

TOM COLLINS, WITH ANDREW DOUGLAS

Spectral urbanism

INTERSTICES 22



Fig. 1 Whites Aviation (1965).
Construction of the southern
motorway viaduct, Newmarket.
[Photograph, WA-63226-F,
Alexander Turnbull Library,
Wellington]

An estimated 15,000 houses disappeared from the path of the motorway network implemented in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland during the 1960s and 1970s, each forcibly acquired and demolished by the New Zealand government.¹ Substantially emptying parts of the inner-city suburbs of Grafton and Newton, and displacing some 50,000 residents in the process, this action was justified by the government as “slum clearance.”² Over the following decades, the Central Motorway Junction proceeded to erase its own destructive origin from Auckland’s collective memory through additions, planting, and a general habituation to the ‘new reality.’ Invariably, urban violence became historical indifference.³

Renovation as storytelling

This violence cannot be undone, and although Auckland will bear the motorway’s concreted and asphalted scars long into its future, an ameliorating justice can be achieved by summoning up a deeper grasp of history and place here. This project intends such a contribution in the form of an architectural proposal for a historic wallpaper archive facility and a pedestrian bridge permitting traversal to one of the now forested but otherwise inaccessible traffic islands at the centre of Grafton Gully’s motorway interchange. What links these two programmes is

the recalling of lost histories: the first relating to wallpaper samples recovered from now lost or renovated villas and bungalows; the second delivering physical as well as imaginative access to the precise site of a lost villa in the Gully itself. While the proposal is speculative (although not unbuildable), it enacts a form of tangible renovation by re-narrativising a site otherwise shorn of its background stories. Historian of everyday practices, Michel de Certeau, writes, “through stories about places, they become inhabitable. Living is narrativizing. Stirring up or restoring this narrativizing is thus also among the tasks of any renovation.”⁴ Architecture, too, tells stories and stories do more than describe; they put something in motion. At their best, stories make for Certeau an art of *coup*-making; striking a blow or making a cut.⁵ In this they carry a certain *mētis*—what the Greeks thought of as practical wisdom or cunning.⁶ As such, this creative design research has sought to cunningly cut through the brute mundanity of this transport corridor, finding in it a turning point from which an original violence can be made perceivable. If, as Certeau argues, “[*m*]ētis in fact counts on an accumulated time, which is in its favour to overcome a hostile composition of place,”⁷ it is through an amassing of stories that I have sought to renovate the infrastructural mass and indifference cemented into the Gully.

The implanting of a wallpaper archive here, at the base of the city’s oldest cemetery, offers, through the most fragile of historical traces, a pivot calling up an ocean of lived settings and interior moments. Against the absurdly vast nature of the transport infrastructure defining this place, the catalyst for the archive is in fact the need to house, beyond a couple of cardboard boxes precariously holding them, wallpaper samples gathered informally by Salmond Reed Architects since 1994 (Fig. 2). Salvaged by the architects from historic building alterations, the collection was eventually analysed and catalogued by an archaeologist with the ambitious aim of providing a working measure for New Zealand’s interior colonial heritage.⁸

Fig. 2 Tom Collins (2022). Salmond Reed Architects’ provisionally stored historic wallpaper collection. [Digitally edited photograph]



Coiled beneath the Grafton Bridge

Yet a consolidation and protection of wallpaper traces in the recovering bush of Grafton Gully adjacent to a cemetery, a quarter of which was destroyed by motorway construction in the 1960s, is half the story.⁹ The wallpaper archive is coupled with a new pedestrian bridge, both of which compose, in plan, an open circle, and a tangent (Fig. 3). While the archive’s poured in-situ concrete volume references the existing Grafton Bridge arching overhead—itsself an

innovative ferro-cement structure at the time of its completion in 1910—the pedestrian bridge is a timber and steel structure that projects outwards from the archive, circling beneath Grafton Bridge, but above the motorway, before reversing at a tangent back towards the motorway island (Fig. 4). The lightweight framing and diagonal bracing of the pedestrian bridge recall an earlier timber and cable-stayed bridge constructed in 1884 but demolished to make way for its ferro-cement replacement.



Fig. 3 Tom Collins (2022). Wallpaper archive and pedestrian bridge site plan, aerial photographs from 1963 and 2017. [Digital collage]

Fig. 4 Tom Collins (2022). Site model, western bridge embankment at rear, scale 1:500. [Expanding foam, rubber, MDF, acrylic, paint, recycled weatherboards, 520x520x600 mm]



The plan form of the proposed architecture also nods to the turning circle of a car at speed, a key determiner of the curvilinear language of the motorway itself. Contrarily, the structure of the pedestrian bridge intends a delicate filigree found with the prospect-gathering nature of the verandas of villas and bungalows—the typology that overwhelmingly constituted Auckland's lost suburbs (Fig. 5). If traditionally the veranda is reserved for the front elevations, themselves shielding and shading private domestic spaces behind, the proposed freestanding bridge imagines itself as a detached veranda whose inwards-facing orientation makes apparent both the absence of a supporting house and the outward scattering of suburban housing made possible by the motorway and suburbanisation it enables. By marking out a territory of absence this way, the bridging architecture



Fig. 5 Tom Collins (2022). Motorist's perspective looking south, underneath the interlocking bridges. [Digital collage]

Fig. 6 Tom Collins (2022). Wallpaper archive vault interior. [Digital render]

Fig. 7 Tom Collins (2022). Car interior, passing underneath the bridge. [Digital render]

implies a kind of Bermuda Triangle, a place of disappearance but also mysteriousness as lure.

Visitors enter the archive from the lower cemetery's existing Waiparuru Nature Trail, before walking counter-clockwise, as if back in time, down a curving corridor towards a skylit vault (Fig. 6). Inside the vault is a wall of vertical file drawers containing the wallpaper collection. With capacity to expand, an amalgamation with parallel collections, such as that held by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, is imaginable. The archive's subterranean placement sees the wallpaper fragments secured within the cemetery's burial ground—a worthy and appropriately colonial resting place. Here, a deathly connotation fittingly recalls the houses from which they were torn, and indeed, the houses that once belonged to the site.

Access to the pedestrian bridge and the journey out into the Gully are achieved through a clockwise reversal up a ramp to the archive's roof. From there, visitors step across onto the timber bridge traversing through the bush before emerging from the treetops to walk out over the motorway. At a tangent point positioned directly above the motorway's centreline, the bridge's two mono-pitched roof profiles come together to create a homely gable, complete with a crowning finial (Fig. 7). If this makes apparent the lost villas of this place, the finial references that provocatively used by Peter Middleton on his own modernist house formerly located only a stone's throw away but forcibly relocated with the motorway's arrival.¹⁰

At the pedestrian bridge's furthest end, descent to the motorway island is contained within a villa-esque volume, itself extruded upwards from the precise footprint of one of the demolished houses previously occupying the Gully (Fig. 8). Formed by an open-framed structure and clad externally in suspended metal mesh, this curtained facsimile of the villa houses an elevator and an in-situ concrete staircase cast using aggregates from the earth excavated for the wallpaper archive. In this way, the architecture's materiality suggests a subterranean closing of the loop initiated by the aerial walkway above.



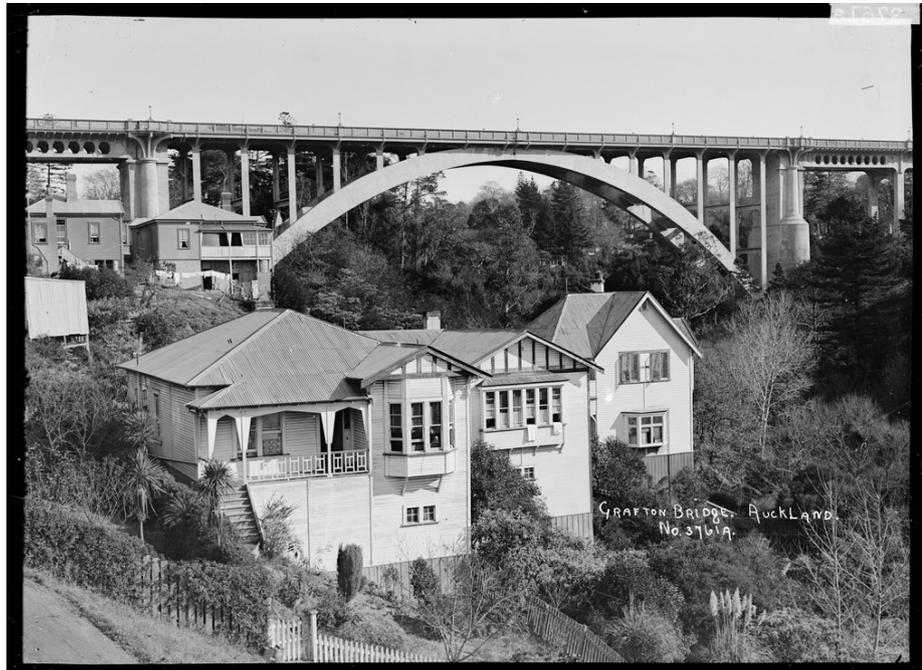


Fig. 8 William Archer Price (ca. 1913). Houses of Grafton Gully, eventually to be cleared. The footprint of the rear centre-left house has been extruded in the proposed architecture. [Photograph, 1/2-001653-G, Alexander Turnbull Library]

The motorway island itself is a contradictory place: on one hand, it has been isolated from occupation for decades, and has consequently grown into a pseudo-Eden, suggestive perhaps of Aotearoa’s pre-human occupancy. On the other hand, it is continuously surrounded by traffic, noise, and exhaust fumes—a far cry from any paradisaical or arcadian ideal. What visitors may do on the motorway island is difficult to say and I have imagined it as a kind of vacancy—a place to be singularly beheld and experienced much like the “Zone” in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979). In this way the architecture can be understood as an approach or frame for beholding whatever kind of ‘nature’ this recovering place is becoming. Like Grafton Bridge upon its construction in 1910, at stake is an attendance upon a “historic ground newly revealed beneath its span.”¹¹

Philosopher Martin Heidegger argues that bridges offer something of a spatial and elemental knotting together of what he terms “the fourfold.”¹² As he puts it, the bridge “allows a space into which earth and heaven, divinities and mortals are admitted. The space allowed by the bridge contains many places variously near or far.”¹³ To Heidegger’s claims I would add that bridges also span time, and do so across times both near to and far from the present. Historian Helen B. Laurenson writes, “bridges such as those over the Grafton (Cemetery) Gully and the Waitemata Harbour not only represent a connection with the future, they also symbolise the metaphorical span of memory. They are a link by which the present can revisit the past.”¹⁴ Following Laurenson, the journey to the motorway island can be understood, beyond the obvious spatial displacement it makes possible, as being both temporal and cognitive. It permits a journeying both backwards and forwards in time, arriving at a realm where the past is remembered and the future is made imaginable anew.

This temporal journey draws on the spiralling narrative of Chris Marker’s science-fiction film *La Jetée* (1962). In it, a man haunted by a vivid childhood memory he can’t quite grasp—the image of a woman and the shooting death of a stranger running towards her on the airbridge at Paris Orly Airport—is

made the subject of experimental time travel in the aftermath of World War III. Circumstances eventually require the man to choose refuge either in the future or the past. Lured towards the latter by the prospect of renewed love, he discovers, too late, that the man being shot in his childhood memory is in fact his future adult self. As such, *La Jetée* reveals, amongst many things, the inevitability of the past's complex hold and return.

Reworking this temporal complexity, I imagined the pedestrian bridge of my own project similarly luring visitors backwards in time against the grain of an infrastructural rush towards the future Auckland has willed for itself. The draw in this case is the false memory of a precolonial Eden used to market settler life in Aotearoa, but now curtailed in this setting to a series of motorway islands—so it is told, themselves once harbouring fruit orchards surrounding the houses of the Gully.¹⁵ This bounteousness, of course, cannot help but be tangled up with arcadian visions that have so coloured and corrupted the colonial and suburbanising projects run up in New Zealand, and for which the motorway network is a further enabler. In another correspondence, the pedestrian bridge of my project *is* the airbridge at Orly airport—the site where the past shows up in an accounting that perpetually undercuts the present.



Fig. 9 Tom Collins (2022). Descent onto the unknowable terrain of Grafton Gully's forested motorway island. [Digital collage]



Fig. 10 Tom Collins (2022). Model arrangement, western bridge embankment on left, scale 1:100. [Timber balusters, timber moulding, wallpaper, MDF, concrete, steel, thread, stocking, polymer, acrylic, paint, 2400x1050x1000 mm]

A note on representation

Lure and lapse then are the gestures driving the project (Fig. 9). I have concluded that representing the motorway island betrays it. In this I have followed Paul Carter's argument, that in making place for things, it is best to "leave what is done unfinished, fuzzy round the edges, ambiguous and subject to growth and decay."¹⁶ While I have deployed the past as lure, Carter's advice on place-forming indicates how incompleteness is also lure for that yet to come. Lapse in fact is leaving open. On this basis I offer another lapse through the project: a refusal of all conventional orthographic drawings to represent it. Without plans or sections as such, models and images are left to tell their stories, leveraging along the way off the inscriptions and deviations that persist quietly and secretly here.

In some sense, the ambiguity and abstractions permitted by this media fulfil the architecture's requirement. Through them, *the architecture is constructed in our minds*, recalling the past and daring us to challenge the future. By seeking to house the city's collective memories and ambitions, the project enacts both memorial and future-building functions through its re-narrativisation of a past once lost.

NOTES

- The Middleton House, Grafton (1960–61) and Waitatarua (1968–69),” *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 31, no. 3 (2021): 307, 312.
11. Laurenson, “Myths and the City,” 180.
 12. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
 13. Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking.”
 14. Laurenson, “Myths and the City,” 171.
 15. “Orchards Robbed. Barefaced Intruders. Clean Sweep of Crops. Grafton Gully Properties,” *New Zealand Herald*, 19 December 1932, 12.
 16. Paul Carter, *Places Made after Their Stories: Design and the Art of Choreotopography* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2015), 7.
1. Patrick Reynolds, “Driving History,” *Architecture Now*, 25 July 2012, <https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/driving-history/>.
 2. Reynolds, “Driving History”; Helen B. Laurenson, “Myths and the City: A Social and Cultural History of Auckland, 1890–1990,” PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 2010, 192.
 3. Laurenson, “Myths and the City,” 192.
 4. Michel de Certeau, “Ghosts of the City,” in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 142.
 5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1988), 79.
 6. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, 81–82.
 7. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, 82.
 8. Salmond Reed Architects Ltd, *Salmond Reed Wallpaper Project* (Auckland, 2011).
 9. Martin Jones and Joan McKenzie, *Symonds Street Cemetery Registration Report* (Auckland: Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 2008).
 10. Michael Davis, Julia Gatley, and Gina Hochstein, “Gone West: