

Architectural RECORD

• SMALL STEPS TO PARADISE •

Small Steps To Paradise are notes that were developed from a recent exhibition called *Great Figure!* The exhibition displayed models and pin-ups of Wellington architecture practice KebbellDaish's residential work and was held at Bowen Galleries, Wellington, between 20–23 November 2010.

Words by [Sam Kebbell](#)

01

Figure

Courtyards, pathways and verandahs are not typical conversation starters. In fact, as a rule, they are effective conversation stoppers at most New Zealand dinner tables. So it might be a surprise to know that a few people are happy to talk about them for several years and in great detail. It turns out that courtyards, pathways and verandahs can be important things. For want of a better word, we call them all 'figures' but we could just as well call them 'protagonists', 'catalysts', 'accelerators' or perhaps borrow a word from Dr Seuss and called them, 'nizzards', 'flunnels' or 'sneedles'. It doesn't matter much what they are called, but however unlikely it might sound, they start long conversations.

Fair enough too. They can form the basis of a house that shapes the life of a family. There are lots of things we could call a 'figure': a grandstand, porch, stoop, hall, gallery, passage, landing, lobby... The list could go on and on, and each one could be broken into various types from various parts of the world – each influenced by custom, climate, technology and philosophical fascination. They all have a certain history and set up social, technical and aesthetic expectations. Conventionally, they go together in certain groups and in certain configurations to form known building 'types': pavilion, villa, bungalow, super-bach, landscaper, skyscraper, stadium, castle...

If culture was static then those conventions would be universal rules and our discipline would suffocate. There is also

a good chance we would still be wearing togas, or some other ancient garb, and spend our weekends feeding Christians to the lions. But happily for Christians, culture is not static. Our values have changed markedly since the blood and sweat of the Coliseum's heyday. Not surprisingly, architecture has evolved too, and it continues to evolve according to our changing values. Playstation in the drawing room is not just a change in fashion; it's a change in culture.

02

Architecture is a Means to an End

Contemporary culture is made up of a few over-arching ideas and lots and lots of sub-cultures. Companies try hard to build their own cultures (or at least some do); clubs do the same, and most families have a culture without necessarily thinking about it.

Architecture plays a real role in that culture. Sadly, some houses cause one's sphincter muscles to tighten and free thought to evaporate; it's just the way they've been done. So not only does architecture exist in the context of contemporary culture, it also plays a role in the production of that culture. Like a good piece of clothing, buildings don't control who you are, but they can amplify who you think you are. So at least in part, architecture is one means to a cultural end goal, and the figure is an important building block towards that. It is just one part of a whole raft of shapes, colours, habits, rules, smells, manners, economies, technologies and one-liners on tee shirts that make up a sub-culture.

The best buildings are imbued with ideas that connect a place to other ideas, world views, experiences and all manner of things that bounce around in a human's head; they respond to context like a good conversationalist.

03

Context is Everything

The idea of context is much bigger than what anybody can see out their window.

When context is understood as the environment surrounding the inhabitant, not just the environment surrounding the building, then the idea of context is much richer than the Mount Victoria design guide could ever suggest. You experience architecture in the context of your life experience. The glossy pages of this magazine, architecture you have visited, films you have watched, books you have read, and even tonight's news, all form part of the context for the next building you visit.

In short, contemporary culture is the context for contemporary architecture – even if only one or two aspects of contemporary culture are relevant. The immediate landscape and neighbouring buildings are enormously important, but looking out the window is just the beginning. These conversations about figure can go on a long time because the width of a path, the dimensions of a courtyard and the orientation of a verandah are all small pieces of a much bigger and unsolvable puzzle.

04

Paradise Reforged

On 6 September 2007, the *Economist* ran an article entitled 'Time to Call it a Day' in which it asked, "If Belgium did not already exist, would anyone nowadays take the trouble to invent it?" Well, New Zealand was a good idea, and despite the occasional cartoonist suggesting that the last New Zealander to leave should turn out the lights, it is still a good idea.


Whichever way you read the history books, New Zealand was the last land mass to be discovered and humanity's last serious attempt to build a country from virgin ground. We are young and obliged to experiment. With each experiment we make, and each small figure we build, we can have a crack at another way to live. That other way to live is the subject of another long conversation and the world's most exciting project: paradise. 

Figure: Courtyard

Courtyard in the centre of a rebuilt Arts and Crafts bungalow.

Photography: KebbellDaish



Figure: Pathway

Elevated zig-zag pathway in front of a pavilion. Photography: KebbellDaish (right); Simon Wilson (below)



Figure: Verandah

Upstairs verandah with deck chairs facing inwards to a studio wall.

Photography: KebbellDaish (above); Sonia Mangiapane (right)

