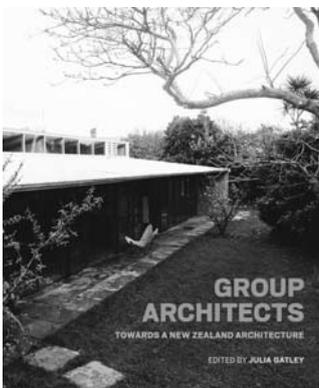


Group Architects:

Towards a New Zealand Architecture

Edited by Julia Gatley

Review by David Mitchell



Gatley, J. (Ed.). (2010). *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

Every year another monograph or two is published on the work of contemporary New Zealand architects, and we can only welcome these additions to our national library. They are, however, generally produced – at least in part – by the architect who is the subject. This casts a critical shadow over the writing. If content does not firmly reinforce the main character, it will not grace the page.

Group Architects are now historical figures, and no such limitation constrains writing about them. Julia Gatley has assembled writers eager to cast new light or new interpretations on the Group. *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture* is the first comprehensive presentation of Group Architects' work. It is a major document in our architectural history, a handsome book and a pleasure to read. The authors are a generation or two removed from their subjects, which gives freshness to their views, and a chance to re-open questions older commentators might have thought settled.

The book is admirably rich in illustrations, with many archival photos, and excellent new ones by Simon Devitt and Paul McCredie. Plans of most of the houses have been cleanly redrawn, and some revealing drawings by the architects are included. Seeing a great deal of the Group's work in a single book clarifies their strengths and, it should be admitted, a few of their shortcomings.

Julia Gatley is the editor, and the largest contribution comes from thoughtful writing by her and Bill McKay. The work is amplified in various (not closely related) ways by other writers, most of whom are architectural academics with strong links to their topics in the book. All the work has been thoroughly researched, carefully annotated, and presented with the visual and the written material in a pleasing balance. The book is academically strong, but readily accessible to any intelligent reader interested in architecture and the people who make it.

The story of how a handful of stropic post-War students rebelled at architecture school, wrote a manifesto, designed and built their own first houses, and very rapidly stamped their brand on New Zealand architecture is retold here. Julia Gatley then presents an ordered and rewarding analysis of the forms of significant Group houses from 1948 until 1968.

Gatley rarely passes judgement, and her even-handedness with the Group's commercial and public buildings is perhaps over-generous. Their row housing for the Navy at Devonport, cut loose in a suburban paddock, looked almost as gauche in its preferred drawn version as in the built one. It seems to have sent Bruce Rotherham overseas for good. The failure to submit their Sydney Opera

House Competition entry will not be regretted by many, and the Flanshaw Shopping Centre design seems as cheerless as Plischke's designs for Naenae 10 years earlier.

It is the houses and the house-like buildings (kindergartens and an ambulance station) that are most convincing. The Group was destined by fate or desire to do their best work in the suburbs, to build a reputation on buildings few have seen, enlarged by the articulate utterances of the charismatic Bill Wilson.

The nationalist desire of the Group to invent a New Zealand architecture was paralleled in New Zealand literature and art. Francis Pound presented a sustained discussion on this theme in his recent book, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity* (2009). Gatley and McKay avoid the jingoistic overtones of the term nationalist, referring to the Group as regionalist. Set against international movements in architecture, there is a provincial ring to the regional, which promises recognition no wider than the country of its birth. Perhaps New Zealand was big enough for the Group. Some architects here (like Ernst Plischke) saw the Group as little more than a sideshow to the great parade of Modern Architecture. As McKay and Gatley point out, some very good local and *émigré* designers in Auckland were contemporaries of the Group. Why, they seem to wonder, did earlier writers "marginalise" these people in favour of the Group?

Certainly, the direct connections between teachers and students through several generations in the Auckland School, from Vernon Brown onward, produced "graduates enculturated in the Auckland architectural scene". Certainly, *The Elegant Shed* was regionalist (Mitchell & Chaplin 1984). But the book version of it arose from a television series, and regionalism was at the heart of TVNZ's brief for it. It was the easiest way of ensuring a national audience.

Yet there was more to it than that: mainstream modernism was everywhere in the world architectural press, and one was hard-pressed to find particular distinction in the local version of it, especially while the godfathers of 20th century architecture were still leading the pack. The regionalists here, for all the influences upon them, tried to be particular, and they did produce coherent bodies of work that varied from place to place. They were good to write about, as Gatley and McKay demonstrate. In discussing New Zealand architecture (in relation to the Japanese and the Swiss), Tom Heneghan has pointed out that the world's "recent fascination with Swiss architecture seems to be because it doesn't look like everything, everywhere else. Decades of internalised conversations and internalised references have given Swiss work a self-contained integrity." (2005: 116) That is, perhaps, the regionalist dream.

Kerry Francis writes about the *émigré* landscape architect Odo Strewe's relationship with the Group, pointing out that while Strewe and Wilson worked on the relation between landscape and buildings, and investigated radical constructions in sprayed concrete, nationalism of any kind (including the Group's search for New Zealandness) could not be tolerated by Strewe. Other *émigrés* from Nazism, like Plischke and Kulka, doubtless felt the same. Many of us would now agree with them.

The multiple sources of Group work – in particular the influence of Japanese timber architecture, and also Scandinavian and American architecture – are discussed by Andrew Barrie, exposing the curious irony that men seeking New Zealandness had half an eye off-shore.

Though two of the original members of the Architectural Group were women, neither Barbara Parker nor Marilyn Hart became architects. Gill Matthewson's chapter "House Work" shows that the Group boys were no less chauvinistic than most of their contemporaries. Freddie Hackshaw and Marilyn Reynolds have let fly to Matthewson with some scorching comments about their attitude to housework, to comfort, and to the tastes of the bourgeoisie. Poor Dorothy Catley felt she had to give away all her crystal wedding presents to keep pace with her new Group house!

Brenda Vale makes measured assessments of the structural and thermal performance of the Group's First House in relation to the material used, and compares it with a State house of the same size. It is no surprise really to find the Group house falls short in most respects: minimal shelters tend to be cold, and small open-plan houses make very difficult family homes.

I still see the early Group houses as artworks about the subject of house. Their exposed structures – generally of imported Australian hardwood or Oregon, imported cedar or redwood windows, and floors and linings of timbers from our last millable native forests – hardly expressed the essence of New Zealandness. Even the obsession with uncut sheet linings, producing battened modular planing, was more uncomfortable than it was useful. The prefab systems it mimicked, which were later seriously explored by Ivan Juriss, were, as Brenda Vale says, appropriate to a much bigger mass market than ours. In the late houses of Juriss, all this is gone. The Robertson, Mann and Worrall houses were relaxed, liveable and richly textured.

Paul Walker and Justine Clark add a considered closing chapter to the book in which they reflect on "The Group and the New Zealand Architectural Canon", noting that, "the Group has subsumed a network of ideas pursued by a whole range of architects in New Zealand. Now anyone who was active at the time is almost always located in relation to the Group." (223) Despite its clarifications, this book will probably reinforce that myth. There were at least a dozen other very good architects in Auckland when the Group were working, and most were friends. Time calcifies as much as it dissolves.

In 1959, as a first-year student at the Auckland School, I heard Bill Wilson for the first time, talking brilliantly to a slide show of recent work by the Group. It was a revelation I have never forgotten. The intelligence, erudition and warmth of the man, and the freshness, the zest for construction, and the localism of the work were truly thrilling. It seemed New Zealand architecture had been invented.

Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture brings it all back.

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