



PROFILE

Gerald PARSONSON of Parsonson Architects

Peta Nichols talks to Gerald Parsonson of Parsonson Architects about his career and his views on architecture.

01



01 Looking north towards the Gibbs House.

02



02 Interior of the Gibbs House.

Where did you grow up, Gerald?

I was born in Palmerston North and we moved to Hamilton when I was ten. I left Hamilton to come down to university in Wellington. So I lived my childhood in two very suburban, central North Island cities. Dad was like an accountant and manager. He did some work for a steel company in Palmerston North and in Hamilton he worked for the Co-operative Dairy Company.

At what stage did you realise you wanted to study architecture?

I felt I wanted to be an architect at quite an early age, but when I was young I had two very different areas of interest. One was drawing and the other was the natural world, animals and insects and that sort of thing. At one stage I was considering studying Marine Biology or Entomology.

Was there anything in Hamilton that sparked your interest in houses?

In Hamilton, when I was growing up,

there was a lot of growth in housing. I had a friend whose father was a builder/developer, and he built some quite interesting houses. I really enjoyed the process of seeing houses get built, and I would design my own houses, which were pretty average things. That, coupled with being reasonably good at maths and drawing, led me to architecture. When I was doing my intermediate year at university, my physics and biology wasn't as strong as my other subjects so that confirmed the direction I wanted to go.

Were you encouraged by your parents and teachers to do architecture?

Yes. My father wanted to be a builder but his father insisted he was to be an accountant so I think he was pleased when I angled towards architecture. I was naturally good at technical drawing and took it all through high school so that also pushed me in the direction of architecture. I was in with all the wood and metal work students, which was different from my other courses

and a lot of fun. But my parents were really encouraging of whatever I wanted to do.

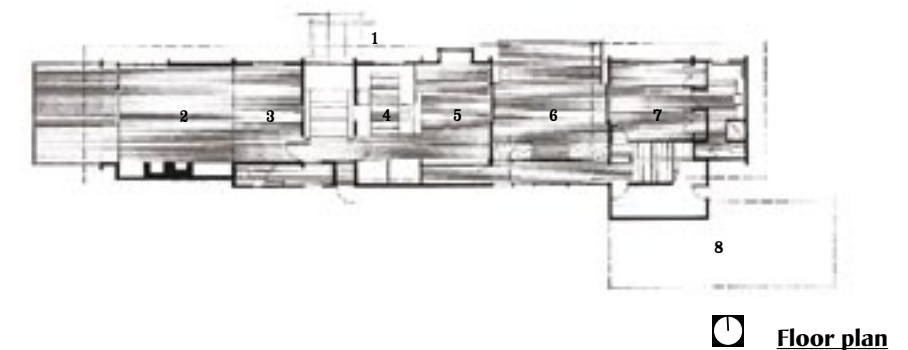
When were you at Architecture School?

Intermediate was in '79 and I graduated in '85. I was accepted into both Auckland and Victoria Universities, but one of my teachers said, 'Oh, you don't want to go to Auckland, it is not a very practical school. Wellington is much more practical'. At that stage I had no view on the state of design or anything. I was incredibly naïve, so I just thought, 'Oh yeah, that sounds good enough to me'... In hindsight, I think I probably would have been more suited to Auckland, because I really enjoy the idea of architecture being more towards the end of art rather than just being a necessary part of the construction process. [At Victoria University] there was heavy emphasis on structures, and a reasonable amount on construction, building sciences, and environmental issues. I was quite interested in solar and green issues back then but it didn't appear to be clearly presented. A lot of the lectures

1999

Gibbs HOUSE

• EASTBOURNE •



- 1 Entry below
- 2 Living
- 3 Dining
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Family
- 6 Deck
- 7 Master bedroom
- 8 Bedrooms above

This house is about life in the trees – creating a delicate platform amongst them to view the harbour and enjoy the birds and the sun. It has a natural spirit that is part of this special setting.

Procession through the house has a sense of unfolding. From below, the house is a heavy, linear wall that retains the forest behind. Entry up and through this wall allows the forest and harbour to be viewed and the house to unfold.

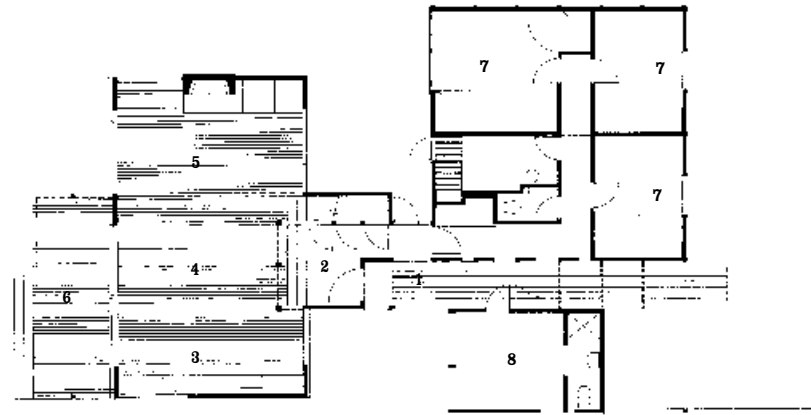
The roof of the main level has been separated from the walls to extend the sense of lightness, upwardness and delicacy of connection. This main level becomes a viewing platform with the views seen through either the slender beech trunks or members of the building. [Gerald Parsonson](#)

Manly Street BEACH HOUSE

• KAPITI COAST •

This is a beach house for a family of five. It was intended that the house create a story of passage from suburbia to the beach and the horizon beyond. From the street the house appears as a slightly ad hoc arrangement of separated forms, with fibre cement sheet boxes anchored to the ground and lighter forms floating around the side, leading to the beach.

The living area is a raised pavilion from which to enjoy the hot summers and views of the sea. Metaphors related to the location are threaded through the design. These are present as you pass through or stay in the house, adding a resonance that is not necessarily fully discovered. Gerald Parsonson



 Floor plan

- 1 Boardwalk
- 2 Entry
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Dining
- 5 Living
- 6 Deck
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Guest

seemed incredibly boring, although maybe that was a reflection of the way I was at that point in time.

I have looked back and have felt quite disappointed at the level of design input in the Wellington School back then. Whether that was because I was still quite naïve, especially at a design level, I don't know. There were other students who knew people like Ian Athfield and Gordon Moller, and their work was correspondingly good, but I was really grappling with design. I feel that we weren't taught anything particular towards design. There was no teaching about the philosophy of design, about how to design or what it means to produce something of substance.

Was there a particular subject you found interesting at the School?

Looking back, I should have done architectural history early on, and I didn't. Then I decided to attempt a history research report in my final year. It was a dumb thing to do and Russell Walden said, 'I'm not

going to be your tutor, because you have no background in what you are wanting to do'. But I really wanted to study the history of New Zealand wooden houses, so I did, and failed. I didn't give up. I repeated the research the following year, but did it alongside other history papers. When listening to Russell Walden speak about how architects produced buildings throughout history, for example, Gothic architects inspired by nature and drawing from religious aspiration, something clicked, and I suddenly started to get architecture. It was a point for me where things started turning a little bit.

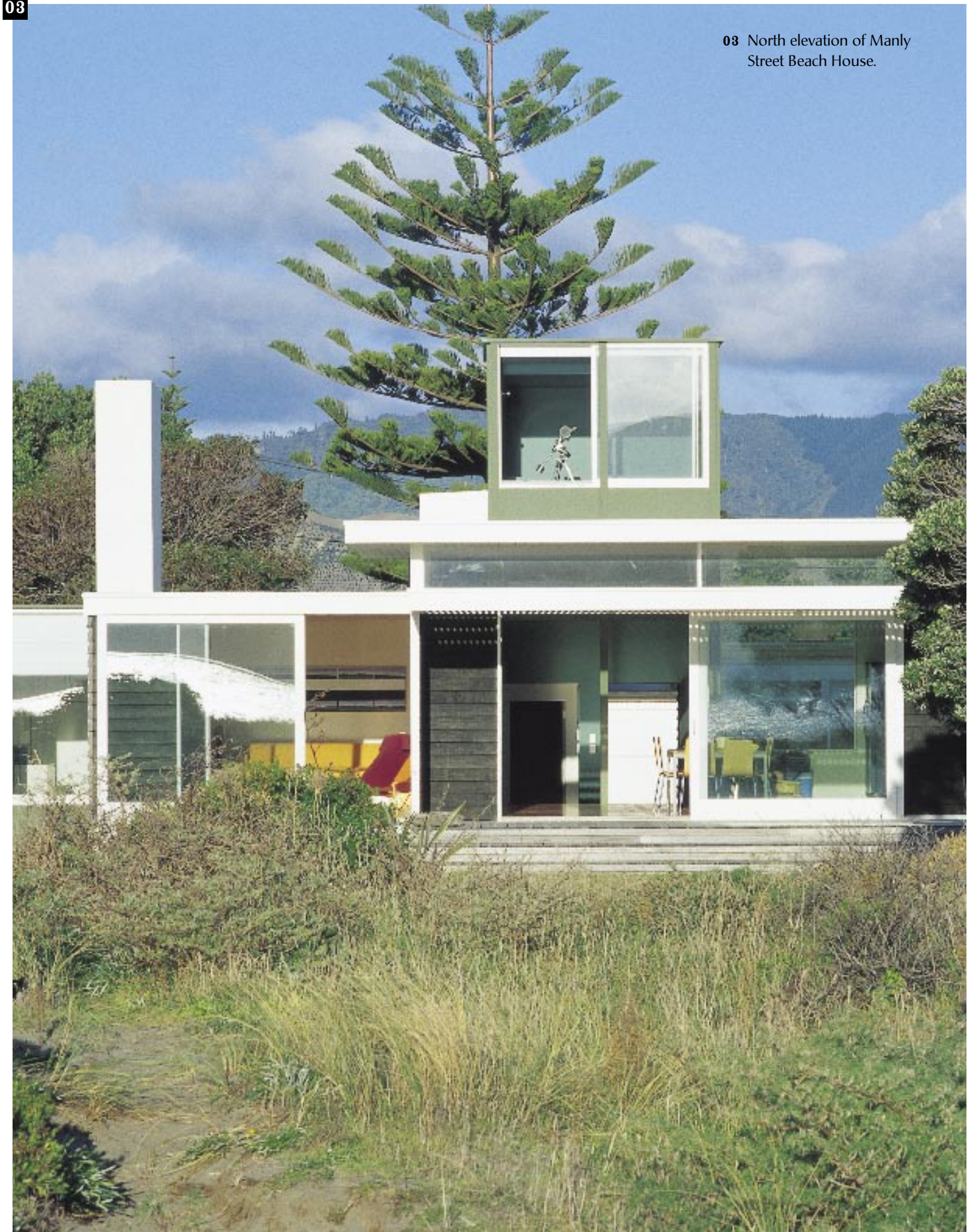
Were you inspired by any of your fellow students?

In my class there were a couple of people who were successful at the School. There was Alistair Scott, who is now a partner at HMA in Wellington and Mark Bassett, who ended up working for Skidmore Owings and Merrill in the States. Mark could paint watercolours like an angel and he used to

sell them through galleries. One time he said to me, 'You can draw, you should have a try at it'. So I did. In my last summer of university I gave up a lucrative holiday job I had through my father in the dairy factory and decided to make a living out of doing watercolours instead. Consequently, I took a massive hit in income, but I sold the watercolours through a gallery in Hamilton. I had never trained as an artist but I remember meeting a guy in a gallery in Hamilton who told me, 'You can draw, but you can't paint'. He showed me how to run watercolour washes and that sort of thing. My father also bought me a couple of books on the subject.

What did you paint?

Realist things, like a beautiful scene or a cityscape. Again, I had a pretty limited range in terms of understanding contemporary art and now that has expanded a lot. I now look back at the work and technically it's not too bad, but I would like to explore something with a deeper meaning if I did it again now.



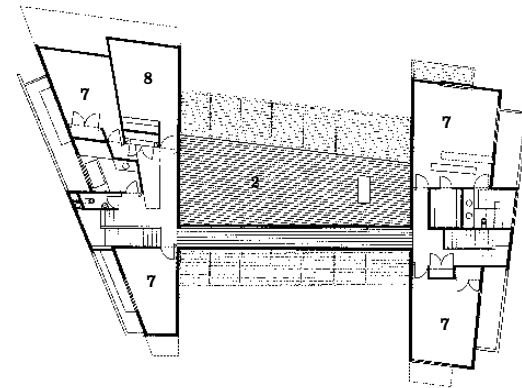
08 North elevation of Manly Street Beach House.

Northland HOUSE

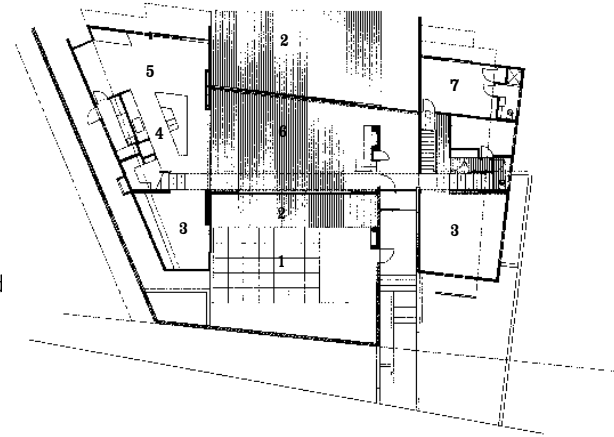
• WELLINGTON •

The house sits on a ridgeline overlooking Wellington Harbour. From the road the house peers austere over the protective courtyard wall, while the inside spaces feel very open and connected to the outside. We were interested in the idea of floating above a landscape, which represented to us a sense of freedom, lightness and appropriateness to this location. The tapestry of land viewed from the sky loosely influences patterns of surface materials; some in shifting layers with non-parallel surfaces subtly distorting perspectives.

Flooring and decking change in material and texture as they run level from the west courtyard, through the living room and out to the west deck. The roof glides over, unimpeded, like a shadow, perforated at the edges with louvres. The wings of the plan focus the views either east or west and close off the house to the neighbours to the north and south. [Gerald Parsonson](#)



Upper level plan



- 1 Courtyard
- 2 Deck
- 3 Den
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Family
- 6 Living
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Study

Lower level plan

Did you work in an architecture practice while studying?

While at university I got a part-time job at Craig Craig Moller, based on my skills of being able to draw well, but not necessarily designing. Gordon's nephew Chris Moller was at Craig Craig Moller, and also his son Craig, and I got to know both of them quite well, particularly Chris, who was a person of boundless knowledge, energy and passion for architecture. People who weren't particularly interested in architecture found him challenging, but I just couldn't get enough. Chris and I ended up travelling around France and Italy together later on.

I graduated and then worked at Craig Craig Moller and became registered. Like any graduate I remember feeling completely at sea when I started. There were a couple of drafts people who would say to us, 'what did you learn at university? Nothing?' Then they graciously taught us how to do the work. I also remember listening to the partners talk about design. Gordon Moller always had an opinion on how to do things, so it was a good way of learning about what makes

good, and not so good, architecture... I remember Craig Moller saying, 'Don't work in one place for too long', so I left after a few years to start my own practice, probably far too early.

When was this?

In 1987. And then there was the share market crash... I had a few jobs lined up, but not a heck of a lot. I enjoyed the challenge of doing things myself. When working in another practice things have to be done a certain way. I remember a time when Gordon allowed me to have a crack at designing a house. I had a love of Art Nouveau at the time and I did what I thought was a cute organic sort of thing, which Gordon took one look at it and said, 'Well, you could approach it this way...' He was really polite about it, and he then he went on and designed this fabulous house.

Was it daunting being out on your own?

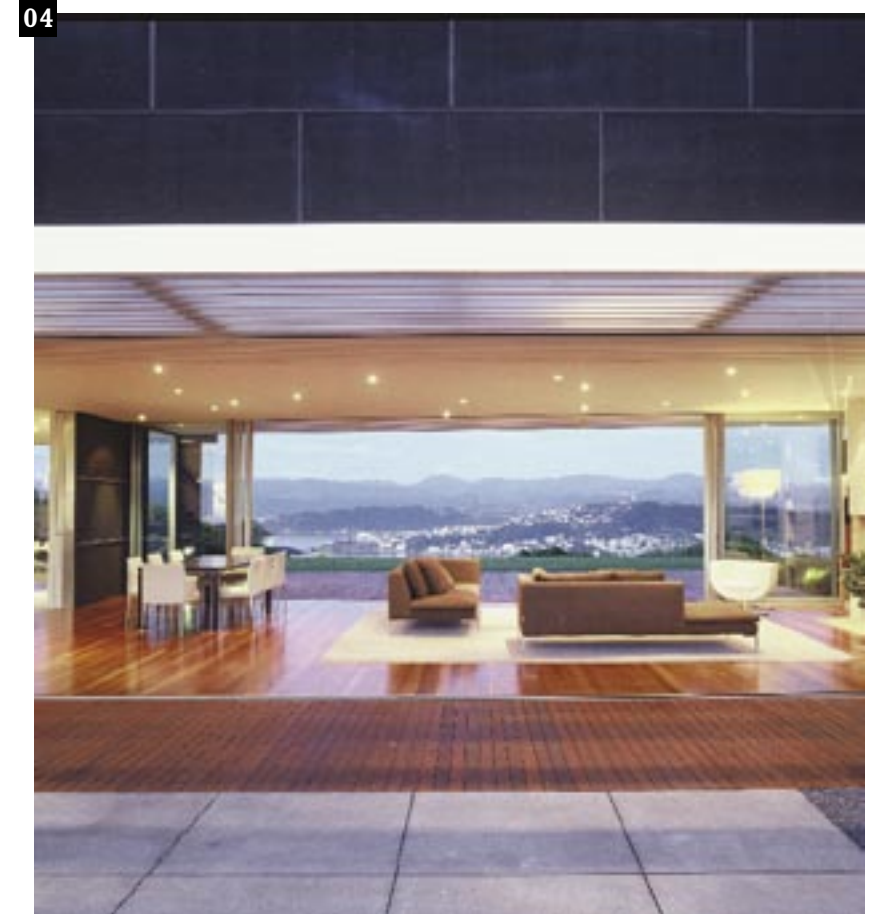
Not really, because you don't get great commissions, because nobody knows you. You get work because you are a recent

graduate or a young architect and you don't charge very much. Also, when you are young you don't have any commitments with family, and because I had been used to living on the smell of an oily rag trying to be a watercolourist, it didn't worry me to give my own practice a punt and see how it went. One of the jobs that got me going was because of my painting. People would ask me to paint pictures of their houses and one time I painted a house in Ngaio. It was quite a lovely Arts and Crafts house and the owners were really social people. They had had a draughtsperson of Athfield's give them some ideas for a renovation of their house and they asked me if I would like to give them some ideas too. At that stage I was still working at Craig Craig Moller but it turned out they really liked what I drew. So that was completed and it was published, which was a huge thrill. Those clients were very social, connected people so I got a lot of enquiries through their friends, and still do.

Kate, my wife, has also been an amazing support and has a very natural feel for design. She has given me some really good

04 Looking through the living space of the Northland House, out towards Wellington city and harbour.

05 Street elevation of the Northland House.

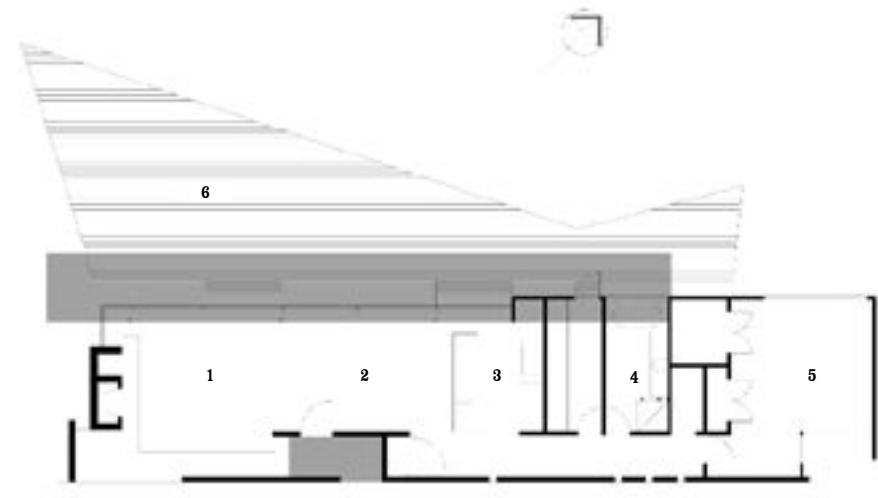


Paetawa HOUSE

• KAPITI COAST •

This small one bedroom house is located at Pekapeka Beach, a small seaside settlement an hours drive north of Wellington City. It rests on gently undulating dune lands, facing northwest, looking across the road and lower dunes out to the Tasman Sea and Kapiti Island to the west. It is intended for the house to both relate to the horizontality of this landscape and also be at odds with it. There is a sense of horizontal and vertical layering, and metaphorically a sense of dislocation or decomposition of parts, as if a creature or construction had been left high and dry above the tide.

The exterior is composed of a rhythm of painted fibre cement panels. Elements of wall, roof beam, roof layers and brise soleil are expressed separately, with light entering in places in between. [Gerald Parsonson](#)



 Floor plan

- 1 Living
- 2 Dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Bathroom
- 5 Bedroom
- 6 Deck



06 South elevation of Paetawa House.

critical comments at times when I have needed it.

You mentioned travelling overseas. When did you do that?

A year or two after I started my own practice. Other people talked me into it. Again, I had the naïve belief that I didn't have to go overseas to learn – 'New Zealand is a fantastic place, and there is so much here and I am starting my own practice and everything is ahead of me'. But Kate, my partner at the time, and now my wife, said, 'You should go and expand your horizons'. It was only about a month, not long, but it was a really intense and rich experience. Chris Moller and I flew to Paris and hired a little Citroën Deux Chevaux – they call it the flying tent because it has a canvas roof on the top. We visited Le Corbusier's Ronchamp and La Tourette, and were just blown away by architecture and art. Le Corbusier really intrigued me by being a painter, an architect, an urbanist, and a provocateur. We spent two days at Ronchamp just drawing and writing about it

and sitting in the local café soaking up the French summer.

Did travelling shift the way that you thought about architecture and designed buildings?

My work did shift, but I think it was a gradual thing. When you start, people ask, 'What is your style?' It's a hard question to be asked. You start thinking about 'your style' and I guess it probably doesn't happen immediately, unless you are a master like Frank Lloyd Wright.

That was another thing – I was inspired by a lot of architects very early on. I was interested in Frank Lloyd Wright who was an observer of nature, he threw away the up-tight Victorian model, which had a very vertically proportioned way of doing things and looked at his country and spread out to the prairie. Wright conceptualised the idea of woven space – the idea that there are not single rooms but a thread that travels through a series of rooms, out into the landscape and back in. I was devouring all sorts of books on Wright, and I used that

as a stepping-stone to find out about other people's work.

When did your practice start to gain momentum?

I developed a reputation for doing nice and comfortable, in-keeping house alterations that were fused with a modern sensibility. Once you get a reputation for something, that's all the work you end up doing, and I got to a point where I was a little frustrated. I was just itching for someone to give me a house. In the mid-nineties I designed our own house in Kelburn, which was an extensive renovation. I threw so many different ideas at it and spent ages trying to pull it all together. There was the idea of woven space, the desire to respect the street-facing façade, and to respect what the house was and its vertical proportions. The rest of the house was horizontally proportioned which related to the sun, the view, and the land. So, there was this transfer between the vertical and the horizontal and I was questioning how you interface that. When I finished the house, I put it into the awards

system. It won a local award, a regional award and then a national award, in a year when only two were given out. Then it was published... That project got me going, really.

In that period I also designed a small house for a friend, who was really trusting. He had a budget of \$100,000 – this was the Hataitai House. We won a regional architecture award for that, and then it was published, too. So that was a bit more momentum, and I think that's the key for any young architect. If you can hang on long enough to have people come to you, you'll eventually make it. I am not a naturally confident front person – I was terrified of going to the awards and have always battled with that side of things, which has been a bit of a pain. Other people are gregarious and very good at pressing the flesh, and that is a real skill to have, but you still have to back it up by delivering good architecture. My business model has been to do as good a work as I can, and then get it published. If people like it, they'll come and see us and if they don't, they won't.

I started out working from home, upstairs in Kate's little two-bedroom cottage in Thorndon. Kate had gone overseas for three months and I was sitting there on my own, with the cat, and it got really boring... An architect friend of mine, Costas Nicolaou, was working under the wing of a guy called John Bowes, and they shared office space with Jasmax, Toomath Wilson Irvine Anderson and a couple of other people. They had some space, so I went in there. I basically just rented a desk and all of us employed a secretary.

Costas had come through the Auckland School and had really firm opinions about ways of doing things. At Auckland, there was the Claude Megson camp and the David Mitchell one, and Costas was in the Megson camp. He was a firm believer in rigorous detailing and control of space. Costas and I would have a lot of debates and disagreements, which were really healthy. They were good, formative times. When John retired, Costas and I took up a little space in Courtenay Place and called ourselves Studio Work. It was an umbrella

name for our individual practices. Then Costas left about the time I started getting busy, so I just filled the room with my staff.

Did you always want your own practice?

Yeah, I think so. I like the idea of setting a target way up in the sky that is not necessarily achievable, and chipping away at it, and really enjoying the process and trying to celebrate moments along the way. It can be hard at times when dealing with all of the mundane stuff – building codes and administrative aspects etcetera, but clients make it really interesting and they vary so much. Some people are very clear about what they want and have thought carefully through every aspect and others just trust you to get it right, wanting us to produce the best we can. We're quite happy to work in any spectrum but it is a real compliment and very humbling when someone trusts you with something that is so important.

What do those different types of clients add to a project?

I really like the work of Ray Kappe, a

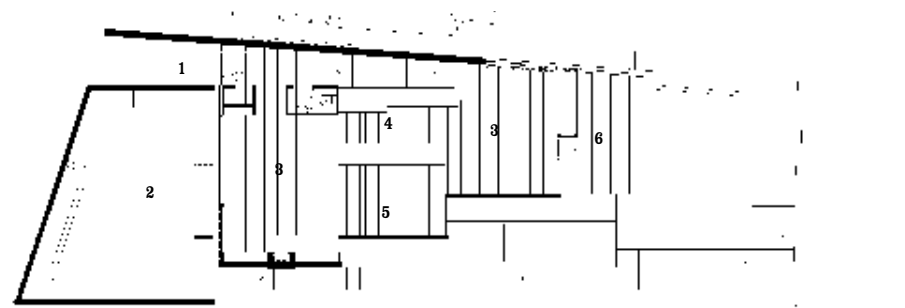
Salamanca HOUSE

• WELLINGTON •

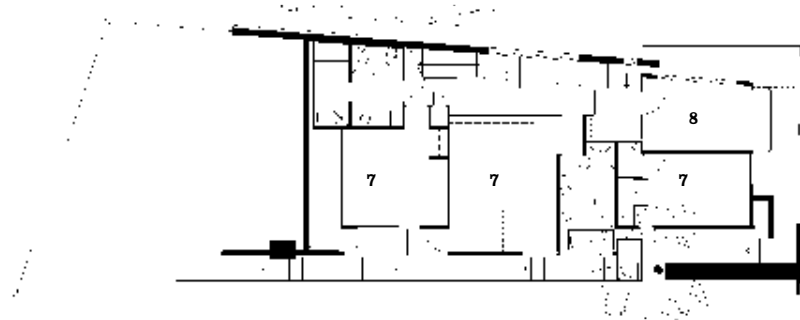
This site was subdivided from the original property, which contained an existing house designed by the Government Architect John Campbell in the early 1900's. It is historically listed and we were therefore keen for the new house to be lower and more subservient in its appearance to the original house while at the same time relating to it formally.

There were many restrictions on the property. The site was tight and relatively steep, the combined properties could not exceed the fifty per cent inner residential site coverage and the new house was required to fit within all sunlight recession planes.

The resultant dwelling fully utilises its site. Space for the bedrooms and garaging was excavated below, forming a base to the lighter living spaces above. The roof is clad in zinc and is cut and folded cleanly to focus views out to the harbour and diagonally to the trees, while at the same time providing a sense of enclosure and privacy. [Gerald Parsonson](#)



Entry level plan



Lower level plan

- 1 Entry
- 2 Courtyard
- 3 Living
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Dining
- 6 Deck
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Study

Californian architect who started up the Southern California Institute of Architecture, or SCIArc. He's probably in his eighties now, and has done some amazingly beautifully considered houses. Kappe speaks about talking to the client and letting them throw you off your path. And that is the way I like to think.

Then there's the ideal way of dealing with clients who have got fixed ideas, and that is just going along with the ride and giving them the best you can for what they are asking for. The clients who trust you immensely provide a separate challenge, 'Where do you go?' For example, you might have a site that's just a level field of grass. That makes the whole job of architecture interesting – what type of client is going to turn up? And clients can change through the process, too. Their ideas about architecture firm up as things are getting built.

What's the key to being a good architect?

One of the keys to being a good architect is being a good listener. It's one thing to

say, but it's another thing to do. To listen you really need to hear somebody and understand where he or she is coming from. Everyone varies. Some very good architects are quite assertive with their ideas – 'Are you with me or against me?' I prefer a process which is much more consultative. Often people are throwing a whole bunch of ideas at you and you have to weigh them all up, and then try and distil a good solution out of it. So listening gives you time to think.

When we were on a holiday in Australia I listened to a talk by a classical composer who said, 'If you are a creative person, it is not hard to generate ideas. We can all generate ideas and iterations of them all, but the art is then editing those ideas'. Being a good editor is a real key. So, when clients are downloading and when you are pouring your thoughts over the top of that, and then you start feeding in building and site issues – they're all the balls floating up in the air, and the ability to pull those together is an architect's skill. The looser you are, the better you are at doing it. The older you get, the more you think you know how to do it,

and that's a bit of a trap. It is a skill to stay really loose and open to possibility.

How do you do that?

There is that Buddhist thing about seeing the beauty in the moment no matter how mundane things get. I have three boys and I say the same thing to them every time and they laugh at me. In the house, Kate cooks the meal and it's my job to clean up, and when the boys help me I say to them, 'Make these the best dishes you have ever done, and just enjoy the bubbles'. It is a nice thing to say and it is a hard thing to do, but it is a good approach, especially when you get busy and you get more responsibility. I admire people like Gordon Moller and Patrick Clifford who seem to handle that stuff with ease. Having worked with Gordon and seeing how he has been a successful president of the NZIA, how he has got an amazing stamina and yet still retains a love of architecture, I find him inspiring in that regard.

You mentioned that you prefer the idea that architecture is closer to art. How





08 Looking towards Wellington city from the upper level of Salamanca House.

does that influence your approach to the design of a house?

Well, I don't like the approach where an architect meets a client with a set of spatial requirements and the architect then creates a plan all laid out according to the requirements, sun and the site etcetera, and then you go, 'Well, what form do we put around it?' Then there's a discussion about liking styles, boxes or pitched roofs, and a particular colour. So then you have a house that has been built around a set of requirements and a form that is picked out of the air, but it is a house that has got no meaning. It is just a house.

How do you reference art in your architecture then?

Another formative thing for me was an introduction to contemporary New Zealand art and music. John Bowes was involved in the raising of Les and Millie Paris's house to fit a storey underneath for art. Les Paris was a lawyer who collected work by McCahon, Don Binney and other New Zealand artists. I remember going to the

Paris's art collection – there was a McCahon painting called *The Sounds at Night*, and it was just black, dark green and dark blue. It was so dark that you could hardly see that it was blue and green. I remember just standing there looking at it, and then the next minute I was in the Sounds, at night, and it was such a moving thing. After that, I started reading about McCahon's work. McCahon would study geologists' drawings of the land and I just started to think about that in relation to architecture.

I also really love Bob Dylan and have read about how he created his music and how there would always be a strong message. Often he would ask questions, which is fascinating because questions spin your mind whereas answers are finite. For example, *Blowin' in the Wind* – the whole song is just a bunch of questions. The idea that architecture can ask questions, I think that's interesting.

Do you apply questions to your architecture?

To sit down and create something, I will

start to write words or word strings and little sketches, and work out what we are trying to do – what is our story? The stories can exist on a whole bunch of levels. One is a visual or compositional level – 'How do the parts relate to each other?' There are people like Kandinsky, whose work is all about shapes and relationships to things, and Mondrian... That's what is difficult about designing houses – you are creating someone's living environment, but you are also thinking about all these other ideas.

Do you explain your artistic ideas behind a design to your clients?

Sometimes, but I find when you explain them they sort of die. Sometimes it creates an enthusiasm and sometimes people think you are a bit crazy. For example, for our own beach house (Manly Street Beach House) it is obviously a modern version of a bach, but I was thinking about the idea of flow across the site from Paraparaumu, which is basically pretty standard suburbia. Then there is a transfer to beautiful dune land that becomes the sea and then Kapiti



09 The kitchen, dining and living spaces of Salamanca House.

Island, which is a nature reserve. So when I started designing the house I started drawing lines across the site. This brought about the idea of solid and light – the pavilion, which is really light casual living, and the bedrooms being a box. At the time I was reading a book on Paul Klee, and I really enjoyed his use of colour, his use of warm browns, oranges and reds. I thought about the idea of a colour box, using those colours to contrast the living pavilion, so I painted the hallway a watermelon red, using orange hand blown glass to shed light into the hallway. You probably wouldn't do it in most houses, as most people wouldn't tolerate it. It has ended up being a really cool thing – it's almost like being inside an organism, inside a shell.

So there are a whole bunch of ideas that have been threaded into this project, and when you explain it, I think it dies a little bit, because the questions are answered. I find it is a real thrill for people to come in and walk down the hallway. One woman walked in and said, 'It's like walking inside a sea creature'.

Do ideas continue through multiple projects?

Yes. I think it's because you are consistently thinking about stuff... you can't help be yourself, and you think certain ways. We try to look at each individual site and draw inspiration out of that, but ... you are the guide, and you can't help doing it your way.

What is it that you most enjoy about architecture?

I really enjoy the creative process and working with clients and watching jobs unfold. It is an absolute thrill. You work up an idea with the client and it just starts from this really conceptual thing that begins to firm up in the drawings and then building starts and you walk around the spaces. Seeing it unfold from a few electrical impulses rattling around in your head to this real building is quite a fantastic process.

Do you still get a surprise when you see the real thing?

With the advent of 3D drawing and rendering programmes you now have a

pretty good idea of how it is going to feel, but it doesn't come close to the thrill of experiencing the real thing. When you are designing a house, or any project, a lot of vigilance needs to go on while it is being built, because it is easy for an idea to die, sometimes even if the contractor moves a stud wall by ten millimetres... Most of the time there is a little bit of flexibility, but there are always crucial points that you need to be right. A design can unravel simply with a steel worker putting a beam slightly in the wrong place.

What are your aspirations for your practice?

I have always really liked the idea of working on a community building, or a church, or a smaller-scale project or even a larger-scale commercial project. But, you know, we are probably not set up for the rigours of a large-scale commercial project. We have got architects that we could hook up with, but again it is about having reputation for doing that sort of work, unless there is a client who really believes you can do it.

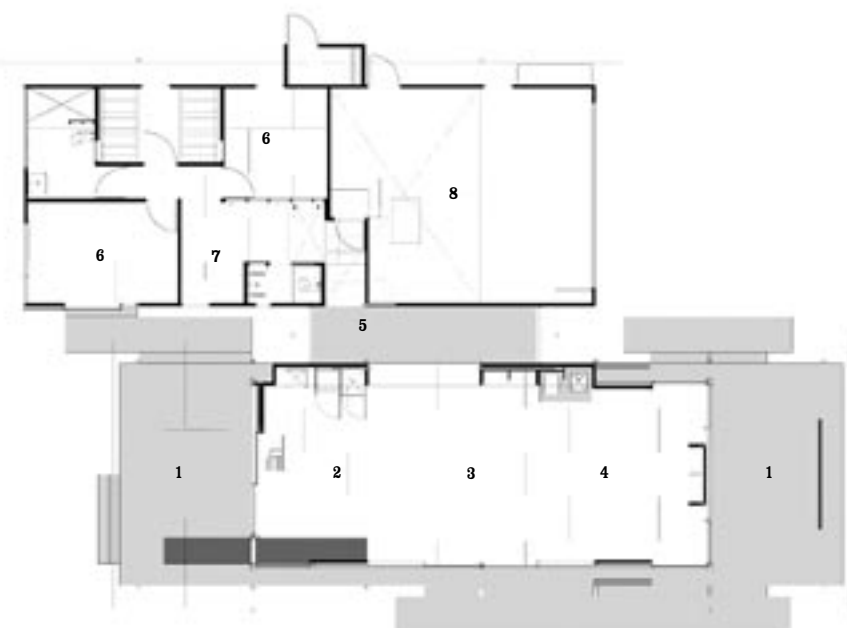
2009

Shoal Bay HOUSE

• HAWKES BAY •

Shoal Bay is a remote settlement on the rugged east coast of southern Hawkes Bay. The building is designed to be part of the rural setting, raised off the ground and sitting beside the original woolshed, which has served the bay since the early 1900s. The bach is rugged yet welcoming and offers unpretentious shelter, it is the type of place where you kick off your shoes and don't need to worry about walking sand through the house.

The bach is formed of two slightly offset pavilions, one housing the bedrooms and the other the main living space. Decks are located at each end of the living pavilion allowing the sun to be followed throughout the day. Sliding screens at the northwest end provide adjustable shelter for the different wind conditions, offer privacy from neighbouring campers and act as walls for outside sleeping. [Gerald Parsonson](#)



Floor plan

- 1 Deck
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Dining
- 4 Living
- 5 Linkway
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Study
- 8 Garage

We were given that opportunity through Icebreaker. Jeremy Moon at Icebreaker was considering someone to design their stores and they had three people in, two people who had experience with shop fit-outs and us, because we had worked on his house. I sat in the meeting and said to everyone, 'Look, we have no experience at this, but we will give it our best shot and every time we have done something we have generally succeeded at it'. Jeremy then said, "Great, I want someone with no experience at this sort of thing, we will try it from a different angle." Our first project for Icebreaker was the Wellington Airport store and we ended up doing a bunch more around the world - Portland, Montreal...

What are the biggest differences in designing commercial architecture compared to houses?

The timelines are much more constrained, and when doing interiors there is no weather-tightness stuff you need to deal

with, which is quite a luxury. Icebreaker is a company that has a real wholesomeness to their approach. They are selling a product from New Zealand and their ideas combine with ours quite nicely.

Over time, have you found that what your clients ask for has changed?

Yes, definitely, but I can't work out if it is because when you get more of a reputation different people come to you than before. Ninety-five per cent of houses in New Zealand are designed by builders or draughts people. Architects have a very limited effect for the most part, but most of the work that is published has had architectural involvement, so we are working at the higher end. Out in the 'burbs' people can do whatever style they want, and we used to get clients telling us, 'I really want a French provincial house', or 'I really want a Spanish house', and I found it strange that people wanted to transplant seemingly random foreign ideas rather than being inspired

by aspects of the location, the landscape, and what we are as New Zealanders. I think people are now generally open to a more architectural way of thinking. There is beginning to be more confidence and I am sure that will grow and will be reflected in the work we do. If you look at the Australians, there seems to be a greater confidence, and they are doing some quite personal and idiosyncratic stuff. We are generally a little bit more polite here.

Now that you are a reasonably established practice, do people come to you for your style?

Yes, that is why they come to you, I think. I remember Ian Athfield talking about his first work, which was a lot of houses for quite alternative types of people, lots of brick and natural timber. When he had moved on from that, he would still get people coming in and asking him to do that older type of stuff. We get people coming in and referring to something that we feel like we have

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10 South elevation of Shoal Bay house.



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11 Looking from the deck of Shoal Bay House.

moved on from, but that's all part of it.

Is there are strong architecture community in Wellington?

Yes. I'm in a small practice group with John Mills – he was with me at university, and he was an inspiration, with his flamboyance. He'd say things like, "If clients are scared of colour, make it stronger". There's also Stuart Gardyne, Stephen Pouloupoulos and Allan Wright from Architecture+, the HMA guys, Nick Bevin and Ric Slessor and Hugh and Ewan from Tennent and Brown. So there's a good core of architects. In Wellington everyone knows each other and you see each other at events. It's a village.

Does residential architecture in Wellington differ from other parts of the country?

I think so. I was at an awards meeting yesterday, and an Auckland architect was joking about an Auckland project that

didn't get an award. He said, 'Oh, it didn't have enough negative details – southern people love their negative details'. I think there is possibly more of a weighting on 'crispness' the more south you go. Also I think you can possibly be freer and more casual in a warmer, more benign climate and a lot of beautifully layered buildings from Auckland demonstrate this, but they wouldn't necessarily stand up to the scrutiny of the horizontal rain and wind in Wellington. Climate definitely starts defining different ways of enclosing space, and there are the topographical considerations as well.

What do you look for when judging architecture?

There are agreed NZIA criteria that are set down. We look for a masterly control of the whole process, from interpreting the client's ideas through to the completed building. We consider planning, form, composition,

detailing, environmental and sustainable issues and discuss how well it all comes together. How well do all the parts work in relation to the whole?

Do you find it interesting?

Absolutely. Under the new awards system we effectively visit around 45 projects, which means we short-list from photographs and documentation to manage the size of the tour to make it sustainable time-wise. But short-listing using photographs is difficult. There will be projects that you look at that don't seem particularly inspiring, but you go to them and they are absolutely fantastic. Or other projects that are graphically interesting, but when you turn up they just fall flat. To experience and judge architecture in the flesh is really important and is one of the privileges of being on a jury. That is why travel is really good – just to experience as much nature, architecture and urban space as you can.

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12 The linkway and living space of Shoal Bay House. The house is formed by the connection of two raised pavilions.

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Selected publications

A Pocketful of Beach Houses, Images Publishing, 2009
100 Country Houses, Images Publishing, 2009
Architecture Inspired by NZ, Mint Publishing, 2009
New New Zealand Houses, Random House, 2007
Exquisite Apart – 100 Years of Architecture in NZ, Balasoglou Books, 2005
100 of the Best Houses from Downunder, Images Publishing, 2005
Living by the Sea, exhibition and book, Mahara Gallery, 2004
World's 100 Best Houses, Images Publishing, 2001

Selected awards

2008: NZIA New Zealand Award: Salamanca House
2006: NZIA New Zealand Award: Martinborough House.
2005: NZIA New Zealand Awards: Mitika Apartments; Pekapeka House; Roseneath House.
2003: NZIA Supreme Award: Northland House. NZIA Regional Award: Northland House.
2001: NZIA Supreme Award: Manly Street Beach House.
2000: NZIA Supreme Award: Eastbourne House. NZIA Regional Award: Eastbourne House.
1996: NZIA Regional Award: Hataitai House.
1995: NZIA Supreme Award: Upland Road House. NZIA Regional Award: Upland Road House.
+ 13 NZIA Local Awards
+ 6 Colour awards

Photography

Portrait: Tim Lovell
Gibbs House: Grant Sheehan
Manly Street House: Patrick Reynolds
Northland House: Paul McCredie
Paetawa House: Paul McCredie
Salamanca House: Patrick Reynolds
Shoal Bay House: Paul McCredie