

INTERSTICES 06

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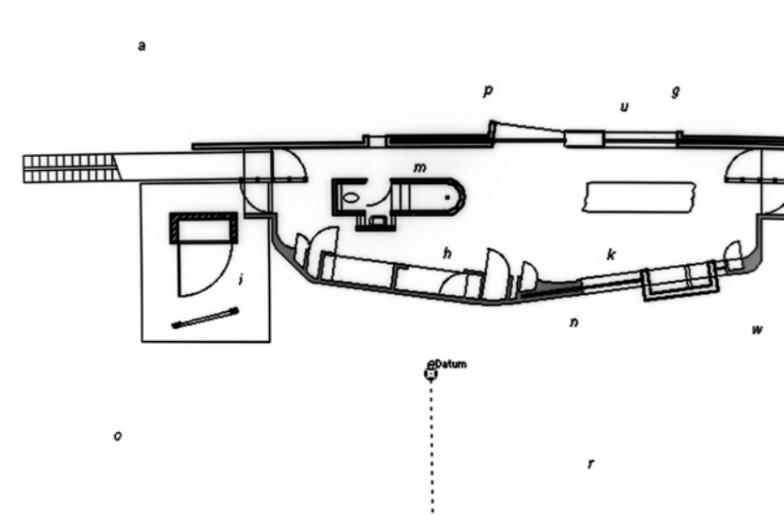
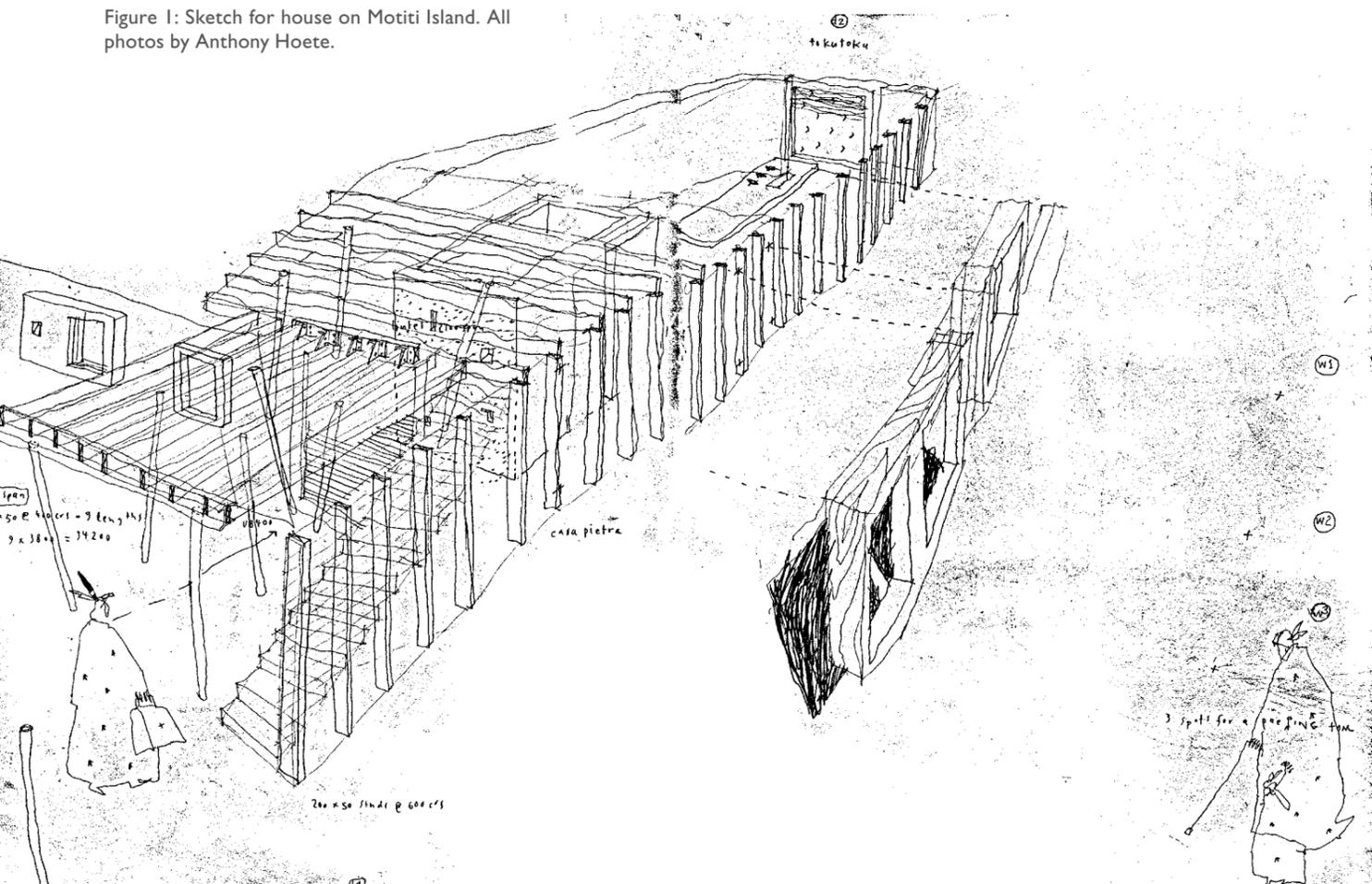


Bovine Buildings

Interview with Anthony Hoete

After graduating in 1990 from the Auckland School of Architecture, Anthony Hoete left first for Italy, and later moved to London, where he has been for the last 14 years. This interview took place with A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul, Albert Refiti and Ross Jenner during one of his occasional visits to New Zealand in February 2005.

Figure 1: Sketch for house on Motiti Island. All photos by Anthony Hoete.



You have just arrived here for ten days from London, perhaps to build another house in Clarence Street, Ponsonby.

Yes, what a blast of fresh air compared to what you can do in London, both in terms of economics and heritage restrictions!

You work in London at WHAT_architecture, how many partners are there?

Three now, but we were originally four. We've lost the W of our acronym—she went back to Germany. I guess that would make us HAT_architecture!

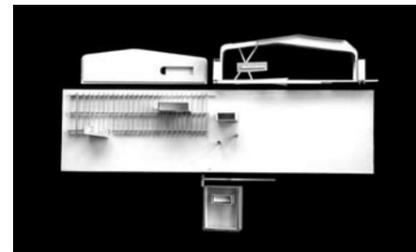
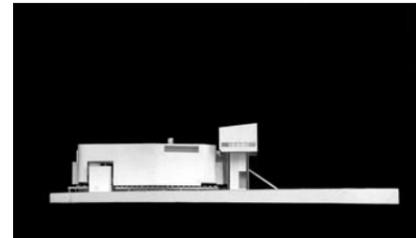
When did you leave New Zealand, and what have you been doing since?

In January 1991, days after the aerial assaults in the Gulf War, I left for Italy. I visited Nigel Ryan, my undergraduate thesis tutor at Auckland, in Rome and ended up working in Turin. From October 1991, I worked in London for Nigel Coates, Stefano de Martino and Sauerbruch Hutton Architects, who had all taught at the AA. However, there wasn't much work around in the early nineties so I decided to do a Masters at the Bartlett. My education at Auckland University had given me little idea of the prevailing architectural lineages influencing European architectural education. At Auckland, references were commonly to Italians like Tafuri, Cacciari, Dal Co ... So when I accidentally found myself interviewed for a course at the Bartlett (in the elevator ride between ground and second floors), I unsurprisingly confused Peter Cook with Peter Wilson.

The experience was liberating: values of metaphor and lyricism acquired at Auckland were swapped for functionality and space programming. At the Bartlett, I met Chiara, a lost six-year-old, and a few hours later her distraught mother Isabelle (whom I later married). In 1995, my father retired and received a golden handshake. After working on fit-outs and planning applications in London for three years, the opportunity to design and build a house appealed ...

Did you design the house here or in London?

It's designed in London, made in New Zealand. The Bartlett Masters course was very autodidactic and didn't really prescribe lines of enquiry. I wanted to experiment, and the design became a 'live experiment', of which actual building was a vital part. Peter Cook agreed and so we designed



Figures 3-5: Ground plan, model South elevation, model components.

it over there (London) and built it over here (Motiti). The site existed then only in memory.

You were back for two years?

Yeah. I grew a 'kiwifruit' (hair and beard of the same length).

Seeing the model, Albert Refiti once said that the house was severely organised, which left me somewhat puzzled. But, in hindsight, yes, the internal planning is severe: two doors, one room. No concessions to western domesticity: bedrooms, parlours, verandahs ...

Was that your father's requirement?

No. The architectural plan coincides with the severity of an island existence. Lost at sea, immune to technological advances, culturally remote.

To get to the island you fly or take a boat. These two arrival points on opposite sides of the island establish the axis upon which the house is founded. One door is oriented towards the jetty; the other to the airstrip. There are no rooms in the traditional sense—only a *whare* space, which is a modern open space.

Also, there are only two objects in the *whare*: one is a five meter long piece of cedar—the table. The wood was shipped from the Bartlett—Peter Cook used to stand on it at the end-of-year shows—and is hung from the ceiling. We used the table to test the structural stiffness of the house—a Robinson 800 helicopter landed on the roof and, by putting glasses of water filled to the brim on the table below, we watched for spillage ... The other object is the concrete water store: the bathroom holds 1,000 litres of rain water in its ceiling to feed the shower, toilet, sinks etc. To get good water pressure from the gravity feed, we needed tall floor to ceiling heights.

What were the planning and design parameters?

Upon arriving on Motiti, we were confronted immediately with land issues: the right to occupy was contested amongst my *hapu*, *Patuwai*, which I interpret as 'troubled waters'. To avoid this problem, which is omnipresent with Māori land today (multiple shareholder interests leading to land locks), we looked for a site on the other side of the island. It is even more intensive: a desolate, fragrant fennel-scape midway between jetty and airstrip.

Given that the island, as tribal land, does not come under the Resource Management Act, planning or building consents were not required. For that, you get limited infrastructure: no electricity, no sewerage, no sealed roads, no vehicles. When we told the engineer that we didn't need a building consent, he asked, "Why are you using an engineer, then?" I said, "Because I don't really want to kill anyone." That was quite funny.

The political state of the island is interesting. My father's generation have an obligation to look after the island, which is riddled with problems. For example, the plane is owned by a Pākehā private operator, who ordinarily would pay landing fees to the Māori shareholders with an interest in the airstrip. However, lack of organisational consensus amongst Māori shareholders means no permission has or is likely to be granted to the plane operator. Thus the plane lands literally a few yards away on the other side



Figure 6: Table at the Bartlett.



Figure 7: Helicopter approaching building.

of the fence onto European title. A not inconsiderable amount of potential *marae* revenue is lost. This creates economic tension, as the islanders cannot generate income on Motiti. What, practically, are we supposed to do? We are supposed to earn money, have a life, then go back there and what? Die? Without economic sustainability, Motiti is in grave danger of becoming a cultural cemetery. So there's a whole sadness associated with the island. Already now its demography is polarised—either very young or retired. The in-between generations have departed to the main land, chasing contemporary trappings: our PlayStation generation. The house sits within a cultural maelstrom.

One thing about the island is its extremely transience. The whole island is transient ... and yet, even though time is moving, nothing seems to have moved. People coming and going all the time, particularly for *tangi* ... against those who effectively live there knowing that they are there to die. There is a smaller island off the big island, which used to be the cemetery and is *tapu*. The relationship between the two islands, one for the living, one for the dead, is surreal: a natural sea bridge which you can only get through at certain tides. You feel as if you're walking on the water.

How many people are living on Motiti now?

Around twenty-five, though the population gets up to a hundred during a *tangi* when there are five to six flights a day (!). Even funerals become embroiled in the economic tension of landing fees: death as revenue.

The geographic size of Motiti is about that of Venice (80,000 people). But architecture is, really, the preserve of the city rather than the country. Given the shed vernacular heritage and *tangata whenua* issues, maybe a Rural Institute of NZ Architects would have a plausible basis.

Is there a hint of Dutch influence in the house?

Accepting the pre-eminence of Dutch architecture at the end of the twentieth century, and its media presence, it would be difficult for *any* architect not to be influenced. That was, of course, compounded by my involvement as an associate at Mecanoo, by teaching at the Technical University of Delft, plus, by being registered as an architect in the Netherlands and a member of the curatorial board for *ab1*—the first Architecture Biennale of the Netherlands.¹

How far did your father's intentions materialise?

My father wanted to build something different. I guess he got that.

The house seems branded with markings from the other side of the world ...

It has a certain foreignness or indifference to its surroundings. In the same way as the transient island population comes and goes, the house also doesn't totally belong to the island. Motiti is a signifier though: an identification point for the *whanau*, *hapu*, and *iwi*.

The skin of the building almost looks like fur on the brick parts—like the wooden shingles on farm houses in Switzerland.

1. The thematic was automobility and was triggered by my research into spatial mobility at the Technical University of Delft, later published in Hoete, A. (2003). *ROAM. A Reader on the Aesthetic of Mobility*. London: BDP.

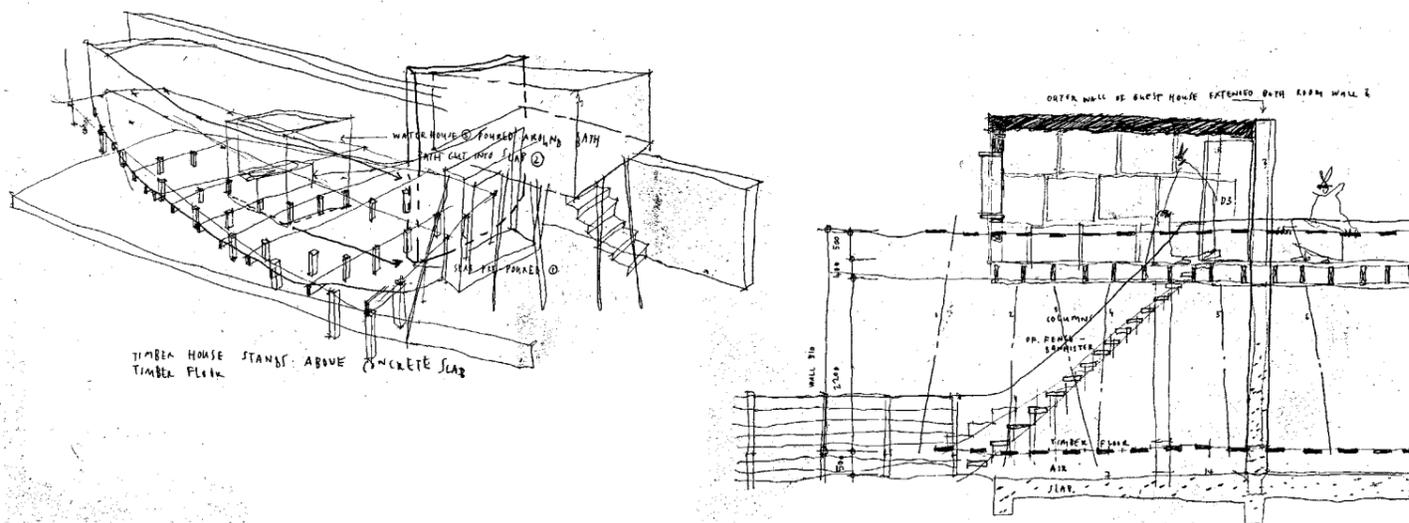


Figure 8: Sketches

We often talk about the life of the building, but not its death. Imagine hundred years of decay—what would be left? On the island, there are the carcasses of houses which have rotted away until all that remains is a concrete fireplace and chimney in the middle of a cornfield. This house, during its so-called building life, sits a bit awkwardly with the rest, not really integrated. But in a hundred years time, it will be dead like the rest of them, and the only thing left will probably be the concrete bathroom. I quite like that.

What in your design do you trace back to influences of your father, and what did the experience mean to you?

Solitude and severity. And the idea of ‘Land’s Cape’: where the passing of the *korowai* (a cloak made of natural fibres such as flax and feathers) between generations reasserts territorial notions of the skin of the earth.

I realised the value of participating in the building process: seeing the drawing ‘translate’ into building. A house is a difficult project because of the personality cults involved: experimental, yet emotionally charged. One can objectify a commercial space but domestic design can get extremely neurotic ... the design incest of tap fittings and trendy appliances.

How do you see your project for your father’s house today?

In retrospect I think the house bears the predictable anxieties of an architect’s first house: it possibly contains too many (urban) details.

What have you done since?

In 1997, when the house was complete, I went to live in Brussels and ended up working at Mecanoo in Rotterdam for five years. It’s two hours by train from Brussels. I’d leave on Monday morning, come home on Wednesday or Thursday night. On Friday morning, I’d take the *Eurostar* to the Bartlett in London and be back in Brussels on Saturday morning. This movement, characteristic of Northern Europe with its dense fluid commuter landscapes, awakened an interest in spatial mobility, which resulted in the book, *ROAM*. Eventually, I returned to London and set up WHAT_archi-

ecture.² It was a slow process but we are gradually establishing ourselves with our first public building, due for completion this year. In it, there’s a wink to the House on Motiti as it bears the same ‘furry’ block detail.

2. Website: www.whataarchitecture.com

What about your teaching experiences?

The Bartlett was academically interesting but extremely intense. Teaching posts (lowly paid) are as competitive as student admissions (high fees). It is difficult in Britain both to teach and run a practice. On the back of my work at the Bartlett, I was offered a post as Associate Professor at the Technical University of Delft. It’s a huge school with 4,000 architecture students with better teaching conditions: there is a fifty percent research allocation which, being Holland, means publication. Teaching is very much about communication and information. I sometimes consider it like managing a football team: a delicate balance of emotional intelligence, strategy, organisation and technique.

Last year, I was Visiting Professor at the American University of Beirut, running a design course called “Urban Surgery” (small project remedies for urban reconstruction). I learnt a lot about the Middle East; I also saw *Once Were Warriors* in Arabic, which was weird. It’s a bit frustrating teaching there, as the students are intelligent without diligence—lazy intellectuals, in other words. I suspect that is because the design courses are organised in two stages: read theory, then apply to design—thus students often over-conceptualise their projects. One cannot expect a reading of a sizeable text to manifest itself legibly within the architectural project. Such demands often yield stage fright in studio. I prefer an iterative process of small steps that loop back: read a paragraph, undertake initial design gestures; feedback into research, produce a design, et cetera. Labelling courses either ‘theory’ or ‘design’ also sends the wrong message: theory can be design and vice versa—more designers should write, more critics should draw.

How do your Dutch, or European, experiences relate to New Zealand bi- and multi-cultural issues?

As I state in *ROAM*, identity, like nationality, is increasingly fluid and mobile. I consider myself an Anglo-Māori (*te hapu Patuwai O Motiti*) married to a French-speaking Flemlander who was born in the US. Our son Maui’s middle name is *PehiamuOPatuwai* (the Belgian of the tribe). The absence of a homogenous Belgian identity (three national languages) sits comfortably with my own cultural schizophrenia.

What this means for New Zealand’s biculturalism I have no idea, but in the *North and South* magazine’s issue on “White Māori”,³ I suggest that both Māori and Pākehā need to consider a cultural context beyond the polarity of each other. With the increasing numbers of Asians in New Zealand, Chinese-Māori (or ‘*Chow-ri*’) will further expand and accelerate indigenous concepts.

Having said that, it is probably also worth saying that I found it much more secure being Māori outside. In London, it’s much easier than here, for sure ... it’s not like life and death or heavy, just less easy. Being outside, you start to realise that indigenous thing. You don’t have to hide from it.

3. Butcher, M. (2003). What is Maori? Who is Pakeha? *North and South* (August), 36-47.

How do you feel about your recognition in New Zealand?

The recent NZIA conference *Taking Stock* and *ROAM* had similar thematics: mobility, identity, perception. I guess I found it surprising that the British Arts Council asked me to speak at the British Museum on these same issues—yet the NZIA expressed no interest.

What similarities and differences do you see between work in New Zealand and work overseas?

Contemporary New Zealand architecture is formulated around the private house. The downside is that it means, socially, ‘architecture as privilege’. More high density, low-cost housing schemes need to be encouraged, as well as an indigenous architecture that moves beyond metaphor and iconic Māori symbolism. Working on the house for my father gave me a chance to engage intensively with the user, that was of great value, and to work intensively on concepts, rather than labour over details.

Would you say that you have an explicit design philosophy?

Everything is discourse, just add ‘what’! Without wanting to sound pretentious, what informs the office is culture in its widest sense and architecture ought to be a function of this. An architecture without walls may not just be possible but preferable, an architecture founded on social event and use. Perhaps a notorious question needs to be re-phrased: not “What is architecture?” but “When is architecture?”

What are your current projects, and where do you see them leading?

Last year we were invited to propose an Olympic Landmark project for Paris. Based upon the story of the red balloon by Lamorisse, we fitted two thousand, two metre diameter helium balloons with an LED that would allow citizens of Paris to text urban SMS, visible from seven kilometres: “I love you Marie”, “Paris 4 Nantes 2” ... everyday communication elevated to national statement. Now that London has won the bid, we need to change channels.

Last year, we were short-listed for another urban project, the New Zealand Memorial on Hyde Park Corner, London. The site has a huge Wellington Arch in the middle, which sets up an axis between Buckingham Palace and Marble Arch. I don’t know who negotiated the project on behalf of the New Zealand Government, but it seems that nobody raised any questions, in death as in life, about what is basically a complete subjugation of all the colonies under the Master Image. The rules said that the design could not go over three meters, which effectively preserved the sightlines of the Wellington Arch. Therefore, a colonial vision was preserved in the memorial, which was actually not about war but about sacrifice. I found that a bit grating.

Naturally(!) I thought we had the right strategy—a memorial that accentuated absence not presence—but we may have had the wrong landscape morphology. Thus, the spatial physicality of the monument was for-

saken for the temporality of the ‘*nu* moment’. A void inside an existing hill was created, accentuating the existing topography. Inside, the walls were of polished greenstone. The passage inside the hill terminated in an open room from which one could reflect upon the colonial landscape.

Otherwise, current projects include: a public nursery featuring fifty reconfigurable floor plans—one for each child; a house in New Zealand featuring a mega-sky window so that you can watch the stars at night; a collaborative project with AKK Architectes of Beirut that is a house with a movable kitchen (sliding plumbing connections!) and perspex staircase; a house in London with a home cinema formed wholly from bent plywood and 100% leather ... more cows and building, that kind of thing.

What is the future for you in terms of this place and over there and ... ?

I would like to work in NZ more often. We have two current projects here. I’d like to think WHAT_architecture can add value through its dislocation!