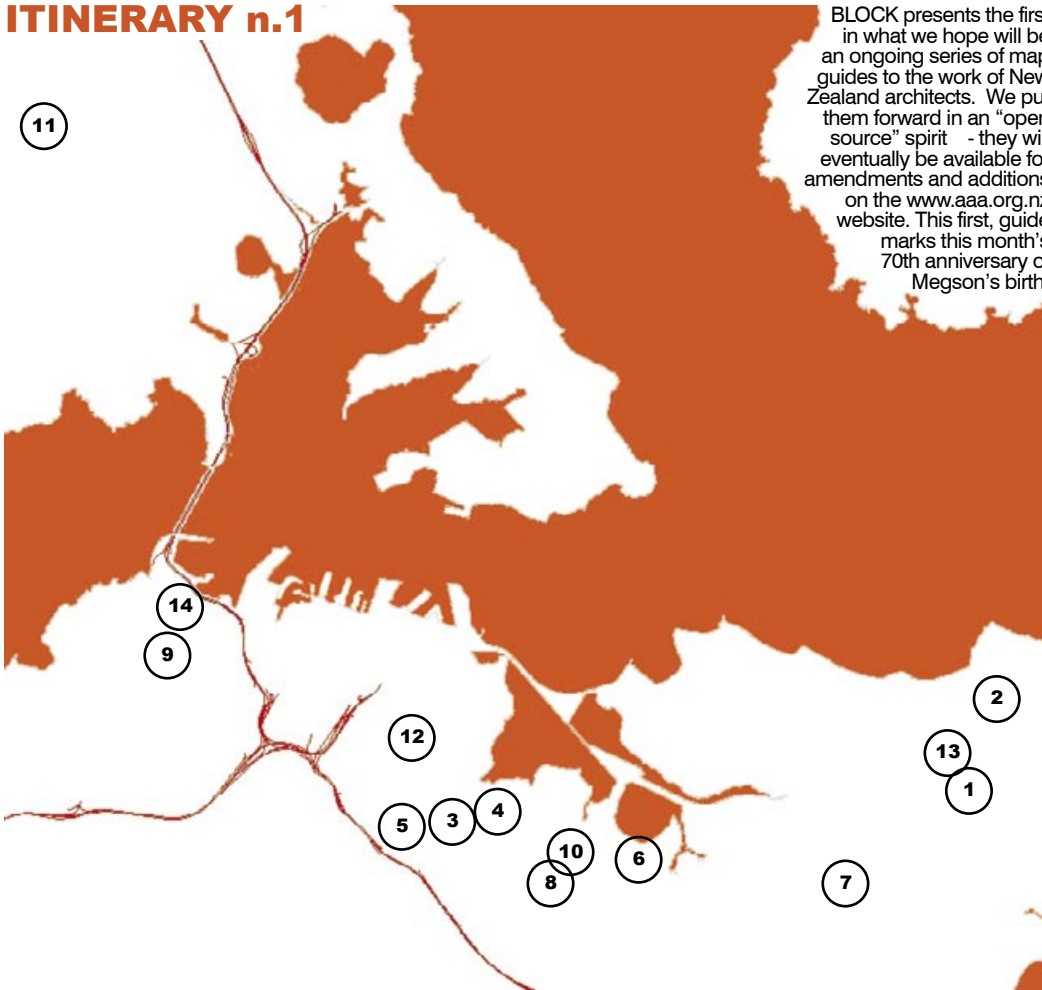
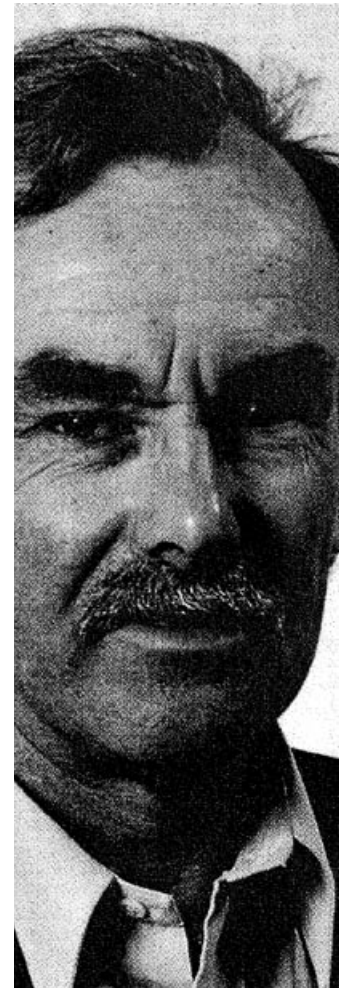


ITINERARY n.1



BLOCK presents the first in what we hope will be an ongoing series of map guides to the work of New Zealand architects. We put them forward in an "open source" spirit - they will eventually be available for amendments and additions on the www.aaa.org.nz website. This first, guide marks this month's 70th anniversary of Megson's birth.



MEGSON IN AUCKLAND

From 1962 until his death in 1994, Claude Megson was as an enormous presence in Auckland's architecture community. As Tony Watkins wrote in 1988, "When you mention 'deconstruction', no one knows exactly what you mean, but when you mention 'Claude' everyone knows you mean Claude Megson."

Best known for his work prior to the mid-1970s, Megson is usually cast as an "individual romantic architect", building on the legacy of figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, and Aldo van Eyck. Like these architects, Megson's modernism was utopian, one in which the drive to abstraction was moderated by the desire to create an architecture responsive to *place* and *occasion*.

Megson's thinking focused almost entirely on the house. His vision was of paradisiacal domestic harmony; a life of civility brought about by architecture which perfectly and effortlessly accommodated all physical and psychological needs. He designed believing he was in contact with the transcendent truths of human life, the meaning inherent in the daily routines and rituals of family life - sleeping, washing, cooking, eating, and so on. The result was an architecture of poetic intensity; an intensity that could be overpowering. Megson lectured incessantly - to students, clients, and fellow architects alike - of what he regarded as the fundamental and unquestionable truths of architecture. He spoke of harmonious and subtly modulated relationships between spaces, proportion, color and texture, qualities of light and shadow. He constantly reworked these basic concerns and his own formal constants, developing each house into a complex whole; in many respects, his architecture changed little during the 30 years of his design career. (As well as such sensual delights, his buildings often presented their owners with chronic leaks - on an excursion after the recent storms to photograph Megson houses, two of the five houses visited had plumbers on their roofs.) Megson used vernacular New Zealand timber frame and concrete block construction, but his cantilevers and constantly folding wall and roof planes created dynamic, complex buildings. His constrained spaces, emphasis on vertical spatial relationships, and articulated exteriors were characteristic of NZ domestic architecture in the 1970s. Indeed, Megson saw himself as Auckland's Ian Athfield, and in many ways he was. The complexity and boldness of Megson's early houses certainly rivaled that of the early works of Athfield and Walker with which they were contemporary; histories of the time often discussed the three together. But by the 1980s, many came to regard Megson as a living relic - an architect doggedly following an architectural direction out of step with contemporary concerns. Prof Peter Bartlett described Megson as pursuing "a sublime, amplified modernism... when during the 1980s society was engaged in a running duel with it and much academic and professional energy was being expended on architectural cross-dressing." Later writing about Megson often cast him as an architect concerned with timeless and immutable values, a characterization that at that time effectively dismissed his work as futile nostalgia.

Another key factor in Megson's outcast status was simply his personality - he rubbed many people the wrong way. As Reid wrote of Megson's oeuvre in 1996, "If it is difficult work to embrace, that is because it cannot be separated from the man." But as memories of Megson's himself recede or are romanticized, his work can be judged more on its own merits. The recent NZIA Enduring Architecture Award bestowed on Megson's Norris House may be the beginning of this process.

New Zealand is a nation obsessed with houses, and yet few clients (or architects) are willing to concede any measure of domestic ease in the pursuit of what might be called "artistic" goals. Megson's legacy was to produce houses that effortlessly accommodated domestic life - concerns of orientation, comfort, and amenity - and yet were provocative, spatially thrilling, and dramatically sculptural. In an age when few NZ architects can break free from well-worn "elegant shed" prototypes or 70-year-old Californian Modernism, Megson's oeuvre stands as a powerful alternative to what are rapidly becoming NZs default, highly "domesticated" forms of Modernism. *Andrew Barrie*

Biography:

Claude Walter Megson was born in Whangarei in 1936, the son of a builder. He attended the University of Auckland part time while working at Gummer and Ford, developing a lasting mentor relationship with Reginald Ford. Megson completed a DipArch in 1963 and MArch in 1969. Megson began private practice in 1962, and was an influential educator, teaching at the Auckland University School of Architecture for almost three decades - lecturing part time at from 1965 and full time from 1969. As well as teaching a whole generation of architect, Megson completed about 40 buildings, received 11 design awards and was the subject of several exhibitions.

Like Frank Lloyd Wright, on whom he seemed to model himself, Megson led a dramatic life - he was twice divorced and two of his houses burned down. Highly charismatic, he inspired both antipathy and idolatry; regarded by many as a guru, others found him overbearing and chauvinistic. Everyone who knew him has a favourite Megson story. "Once you had a Megson building, you also got Megson too; often for life," recounts Giles Reid "Stories abound of him taking a shovel the client's garden while they were away on holiday in order to bring it into line with his intentions."

Megson was felled by cancer on June 8, 1994, then only 57.

1

1963

Wade House
4a Fern Glen Road, St Heliers

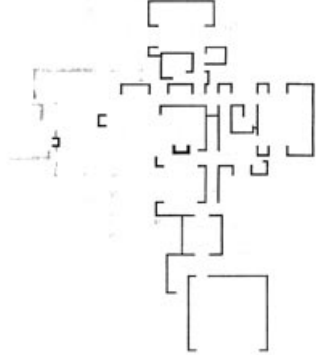


Megson's first building in private practice, designed when he was only 26 years old, this house demonstrates his debt to International-style modernity – in its use of cantilevers, the expression of each room as a cubic volume, and in the deployment of a lightweight timber superstructure over a solid masonry base; all features that would become characteristic of Megson's work. Arranged around a series of compositional axes and clad in board-and-batten timber, the various rooms are expressed as highly textured volumes. The house was significantly altered after the Wades sold the house in the late 1980s.

2

1965

Jopling House
59a Cliff Road, St Heliers

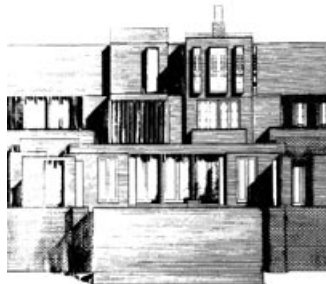


Standing on a sheltered back site on Achilles Point, this house won a NZIA Branch Award in 1965. The building is composed of "units" of timber-framed walls of various lengths with a return at each end. Separated from each other by full-height windows or doors, these repeated elements are deployed to create spaces with different orientations and varying qualities of enclosure and interconnection. The original landscaping included pebble gardens and fishpond which allowed the volumes of the house to "float" above the site. Enduring chronic leaks, the current owners are undoing some of the harm previous residents wrought on the house and landscaping.

3

1967

Wong House
1a Warrington Road, Remuera



Like the early works of Athfield and Walker with which it is contemporary, this house is made up of many small cell-like units. But as Peter Shaw wrote, Megson "avoided the colouristic exuberance and formal exhibitionism of his Wellington contemporaries." Cascading down a steeply sloping site, every room is expressed as an independent volume clad in dark-stained cedar weatherboards, the resulting composition a masterly interplay of material, line and volume. The house earned Megson an NZIA Bronze Medal in 1969, but has now been significantly altered – the timber joinery replaced with aluminium, and the stained glass windows removed. In the 1990s almost all the original weatherboards were stripped and replaced with plaster.

4

1969

Mrkusich Townhouse
64 Hapua Street, Remuera



Built for the abstract artist Milan Mrkusich and his wife Florence, this was the first of several Megson buildings in the immediate area. Three townhouses merge together in a play of cubic volumes. One of the townhouses recently received a sympathetic renovation and alteration by architect Lisa Webb. See *Architecture New Zealand* Nov/Dec 2005.

Sources:

The photographs are by Andrew Barrie; the drawings from the University of Auckland Archive. Many thanks to Wendy Garvey for her assistance. The publication of Megson's work has been remarkably sparse; he is mentioned only in passing in David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin's *The Elegant Shed* (1984) and, more surprisingly, is completely omitted from Douglas Lloyd Jenkins *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design* (2004). The best source on Megson is Giles Reid's 1996 undergraduate thesis *Megson in Detail: Buildings 1962-1976*, held by the University of Auckland Architecture Library. The Library also holds Judy McKillop's 1990 undergraduate thesis *I, Claude. An Architectural Biography*. Megson's own 1970 Masters thesis, *Formal Aspects of the House*, records his design philosophy and includes a number of his own early works. Key publications include Tony Watkins essay on Megson in the Nov/Dec 1988 issue of *Architecture New Zealand*. The July/August 1992 issue of *Architecture New Zealand* presented a series of essays on Megson, with contributions by John Dickson, English academic Geoffrey Broadbent, Paul Walker and architect Simon Carnachan. The Sept/Oct 1994 issue of *Architecture New Zealand* includes an obituary composed of short texts by Prof. Peter Bartlett and others.

5

1970

Germann Townhouses
14a MacMurray Road, Remuera



As an unbuilt scheme, this project was awarded an AAA/Monier Award in 1971 by judges John Goldwater and David Mitchell. However, the initial client ran short of money and was forced to abandon the project, which was eventually completed by Doug Walsh, a young property student studying taking a university paper under Megson. The building's gabled, board-and-batten clad form is divided into three units, each of which opens on a private courtyard landscaped with native and tropical plants. The roof forms of the remarkable carport have been sheared to a 45-degree angle.

6

1970

Cocker Flats
27 Darwin Lane, Orakei

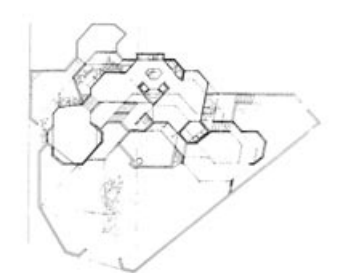


In 1963 Megson prepared a scheme for five townhouses on this site for Bill and Finola Cocker, who would later commission the townhouses in Freeman's Bay. The building eventually constructed on the site, referred to as Bill's "Shack" or "Bachelor Pad", was notable for its narrow entry bridge and the dramatic views it offered over Orakei Basin. The building has since been remodelled and extended by a succession of owners, and a 'minimal dwelling' on the site, designed and erected by Megson's students in the early 1970s, was recently demolished. The best view is from the walkway that runs around the basin shore.

7

1972

Barr House
7 Keretene Place, St John's



Built on a fan-shaped section at the end of a cul-de-sac and overlooking a bush reserve, this house draws heavily on Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses. Like those houses, a brick base which defines foundations, landscape elements, and lower walls is combined with a superstructure of wide, rough-sawn horizontal cedar planks. But where the Usonian houses were regulated by strict planning modules - hexagonal, diamond, square or rectangular - Megson willfully employs walls at 30°, 45°, 60° and other angles. (The views Megson often employed looking diagonally down through multiple levels are here flipped into the horizontal direction.) These insistent deflections combine with multiple floor levels - the house is arranged over eight half levels - to produce a maze-like whole.

8

1973

Norris House
20 Walton Street, Remuera



This house won a NZIA National Award in 1978. When it received an NZIA Enduring Architecture Award in 2005, the jury citation read: "This house has been home to the Norris family for some 30 years – it exudes Megson's intense reading of family life and its relationship to climate, particularly the movement of the sun over time, to ritual and occasion both formal and informal, and to both the immediate landscape and that beyond. The translation of this reading into a formal composition that is clearly 'modern' in its genesis creates spaces that maintain their form whilst allowing overlap, intersection and invention, as Megson himself may have described it 'a poetry of space.'"

9

1973

Cocker Townhouses
57 Wood Street, Freemans Bay



Originally built as an investment property for Bill Cocker (a lawyer turned painter) and his sister Finola - who now occupy two of the four units - the building took four years to complete and involved enormous wrangling with neighbours and the council. Riffing on the forms of nearby villas and hinting at Mediterranean hilltowns, this building is a complex composition of prismatic forms in white weatherboards with shingle roofs, overlaid with filigreed timber balconies. The living spaces of each unit open onto a private courtyard garden. Bedrooms are located on a floor above, and the roof-level turrets - accessed via trap doors - house small studies with panoramic views over the city and harbour. See *New Zealand Architect* no.6, 1977, and *Home & Entertaining* Aug/Sept, 2002.

10

1974

Rees Townhouses
54 Hapua Street, Remuera

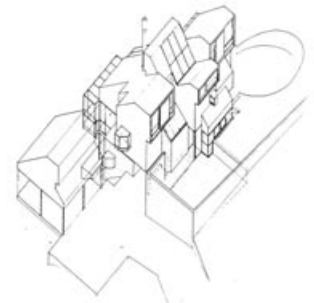


A bachelor pad and larger townhouse, this building was designed for Gavin Rees, who had lived for several years in Megson's Mrkusich Townhouses up the street and owned the "Design Store" where Megson procured much of his furniture and light fittings. Megson regarded this building as his most spatially controlled and exciting; arranged over a series of floor levels, each room is a separate volume, the various spaces being connected along a carefully choreographed circulation route. Above this labyrinthine arrangement dances a roof configured as a highly plastic series of lanterns, the Butynol-clad periscopes originally being painted day-glo red.

11

1978

Phillips House
11 Wyvern Place, Glenfield



Inserted into lush bush at the end of a cul-de-sac, this project employs a number of characteristic Megson elements. The base of the house is formed from concrete blocks, with interiors on six-half levels cascading down under an inclined glass roof. Enclosing this is a highly complex composition of "periscope" forms – arranged both vertically and horizontally - that recall the Rees Townhouses, but which are painted a lush green – hence the project being referred to as the "Green House". Projecting out into the bush on the downhill side of the house is balcony composed as a cantilevered cage of steel pipe, a motif that would reappear in Megson's own house. The house is now seems to be declining.

12

1990

Horrrocks House
27 The Glen, Remuera



Owned at one time by Simon Carnachan, a former student and close friend of Megson. In the 1989 NZIA Auckland Branch Ten Best Buildings Awards, a Best Interior gong for the house was given, oddly, to Carnachan. The jury citation read: "Intriguing interaction of interior spaces with well developed exterior courts providing stimulation spatial extension. Judicious use of original art and sculpture. Effective expansion by the Carnachan's of Claude Megson's concept." Lush planting now almost completely obscures the house from the street.

13

1983

Megson House "Fern Glen"
40 Fern Glen Road, St Heliers



Megson created this house for himself and his wife Cherie by partially demolishing and building over a modernist brick house by architect Professor Richard Toy, a senior colleague of Megson's at the School of Architecture. (Remarkably, the Megson's had lived in Toy's house for 15 years before commencing work). The site – a corner section located on the brow of a steep rise - is vertiginous, and Megson's extensions further emphasized the vertical. Toy's house became a brick base over which a new timber superstructure was placed. Fixed to the downhill façade, a series of balconies – cages of mesh and red-painted steel tube - project the spaces of the house out into the treetops.

14

1993

Walsh House,
7/79 Shelly Beach Road
St Mary's Bay



This house overlooks the Western Marina, and is clearly visible from the motorway on the southern approach to the Harbour Bridge. The client, Doug Walsh, awarded the commission through a competition between Megson, architect Bill Mackay and University of Auckland lecturer Ross Jenner. The project proved to be the last of Megson's works to be built.

Other Addresses:

Hall House (1964)
10 Eric Price Avenue
Milford, North Shore City
A lightweight upper storey held aloft by a solid masonry base, this house occupies a dramatic waterfront site overlooking Lake Pupuke. Visible from the lakefront walkway.

Mayes House (1970)
149a Arney Road Remuera
A series of white plastered volumes perched on a cliff top overlooking Orakei Basin. Best views from Shore Road.

Donovan House (1976)
29 Whites Road, Whitford
Manukau City

Allen House (1992)
6 Auckland Road, St Heliers
A residence and two flats are accommodated within a layered volume that drops dramatically down a steep cliff face. The house across the street at no. 9a is also a Megson building.



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