THE INAUGURAL LECTURE
ARCHITECTURE MATTERS
BY JOHN WALSH
The Inaugural Lecture

Block is delighted to mark our fifth birthday with the publication of a transcript of the inaugural Block Lecture. In the last five years we have enjoyed adding to the written discourse on architecture and, through the Block Foundation, supporting visiting speakers, exhibitions and other events. The overseas speakers have bought an intimacy and immediacy to their work and commentary that transcends knowledge gleaned from the printed word and the two dimensional image. In doing so we the audience have been intrigued, inspired and, on occasions, reassured that our own work can stand up well to international comparison.

The format of the architectural lecture is invariably, and unsurprisingly, structured around the speaker’s oeuvre, be that of an emergent Japanese wunderkind or one of our peers from the studio down the road. Less common outside of the schools of architecture in New Zealand is the overview - an informed commentary on the state of our art. It was in consideration of this that the Block Foundation organized what we hope will become an annual event – the Block Lecture.

We were delighted that John Walsh accepted our invitation to deliver the inaugural lecture. As a profession we have been fortunate to have had the benefit of John’s thoughtful and erudite writing in Architecture New Zealand and the two major survey books he has authored; New New Zealand Houses and Homework. John has also been a judge at the 2008 World Architecture Festival, an appointment that recognized his critical eye and, somewhat more rarely in New Zealand, his ability to clearly articulate his thoughts. His role as judge in the festival also allowed an insight into the wider world of architecture – the bravura performance of seasoned presenters and competitors, the informal and unprinted commentaries, and the intrigues that inevitably attend upon such a gathering of egos.

For those of you who found John’s talk thick with interesting ideas and observations and wish to ruminate at length, and for those of you who missed a very pleasant evening, Block offers this transcript. Pip Cheshire

Block Editors:
Pip Cheshire, Andrew Barrie, Nat Cheshire, Sean Flanagan, and Ian Scott.

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DRAKE & WRIGLEY
NZ Metallurgists Est. 1938
When Pip Cheshire asked me to give the inaugural Block lecture of course I looked for a way out: the written word is my medium, not the spoken one. But there wasn’t really a viable escape route. I’ve spent 10 years soliciting copy from people, including Pip, who I could always rely on for an excellent book review written to deadline. In these circumstances, I couldn’t really say no when the shoulder that was tapped was my own.

So, I decided to view Pip’s invitation as an opportunity. It would compel me to sit down at a desk and write something difficult. And here’s a tip about writing, for anyone who’s interested: it’s just like exercise. If you don’t do it every day, your muscles will waste away.

Specifically, writing this speech would force me to analyse my decade circumnavigating New Zealand architecture and New Zealand architects (a voyage that would leave many a traveller in need of therapy). All of us, at some level or at some moment, have to answer the question: Does it matter what I do? This is a private interrogation, but it is connected to another line of enquiry, one of larger importance: Does what I do matter?

I had ventured into a field in which this latter issue has enduring significance. Architecture, like holy orders, is a vocation in which large claims are persistently undermined by nagging doubts.

I’m not an architect, so why did I become a fellow-traveller? When and where did this little journey start? At the end of 2001 I applied for the position of editor of Architecture New Zealand, the official magazine of the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA). Or so it bills itself; in reality, the marriage between the NZIA and Architecture New Zealand’s publisher is conveniently de facto rather than strictly de jure.

I got the job, on the strength of a few articles I had written for Urbis magazine – a stablemate of Architecture New Zealand – and on the basis of a savage drop in salary. I really wanted the job. I wanted to edit a magazine and Architecture New Zealand was a good magazine with room for improvement. A nice little do-up. More than that, its subject matter was important: architecture matters. I knew that much, at least, and for the last 10 years – in the magazines I’ve edited, in a couple of books I’ve written, and in my present role at the NZIA – I’ve been trying to find the words to back up my belief.

Pip’s invitation sent me to the back issues of Architecture New Zealand. I found myself declaring, in my very first editorial, that “Architecture has such capacity to lift our spirits; by giving good shape to our world architects can help us enjoy our lives.” I wrote that “buildings constitute the built narrative of our lives” and that a measure of any building’s success is whether “we’re happy that it is part of our story”.

That was an ingratiating start, and more than 50 issues later, in my final editorial, I was still attending to the egos of my core audience. I signed off by sincerely praising the generosity of this country’s architects,
and by acknowledging their willingness to submit their work to critical appraisal. These are both professional qualities that, in our small society, have always been endangered, and which, in our cautious and litigious age, are more admirable than ever.

Along the way between my first and last issues of Architecture New Zealand I became aware of the benefits of architecture, if not to society then certainly to its practitioners. For a start, architecture is a career with no end, short of the final one. Architects are considered young if they’re under 40, and Oscar Niemeyer is 103 and he’s still drawing. For another thing, an architectural career, with its litany of unrealised projects, is an opportunity to develop a Zen-like indifference to success and failure. Being an architect also means you can work on your own house, forever. You have an organising principle for overseas travel. You can experience intense relationships with people who will confide their hopes, dreams and tastes in furnishings, and you’re under no obligation to marry them. You can also meet a variety of people who are affluent, powerful and important, and who will take the time to remind you of this.

So, I had entered territory that was socially, professionally and personally significant. What of the publishing vehicle in which I traversed this ground? My new employer was Robin Beckett, the proprietor of AGM Publishing. Robin had inherited the company from his father, who had founded it in the 1930s. Considering the viciousness of New Zealand’s business cycles, AGM’s longevity was heroic. And it certainly had had plenty of time to develop its particular character. When I joined it, the company, in the way of most small publishers, was wildly idiosyncratic; it began to make sense to me only when I started to interpret its systems as folk customs. At times I used to wonder whether AGM was primarily a business, or a family employment bureau. On the payroll were Robin’s wife, his sister and his two daughters. In addition, there were various other staff members whose service was so long-standing that they had crossed the line from employee to faithful retainer.

AGM’s paternalistic regime was an expression of its owner’s values. Robin Beckett is Old School – very old school: he went to King’s College, in its more patrician days – and he has the sort of decency that deserves, but does not always receive, reciprocation. AGM’s hiring decisions could be erratic. I remember a female bodybuilder with pneumatic assets that were inversely proportional to her conversational skills. (Perhaps she’d forgotten how to talk because most of the men she met were speechless, too). Then there was the recruit who was introduced to staff one Friday afternoon. He was as confident as a conman. In fact, he was a conman, and was exposed as a fraudster the very next morning, in the front section of the New Zealand Herald.

Receptionists might be challenged by the duties of courtesy, editors by the demands of literacy, and salespeople could go AWOL for large parts of the day – but they all benefitted from the light hand of gentlemanly supervision. If tolerance is one trait of the family business, frugality is another. When it came to new technology, AGM was an adopter of last resort. Collecting email attachments involved a pilgrimage to the building’s sole PC, and prose was produced on a proprietary computer system of demonic design: you become very economical with citations when it takes half a line of code to open and close a quote.
Many laudable circumstances mitigated an eccentric situation. One was the enthusiasm of Robin Beckett and his wife Kirsty Robertson. They were tirelessly supportive of New Zealand architecture and design. In fact, AGM’s boosterism could be breathless. I once counted 22 exclamation points in an Urbis editorial. Well, why not, I thought: it made sense that a magazine promoting New Zealand design to world-class status should aspire to set new international standards in emphatic punctuation.

If an editor had Robin’s respect, he or she would be left alone to exercise an editor’s prerogatives. Like every publisher from Rupert Murdoch up, Robin believed he had divined the mysteries of cover design, so he interfered there – as was his right. And his concern for the bottom line of course made him receptive to the desperate wheezes of the ad sales staff. But Robin was generally too busy to micro-manage, and he pretty much left me to my own devices. And so did Architecture New Zealand’s editorial board.

The editorial board was an attempt to realise the notional links between the magazine and its endorser, the NZIA. Christina van Bohemen, Gordon Moller and Patrick Clifford were the architects who volunteered their services – or perhaps they were volunteered by their Institute. I remember the first meeting: Christina, as usual, was constructive and supportive, and Gordon, who had himself edited the magazine in the 1970s, talked about the need for more white space in the magazine’s crowded design. He was right, of course, and he was still right when he raised the issue in the next board meeting, and the one after that.

I think we could all sense the Groundhog Day potential of these sessions, and the editorial board went quietly into abeyance. Before it did, though, it served to raise an important issue, one that’s fundamental to architectural publishing: What are the criteria for publication? The prompt for this discussion was an article I’d written about a new building in the Albany netherlands, north of Auckland. It was an academy for the Transcendental Meditation Society, and its construction proceeded according to arcane oriental principles. Neo-Vedic design, you could call it. The building met a need and satisfied an unusual brief – was that sufficient, the editorial board enquired, to justify its publication?
Patrick Clifford’s position was that the magazine – the ‘official journal’ of the NZIA – should acknowledge excellent work. Quite apart from the issue of finding enough material to pass that test, I thought the magazine should also publish diverting stories, and the architectural endeavours of the adepts of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi certainly seemed curious. Anyone who attended a New Zealand university a few decades ago will recall this colourful outfit and its bizarre point of difference, Yogic Flying. What would happen when a sect dedicated to levitation gravitated to architecture?

That’s a journalist’s question, and Patrick thought an architecture magazine wasn’t really the place to answer it. I did, because what fascinates me about architecture is the breadth of its concerns. Architecture isn’t an exclusion zone; it’s a catchment area fed by some significant tributaries: history and science, art and commerce, politics and religion, and, unfortunately, post-modernism. The Transcendental Meditation Society’s Academy at Silverdale may not have been a stellar advertisement for the cause of inclusivity, but that’s not really the point. As we all know, the defence of principle is often conducted on less than ideal ground. For me, the narrative interest of a celebrity guru’s New Zealand outpost compensated for the building’s shortage of award-winning qualities.

My difference of opinion with Patrick endured down the years, even as I shuffled closer towards his end of the argument. When magazine or book space is at a premium, whimsy becomes harder to justify. More venally, architecture chosen because it tells a good story isn’t necessarily architecture that yields good photos. And I’m afraid everything in architectural publishing conspires to turn its practitioners into Lookists.

Architects have a vested interest in publishing criteria because the record, over time, becomes the canon. Publish and be damned? It’s a risk architects are prepared to take because if you don’t publish you might be forgotten. Some good buildings fall out of history, taking their architects with them, because they’re not published. And some ordinary buildings get a great run through the media, taking their architects along for the ride. It took me aback when the Wellington architect Chris Kelly – himself no novice in the publishing stakes – told me one day, years ago, that, by virtue of my tenure at *Architecture New Zealand*, I had become one of architecture’s local gatekeepers.

So much in life depends on the credibility of the masks we wear. Titles by themselves can convey authority, and words if they’re printed command attention. I had no idea I was an architectural gatekeeper; if anything, I was a kind of school crossing guard, merely trying to ensure that Jasmax and Warren and Mahoney waited in line, even if they pushed to the front of the queue. Ascribing influence to my position seemed as implausible as according it glamour. For much of the last decade I sat in a cubicle in a building on the corner of New North Road and Bond Street, a leaky Auckland office block with bad karma passed on from its days as a council rates collection facility.

From this unpromising Kingsland vantage point, I observed New Zealand’s architects. How did I regard them? I think at first as an anthropologist would. For field study purposes, they were my tribe.
There are only a couple of thousand architects in the country, but that’s a good-sized group – small enough to be comprehensible, large enough to be various.

I abandoned the anthropological perspective as I became more familiar with the tribe – and now I’ve practically gone native – but occasionally I have a relapse. This is normally brought on by an encounter with a provincial architect, more than likely, for some reason, a practitioner from Otago. In just about every publishing discussion I’ve had with one of the profession’s Southern Men I’ve arrived at a point where I start to feel like a disingenuous anthropologist treating with a cagey villager in some remote New Guinea valley. I can sense the suspicion at the end of the line: What’s he after, the southerner is thinking, and how much will it cost me? The issue of photography is particularly fraught: in Dunedin, I’ve come to think, photography must be regarded as soul theft. Either that, or an inexcusable extravagance.

Auckland architects have a different attitude: they’re all for photos, as long as they don’t have to pay for them. Actually, negotiations about architectural photography are never straightforward. I remember another meeting with Patrick Clifford, this time in his capacity as a director of Architectus. We were in a café, discussing the licensing regimes of photographer Simon Devitt. Why should we both pay Simon for the same shoot? We kicked this issue around, a little desultorily – we both respected Simon’s copyright – until it was time to go. We stood up, looked over a booth divider, and there sat Simon.

A good publishing lesson to learn: in New Zealand, everyone is separated by a thin plywood partition. By the way, I have to say that I appreciate Simon’s determination to build a career as an architectural photographer in this small country – and many architects have reason to be thankful, too.

Anyone setting out to write on any subject has to address two fundamental issues: what approach to take, and how much distance to maintain. I resorted to an analogy from the social sciences – that of the anthropologist recording an exotic culture – because that’s where I started out: my first degrees were in history. And I topped this education off with a journalism degree. So: a voyeur, twice over. There are different ways to write about architecture, just as there are many roads leading into it. I’ve always written from the outside in, because I’m not an architect. No matter how much I learn about architecture and the people who practise it, I’ll never be able to design a building. I suppose I’m a contextualizer. Also, I’m a go-between: I try to explain the activities of a group of practitioners whose buildings do the talking to a wider audience that’s often profoundly hard of hearing. In other words, I translate between the mute and the deaf.

At times, I think, “I’m not trained for this”. But then, what would the right training be? If I were an architect, I wouldn’t be writing about architecture, I’d be making it. We all have an architectural journey, our own architectural narrative. Writing this, Winston Churchill’s dictum comes to mind: “We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us”. Like a lot of things Churchill said, this sounds good, but what does it mean? I’m trying to think of a building that could produce the Churchill shape. Well, he was certainly as commodious as Blenheim Palace.
My own humbler architectural shaping started in the small house my parents built on the Kapiti Coast, and continued in a few bungalows, a council house, a school centred on a hulking, neo-Gothic pile, some villas, a New York tenement, several London terrace houses and a Los Angeles Spanish Colonial-style apartment block.

The most singular building of my childhood was our parish church in the Wellington suburb of Miramar, which was designed in the late 1950s by a Dutch immigrant architect, Frank Robbers. It’s a concrete structure with graceful modernist pews also designed by the architect, a generous roof span, and lovely light, admitted through faux-stained glass and numerous small windows punched though the sides of the building. The client, a priest as educated as he was irascible, was far more architecturally adventurous than his parishioners. His building’s problem, which became his problem, was that many of the congregation did not want to be dragged into the light. They preferred to practice their rites in gloomier and more intimate settings; they felt lost in too much space. I was too young to hear the parishioners’ complaints for what they really were – a protest against modern architecture. I know the meaning of their railing now.

Architecturally speaking, I remained remarkably careless of my surroundings. When I studied journalism in New York all I really thought about the city’s architecture was that there was a lot of it. I went up the Twin Towers and the Empire State Building, and I liked the Chrysler Building and the Manhattan skyline viewed at night from Brooklyn Bridge. New York was going through a rough patch, and if you were wise you didn’t gawk, like a muggable tourist, at the tops of buildings; you kept your head down and scanned the streets and pavements. It wasn’t until I returned, years later, after New York had gone through a revival, that I enjoyed the luxury of a long, slow stare at the Seagram Building.

Before I started at Architecture New Zealand the closest I’d come to any architectural epiphany was an afternoon spent in Carlo Scarpa’s galleries at the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. I was moved, but I
couldn’t say why. Now, I’d probably put it this way: in those galleries, space and structure and statuary are in such perfect equilibrium that time stands still. After I started at *Architecture New Zealand* the closest I came to a revelation was an evening in Mies van der Rohe’s restored Barcelona Pavilion. The night seemed a dream, albeit one interrupted by the guest seated to my left, an Ulsterman with a strong interest in the All Blacks and women’s shoes. (The dinner also had its Dismas, a director of the Norwegian practice, Snohetta: if there’s nothing like the sound of a Northern Irish accent to remind you of the depths to which humanity can sink, there’s also nothing like a conversation with an urbane Scandinavian architect to indicate the heights to which it can aspire.)

Aware of my educational shortcomings as a neophyte architectural writer and editor I looked for inspiration in the logical places. *Architecture Australia* is too institutional – there’s nothing de facto about its relationship with the Australian Institute of Architects, and nothing
unconsummated, either. The magazine and the Institute make out in every issue. As for more exotic exemplars – *Detail* is rigorously Teutonic and *Abitare* is luxuriously Italian. They’re both out of our puny league. Other international magazines, such as *Architectural Record* from the United States, are so in thrall to their advertisers that they look like catalogues. Hope lay with two British magazines, *The Architectural Review* and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) *Journal*.

Like many UK cultural institutions, these magazines have mastered the art of the comb-over – they find clever ways to disguise thinning resources. This, I knew, was a skill I’d have to learn. More positively, Britain has a tradition of literary architectural criticism. Writers like Hugh Pearman, who edits the RIBA *Journal*, and Jonathan Glancey, who writes for *The Guardian*, seem to get as much fun out of writing as did Reyner Banham, once he’d moved to America and fallen in love with Los Angeles. If writers enjoy the art of writing, the chances are that readers will enjoy the act of reading. The older I get, the more I believe that the worst thing writers can do to readers is bore them. It’s good for writers to remember that, in most cases, no-one is obliged to read what they’ve written. If I’m writing and boring myself, I go and read someone like Anthony Lane, who writes for the *New Yorker*, or Martin Amis – someone who knows how not to be boring.

This is a craft responsibility. A professional one, for a writer or editor, is the issue of proximity to the subject. How close is too close? My problem, as a writer and editor in a specialist field in which performers naturally prefer cheerleaders to critics, is that I was trained to be a sceptic. Journalism is founded on inquiry. You ask those simple questions – Who? What? Why? – and you see where the answers take you. Often, you end up following the money. In this respect, at least, journalists have something in common with architects, although each group wants the chase to end in a different way. (A building in one case, blame in the other.)

At the Journalism School I attended, at Columbia University, there was a room called the World Room. At first, I thought this name was just another example of American conceit, like calling the championship of a sport no-one else plays the World Series. Actually, the World Room was named for the *New York World*, a newspaper founded by Joseph Pulitzer, the man who had paid for the room’s construction. Inscribed on a wall was an encomium from Pulitzer which had become the Journalism School’s informal mission statement: “Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable”.

Architects, I’m sure, don’t set out to afflict the afflicted, but many of them spend their working lives comforting the comfortable. That’s the way it goes, in a profession that depends on a clientele. Many architects are not always comfortable in the straightjacket of private patronage, and try to contrive ways to escape into the wider world. On this note, I think a profession displays remarkable confidence, or acute self-awareness, to set up a School, as Architecture has done in Auckland, in a former lunatic asylum.

I’ve always sympathised with those architects who try to get public work, even as I’ve colluded in their confinement to the private realm. I’ve done this by editing a magazine and writing books dedicated to
domestic architecture. In my own defence, I should say that publishing, like architecture, is an art of the possible: Houses are what people want to read about. At least, that’s what publishers think. Over the years, I’ve suggested other types to publishers – civic buildings, for example, and educational buildings, which are important because, for most children, school is the only place in which they’re ever going to be comforted by architecture. But the commercial book publishers always say no: if they’re going to publish buildings, they must be houses. I have to accommodate this residential fixation – better domestic architecture than no architecture – and so I’ve signed up to do another book about houses.

I’ll try to make it different to my first. That book, for which Patrick Reynolds took the photos, was published in 2007. Already, it looks like an historical artefact. Any book about architecture ages quickly, because styles – if I can use that word – change fast. Our book, it turns out, was published at an architectural high-water mark, just before the tide turned. In retrospect, the book was a chronicle of good times: New Zealand architects had had seven fat years during which they’d designed some very long boxes. Or extruded them, as Malcolm Walker would have it.
New Zealand affluence developed a house style, in the seven or eight years after the turn of this century. It was a very photogenic style. I feel I have to tell a story here, concerning the masters of the dominant style of the last decade, and the architects, by the way, of the room in which this speech was given. Fearon Hay, in 2008, entered one of their Queenstown houses in the World Architecture Festival, a new architectural competition staged in Barcelona. The project made it to the final stage of its category and its architects presented it to a jury and a room full of spectators – including me (hence my night out in the Barcelona Pavilion). Unfortunately, one of the jurors was the English architect Will Alsop, and even more unfortunately, Jeff Fearon and Tim Hay encountered him after lunch. (I’d earlier witnessed the approach of an English competition juror to lunch when I came across Mark Dytham in the Parc Guell, in the company of a glamorous companion and a jug of sangria. He was fortifying himself, he said, to judge the retail architecture category.)

“I’ve seen this house before,” Alsop told Jeff and Tim. “When I was a boy, in the Sixties, my parents gave me a book about modern architecture. Your building was in it.” This remark was made with a smile, but it was a joke with a sting in the tail. When Alsop’s parents gave him the alleged book, modernism still had some meaning as a movement. Forty years later, it was repeating itself as a style – a house style for clients who’d be horrified by the socialist company modernism kept in its youth.

I felt a bit sorry for Jeff and Tim. Positive reinforcement from New Zealand nesting magazines is not the ideal preparation for a session with a mischievous spirit like Will Alsop. I think Alsop was hoping for a counter-punch, but New Zealand architects, Marshall Cook excepted, aren’t practiced in the pugilistic arts. Fearon Hay’s house wasn’t a category winner in Barcelona, although it certainly wasn’t out of place as a finalist. The jury chose a Japanese building that exquisitely expressed a pure idea; that the house was practically uninhabitable was obviously immaterial.
On that same afternoon Will Alsop gave Andrew Patterson a rather torrid time, and again it was an experience for which Andrew’s history of benign New Zealand criticism may have left him ill-prepared. I also felt a bit sorry for Andrew. After Alsop had his way with a Patterson house in Ponsonby, another member of a different jury turned his sights on the clubhouse at the Hills Golf Club near Queenstown, a winner of a New Zealand Supreme Award for Architecture.

This was a more profound examination. Andrew presented this project as a sensitive intervention in the extraordinary topography of the Wakatipu Basin. The building is so deferential that it’s largely subterranean. Not good enough, said Shane O’Toole, an architect and critic then writing for the London Sunday Times. Pointing out that, no matter the quality of its architecture, a golf course is an alien presence in an alpine environment, and resource hungry and socially exclusive to boot, O’Toole asked Andrew why he had designed his building.

Now there’s a bald question that architects seldom have to answer. I can’t remember what Andrew said, if anything, but surely, for any architect in his position, the honest answers would be, “Because someone paid me to.” And, “Because if I didn’t do it, someone else would.” Of course, knowing what we now know about News International, Andrew might have turned the question back on Mr O’Toole: “Why do you write for Rupert Murdoch?”

Closer to home, someone paid Ignite Architects to come up with a neighbourhood-monstering scheme for the old yeast factory site in Ponsonby, and a very big car parking building plonked across from the Auckland waterfront – that Council-proclaimed ‘world-class’ littoral. And someone – oh yes, it was Mark Hotchin – paid Sumich Architects to design a house on Paratai Drive that, reportedly, is costing upwards of thirty million dollars to build. You don’t have to be a Savonarola to find the spectacular extravagance of this exercise morally indictable. It’s quite legal, of course, and, on the architect’s side, quite professionally proper. Just as we’re all entitled to a lawyer, so we’re all entitled to an architect (if we can afford one).
Hard questions are often fair questions. Perhaps architects should be asked more often to justify their work – to talk not about what they have designed, but why. (The I-was-just-following-orders argument is never convincing, in any pursuit.) There is far more to architecture than technical ability or virtuosity, which is why it is important, and which is why I want to write about it.

Contemplating Andrew Patterson’s Spanish Inquisition, and numerous other projects far more deserving of the third-degree, I realise that many of life’s pursuits – including publishing – require their practitioners to, in Christopher Hitchens’ words, “keep a double set of books”. Hitchens learned to do this because he was an old Trotskyist – a word with a nice ring to it, in the Northern Club – with a taste for hanging out with people the comrades wouldn’t approve of. So: one set of books to account for the endeavours consistent with professed beliefs, another to record life’s less purist, but more diverting and remunerative activities.
Architects are familiar with this double accounting method, and they also learn to live with discrepancies between practice and purpose. Sometimes the contradictions cannot be ignored. Gordon Moller once remarked in an interview that, unlike his Sky Tower, his adjacent Sky City Casino had not received an architecture award from his peers. The latter is a complex and technically accomplished building, and Gordon speculated that it wasn’t acknowledged because it is a casino. I suspect he might have been right. Sky City’s income derives from what we used to call vice. It’s perfectly possible – although not verifiable – that an architectural jury, when it came to consider the casino, couldn’t stomach the function and so refused to award the form.

Anyone writing about architecture, especially the affluent residential architecture that is the staple diet of local publishing, knows all about living with contradictions. You have to take care of your psychic constitution: envy’s not the occupational hazard, but self-loathing.

With understanding, though, comes forgiveness. The more I learned about architects the more I sympathised with them – well, many of them. I found it harder to heed the old Journalism School warnings about getting too close to your subject. Of course, that’s a hard news position, and it was always rather at odds with another journalistic imperative: the need to cultivate your sources and protect them.

So, you have to keep your distance from your subject but you also have to get close to your source. But what if your source is your subject? You can see how complicated the issue of proximity can become. What brought me closer to architects was a growing realisation of the difficulty of their job. It’s very hard work, realising a very good building, and most of the time, it seemed to me, that of all the people involved in a construction task, it was the architects who cared most about the quality of the outcome. Perhaps I bought into the profession’s conspiracy theory – the council, the builder, the project manager: they’re all out to get the architect – but, so help me, I started to believe that in writing about architects I was comforting the afflicted.

A couple of graphic illustrations of the profession’s marginalisation recently reinforced this notion. The first was the shabby treatment of architects who entered, in good faith, the Queens Wharf design competition championed and then disowned by the former mayor of Auckland, John Banks, and the former chairman of the Auckland Regional Council, Mike Lee. The politicians’ scornful populism was echoed in a diatribe against architects published on the New Zealand Herald’s opinion page. Architects just bring out the worst in some people: the Herald article was written by an AUT professor. I’m not sure what position he occupies – the Paul Henry Chair of Modern History?

The second episode of marginalisation is the continued sidelining of architects in post-earthquake Christchurch. It has been very difficult for the architects of a city with a fine architectural tradition to gain access to the reconstruction process. The government is under a lot of pressure to get things done; even so, it seems to enjoy asserting
its pragmatism. High quality design? The worry is that this will be dismissed as a “nice to have”.

Behind these realpolitik lessons administered to architects there’s the broader issue of relevance. Again, I sympathise – when I did an Internet synonym search for marginalisation, the question came back: Do you mean journalist? Obsolescence is never far from the mind of anyone who has anything to do with publishing. It was also in the thoughts of the RIBA earlier this year when it released a paper called ‘The Future for Architects’. The paper popped the question, “Will architects exist in 2025?”

The RIBA’s answer was rather inconclusive. Architects will probably still be around, although they might call themselves something else, and they might be working in big, market-dominating conglomerates which, despite Warren and Mahoney’s confident asseverations, doesn’t sound like much fun (although it may well be necessary, if architects want to work on big projects). I’m more optimistic – and not just because I’m now paid to be. In the last half a century architects have seen the advent of urban planners, traffic engineers, project managers and urban designers. None of them, as far as I can make out, can design a building.

I think architects will be OK. What they do won’t get easier, that’s for sure, but I’m sure it will remain rewarding and fulfilling. I want to believe this because, like its practitioners, I believe architecture matters. JW