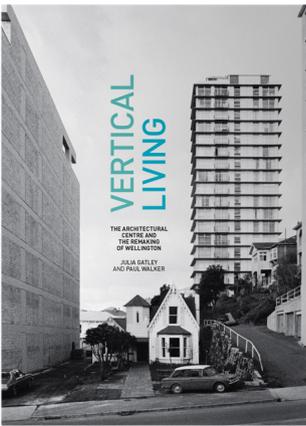


review / MARK SOUTHCOMBE

Julia Gatley & Paul Walker *Vertical Living: The Architectural Centre and the Remaking of Wellington*

Auckland University Press, 2014

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Vertical Living draws together, consolidates and rethinks the histories of the Wellington Architectural Centre interwoven with a wider modern architectural history of Wellington City. The broader intention, as authors Julia Gatley and Paul Walker state, is to begin writing “the city back into the history of architecture in New Zealand” (2014: xi). This is the book’s strength but also its inherent limitation—a strength because it broadens the book’s scope and scholastic intent significantly, yet a weakness because, as the authors acknowledge, the writing of the city into New Zealand history is an undertaking beyond the scope of a single volume.

The first chapters outline the period preceding the Architectural Centre’s establishment. Political and architectural contexts are documented comprehensively alongside major milestone buildings of the city.

Material on the formation of the Architectural Centre follows documenting early meetings and social events in private homes, the support of major governmental design ministries, and the active involvement of public servants, students, artists, designers and architects. It is a vivid picture of a nascent revolutionary institution.

The Architectural Centre had visionary and social underpinnings that sought to counter the institutional culture of the 1940s workplace. Its forward-looking focus recognised the need to educate students, architects and a wider audience about the potentials of modern architecture. The Centre walked the talk from the beginning, establishing a series of summer schools focused on both the training of architects and improving the quality of the Wellington built environment. It served as a counterpoint to the perceived deficiencies of the Auckland University College course and the alternative professional training course for architecture. Its focus on architectural education had a wide influence, proving an important impetus for the eventual establishment of a second school of architecture in New Zealand at Victoria University of Wellington.

The book is divided into decade-long chronological sections, themselves organized by themes addressing particular foci pursued by the Architectural Centre. The 1950s and 60s decade section is augmented by a chapter focusing on publication activities of the Centre, particularly the *Design Review* and *The Book* projects.

This chapter, “Bursting into Print” by Paul Walker and Justine Clark, is followed by Damian Skinner’s “The Gallery” where the history of the Centre’s gallery is examined, including its experimental focus, exhibitions, influences and roles. The two decades are further evaluated through consideration of the Centre’s advocacy for designed urban environments, or ‘town planning’ as it was known. This urban focus was taken up through publication and well-known visionary theoretical projects such as *Te Aro Replanned* and *Homes Without Sprawl*, with the latter exhibited in Wellington and toured across other New Zealand cities.

The 1970s and 80s introductory chapter “The Commercial City” is more general. It contains fewer milestone projects and the details surrounding them. The absence of some key projects creates gaps in the architectural history of Wellington City the authors are consciously documenting. Some of New Zealand’s most and least memorable postmodern buildings were built in Wellington at this time, and these remain, defining how Wellington is experienced today. These include big buildings by Warren and Mahoney such as Mercer Tower, 49 Boulcott Street, and the pivotal Bowen House, also Structon’s Sun Alliance Building on the Terrace, the Saatchi and Saatchi building on the corner of Taranaki Street and Courtney Place, the ANZ Centre and the Park Royal, as well as Craig Craig Moller’s integration of Plimmer House cottage into a larger built composition around the same time.

Smaller buildings that would help round out the Wellington City story of that time would likely include projects such as the Willis Street Village by Roger Walker and Moore Wilsons, the latter with its split façade, balancing cube and painted Gravesian murals—perhaps the high point of Ian Athfield’s post-modern period and the beginning of a second phase of the redevelopment of the Te Aro part of the city. The associated chapters “The Centre as a Protest and Lobby Group” and “The Recognition of Heritage Values” partly account for the omission of many key projects of the period. The Architectural Centre’s focus on the buildings lost in Wellington at the time was paralleled by a lack of attention to the new city emerging with the generation of replacement buildings.

Vertical Living’s discussion of the fight for the harbour’s edge in “The Centre as a Protest and Lobby Group” chapter records an important historical period for Wellington that is all the more remarkable in the light of the extent of change that occurred, and the resulting new public access to the waterfront which now exists. An account of how the Architecture Centre effectively lobbied for access to the harbour shows a particular and political shift in the Centre’s activities—a commitment with significant personal cost for the individuals involved. The account of this period would have been deepened by discussion of the design and realisation of the quirky Frank Kitts Park, the first of the major changes to the harbour’s edge.

The final section, “The Nineties and Beyond”, and its three sub-chapters are appropriately focused on major projects around the waterfront, particularly Te Papa Tongarewa, the Civic Square, Taranaki Wharf Precinct, and Waitangi Park, however they miss one of the early big projects—Craig Craig Moller’s huge Queens Wharf Event Centre. While referenced briefly with Frank Kitts Park as part of the Waitangi Park discussion, there is no discussion of the history or design of the Queens Wharf Event Centre itself. The twinned building of the Centre, originally designed as a retail shopping mall, and the sail-shaded public space between

them introduced major public venues to the waterfront. They also formed a gateway from the city to the waterfront and were a catalyst for further public access to the waterfront.

The chapter in the “The Nineties and Beyond” final section, titled “Exhibiting Architecture”, showcases the depth of Wellington’s growing architectural awareness and design culture in a period when the Victoria University of Wellington School of Architecture had become well established and increasingly engaged with the city from its new Vivian Street location. The last chapter of this section, titled “Turning Sixty”, reflects on the period and possible future of the Architecture Centre. Although depiction of the Centre’s more recent projects lacks the elaboration and illustration afforded to the work of earlier years, it shows how the Architectural Centre continues to influence the shape of Wellington City today.

Vertical Living’s intention to begin articulating an urban New Zealand architectural history is an ambitious and valuable undertaking. The pairing of the Architectural Centre and its history with the wider, evolving city has resulted in a rich and rewarding narrative. Inevitably the dance between the histories of the Centre and the city results in some divergence, for the former remains a critical and aspirational mirror of the latter. As such their correspondence must remain an ongoing project.

Through Gatley and Walker’s scholarship, the Wellington of today can be seen as a city with a self-aware design history. This arose substantially through the ideas and actions of a group of politically astute architectural advocates. City change has clearly been influenced by a series of public activities, events and publications the Architectural Centre orchestrated across a 70 year period. *Vertical City*, in its documentation of the operation of the Architectural Centre and the parallel growth of Wellington City, is also a valuable contribution to wider discourse on city growth and change over time.

REFERENCES

Gatley, J. , Walker, P. (2014).
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