

# Thinking it through

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*This book is dedicated to everyone who has suffered from fundamentalist power*

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# Prologue

Life is wonderful for its richness and complexity. Among six billion people we immediately recognise a friend. Every person is unique and quite distinctive.

In the same way landforms are both astonishingly diverse and yet quite distinctive. When we see the ridgeline of a mountain range we know exactly where in the world we are. Even the forests of the world are astounding for their millions of subtle variations. Seeing nothing more than the trees around us we know where in the world we are standing.

Life is also dynamic and constantly changing. The natural environment is alive. Autumn colours give way to bare branches, but then buds announce the spring. When we see migrating birds flying we know a change of season is on the way. Some birds in contrast stay at home but even then a robin sits on the window ledge to tell us that food is hard to come by in the winter. No day is like any other day. The clouds, the mist, or the light continue to delight us as we see a world we have never seen before, so that without going anywhere the whole world comes to us. We are filled with wonder and awe.

However when human beings seek for power over other human beings and over the natural environment all this changes. Any concentration of power brings the need for simplification. It is just too difficult to cope with everyone's eccentricity, and the rhythms and nuances of nature cannot be captured in any bureaucratic report. Distinctions and dynamic change are either dismissed or simply ignored.

Reductionism is the curse of our time. Our fundamentalist political structures are not only unable to answer the environmental questions which are being asked. They are also destroying our planet in their attempt to reduce nature to something which they can understand. Those with political power fail to see that they will never be able to gain power over nature. Fundamentalism, which even simplifies people, will finally end up destroying us.

A distribution of power is the only chance the world has for survival. The prognosis however is not good. Those with power want more. Those with no power do not want to take responsibility for their own lives because complacency is very comfortable. Most people fail to realise their potential because of the effort involved.

In theory democracy is the political answer. In practice democracy has become just another manifestation of fundamentalism, with a vote which gives power away. A vote is just another form of reductionism.







Architecture has always been closely linked to power. Here too reductionism is the curse of our time. Fundamentalist architecture is everywhere, and, like fundamentalist political structures, it is not able to answer the environmental questions which are being asked. Architects and planners are destroying our planet in an attempt to reduce nature and people to something they can comprehend and control.

This simplification of our built environment has resulted in global placelessness. Everywhere has become like everywhere else. There is little point in going anywhere if you want to take it all with you, particularly if you arrive only to discover that your journey was really not necessary because an architect has been there ahead of you to massage diversity into familiarity.

Democratic architecture is much more than voting for your favourite building while giving power away. Democratic architecture is a tough alternative. Every building could be as unique as every person, but that means each person first discovering who they are rather than wondering who they would like to be.

Vernacular architecture has always been concerned with the distribution of power. Responding to place, culture and occasion comes easily for people who know who they are, and also know and love their place. Local people know their own history, traditions and stories. The bureaucrats who take power away from them understand none of these things. Fundamentalism has neither spirit nor soul.

Climate change is not the world's most significant problem when compared with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism makes it impossible to address issues such as climate change. Simplistic solutions become an excuse for not taking personal responsibility. Achieving a well-ordered universe means going back to first principles and learning from nature. Every person has a unique contribution to make to the world.

These are interesting times to be alive. Reaching limits is no longer a theoretical question. Business as usual is not an option. We all need to think through the way we create our built environment. We cannot leave that responsibility to architects any more than we can leave the intellectual debate to those who like to think of themselves as intellectuals. The only way for us to overcome fundamentalism is to take back the power we have given away, and to learn how to handle that power in an ethical and responsible way.





# F a l l i n g   i n   l o v e   w i t h   l i f e   a g a i n

**H**aving a revolution is never as difficult as sustaining a revolution.

Lighting the first fire is never as difficult as rekindling the old enthusiasm, the old idealism, the old spark, or the old clarity of purpose and direction. Yet a fire which bursts into flame and then dies can be very destructive and offer no creative alternative to what has been destroyed. Keeping the revolution fresh is at least as important as having the revolution in the first place.

When an organisation is established the greatest achievements are often made in the early days when the conditions are at their most difficult. The first generation is totally committed to what they are about. The second generation learns from them and keeps the vision alive. The third generation, who were not part of the revolution, does not understand what it was all about. At this point, if the organisation does not renew its own revolution, it will either destroy itself through the long lingering internal death of becoming tired, or else it will be destroyed through not having the resources to meet the external challenge of some new organisation.

Most of our lives are full of tired revolutions. Tasks which we once tackled with energy and enthusiasm become familiar, commonplace, and finally a little tedious. People who once made our hearts leap with joy, and gave us a great surplus of energy, come to be taken for granted and they no longer catch us by surprise.

A tired revolution will always be overwhelmed by a new revolution, not because new is better, but simply because new is new. Revolution can be an end as well as a means.

Sadly, it is too often not recognised that while the old can be made new, the new can never be made old. An old friend rediscovered has a special richness, depth, and sense of place which weaves them into the context of our lives.

If we did not have a superb post office network serving every remote corner of New Zealand we would be turning the country upside down to achieve one. Because this revolution has been achieved and allowed to grow tired, it is being destroyed by a new generation which has failed to renew the old vision of “penny postage”, along with the old vision of an egalitarian society with health, justice, education and welfare for all. The final sadness is watching the argument over the distribution of “assets” which were created as the result of a love affair.

It is not enough to fall in love once. We need as a nation, and as individuals, to fall in love again and again with what we are about. Reason is no substitute for the spark of love.

A house is a revolution. A house is falling in love with life. A house is both an organisation and a political statement. If a house is none of these things it would be better if it had never been built.

A house can also be a tired revolution. Too many houses have arrived somewhere, but are not going anywhere. Once they were places of energy, enthusiasm and belief. Now they only need to be cleaned.

There is a necessary alternative to either clinging to the stability of a boring and tedious commitment, or discarding the old in searching for a new love affair with another site or house. Just as every person needs to regularly fall in love again with a familiar partner, and every political party or organisation needs to regularly fall in love again with its vision, purpose and direction, so every person needs to regularly fall in love again with their house.

It will not happen unless we make it happen precisely because familiarity prevents us from seeing that it is necessary. We do not notice that criticism has become entrenched or that responses and defence mechanisms have become ingrained. We may even have stopped doing the things that the house was all about, and never even noticed that they have gone.

Falling in love is regaining that special touch of madness which makes it possible to row along a moonbeam drinking champagne for no particular reason beyond the sheer joy of being alive with someone you love. You cannot calculate love.

Falling in love with a house is concerned with being, not doing. Not asking why, but asking why not. Experiencing the sheer joy of being alive in this place, which, because it exists, makes it possible to touch life.

Falling in love does not conceal problems or difficulties, or even really deal with them. Rather a person in love sees problems in a different way, through positive eyes, and in the context of years of fondly remembered good experiences.

Lovers are never bound by convention, so there are no formulae about falling in love with a house. Try taking a holiday at home. Postpone everything which needs to be done, and take time to enjoy what has been done. Sit quietly in the morning and listen to the insects and the birds. Buy a case of champagne and invite a few friends who love this house to talk the evening away remembering old times. Discover that the most wonderful place in the world to be is just where you are.

You will sense success in keeping the revolution fresh when friends notice that you have changed. When they ask what is wrong you will have to confess that you are having difficulty keeping your feet on the ground.



*Falling in love with a house is concerned with being, not doing*



## Context for change

The timelessness of climate, landform or place is one source of architecture and urban design. The transience of political, social and economic ideologies is another.

Seldom had political and economic ideology seemed a more ephemeral source for architecture, and seldom had architecture seemed a more deeply rooted foundation for traumatic and unexpected change than it did in Prague in November 1989.

Spring in Czechoslovakia may well be autumn in New Zealand, but we both have much to learn from the architectural destinies of our seemingly different countries.

In the centre of Prague in 1989 there were no competitive high-rise buildings. The relationship of the city to the river, the castle on the hill, and the surrounding landforms remained visible and coherent. The historical reasons for the city being in this place remained clearly apparent in the urban structure. The interface of the city and the river was given to a wide public promenade, so that people could meet and talk, or fish and feed the swans, in the places which an economist would see as having the highest commercial value.

The whole city centre was pedestrian in scale, and had that rich touchable architectural texture which has been lost in cities which have been “Americanised”. Prague was a delightful city to walk in at any hour of the day or night. Beautiful women strolled alone after dark in a way they could never do, and would never want to do, in New Zealand.

Prague was not frozen in one period of time. The buildings were extremely diverse. Contrasting architectural styles jostled against each other in a way which would seem to be a recipe for chaos. On the contrary, there was an unexpected vitality. In one word Prague could have been described as “civilised”. It had both that depth of culture and “lightness of being” which could also be found in Czechoslovakian films, books or graphics.

Prague could not be dismissed as merely romantic, or lost in nostalgia. If it needed to be linked to a political ideology the city could have been described as “socialist”, because it was first and foremost concerned with the common good. Socialism may well have also saved the city from destruction in the previous twenty years, by protecting it from exploitation. The city however preceded socialism, and needed after the Velvet Revolution to learn to live on, without protection from the pressures of capitalism.

In November 1989 the turning point for the winds of change in Prague began when first the cleaners and then the police refused to remove the signs which appeared above the candles burning beside the blood-stained walls where the “paramilitary” had clashed with the people. Messages began to appear all over the city and within a day or two there must have been a million of them. Everywhere clusters of people gathered to read and to write their replies. The protest which toppled the government was intelligent, well-informed, and highly verbal.

The whole city became a conversation, and the city performed in a thoroughly civilised way. The urban form provided a context for political and economic change. The city was the gathering place of the people. The architecture outlived the rise and fall of communism.

The difficult and complex question was whether the urban form of Prague could survive occupation by market-oriented capitalism and consumerism. Buildings which symbolise the concentration of economic or political power have no concern for the common good.

In a market-driven economy the environment you save remains as a continuing invitation to exploitation, while the environment which has been exploited can never be recaptured for the common good. Protection can only be achieved by a whole society acknowledging what is sacred, not by legislation.

The true architecture of democracy is the vernacular architecture of the people. The tiny bars in Prague which seated no more than eight people, where you needed to squeeze in to be part of the seemingly continuous debate about politics and culture, said more about democracy than any deregulated concentration of power.

There was every reason for hope. Hope within Czechoslovakia, because of the depth of a culture steeped in values as timeless as the Vltava River flowing through Prague. Hope within New Zealand, because we too have developed values which are the envy of the rest of the world, and it is not yet too late to stop them slipping through our fingers. Hope within a world on the brink of ecological collapse, because Czechoslovakia has shown that dramatic, and impossible-to-predict, paradigm shifts are not only possible, but also can seemingly happen overnight.

Change without vision is a recipe for disaster, but change with clarity of vision can be incisive, peaceful, and full of joy. It was interesting to find not economists but rather artists and architects at the centre of the Velvet Revolution in Prague.



*The true architecture of democracy is the vernacular  
architecture of the people*



# Our year, our country, our architecture

By good chance 1990 became much more than a celebration of “our year, our country”. Our year became a time when an unprecedented force of positive creative energy was sweeping the world. Entrenched protest and the politics of confrontation and advocacy had been left behind by the opportunity for visionary change.

As a nation we seemed to have astonished ourselves at our ability to get it right. The emphasis in the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony, for example, on people rather than technology, and simplicity rather than hype, seems to have evoked universal approval. Without surveys, submissions or select committees, creative individuals held up a mirror which our nation recognised as reflecting both what we are and what we want to be.

Another success for the 1990 celebrations was the care with which architecture was not allowed to come between people and experience.

The perfect complement to the winning of three gold medals in a night of cycling was the astonishing Auckland sunset and the magic of a moon hanging in the sky over the velodrome. The silhouette of volcanoes etched against the colours of the dying day provided that perfect sense of “occasion” and “place”, which architects love to talk about.

The magnificent Waitangi landscape only needed to be recognised as an architectural space. It did not need any “enhancement”. The waka reached out into the Bay, not the buildings. Tent city nestled beneath the hills, set back from the sweep of the surf rolling onto the beach. It was enough to sleep within a stone’s throw of the waka. In glades among the trees, across the symbolic bridge, poets and dancers told the story of who we are. Even the symphony orchestra needed nothing more than the supertop, so that the sound of the National Youth Choir drifted across to the contestants in the jigger chop. Good urban design begins with a love of place.

The “urban designers” who chose to have the Games marathon to the east, the cycling road race to the west, the cycling time trial to the south, and the roadwalk in Devonport, demonstrated both skill and sensitivity. Visitors to the Games could experience the form of the city. It is a great tragedy that profit-motivated urban design always comes between people and the experience.

1990 was also a celebration of low-key architecture. Anyone arriving at the entry to the Ardmore Games venue for the shooting was greeted with a VIP welcome. An apology was made when the top car park was full, and free transport was provided from the bottom car park to the gate of the range. Within minutes it was possible to stand beside yet another gold medal winner. The people made the architecture; the architecture did not make the people. Anyone who did not go to the shooting missed out on a wonderful experience.

Princes Wharf became magical architecture during January 1990. People swung on it and clamboured all over it. They hung signs on it and dropped tomato sauce where carpets could have been. The building just laughed and asked for more. At the end of the Commonwealth Games closing ceremony a few thousand people in partying mood, but with nowhere to go, ended up at Princes Wharf. It had become the urban focus of Auckland. All this was much later destroyed by fashionable “hard architecture”. Forming a breakwater out of a floating crane and a barge or two is not an expedient. It is appropriate architecture.

The Games closing ceremony must rate as one of the best parties ever held in New Zealand. The mood was a direct response to a week of commitment and excitement. The atmosphere was electric, but only for those who had taken part in the Games. To be a voyeur at a party is always a disappointment. Even the VIPs in the main stand seemed to be ill at ease with enjoying themselves. For everyone else a Mexican wave was enough to create an architectural space.

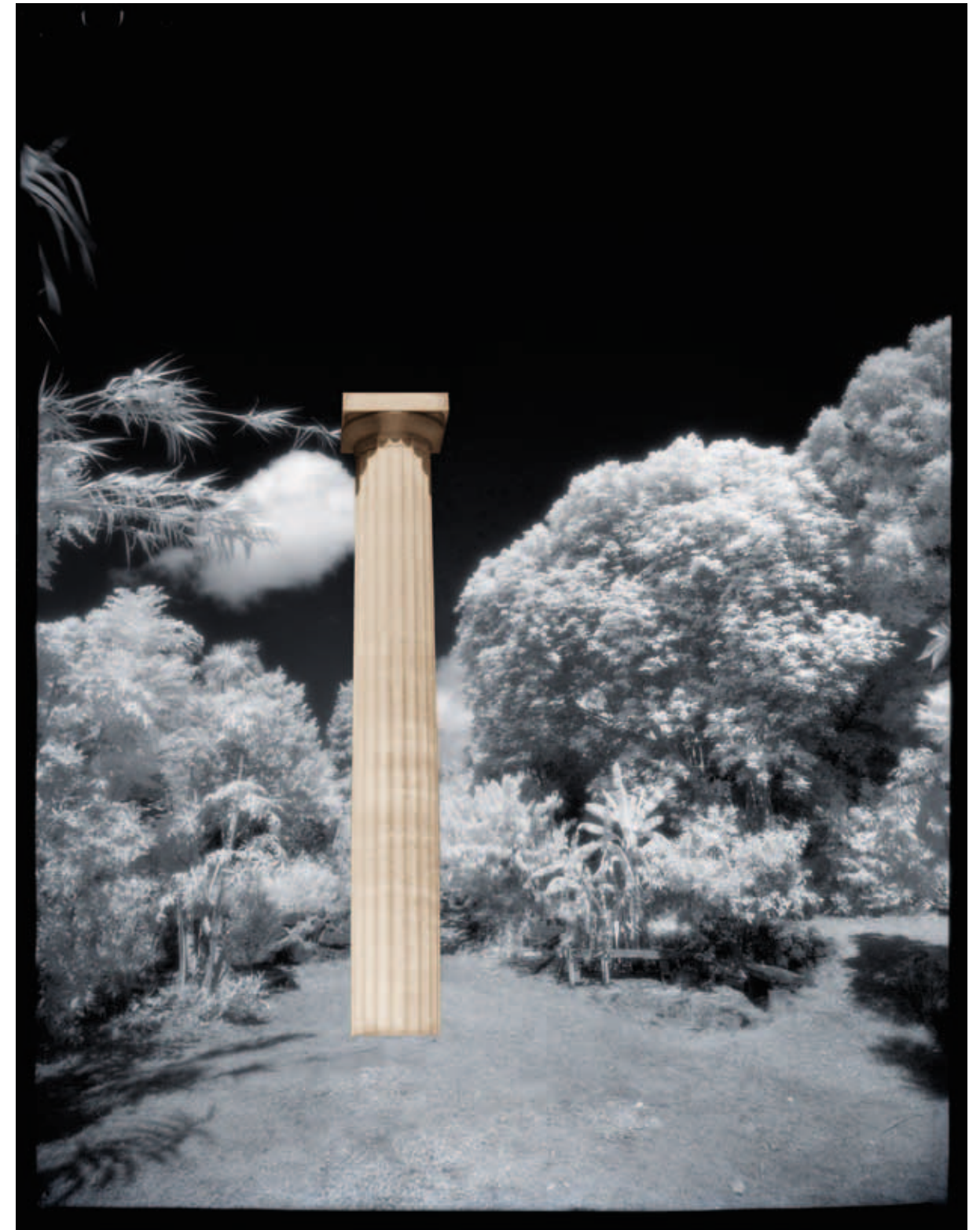
At Kiri’s homecoming the lack of architectural controls enabled people to behave like human beings. Goodwill became a substitute for aisles and barriers.

It was a little chaotic out on the water with 6000 other boats farewelling the Whitbread fleet, but no one would have wanted to be back behind a sheet of plate glass with a television set. The architecture of the harbour is concerned with boats not buildings.

The 1990 celebrations demonstrated again and again that minimal architecture is good architecture. The clarity of the message should have been powerful enough to change the direction of New Zealand architecture.

“Development” and buildings are not an essential first step in making experience possible. Out on the streets 1990 demonstrated that the term “places for people” is really only a euphemism for “places for profit”. Architecture which comes between people and experience makes a profit from charging for the access it has first denied.

The Games judo on the night when Brent Cooper won gold was a contest between philosophies as well as a contest between people. In contrast to others who developed frenetically all over the place, Brent made few moves, but the moves he did make were the correct ones. If we are going to go for a building gold the lessons are obvious.



*Minimal architecture is good architecture*



# B u i l d i n g   r e s e n t m e n t

When a tree is threatened with the loss of its life, who speaks for the tree? When a lizard or a bird or a moth is threatened with extinction, who speaks for the ecosystem? When the world itself is pushed to the brink of disaster, who speaks for our children's children?

Fortunately many people have the ability to see the world, and themselves, from a viewpoint which is different from their own. They speak for the trees, the threatened species, and the right of the world itself to life.

There are, however, many people who cannot see beyond their own world-view. They cannot even see that if the trees, the lizards, the birds, the moths and the world die then the people who failed to care for them will die too.

One of the problems of people who are self-centred is that they cannot even conceive of a person who is not self-centred. They really do believe that all the people who are not like them finally do have a bottom line which is exactly the same as their own. Thus they make personal attacks on people who in fact are only speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. It is a burden which anyone who cares about the environment or the future must learn to carry.

Buildings, like people, tend to be either concerned about themselves or concerned about much wider issues.

1990 provided an opportunity to reflect on closing the gap, which was then becoming a gulf, between those who put banners up in the streets to celebrate the joy of being alive, and those who cut them down to celebrate their own selfishness. 1990 provided an opportunity for us to step outside ourselves and see our nation from another point of view.

The traditional training of an architect was concerned with developing a mind which was able to know, and which sought to know, the agendas of other people. It did not matter how the architect preferred to dine. What did matter was how the client preferred to dine. Beyond the mind of the individual client the professional role of the architect also demanded an ability to enter into the agendas of the community.

One of the failings of architects was that they kept imagining that everyone else was also trying to see the world from other people's point of view. There was a communication gap which was never identified. Discussions always became convoluted when one of the protagonists was an advocate while the other was trying to facilitate a balanced design solution.

Some architects, and perhaps some architectural movements, simply moved to an advocacy role. They built what they wanted. Little wonder that the public was disenchanted with the resulting cities. Catch phrases such as "people places" are no substitute for a design method which is itself a "people process".

In 1990 the single party rule of powerful self-appointed elites was being rejected all over the world. The people on the streets, if not the experts in their offices, recognise that the path to well-designed cities, and well-designed buildings, begins with a society which as a whole has developed an ability to enter the minds of others, and also to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Design is concerned with synthesis and harmony, not advocacy and style.

The problem with architectural democracy is that every building must make a contribution. Every person involved with building must transcend self-interest.

The process begins with an exploration of the way in which other people see our buildings.

Many millionaires imagine that everyone will admire the opulence of their magnificent homes. However those who seek envy will only reap resentment. The reality is that most people admire a millionaire who has the ability to live simply.

Many architects imagine that everyone in the world is waiting for their latest intellectual breakthrough. The reality is that most people prefer a building in which they can feel comfortably at home.

A great deal of simple vernacular architecture is resented by those who see it as a challenge to either their power or their desperate desire for a valuation increase to prop up their insecurity.

Beautiful perspectives concerned with attractive forms, and urban design reports which do no more than advocate the joys of townscape, attempt to conceal the resentment which the final product will generate. Oil tankers and fishing boats do not alienate people from the water's edge. They are part of the "common wealth". On the other hand, private housing and private offices at the water's edge, even when they are brilliantly designed, take that "common wealth" away.

The mood of 1990 demonstrated that no nation in the world enjoys its waterfronts as much as New Zealanders do. The visit of the Whitbread fleet challenged the need for any "development" in a way that no debate could ever have achieved. Yet the opposite of what every Aucklanders had enjoyed was being advocated. "Development" of the harbour edge is still, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, being presented as an essential first step in bringing the city to the water.

The capacity for self-centred architecture to generate bitterness, resentment and alienation should never be underestimated.

Nor should the delight of discovering, when knocking on an unfamiliar door, that the building was expecting you.



*Those who seek envy will reap only resentment*



# It's time to recognise the importance of things that are not negotiable

Setting agendas is always more important than making decisions.

Leaving decision makers to waste their time on irrelevancies while denying them access to real choices is one of the classic techniques of management power play. How frustrating it is to sit on a jury knowing that the truly guilty person has not been brought before the court, or to sit on a selection committee knowing that the successful candidate has already been decided on.

When agendas are set by cultural norms and social attitudes they can simplify our lives, but they can also enslave us. The majority of people probably live out their entire lives following the rules of someone else's game. Their achievement is that they play well. Their tragedy is that they never break the shell that encloses their understanding.

Setting the sustainability agenda is much more important than making decisions about the implementation of sustainable management strategies.

At first glance sustainability seems to be a rather self-evident goal for either a life or a culture. The concept seems simple enough to understand and has only become an issue because we have brought the world close to ecological collapse. We assume all too easily that a sustainable building is one which will last forever.

The temptation is to lay the cloak of immortality on art which seeks to declare eternal truths. We lavish every known technical skill to protect a Rembrandt painting or some other icon of our civilisation. It seems that architects, and perhaps their clients too, dream that their Rembrandts will be assiduously protected by future generations, and achieve immortality.

The connection is seldom made that preservation of one item inevitably leads to the destruction of something else. Every generation has struggled to come to terms with entropy and the tendency towards disorder. Our generation, with its emphasis on the egocentric individual standing apart from the community, has done nothing to make the struggle easier.

Architectural books normally record monuments, noting, like Shelley's traveller, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert". They fail to see the significance of the inscription beneath: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" Shelley seems to be an ecologist rather than a poet when he goes on: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The power of leaving items off an agenda can be matched only by the power of introducing new items onto an agenda. From a time when taboos were many we have come to a time when nothing is sacred. They were fools who gave their lives that we might live.

It is only the flicker of an ecological eye since our whole community understood that national parks were off the agenda. Only those who have read the new Coastal Policy realise that the New Zealand coastline is no longer sacred. Land and buildings are traded along with the values they enshrine and only the sales figures are recorded at the end of each year.

Sustainability has been confused, knowingly or unknowingly, with survival. Sustainability is the concept of handing on to succeeding generations an undegraded planet. Survival is an irrational desire to live on, if necessary at the cost of future generations. Survival management tends to widen agendas and to transgress norms, particularly in times of cultural instability. Hallengraeff observed of phenomena in the natural world: "There is good evidence that an introduced organism finds it much easier to establish itself in a disturbed eco-system than in one that is stable."

Fighters for justice are always less assiduous during economic or ecological recessions. Now ethical standards have themselves become negotiable currency.

In times of great change it is important to declare those cultural values which are not negotiable. Sustainability implies buildings of honesty, integrity and trustworthiness. Sustainability implies buildings with a sense of humour which recognise the human condition.

Instability and insecurity breed violence, and if violence is not acceptable in New Zealand then it is equally unacceptable at every level of our society, and in our architecture too. Sustainability is not possible when a struggle for power is only resolved by a balance of power.

In a dealer gallery it is important to put NFS on those paintings which are simply not for sale.

The world of design is the only public forum where value conflicts can be creatively discussed and creatively resolved. Designers are accustomed to both setting and challenging agendas. Designers routinely resolve conflict by moving outside normal agendas, but at the same time designers realise the importance of recognising what is not negotiable.

Sustainable architecture is first a way of seeing, and only then a way of doing. Sustainable architecture checks the agendas before making decisions.



*Setting agendas is always more important than making decisions*



# Cities are networks of people brought alive by ritual celebrations

A city is much more than the sum of its parts. Urban design is much more than the bringing together of architectural artefacts. The urban sculptures which enriched the streets of Chicago over the 1993 summer were much more than art objects.

Integration and interaction are essential foundations for any planning process seeking to realise the potential of a city. New Zealand's 1991 Resource Management Act recognised this, and unlike previous legislation, set out to be "enabling". Sadly the first plans promulgated under the new act failed to follow the bold initiative and to shake free from the restrictive legislation of the 60s. In contrast Suzanne Lacy and the coalition of Chicago women who designed the "Full Circle" sculpture broke those barriers and moved on to make new connections.

Design is the art of making connections. Designers are sensitive to discordance and feel pain in a way that totally escapes the isolated specialist. Designers felt pain at the gap between the Resource Management Act itself and failures of interpretation. Another gap opened up within the architectural profession. Some architects became "followers", looking only to mediocre interpretations of the Act for guidance, while others took a leadership role in showing what creative sustainability might be. Chicago had never been afraid of either innovative architecture or revolutionary "architecture-enabling" technology, such as the elevator. Chicago takes leadership for granted.

Leadership is always positive. Reactive responses belong to those who lack the inspiration to have visions. Giving priority to solving city problems is rather like seeing problems rather than opportunities in our personal relationships. A wise person delights in a chance meeting with friends, and only laughs to think that it always seems to happen when one is already late for an appointment. How sad it is to see the loneliness of those who have solved all their problems and are left with a beautiful house and no-one to share it with. Petty bureaucrats debated the problems which would be caused by leaving great boulders on the sidewalks of Chicago. History will not remember them.

There is no particular skill needed to stop something from happening. Asking people the questions which they are already aware of, and reminding them of the problems they already know about, cripples enthusiasm and generates that mixture of boredom and inertia which in medieval times was called "assidia". No-one needs another conference where experts remind each other of the city problems everyone knows about. We need a vision which recognises why people love living in cities.

The Resource Management Act made the fulfilling of visions possible, but the community needed first to develop those visions. The few brief words recorded on the boulders in Chicago said nothing about the anguish and agony which is part of the life of every person of vision. They spoke of hope and encouragement.

Growth occurs in a supportive environment. Buildings and cities exist to support growth. Not economic growth, but growth of awareness, love and sensitivity. Sustainability is not about a perception of a particular way of living. It is about life itself. The Resource Management Act established the principle that we must look beyond what we are doing to ask why we are doing it. In the streets of Chicago there were many people but they were strangers passing by. The plaques on the boulders invited everyone to pause for a moment and meet a new acquaintance. Someone we would wish to know if only the opportunity came our way.

Every architectural move we make either opens up or closes off opportunities. The Resource Management Act opened up the opportunity for cities to become complex and diverse networks within which every space was as unique as every individual. There were only a hundred boulders in the streets of Chicago, but there was a sense of the infinite. It was impossible to tell if you had discovered them all.

The story behind the Chicago sculptures revealed a little of that sense of the infinite. There were more than 3000 responses to an invitation to nominate women whose lives enriched the city. Ten historic figures and ninety living women were chosen. The plaque on each stone recorded the name of the woman and offered a few words about her work or philosophy.

At the end of the summer each of the living women hosted a dinner, gathering a few of their friends together. They celebrated their lives and their achievements. The event was also a celebration of the city.

At first the boulders on the streets of Chicago passed unnoticed. Then pedestrians paused to read a plaque and made a friend. Slowly everyone discovered that the city was crowded with invitations. It began coming alive. It finally became possible to recognise that a city is above all else a ritual event. A city is first a gathering of people, and only then a gathering of buildings.

A sustainable city is a ritual celebration of millions of connections. Only when the design process brings all those connections into harmony can we say that a city is alive.



*A city is, above all else, a ritual event*





# p i l o g u e



wenty years after the last “Thinking it through” column was published it seems that little has changed. All the same questions still need to be asked.

Power has become even more concentrated, with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. The exploitation of the world’s limited resources has accelerated, bringing the planet closer than ever to collapse. The extinction of species is matched only by the loss of habitat. One fundamentalist ideology still seems to be pitched against another. For all the talk of democracy individuals everywhere feel marginalized and helpless. They are disempowered, ineffective, and discouraged from thinking. Ordinary people have become just pawns in someone else’s game.

Architects continue to serve those in power. Ego-architecture massages the egos of both architects and clients. Architecture has drifted ever further away from social responsibility, and the built environment remains as the most significant cause of environmental collapse. Placelessness has become endemic with the drift to cities accelerating the loss of vernacular architecture and cultures. Even the right of an individual to build themselves a home has been taken away by the building industry. As people forget how to build they lose both the skills and the understanding.

The need for change is more urgent than ever. Why then has the necessary change not occurred?

Individuals can change very quickly. An opportunity may be grasped, even if there are risks involved. A response to a new situation can be as unanticipated as it is unusual. Individuals can break all the rules and be forgiven when their judgement is seen to be correct. A change of attitude does not even require any resources. Any society which empowers individuals can be responsive, resilient, adaptable and responsible. New Zealand’s traditional culture reflected this way of seeing the world.

In contrast institutions tend to resist change. Institutions seek to perpetuate their own existence, even when they are no longer relevant. Those with power are afraid to lose it. Institutions establish laws and structures to maintain and enforce the existing order. New Zealand’s new culture reflects this way of seeing the world.

Any society where those with power have no reason to think, and those who think have little access to power is not likely to survive. Comfort postpones the need to be concerned about the future. However hope lies in the way life wants to live, and only requires a helping hand.







he journey taken by the modern environmental movement is a journey which every individual needs to take.

The first phase was “the technical fix”. At the time of the first global environmental conference in Stockholm in 1972 everyone presumed that the scientists could work out how to control pollution and solve every other environmental problem. Even today many architects still assume that triple glazing or insulation will avoid the need to think. We need skills but we also need to move beyond them.

The second phase was “Gaia” or the recognition that everything was interconnected. The world was seen as being dynamic and alive. Life wanted to live. The world wanted to heal, if only we would give it a chance. Most

architecture today is nothing more than a consumer object. It is stillborn, paralysed by a design process devoted to a single concept realized in static magazine photographs, as much as a restrictive permitting process. We need to breathe life into our buildings, welcoming constant change and growth. We need to understand how our buildings feed upon and might enrich the life of the planet.

The third phase of the modern environmental movement was the recognition that existing political structures were not appropriate for addressing the environmental questions which were being asked. Rather than going green, power structures would need to give their power away. Even today many architects see a concentration of power as an essential foundation for realizing their dreams. The boring simplification demanded by fundamentalism is for them just an unfortunate by-product of keeping control. Local government has staggered on, unable to accept that no one can hear what anyone else is saying. We need to be willing to take responsibility for our own lives.

The fourth phase was the recognition that environmental questions are really spiritual questions. It was possible for architecture to get in the way. Thoughtful people realised that the earth did not need human beings. Indeed it seemed that the world would be better off without us. The questions moved from what we should do to who we should be.

The fifth phase might be seen as the recognition that we are one human race rather than a collection of competing individuals. The spiritual journey needed to be made by the whole human race. Survival will be possible only if we act together. A different approach is needed to both architecture and life.

Twenty years after the articles were written the questions remain.

