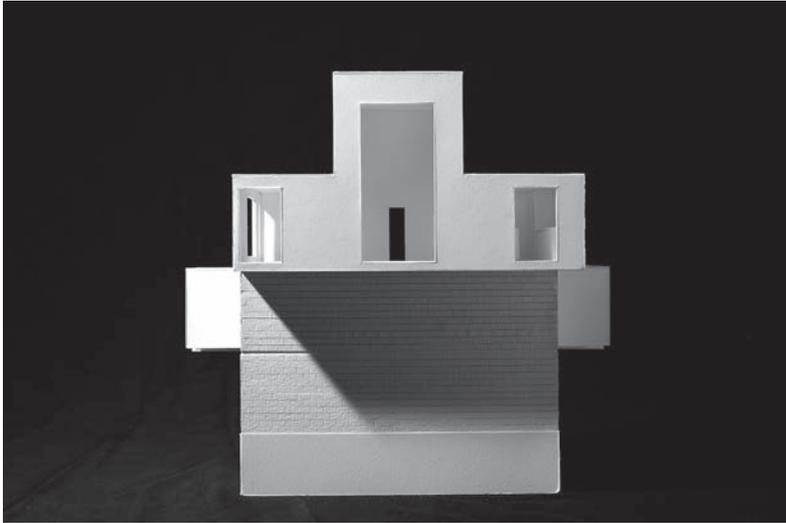


Review 2 by John Walsh



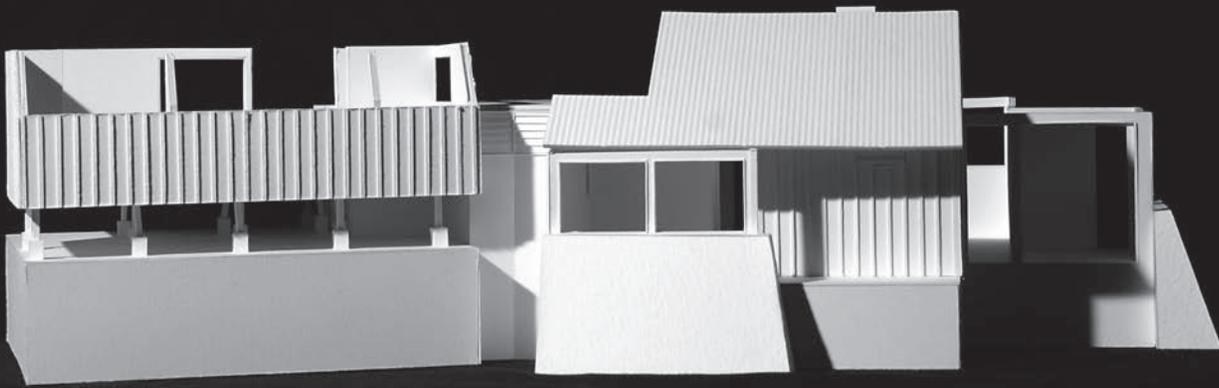
Figures 3 and 4: Thompson House (Auckland). Architect Rewi Thompson, 1985. Photos Vincent Kar

What's the collective noun for a gathering of architects? How about a 'muttering'? As the opening night of Auckland Museum's *The New Zealand House* proceeded, initial murmurings in the reception area gave way to more audible grumblings. Some homonymic confusion at the drinks table? ("More whine, sir?") No; the cause of the discontent lay elsewhere—upstairs, in two first-floor exhibition galleries. There, displayed in three vitrines, were the *Models for Living*: forty-eight, 1:50-scale, card models of New Zealand houses, all in white, seemingly innocent, and perversely provocative.

Some criticism was predictable. In any exhibition, curatorial decisions—what's in, what's out—invite dissent. But the particular issue that vexed some viewers of *Models for Living* was the question of context, or rather, the lack of it. The gist of the slightly slurred complaints was that the exhibition reduced architecture to object, an impression strengthened by the austerity of the 'concrete galleries', the paucity of information about the displayed models, the lack of supporting material, and captions that were either confusingly placed or non-existent. (One vitrine had thirteen models, but only nine captions.)

The shortcomings of the captions suggested fumbles under deadline pressure, but the curators could plead mitigating circumstances to some of the other charges. Originally, curator Charles Walker had intended to augment a larger exhibition (one hundred models for one hundred years!) with architectural drawings and photographs, but a budget cut meant a scaled-down show. So: half the number of models, no plans or photos, and collateral material reduced to a few text boards and looped screenings of two episodes of David Mitchell's 1984 television series "The Elegant Shed" and one undated Television New Zealand documentary on state housing.

Thus truncated, did *Models for Living* get a compensatory boost from the other displays gathered under the rubric of *The New Zealand House*? Not really; this was one show in which the whole was not greater than the sum of its parts. Immediately outside both concrete galleries was a case occupied by Stephen Brookbanks' models of Rangitoto Island baches. Coloured models of *ad hoc* structures placed outside rooms with white models of

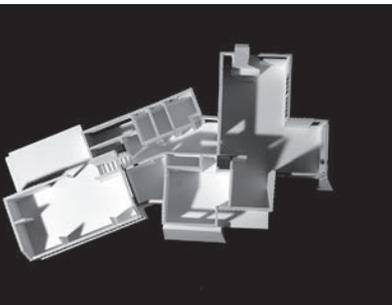


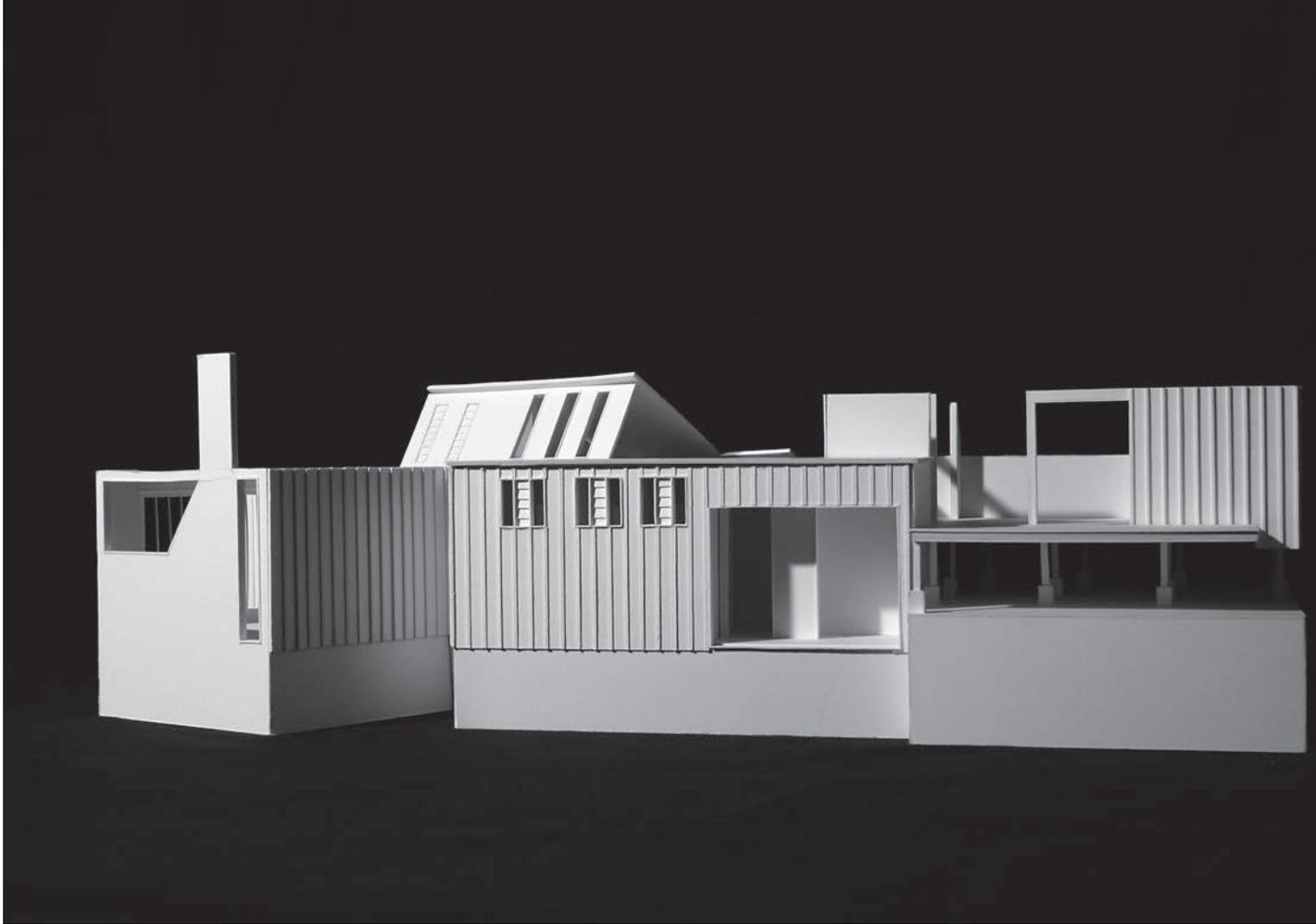
Figures 4-6: Chapple House (North Shore, Auckland). Architect Michael Austin. 1969. Photos Krzysztof Pfeiffer

architect-designed houses: whatever the motivation for the juxtaposition, it was a graphic expression of design apartheid. Around the corner was *Houseworks*, Monique Redmond's series of small portraits of houses picked out in computer-programmed embroidery. As with those scale-model ocean-liners assembled from match-sticks, one can appreciate the effort, while wonder at the point. And one floor up, reached via the militaria department and so far removed from the rest of *The New Zealand House* that it should have been given refugee status, was an abbreviated version of Wellington City Gallery's Ernst Plischke exhibition. Rather strange to be ushered into the presence of an émigré from Nazism with "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*" ringing in one's ears ...

Models for Living, then, did not get much in the way of contextual assistance from its exhibition mates. Visitors had to make what sense they could of the displays, and the rewards offered by a 'reading' of the models were probably a function of design literacy. In this respect at least, the exhibition visitors' books were interesting documents. Some visitors were enthusiastic ("Models are excellent—showing the structure explains it all", wrote one), some were dismissive ("Flat-roofed houses are impractical"), and the odd one clearly was odd ("Life is difficult—but we are here to live peacefully"). A few visitors lamented the exclusion of certain architects ("Athfield? Walker?"), and some regretted the absence of topography ("The models are well done—but what about the site? Is lack of context a typical NZ response?").

"It would be great if the models were on turntables, as you needed to see the work as whole," wrote another visitor. An intelligent point, if rather naïve: without sturdy protection the white models would have been tagged or bagged before one could say Vladimir Cacala. (An exaggeration? In one





visitors' book the message "Yo fuk yo, Black Power" was exceptional not for its obnoxiousness but its legibility.) What may have been in the back of some visitors' minds was the exhibition of architectural models of contemporary Japanese houses presented by Auckland's Objectspace gallery last June. At that small exhibition, also curated by Charles Walker, viewers could practically poke their noses into the standalone white card models.

At the Objectspace exhibition there were some misgivings about 'object architecture' but also a more relaxed appreciation. What made Auckland Museum's model show more contentious is that it was closer to home. *Models for Living* mated objectification with canonisation—an alliance sure to alienate those who know too little (much of the public) and those who know too much (all the architectural Nick Hornbys with their lists of top Kiwi houses).

Apart from anything else, *Models for Living* prompted a stimulating consideration of the issue of how architecture can be displayed. We all know there's no substitute for being there, and we all realise being there is often impossible. Having witnessed the effort that went into the preparation of *Models for Living*, I prefer to take the glass-is-half-full approach. Perhaps the exhibition was oversold (canny marketers always under-promise and over-deliver) but attendance was a reasonably happy experience—if not a haptic one.