

Last Loneliest Loveliest New Zealand at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014

Paul Walker

The presence at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale of a New Zealand exhibition is to be gratefully welcomed. Rem Koolhaas's challenge to the national pavilions at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale was to investigate the impact of modernisation over the past 100 years, and to consider whether any national architectural characteristics still exist. Working in a compressed time frame and with limited resources, the New Zealand curatorial team, led by David Mitchell, have resoundingly responded that there is indeed a unique New Zealand architecture, emergent in a developing synthesis between New Zealand and its Pacific context. This is apparent, they suggest, in pavilion-esque buildings, with highly wrought structures and light-weight enclosures. This view is particularly manifest in the interview with Mitchell in the small, stylish publication that goes with the show (not quite a catalogue, as much of the exhibited work, frustratingly, is not listed) where he reveals the impact of his own Pacific voyages and encounters on his thinking.

Last Loneliest Loveliest is a beguiling exhibition, and it has garnered good reports in the international design media. The trouble is, little in Last Loneliest Loveliest historiographically supports the proposition it makes. Rather, Last Loneliest Loveliest offers an architectural fable as a response to Koolhaas: it does not do the history homework that Koolhaas asked the national pavilions to do. For example, the credentials of various beautiful contemporary houses included in Last Loneliest Loveliest (Mitchell & Stout, Bossley, Clifford, etc) to be considered uniquely New Zealandish are not tested. With articulated structures, elegant assemblages of pitched roofs, timber surfaces, sitting amid trees on sites photographed rhetorically to emphasise isolation (even if they are in suburban or suburbanising locations), all appear to use a language which speaks 'localness' in many other places as well – California, British Columbia, Chile, Queensland, Japan, you name it... Replace the pohutukawa that shroud all those expensive coastal houses with banksias, and Australians could be persuaded they were on North Stradbroke. An expanded Pacificness perhaps? But then the wealthy coastal hinterlands of Cape Town or Perth could just as easily be cited as places where this work could claim a home. If The Group could be aware, as they appear to have been, of the ironies in their seeking of localness just as the world at mid-20th century impinged on New Zealand to an unprecedented extent (after all, they sent their manifesto for endorsement to Richard Neutra) why cannot the current neo-Group-cum-Bay Region stylists? Do not these beautiful houses which speak New Zealand for the curatorial team for Last Loneliest Loveliest rather express a kind of internationalised fantasy of the good life – psychological distance and withdrawal – implying all the resources needed to make it viable? It appears indeed to be a fantasy that has been assigned by the international design media to New Zealand architecture to fulfil, just as New Zealand landscapes fulfil a certain role in international film production. Does anyone think The Last Samurai or Avatar are local cinematic culture?

On the other hand, the non-domestic buildings in the show often have a complexity beyond the Pacific-lightness-structures-and-cladding line they are made to toe. Mitchell points to the connection of the staircase structures in Peter Beaven's Lyttelton Road Tunnel Administration building to 1950s Japanese translations into concrete of traditional timber building elements. The comparison is persuasive, but the hulk Beaven's piers held up was more Chandigarh, don't you think? Miles Warren indeed said that the complex, internally exposed roof structures of the University of Canterbury Student Union were a kind of structural knitting learned from how New Zealand carpentry puts sticks of wood together. But he has also emphasised the significance of learning

about masonry in his years in England. The articulated, hybrid structural and constructional approach of early Warren & Mahoney resonates most strongly not with other work in New Zealand or the Pacific, but with the English, 1960s post-Brutalist work of Howell Killick Partridge and Amis, a practice formed by the architects who had been Warren's senior colleagues in the London County Council architects' department. Equally, the walls of John Scott's Futuna, and the stones of its paved floor and monumental altar – as important to its architecture as the flayed gables of its roof – link it to the 1950s Hawkes Bay masonry work of Maurice Smith and Len Hoogerbrug (and maybe thereby to another moment of New Zealand trans-Pacific fantasy, the strange fixation in pre-war Hastings on Californian Spanish Mission). It is these precise ebbs and flows, the complex movements of cultural and technological flotsam and jetsam, that locate this work historically, rather than some generic 'Pacifinness' whose operations are simply left unexplained.

So forget Last Loneliest Loveliest as history. It isn't. Is it nevertheless a good exhibition? It's certainly pleasurable.

Some things are unconvincing. The Cardboard Cathedral (Shigeru Ban) and the Auckland City Art Gallery (FJMT & Salmond Architects), a famous name and the winner at last year's World Architecture Festival, seem to be here just to jolly things along. The separation of these two projects spatially and visually from the rest of the exhibition rather suggests that they are indeed incidental. But Mitchell bravely asserts they belong on account of being light, pavilion-like and Pacific-y, as if working in Auckland or Christchurch made FJMT and Ban come over all New Zealandish. It doesn't wash. A glassy pavilion for an art gallery is perverse, and the money spent on building an extravagant entry point (for that is what it really is) for ACAG is a scandal when the project did not stretch to at least one really big, flexible exhibition space. FJMT's Richard Francis-Jones has made another highly-wrought bauble, more in keeping with the Gucci and Louis Vuitton goodies you can now buy on Queen Street than the spin given to the other 'New Zealand' buildings in Last Loneliest Loveliest.

But nevertheless Last Loneliest Loveliest is engaging. The buildings and images it has found and brought together, familiar and unfamiliar, are beautiful. They tell a story, but it's a fable rather than history. A fable about what New Zealand architecture could once have been – Last Loneliest Loveliest lost? The fragmentary nature of the various pieces – the artwork 'Oceania' by Kim Meek featuring a map of the Pacific with its human crossings; a whata-a-rangi containing a model of the Auckland War Memorial Museum; the highly curated selection of work on the surfaces of the mylar tent; the ending of the exhibition in an intricate and clever student project installed on a tower which reputedly models "new timber technology being developed after the Christchurch earthquakes"; beautiful brooches made by Miriam van Wezel – suggest the craftedness, the confection, the aesthetic swoon of the thing, made swoonier still by its being set up in a luscious Venetian location. In many ways Last Loneliest Loveliest is a return to and development of themes in Mitchell's *The Elegant Shed* of 1984. That book's episodic structure – drawn no doubt from its origins in a television series – suggested that New Zealand architecture had to be thought of as a congeries of local architectural genealogies and trajectories. It left the inference to be drawn that there were others to find and unpack. This was not just good story-telling, it was good history-writing. In particular, New Zealand's Venice show is a continuation of the Auckland chapter of *The Elegant Shed*: after all, it was Auckland that drew Kipling to sigh "last, loneliest, loveliest".

But here's the rub. The story is now singular, so it has a certain burden to be coherent. Auckland has doubled in population in the past three decades; it looks and feels like a city in a way that it previously hadn't. It has all the opportunities and discontents of a city, and hundreds of thousands of recent migrants with experiences of urban life in Asia. Mitchell's show – while not history – nevertheless looks too much to a past view of New Zealand's architectural prospects; it has nothing to tell us directly about the possibilities wrought by the change most manifest in the sheer growth in

Auckland's population and cultural diversity. Sure, it's implied: the size and the extravagant sites of those new pavilion-ish houses under the pohutukawa trees have been afforded by the proceeds that successful Auckland – or international – enterprise now yields for a few. But this is rather veiled by the nostalgic pleasure that we have all recently taken in the design of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, from which these houses draw. We are not asked in *Last Loneliest Loveliest* to consider the conditions (of contemporary capital) that make such extravagance possible.

Thirty years ago, *The Elegant Shed* astutely stated that the story it told was particular, and that, as Mitchell put it, "some fine buildings and some excellent architects have had to be left out because their work has not fitted the story I have chosen to tell". No doubt the limitations of the exhibition format are even more pressing than those of a book, the need for the message to be singular made yet more urgent by the constraints under which the curatorial team operated to get *Last Loneliest Loveliest* to Venice. But in one place *Last Loneliest Loveliest* does break from its general disavowal of complexity and its fixation on loveliness, to point to the contemporary city. Just as *The Elegant Shed* ends astutely by looking forward through the work of the most inventive architectural graduates of the 1980 generation – Noel Lane and Rewi Thompson – so *Last Loneliest Loveliest* gives a privileged spot to the work of a recent new talent. Frances Cooper's 2013 MArch project 'Architecture of the Synthetic, the Spectacular and the Belligerent', for the urban reclamation of Auckland's Wynyard area, proposes a littoral city that is both urbane and artificial. It doesn't forget previous generations of architectural indulgence about landscape and pavilion typology but – including them as citations amongst a repertory of other architectures, histories, fables – nor does it simply repeat them.



photo credit: John Gollings