but far from the sun of Egypt in southern cold. Big hills stood in front of little hills—a landscape of splendour, order and peace—something belonging to the land, and not yet to its people."<sup>2</sup>

An Egyptian myth I found attractive: the sun traverses the sky in a day-boat, at sunset transferred to the night-boat on the horizon, to be towed on the waters under the earth, to be reborn in the redness of dawn.

In this island land, fished from the sea, and rediscovered several times over by people in boats, drawing boats up on shore to stay, we thought we detected a motif of the boat in the air:

Patea Aotea Canoe Memorial;

Petone Pioneer Foreshore Museum;

Gisborne's Endeavours skewered on poles and Star of Canada on the Turanganui riverbank;

Devonport Naval Museum;

Waipu House of Memories Memorial;

Boats on trailers parked in streets, or built in backyards, or up on the hard;

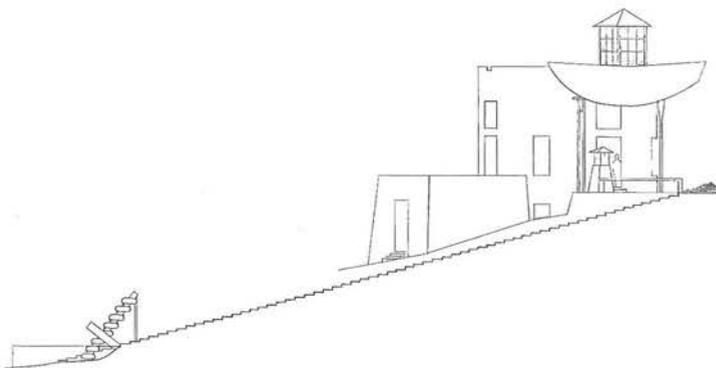
The fishing boat safely ashore;  
The lifeboat about to set out;  
Ghost boats on the old foreshore;  
Dinghies on the beach, wrecks, Ark, canoe;  
The Ratana Manuao \_ from the English Man o' War.

The boat in the air can be simply a joke, a pun on Waterview, a reference to the awkwardness of launching a boat on this bit of the harbour of the "City of Sails". A literal house for a littoral suburb. But it evokes the rising and falling of the tides, heightens the sense of the end of the isthmus, the change of surfaces where land blurs with sea and sky out on the shoals and birds alternate with fish, and the sky is unnaturally at one's feet, reflected in the smooth, knee-deep water. The boat shape reflects the crescent moon first seen in the west, riding low over the waterless lagoon, the moon that fills or drains the harbour. The boat — not sign or symbol, but real boat or rather imitation real boat — stands propped on mast and oar over the front door, portaged boat forming a port and portal, porte-cochere and portico. Port-harbour-home. Port-left-high and dry.

Another tide is evident from this site—traffic streaming home in the evening, across the causeway in the wake of daylight, red tail lights in the dusk like sparks from a fire roaring up into the emptiness after sunset, and the vast hollow aerial miles apparent before stars appear. The house is conceived as a suburban villa, a simple country house now hemmed in by suburban tides. There is no dialogue with neighbours, the house addresses landscape and distance, marks the end of the street where land is separated from sea and sky and day turns to night. A cylinder pushed away from the street to the corner of the site, by a tiny stream, it is an observatory lost in its own world of the dreamy lagoon.

Simple shapes form the house: a cylinder resting on a cube, crowned with a tiny Egyptian pyramid, transparent in the guise of a skylight (or is it the volcano's tip or a glimpse of the

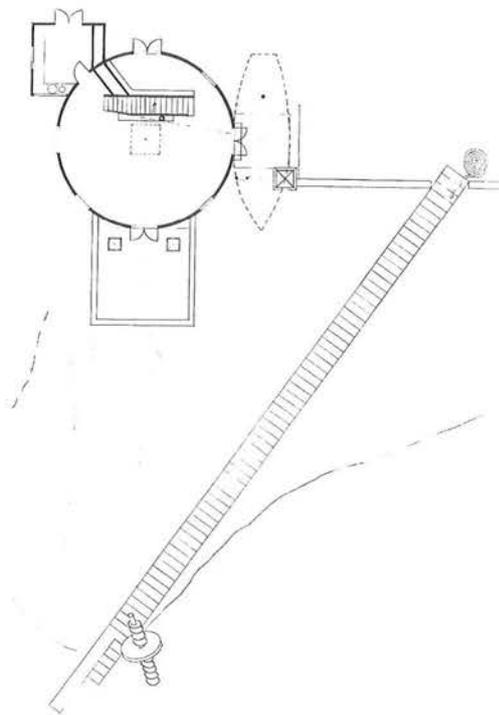
Southern Cross?) The expansive curve of the rotunda addresses the horizon, recalling the way that in water, ripples go away from you, on this edge of the Pacific, Melville's ocean, "that rolls the whole earth round,"<sup>3</sup> Banks's sea, "that lens of water twice bulged and wob-



bling and rolling round the Earth."<sup>4</sup> (This house—white whale or Pequod?—contains on its deck a tiny lens of precipitated water in an inverted perspex sky dome, lensing light into the basement: "Here the small waves fall on the beach for a while."<sup>5</sup>) Like an orrery the cylinder models and tracks the orbit of sun and moon, and curve of earth, as William Blake's "serpent temple, image of infinite shut up in finite revolution,"<sup>6</sup> expansive yet containing the domestic interior, intimate world cupped in the face of immensity, as seen in Joseph Cornell's 'space-object boxes,' where "once gone through we trace the round again ... where lies the final harbour where we unmoor no more?"<sup>7</sup>

The long flight of stairs (the stroke of the W,) veers off northwest and runs away down to an empty jetty and idle Archimedean screw at the extreme tip of the site, inscribed "*Lux lucis lune diminuendum est,*" our motto, "the light of the moon is not constant and cannot guide one from the other side to the shore of here."

As the earth turns, from the first inkling of morning sunlight in the library, the sun swings round the rotunda, slowly filling it with daylight, till brimming full and driving shadows before it, the setting sun buoys its satellite the boat up into the air, brilliantly lit at sunset, like the evening crescent moon sometimes seen floating over the shadowed lagoon, or the



full moon rising over the volcano at the other eastern end of the street. The last rays of horizontal sunlight penetrate the western portals of the house, drill through a pin hole in the farthest wall over the fireplace to project an inverted miniature image of the world in the *camera obscura* darkness of the stairs to the basement, and this last scene of day is played out in fading light over the kindled fire.

Two lighting systems are installed, labelled “true” and “false”, one obvious, one subtle—glint and gloom.

At night a small lighthouse under the boat illuminates the porch, the dream world built by that strange artificial wavering light of candle and lamp beats out the pulse of the night. Outside the sinking moon grounds its driftwood and jetsam fleet and sucks out the lagoon water over the rim of the horizon, the travelling meniscus pushing mangrove propagules like tiny boats before it, out into the open sea, to circle the planet, heading for that foreign shore, the world, where once they said of a land upside down from them: “When the sun rises for us, then for them it sets; when it sets for us, then it rises for them. Our noon is their midnight, and our summer is their winter, and so everything goes in opposites and the ancient scholars have discussed this in amazement and at some length. Perhaps this newly discovered New Zealand is equivalent to our (untranslatable Dutch) ‘opposite-footers’.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes:

1 “... So the sooner we decide on a sensible plan the better.” Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rein

(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), p. 163.

2 C. McCahon, *Beginnings, Landfall*, 80, 1966, pp. 363-4.

3 H. Melville, *Moby Dick or the Whale*, (1851).

4 I. Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (Futura, 1984), p. 182.

5 *Ibid.*

6 W. Blake, from 'Europe: A Prophecy,' Pl. 10.

7 Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

8 Van Nierop, *Summary of Tasman's Voyage, 1674*, (quoted in A. Salmond, *Two Worlds* (Viking, 1991), p. 82.)