



View of living space

Grace and McCrae Houses: A Review

Paul Walker

The Grace house is small, two storeys, built for a single occupant in the garden of an old Auckland villa. It seems straight forward, even elegant. One simple gabled form contains a garage, kitchen, and toilet and shower downstairs; bathroom and bed up. A second volume, single storey, houses the living room and, separated by a wide sliding door, a sun room-cum-spare bedroom. All the rooms are in fact well disposed to catch sunlight and views – even from the bath tub, I suspect, a view may be had of the top of Mt Eden – while the building organises the site intelligently to create a forecourt at front and a small private garden at back. Fenestration is generous, well-proportioned, disciplined. Materials, colours and finishes are disciplined too: dark-stained weatherboards, corrugated metal roof and white-painted trim outside, more white paint and ply-wood surfaces inside. All in all this is apparently a house of commodious simplicity.

But a taste for simplicity seldom lasts for long and it is some time now since we were taught that the zero degree of formal rhetoric is the most contrived position of all.

This tastefully minimal house is, then, not quite the open book, the black and white thing, it first appears to be. It is not simple. It is over-detailed. It is occupied not just by a modern, economical sensibility, but also by all kinds of associations and memories, that dull patina called 'meaning'. Amongst others, the ghost of a Bachelardian archetypal house lurks here, though there is no fireplace for it to gather at. The garage has become the densely unknown chthonic space that the cellar used to be. Its unseen interior (there are no windows and I did not go into it on my visit) and the machine it shelters have a palpable presence in the house by dumbly intruding into it – you have to move along and past the garage negotiating your way into and then through the place. Attics, those other essential attributes of the story-book house, have a presence of sorts here, too, in the upstairs bedroom and porch overlooking the roof over the living spaces below. These have somehow slipped out of the vertical equation of the oneiric house, preferring the existence of a cottage in a garden to anything more urbane.

Nooks and crannies are necessary for the accumulation of domestic memories. There

are many of them in the Grace house – sills, bays, shelves. It is over-detailed. A sort of zone in the house alongside and under the stair (clear in the plan) has accumulated these small places. There is plenty of storage, plenty of space for family secrets or for dead vacuum cleaners and other skeletons in the disciplined consumer's cupboard.

If this building is intrigued by ideas of houses that are essentially literary (and I think this may have been instigated in part by the client who, for instance, insisted on going upstairs to go to bed) it is also preoccupied, to a degree, with high architectural ideas. These, also, have a distinctly retro flavour. The stair participates in the dreamy psychology of the house, but by occupying its own distinctive form rather than being tucked into the rest of the house fabric it also partakes in that kind of architectural modernism in which the chief adornment of the body of the building is its dismemberment. The interesting New Zealand architecture of the sixties was of this kind. The house seems mindful of this period not only in its articulation and re-articulation of elements but in various other ways too – roof pitch and window proportions and placement have a 'Christchurch school' flavour. The materials and colours can take us back further still, to a strain of creosoted 'Georgian' suburban houses of the forties and fifties on the one hand, and to Vernon Brown's Auckland sheds of the same time on the other. By inviting us to make these comparisons the Grace house indicts its own assertion of simplicity: here, black and white are merely shades of grey.

The McRae house in Judges Bay appears to engage in many of the same games as the Grace house. It also looks back to the suburban domestic architecture of the fairly recent past. The vertical boards, window and door treatments, and even the direct relationship of house and car are reminiscent of the expansive suburbia of twenty-five years ago.

But unlike the Grace house and unlike those sixties houses which in part it mimics, the McRae house is not composed within any vision of coherent domesticity. Consider, for example, the dining room: it has no obvious, direct relationship with the other living spaces but is so immediately connected to the parking deck adjacent as to be an extension of it. You eat in the garage. Guests can drive in for dinner.

The kitchen and dining area has its own wooden volume. Likewise, the bedrooms and the bath have their own separate box, as does the living areas half a storey down from entry level. There is no interaction in plan between them. From the exterior, too, each zone maintains formal independence – at least in the drawings of the house – through different roof treatments. The dining space is to have three steep top-lit truncated pyramids above, the living room two rows of hooded skylights. The bed/bath box is already asserting its individuality with a butterfly roof, floating on glass as they always do. The butterfly is, of course, also an inversion and

rejection of the gable which is almost inevitably used on New Zealand houses to contain whatever formal work may be occurring below.

All of this is not to say, however, that the McRae house is not composed or lacks coherence. But such composure as it does have is derived from the abstract disposition of its forms and not from the iconology of a typical or an archetypal house. But this suggests, again, a rather atavistic quality. These days formal procedures are usually set up only so their rules can be distorted or violated. This does not happen here.

Central to the composition of the building is a three storey tower made of block as opposed to timber, painted baby blue with blotches. Though it looks like a vertical circulation core to nowhere from the outside, it in fact contains three small stacked rooms, the purpose of which – apart from filling a formally necessary shape – is, as we say now, 'undecidable'. (The architect has, as a matter of course, assigned uses to them.) This oddness marks the whole house.

The Grace house and the McRae house are interesting insofar as they deploy – to rather different ends – forms which purport to be a-semantic as well as repertoires of recent, domestically charged architectural motifs. But in neither is anything overt.