

review / JOHN WALSH

The Auckland School: Celebrating the centenary of the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning. Gus Fisher Gallery, 8 September–4 November 2017

INTERSTICES 18

Michael Milojevic, Lucy Treep, Andrew Barrie, and Julia Gatley; Exhibition designers: Michael Milojevic and Lucy Treep



Photograph, Sam Hartnett (2017)

The University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning is such a mouthful it's no wonder it is commonly abbreviated. But "The Auckland School" is not just convenient shorthand; it's a sobriquet that expresses affection and denotes distinctiveness. And that's fair enough: the school is the alma mater of a majority of this country's architects, it does have a particular character, and for nearly half of its existence it had no local peer. The school has a lot of history, exactly a hundred years' worth, in fact, and that's an anniversary that was duly acknowledged in *The Auckland School: Celebrating the Centenary of the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning*, an exhibition at the university's Gus Fisher Gallery.

This was a survey show, necessarily and overtly so, given its purpose and provenance. The curators stepped up to perform a task that no doubt called for discretion as well as diligence: to present the life and times of the institution

for which they all work. Any institutional history, whether written or exhibited, would seem to have three basic foci: place, people and product. That is, an institution has a physical form that literally gives it shape; personnel who have enlivened it; and “outputs” it has generated. Together, the where, who and what of an institution constitute its identity. They also offer a natural organising principle for curators wishing to show a hundred years of history.

Not surprisingly, *The Auckland School* was thus exhibited at the Gus Fisher Gallery, a challenging venue because of the void at its heart. The foyer occupies so much of the gallery’s available space that it must do its bit to accommodate an exhibition, but it doesn’t make it easy for curators. In *The Auckland School* place and people were exhibited in this foyer, a doughnut of entryway space in which the staff were accorded one side of the room, and students the other. This arrangement was a rational response to an awkward situation, but it had the effect of imposing on teachers and taught a form of apartheid that, surely, was absent, at least in the last half century, from an academic department with its own intense culture, not to say instances of intimate relationships.



Photographs, Sam Hartnett (2017)



Mind you, unfortunate separation could be construed as desirable distance in the case of some artefacts displayed in the vitrine on the staff side of the room—a collection of departmental headshot photos that, in traditional university style, made mild-mannered lecturers look slightly deranged. A wall display of other portraits—paintings, sketches, cartoons and professional photographs—of prominent school figures was kinder to its subjects, and more revealing. One image that stood out was Frank Hofman’s well-known portrait photo of Vernon Brown, the influential mid-century architect and teacher. Brown doesn’t so much sit for the camera, as smoulder in front of it. He sports a Van Dyke beard and there’s a twinkle in his eye; did he have a secret life, one wonders, as High Priest of a suburban coven?

Facing the staff across the foyer were the students, variously captured, down through the years, in unguarded moments and self-conscious poses. From the 1940s there were the boys, among them Ian Reynolds, in sports jackets and

slacks, and the outnumbered girls, in their frocks. Thirty years later, the students are unisexually hairy—hippy-looking and studiously louche. Everything is droopy, except for the sprung mattress coiffure that was already the feisty signature look of Ian’s daughter, Amanda. As the curators of *The Auckland School* understood, you can’t have too many people shots in an institutional retrospective: the old boys and girls of the school were, after all, the core audience.

A sense of place is perhaps harder to convey in a photograph than a sense of person. Even so, a stranger to the school’s history would have struggled to form, in a visit to this exhibition, much of an impression of the school’s built environment. In part, this could be explained by the school’s itinerant progress via several temporary premises to its eventual purpose-built (but rather unloved) home. And maybe there aren’t that many good photos of the school’s buildings.

However, without getting too Churchillian about it—invoking, you know, the old saw about the mutual shaping influence of people and buildings—it would have been useful to get a better sense of the physical context of the school’s pedagogy, especially during the “loose years” of the 1960s and 1970s when the students occupied, in a relatively democratic way, the makeshift studios designed by revered staff member Richard Toy. The Auckland School in that era may have been the closest the New Zealand academy came to expressing the *soixante-huitard* spirit of a tumultuous time.



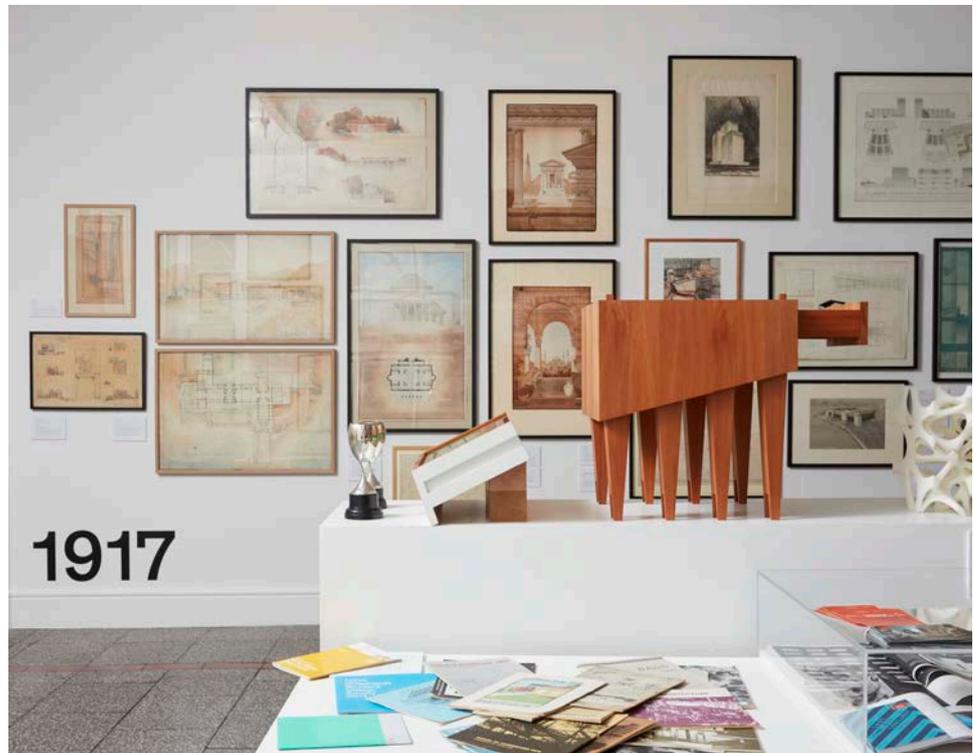
Photographs, Sam Hartnett (2017)



The foyer treatment of place and people was an antechamber to the main event: the presentation of product. The rectangular room that is the Gus Fisher’s largest exhibition space was bifurcated by a double row of vitrines, reliquaries for items such as student sketch books, study papers, publications, including books and journal articles written by staff members, and a few models. So far, so familiar: the contents of these display cases were not that different to those that might be mustered by a humanities department marking a milestone.

But it was a different story, or at least a more compelling one, that was told on the room’s walls. The room was lined with dozens of framed student drawings, hung close, salon-style. This is where much of the curatorial effort, and probably most of the exhibition budget, was spent. That’s understandable: what can an architecture school show that an English department can’t? The display of drawings was

also where the narrative of the centenary exhibition was most apparent, and the energy and identity of the school most clearly expressed. Drawing, in its various media, is integral to The Auckland School's reputation as a design-centric architecture school. At *The Auckland School*, visitors well and truly got the picture.



Photograph, Sam Hartnett (2017)

The student drawings were arranged chronologically, above a dado-line counting off the decades. There were beautiful drawings from the school's Beaux Arts years, when students laboured over their testimonies of study, works such as Reginald Dewar Morgan's *A Small Museum for Maori Relics* from the 1920s, and Mary Dorothy Edward's *Drawing of the Hagia Sophia* from the 1930s. Modernism was announced in WA Gillespie's *Secretariat Building* (1951) and still animated Edward Lawry's *Queen Street* (1965). Julie Stout's *The Water Garden Heart of Auckland* (1985) imagined a relaxed subtropical vernacular later realised in the celebrated Heke Street House she designed with Auckland School notable David Mitchell, while Lynda Simmons' *After Matisse* (1984), a scene suggestive of a steamier clime, was the most sensuous drawing in the exhibition.

The most interesting juxtaposition of drawings occurred in the corner where the display came full circle and very recent student work abutted the painstaking pre-war testimonies of study. The drawings by Raphaela Rose, Frances Cooper and Tessa Forde are as skilful in their execution as their Beaux Arts antecedents, but completely different in sensibility. The satirical point of some recent student projects is sharp enough, perhaps, to test the tolerance of the corporatised academy.

Many of the framed drawings came from the University of Auckland's Architecture Archive, but more came from private sources. The selection criteria weren't declared; presumably, the drawings were chosen for their excellence and capacity to exemplify an era in the school's history. Captions accompanying

the drawings were certainly lengthy, although their placement was not always helpful. The extended captions were the curators' response to those basic exhibition questions: how much should you show, and how much should you tell? How much information is needed, and in what format?

The small point captions demanded much of visitors, especially those from outside the school community. Was *The Auckland School* a closed shop? The curators evidently, and again understandably, wanted to share their research, but members of the public venturing into this public exhibition might well have wished for less detail and more context. A few panels of concise and legible wall text could have served to tie the drawings on the walls, and the exhibits in the vitrines, to the story of a school that has passed through five broad developmental stages: Interwar/Beaux Arts; post-war/modernism; late Sixties and Seventies/vernacularism; Eighties and Nineties/post-modernism; Noughties and Teenies/digitalia.

This schema is a bit simple but quite serviceable, and in fact follows the framework of the centenary publication, *The Auckland School: 100 Years of Architecture and Planning*, which was edited by Julia Gatley and Lucy Treep. There's the exhibition context, and visitors to *The Auckland School* might well have been advised: read the book before you see the show.

