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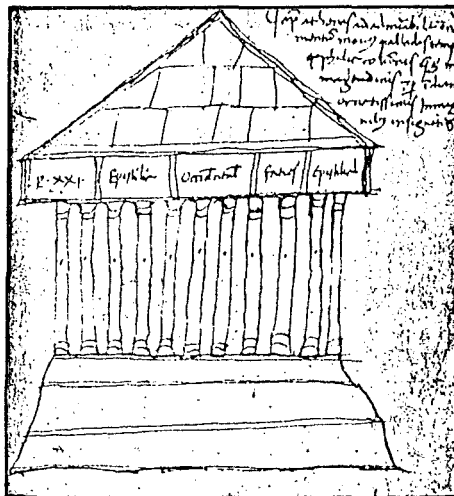
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THE LANDSCAPE OF VISITOR CENTRES



ANDREW CRAIG

Abstract

Guidelines to an understanding of visitor centres and how they impose and are imposed upon by the landscape. This dissertation is principally directed to Landscape Architects and those involved in the design and implementation of visitor centres in relation to the landscape. Its emphasis is on fostering an understanding of visitor centres and their relationship to the landscape rather than providing hard and fast practical solutions, in which, needless to say, landscape professionals should be well versed.

This dissertation is divided into five basic parts, and although distinct, are closely interconnected.

- Part one: An introduction outlining aims, defining the problem and the visitor centre.
- Part two: A philosophic view of attitudes to visitor centres in the past and present, and how they affect our perception of the landscape.
- Part three: A look at the practical application of how an understanding of the visitor centre affects design at ground level.
- Part four: Case studies - Two case studies examining how two visitor centres have been related to the landscape.
- Part five: A look to the future and the implications involved. Also a conclusion and a summary of resources.

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Diploma of Landscape Architecture at the University of Canterbury.

Submitted by Andrew Craig, B.A. 1986.

Acknowledgments

Many people have assisted me with this study
but I owe special thanks to:

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criticism and guidance;

-Clare Findlay for her assistance.

-The staff at Punakaiki and Nelson Lakes
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Contents

PART 1	Introduction	1
	Approach	7
	The Problem	11
	Definitions	17
PART 2	Form, Context and Content	27
PART 3	Not Putting it on the Ground	54
	The Role of the Landscape Architect	58
PART 4	Case Studies - Introduction	64
	Case Study One - Nelson Lakes	70
	Case Study Two - Punakaiki	80
PART 5	Conclusion	86
	References	90

PART 1

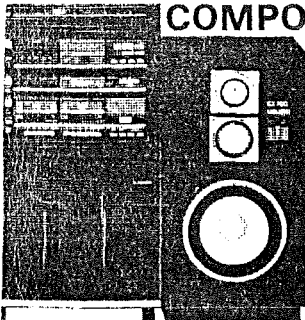
Introduction

'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.'

Julia S. Lang

Preamble to children's story in, 'Listen with Mother.' BBC radio, 1950.

In 1957 the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tonnies used the term, 'gesellschaft', to describe modern urban society. This as opposed to preindustrial rural society, the characteristics of which, he termed 'gemeinschaft'. The distinction is that the former is characterized by rationality, heterogeneity, mobility, diversity, choice, consumption, and perhaps most importantly because it is inevitable, the acknowledgement of, and indeed the demand for, change. Whereas in the latter, the opposite prevails. The gesellschaft society is one that is information rich and as a result, and in comparison with the past, is universally well educated. Consequently it is a demanding and articulate society that has an insatiable appetite to speak and be heard, and will employ, from an extensive range, any medium available to do so.



COMPONENT RACK SYSTEM

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Now you can build a treasury of moving snapshots!

TODAY 2pm, 8pm

SCHWARZENEGGER

PREDATOR

NOTHING LIKE IT HAS EVER
BEEN ON EARTH BEFORE!

RP.16 Content may offend

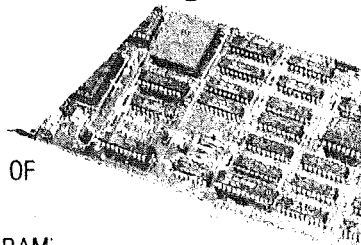
CONTACT 2308 is very keen on horses, good chats and whitebait fishing. He describes himself as independent and is looking for a social companion. If you're a lady who enjoys the outdoors and animals you might enjoy the company of this gentleman, or any of the many Contact introduce. Ph.

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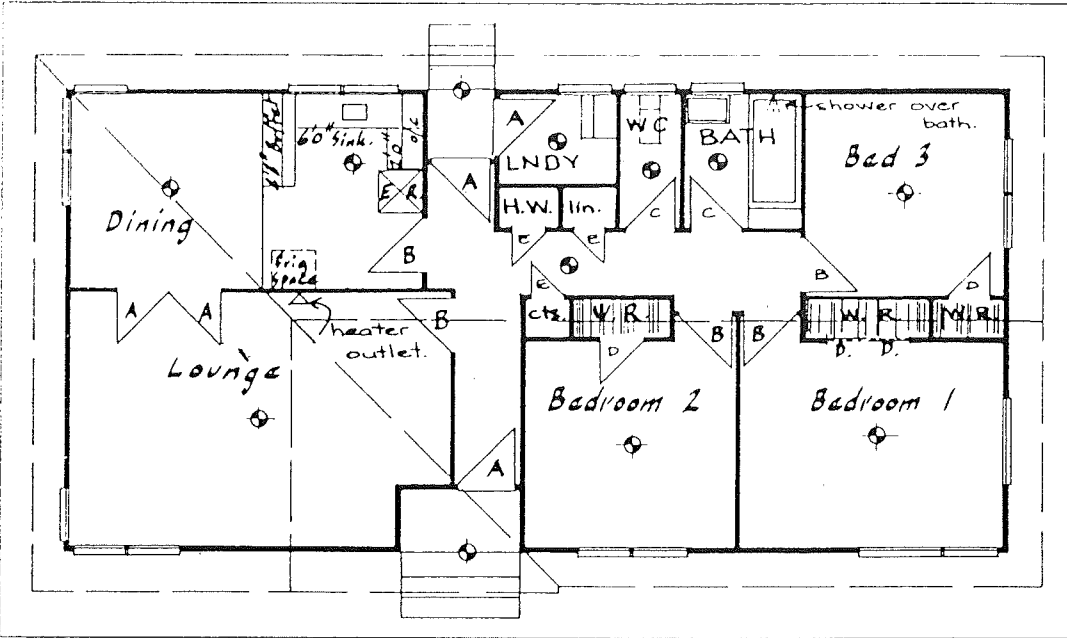
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Despite societys' heterogeneity, its diversity tends, toward the modular. ' In modern society, life is more segmented, its various aspects put into their own compartments, so to speak, with little harmony with the other parts. With the economic aspect of life quite distinct from other aspects, its rationality is at a maximum. Leisure and play are altogether distinct from work, which is set apart from the rest of life by the tyranny of the clock.'² We like to divide our lives into compartments such as worker, spouse, parent, pupil, teacher, worshipper and player, to name but a few. Trendily, albeit somewhat paradoxically, we like to think that we mix our modules into one homogeneous mass, and so become holistic or whole persons. Regardless of the many roles we play, we still remain, nonetheless, a highly differentiated society, and yet a three piece suit or an office block in Tokyo is really no different from one in Auckland or Rio de Janiero. A kind of parallel plurality exists that is, nonetheless, cemented in a global conglomerate which dictates that the only certainty is uncertainty.

All this in contrast to a time not so long ago where, prior to the industrial revolution, people lived where they worked and played and worshipped and loved and died. The geography of form, content and context were one and the same and change was a menace, and of course to many, it still is. In preindustrial rural society, the environment was, '... a mystery to be revered, feared, and propitiated or an illusion to be ignored. Modern man, in contrast, sees his environment as an orderly universe governed by laws that can be understood and forces that can be harnessed, and he strives to understand these laws and manipulate these forces.'³ The way we go about understanding these universal laws and forces is one where we reduce them to their simplest form and in so doing reveal the 'Truth'. Our living, in many ways, echoes this approach to understanding, so that everything we do is reduced to simple modular forms.



The modern house plan differs little from the city plan.
 Our plans for where we live reflect the way we live.
 This occurs at all scales, from our house, to our country.
 Mitchell. The Elegant Shed.



In preindustrial
 society living spaces
 evolve with a
 directness and
 immediacy that results
 from an intimate, and
 inseparable, understanding
 of the environment.
 Photo: Rudofsky
Architecture without
 Architects.

We live in a house that has a room for excreting, a room for sleeping, a room for cleaning our bodies, clothes and dishes, one for fun, the dog, the cat, and the car. We even have one for eating what we cooked in another. If we want money; we go to the bank, books to the bookshop, groceries and videos to the petrol station and a birth to the maternity ward. You want to know about land preserved in perpetuity because it contains, '..... scenery of such distinctive quality or natural features so beautiful or unique that their preservation is in the national interest,' (National Park act 1980), then you go to a visitor centre which houses information about such land, and in itself is housed on the land.

This dissertation is about visitor centres and what they do in and on and to the land. It concerns the landscape that the visitor centres create and who creates them and why, and so this dissertation is aimed at the 'dramatis personae' of visitor centre design and their part in generating the landscape thereof.

This is not a, 'How to', or a, 'Everything you have ever wanted to know about but were afraid to ask.....', guide, but is rather, a signpost that will hopefully direct its reader to seek an understanding of the visitor centre 'raison d'etre.' Although this dissertation is directed principally to all those involved with visitor centre design, it is especially aimed at those whose concern is the landscape, and in particular landscape architects and allied professions. It will hopefully provide a basic understanding of how visitor centres work and how such an understanding can be utilized in the design of visitor centre landscapes.

Understanding is the key word and it is the basis upon which this is writ, for as every designer need not be told, it too is the basis for every problem solved. So by understanding the nature of visitor centres and the relationship that is engendered between them, their managers, the public and the landscape they serve, designers can incorporate this knowledge into and as part of the visitor centre landscape.

NOTES

1. Biesanz, J & M. Introduction to Sociology, p.464.
2. *ibid.* p.464.
3. *ibid.* p.465.

Approach

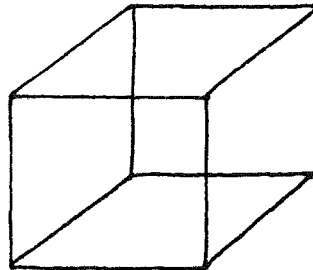
One of the definitions of approach is to 'attempt to influence or bribe', (OED), while another is to 'set about the (task)'. While it is a motive to 'influence', it, depending on your outlook, may or may not be a 'bribe'. To 'set about the task' is to plan, plot, procede and scheme and although this dissertation is not a recipe, it does aim to motivate an understanding as to why we cook what we do. To carry the analogy further, one might ask, why is it that we eat hot roasts and puddings on equally hot Christmas days, here in the antipodes? Knowing the answer is not the 'set about task' here, but what is, is encouraging the question. To be sure, the basis of understanding comes from finding the right answers, but the right questions have to be asked first. It is the designers task to both ask and answer the question. It is the task of this dissertation to motivate, and if necessary, provoke the question. It is not the task of this dissertation to provide the answers. As much as anything this dissertation is about the design process, which has alighted upon, by way of example, the visitor centre and its attendant landscape.

Different questions give different, 'true', answers and yet the object in question remains the same. What differs is our perception of it and herein originates our questions and answers. Visitor centres are no exception.

Q. WHAT IS THIS ?

Q. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Q. WHAT DOES IT REPRESENT?



A. A CUBE SEEN FROM ABOVE.

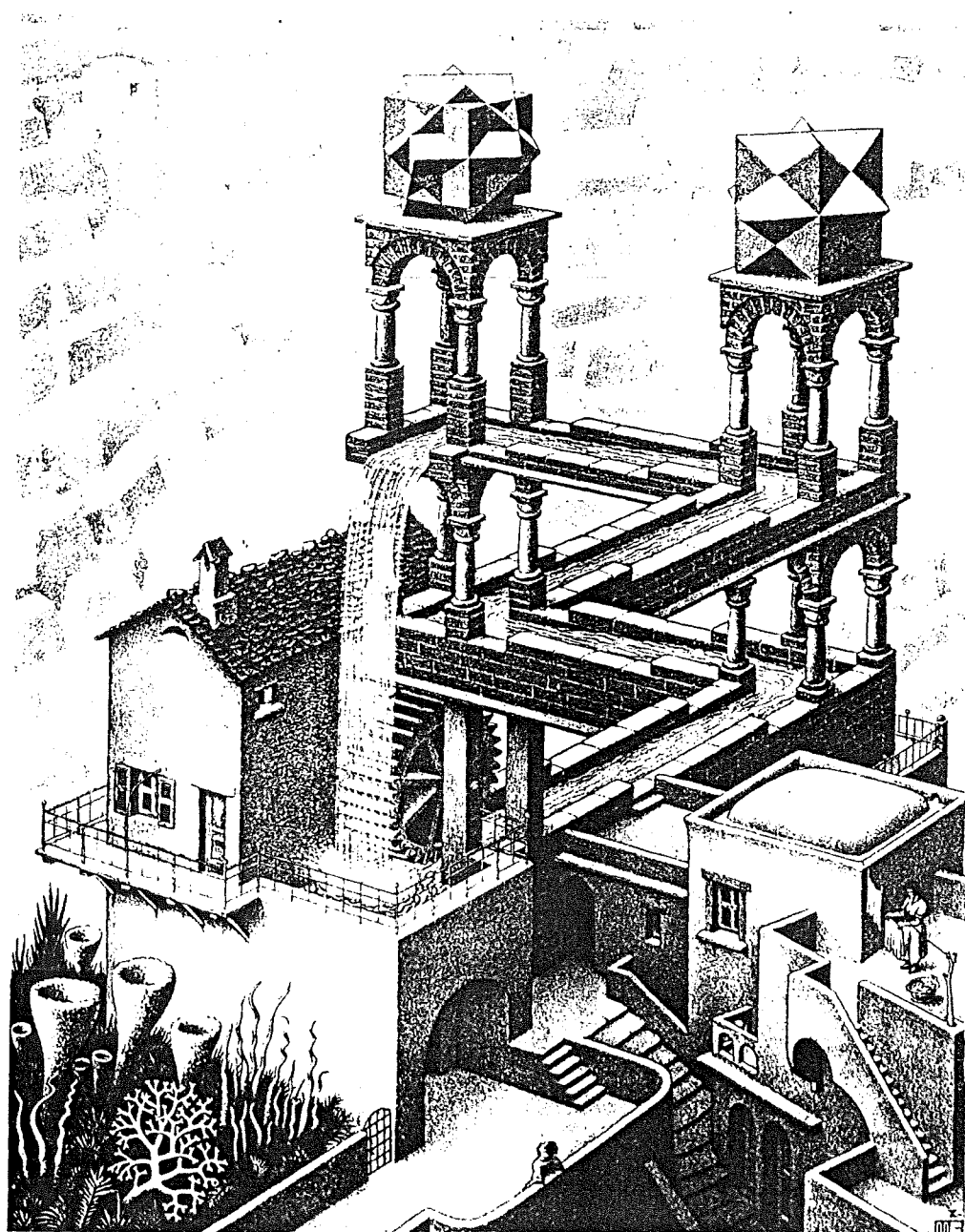
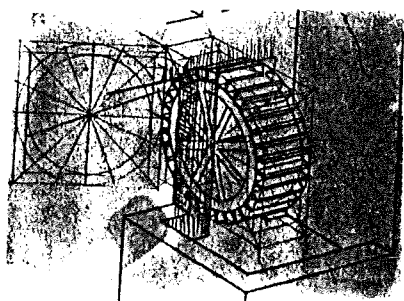
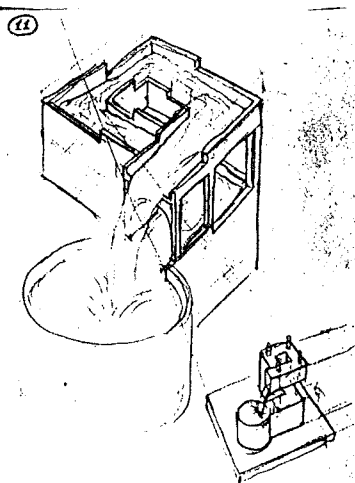
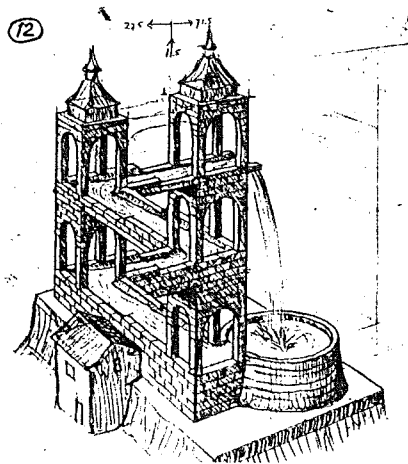
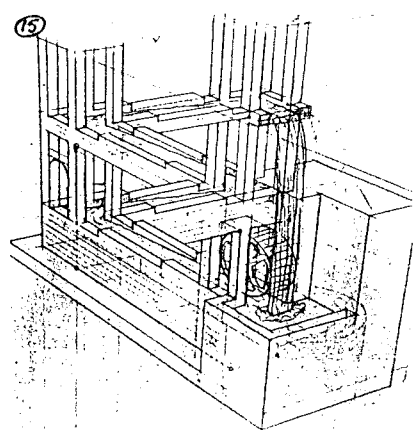
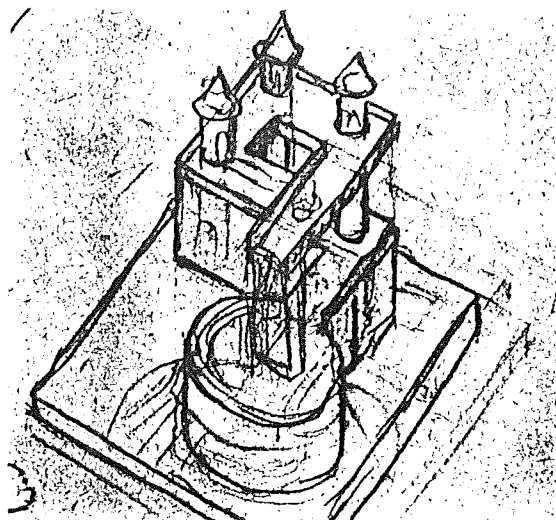
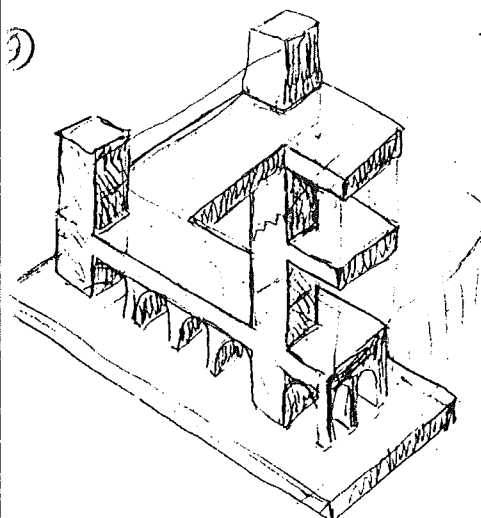
A CUBE SEEN FROM BELOW.

A. 1 SQUARE; 2 TRIANGLES; 4 TETRAHEDRONS.

A. A SERIES OF HORIZONTAL, VERTICAL AND DIAGONAL INTERSECTING LINES.

Clearly then, the approach, here is to motivate understanding. It is not quantifiable simply because visitor centres, and what they do, originate attitudinally, and the mind is an extraordinarily protean, if not amorphous, place. We are also talking about a process, a continuum to which there is no real end, although architecturally a visitor centre may, in itself, be conceived of as an end. As was pointed out in the introduction, the only certainty was uncertainty or change, thus defining time, and so the means or process, rather than the end, is validated. Too often, it seems, the solutions to problems are seen to be manifest in an end, whereas in actual fact they reside in the process itself. The process represents a way of thinking out of which emerges, hopefully, an understanding. Visitor centres are the manifestations of a process and come to represent a way of thinking. So to is this dissertation, where the focus will be on the adaptive rather than on the substantive. Ideally the two will come together and not preclude each other.

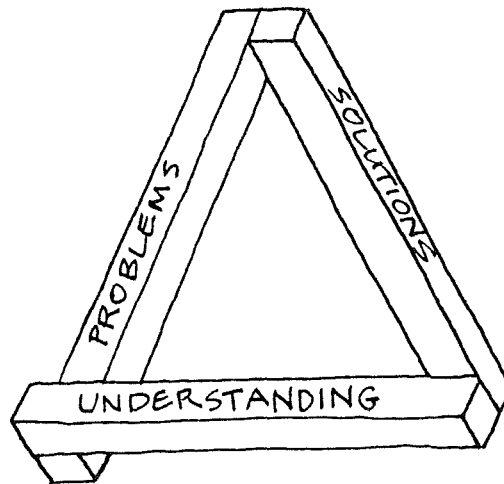
The emphasis, therefore, will be on attitudes, their origins and their applications in the landscape of visitor centres. Visitor centre landscapes, in physical terms at least, express, via form, the content or ideas of their authors, as indeed all contrivances do. Visitor centres are the uniform by which certain attitudes are expressed, in much the same way an individual conveys an outlook in the way they dress and speak. This approach, then, will examine the way society expresses, via the designer, a certain landscape ethos in the dress and language of the visitor centre, and its surrounds. The approach will be a critical one that will focus upon the form, content and context of visitor centre landscapes and how they represent the mindsets of those who develop them. It will be qualitative in that it should, hopefully, inspire those involved in visitor centre design to examine the self and in so doing investigate attitudinal stances, and so recognize the restraints and opportunities that will arise out of an understanding of these.



Waterfall. M.C. Escher, 1961

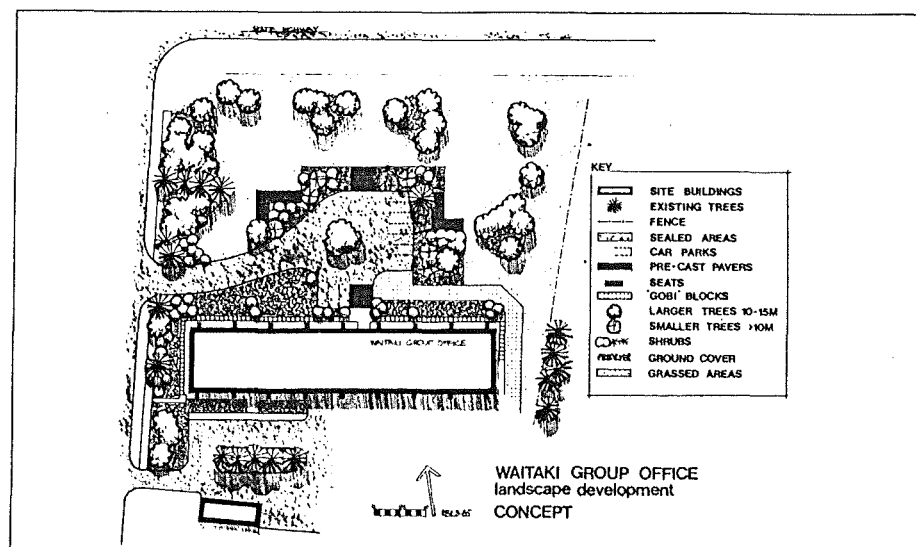
The Problem

As inferred in the introduction, the main problem with a visitor centre landscape is a lack of understanding. Needless to say, this is in fact the main problem of any design issue. The solution is simple therefore, and that is to understand the problem. This may sound facile, but in fact understanding can be very elusive, and as a consequence the problem, though acknowledged, will evade the best resolution.



Penrose's impossible tribar demonstrates well the problem, understanding, solution triad. The problem becomes the solution, the solution the problem, and so a question arises, the answer to which becomes understanding itself.

The problem with visitor centres it seems , is not so much one of reaching pragmatic solutions manifest at ground level, but rather one of not understanding the full scope of problems and the baggage of implications that must accompany them. Most designers appear to treat the visitor centre landscape as if it were simply another institution, with the result that many of the solutions are in essence really no different from those in urban application. The only difference might be the substitution of roses and flowering cherries for lancewoods and hebes, whereas the carparks, pathways, walls and floors are simply translocations of more or less standard design solutions . Such solutions may, on a practical level , work very well and might well be the best solution , but on a more philosophic level often fail to reach a nexus. It is the bond or link between the philosophy or ethos and the visitor centre landscape that requires, at the very least, acknowledgement. It appears that many designers are often unaware of why we have visitor centres in the first place and from whence did they originate, and so the necessary connections between a philosophy and its form may be very tenuous indeed. Yet, we all, inextricably, possess a philosophy or world view, (paradigm), that will always be realized in our actions. The problem is to what extent are we aware of it and the connections we make thereof. It is only by acknowledging the world views of ourselves and others that we are able to understand design problems and so resolve them.



It is of no matter whether the story or myth, (they are synonymous), is true or false. The important point is that as far as the teller is concerned the story is true, for that is their way of seeing the world.

It is of no matter whether the story or myth, (they are synonymous), is true or false. The important point is that as far as the teller is concerned the story is true, for that is their way of seeing the world.



The Landscape, July 1982.

The myth, then becomes, '... the instrument by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience'¹ To which Barbara Sproull adds that, 'Myths proclaim basic attitudes towards reality. They organize the way we perceive facts and understand ourselves and the world ... there is no escaping our dependence on myth. Without it, we cannot determine what things are, what to do with them or how to be in relation to them.' 'It is preferable...'² Lloyd Geering concludes '... to live by myths which have been acknowledged and examined than by those of which one remains unaware'.³ A visitor centre is some peoples' way of seeing the world and it is the designers task to ensure that their view or myth is not misrepresented, but rather acknowledged.

To compound the problem, the designer has to cope with the myths of many, since the realisation of visitor centres involves a multitude of actors all seeking a say in the process. The result is frequently a monument to compromise, that might satisfy its perpetrators, but like many a democratic beast, is often, toothless. This is not to say that the participatory process has not got its advantages, but rather that the landscape designer needs to be aware, (and it is difficult not to) of the actors involved and the roles they expect to play, and so account for them in the design process.

The problem here is not so much the people involved, but rather their understanding of visitor centre landscapes. Here lies, perhaps, the the greatest strength of the landscape professional who armed with such an understanding can solicit a coordinated and well founded approach to the problems at hand. The problem thus becomes one of authority, and the real authority is, of course, an understanding or appreciation of visitor centre landscapes.

Again, one must emphasize that the source of the problem is one of attitude and one of understanding. Therefore, the problems do not, as such, reside in the landscape itself, but rather in the minds of those involved. What we see in the landscape of visitor centres reflects more upon ourselves than that of the landscape itself. Therefore, an inadequate design mirrors our own inadequacy and is not to be blamed on too much rain, too much wind, and too many visitors. At the risk of sounding evangelistic, we have to, in other words, take responsibility for our decisions, the competence of which will be directly proportional to our appreciation of visitor centre landscapes.

Finally, and briefly, one needs to address the design process itself. It too can be problematic in that it is very much a product of current society. That is, as suggested in the introduction, it can, and often is, a compartmentalised process whereby each actor is allotted a specific role, at a specific time, according to his or her speciality. Consequently, each leave their signature in what ultimately becomes a conglomerate of parts, that may or may not add up to a cohesive whole.

NOTES

1. Max Schorer quoted by Lloyd Geering.
N.Z. Listener August 15, 1987. p87.
2. *ibid.* p87.
3. *ibid.* p87.
4. *ibid.* p87.

Definitions

The term 'visitor centre' is a relatively recent one, only having application in New Zealand within the last twenty years or so. However, this dissertation is not so much concerned with the semantics but rather with the function and meaning of visitor centres. Nor is it concerned with just visitor centres, but also with all those facilities with similar functions regardless of location. Nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity, the term visitor centre will be used and its context confined to preserved or reserved lands such as national and forest parks.

There are numerous facilities of varying scale and nomenclature that have what might be termed visitor centre functions. Many of these have been named according to perceived distinctions based on function. Primarily, these include, for example;

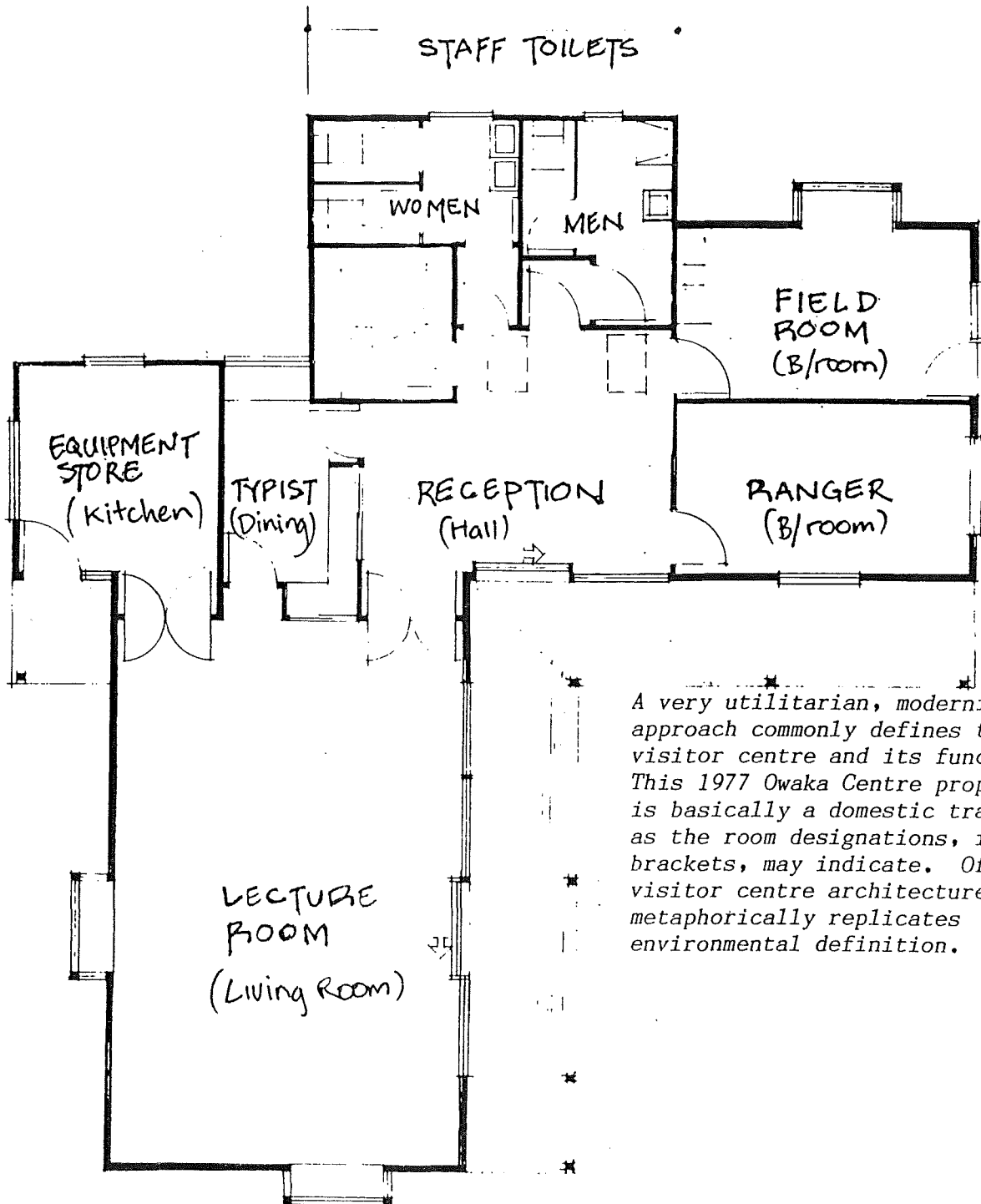
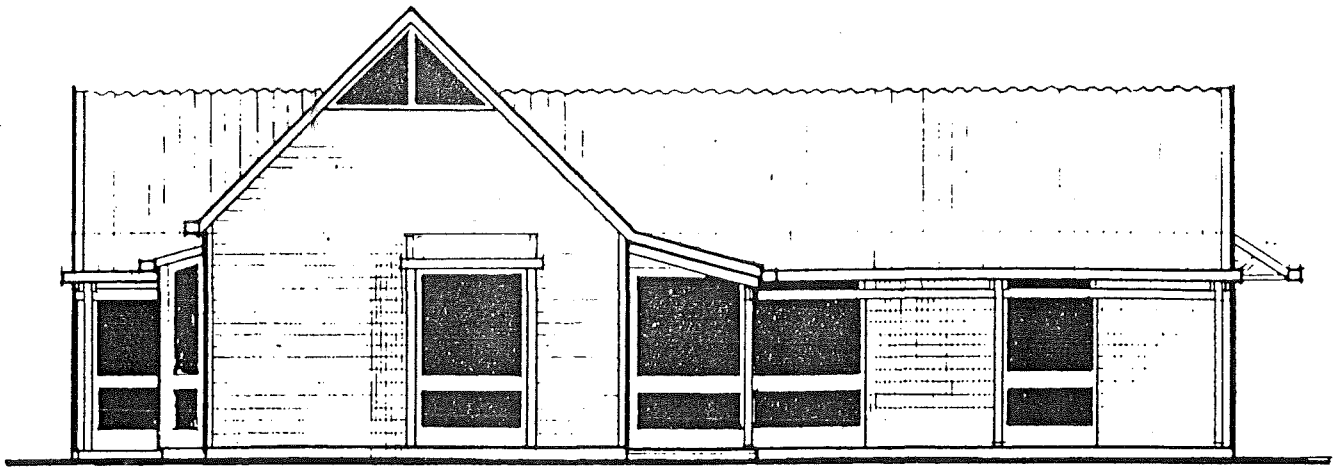
1. Information Centres - unpersoned, small scale, primarily dispensing information.
2. Park Headquarters - combination information and central administration centres.
3. Ranger Stations - secondary administration and information.
4. Visitor Centres - defined as such.

The distinction in New Zealand between visitor and information centres is that the former houses full time administrative and/or interpretive staff. However the term, 'visitor centre', has now come to supplant, in many instances, park headquarters and the like, and yet the functions remain basically the same.

The term 'Visitor Centre' is currently favoured simply because it is, to coin a cliché, user friendly. The word, 'visitor' is narrative in that it directly addresses the audience by making reference to, and therefore, including them. In other words, it is an inclusive rather than exclusive term, unlike information centres which imply a separation from those seeking information, and the information they seek.

For the most part though, the definition of a visitor centre is synonymous with its function. Sharp, very simply, and perhaps inadequately, defines them as, '... a public use building where visitors congregate.'¹, to which has been added, '.... for information services'.² While this is true it is by no means a full definition. Aside from associated services such as administration, a visitor centre must include the reasons why it dispenses information, in addition to establishing the relationship between it and its users. Also included in this definition should be not only what information is given, but also what it means from the point of view of who is giving it and who is receiving.

Definition, to some extent, depends on who it is that is defining, and in the case of visitor centres the definition may vary between the public, the managers, the sponsors and the designers, and is thus more a function of perception than anything else. Here is one manager's view; 'I perceive the centre's primary function as that of providing a platform for public service, information and education with the aim of enhancing the public support for the conservation ethic (= the wise and balanced use of our resources) and National Parks role in that concept.'³



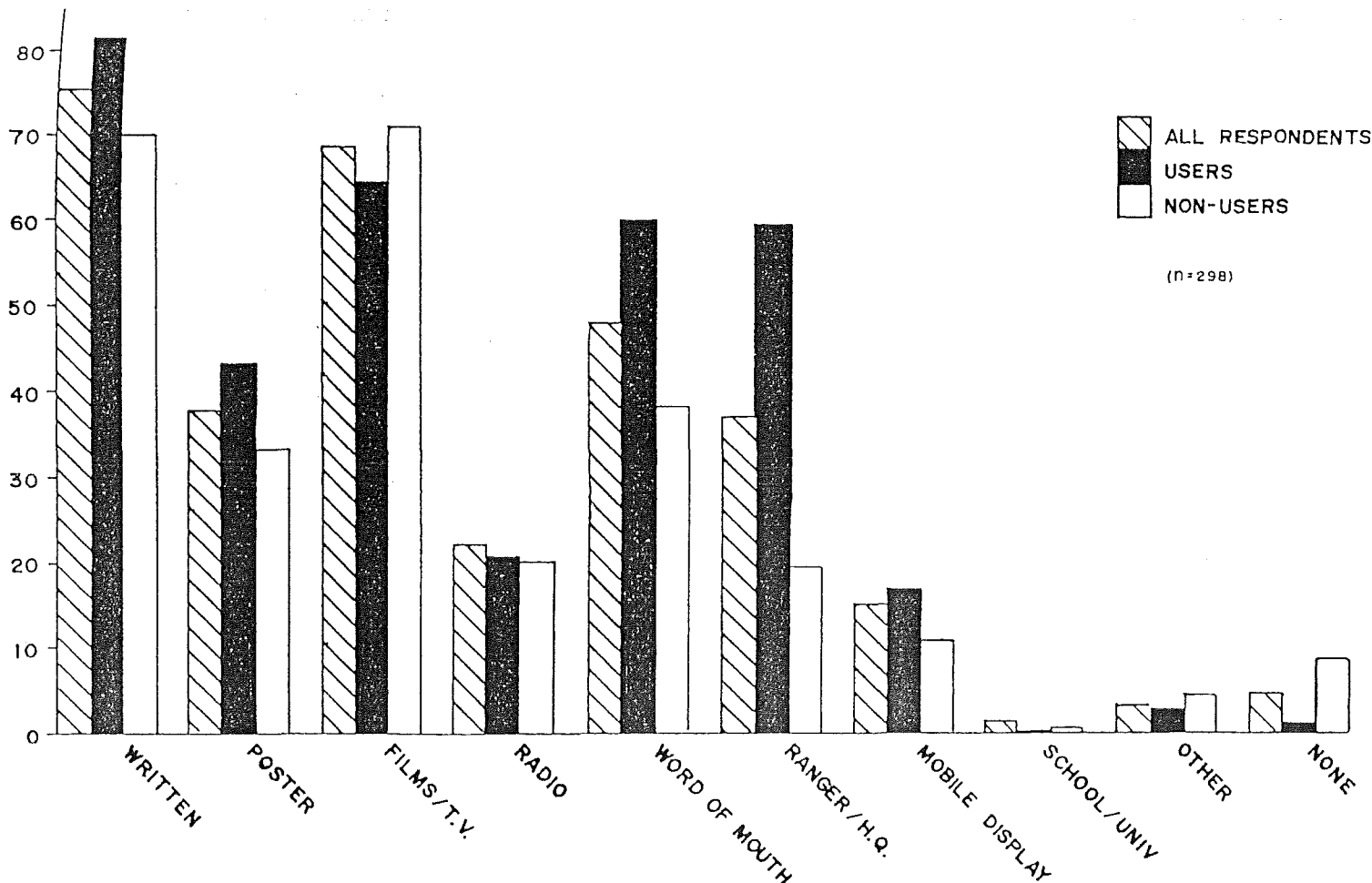
A very utilitarian, modernist approach commonly defines the visitor centre and its function. This 1977 Owaka Centre proposal is basically a domestic translocation as the room designations, in brackets, may indicate. Often visitor centre architecture metaphorically replicates environmental definition.



Graph above: Perceived functions of national parks. K. Booth, p70

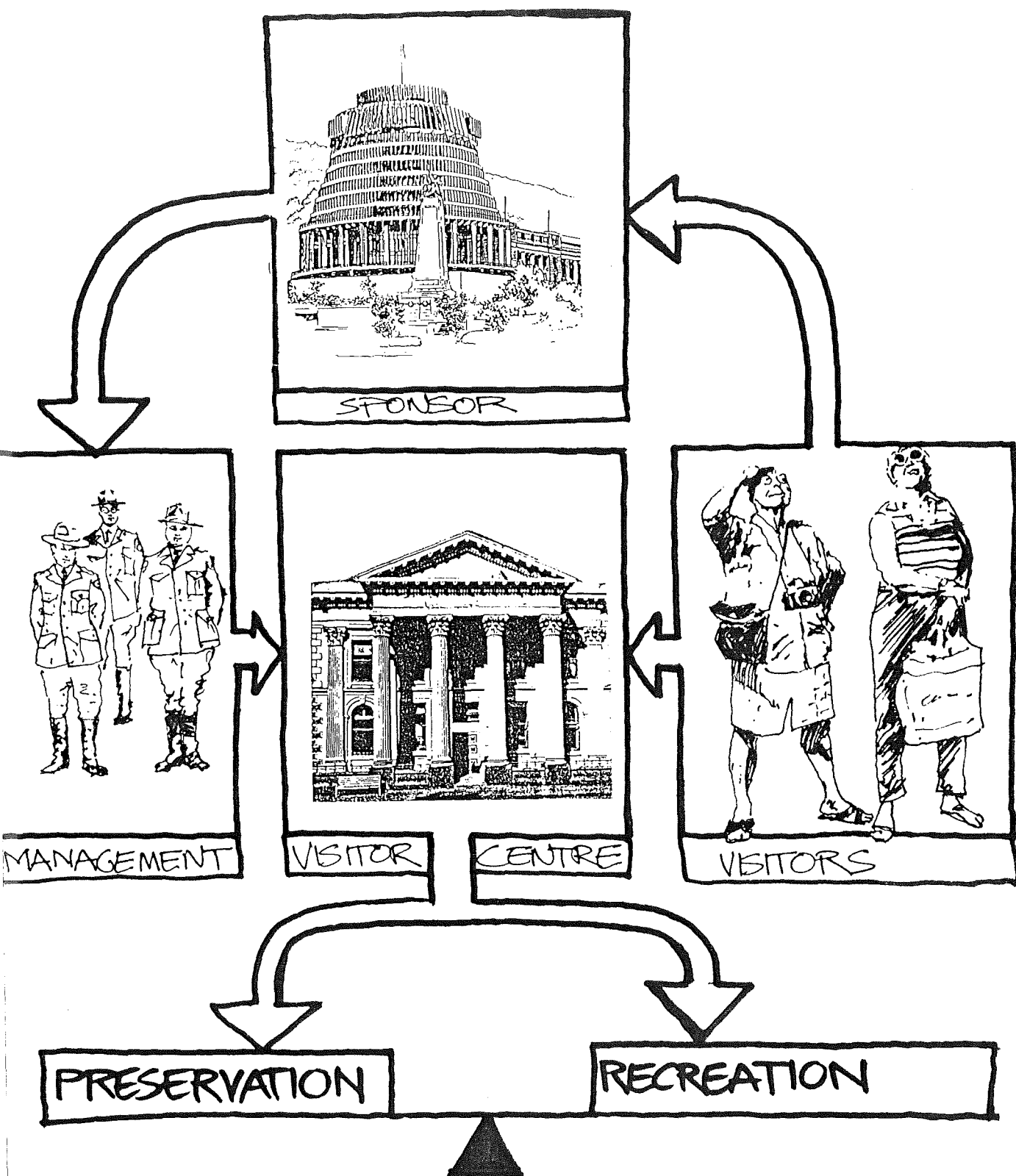
Note the very awareness of preservation, indicative, therefore, of the sponsor's success in fulfilling their objectives. However, note, in the graph below, that at least three other mediums supercede visitor centres, as a source of information.

Graph below: Sources of information. K. Booth, p69



From a manager's point of view this would appear to be an accurate definition, given that the purpose of most land served by visitor centres is to be conserved, if not preserved. It is a definition that inherently alludes to behavioural psychology⁴ in that one role of the visitor centre is to elicit a desired behavioural response from the public. Visitors are, in effect, being asked to respond favourably toward the environment, and more especially to that which the visitor centre serves. In this sense the visitor centre is manipulative in what one hopes, is a benevolent manner. Visitor behaviour is reinforced by appealing to mutual benefits that both the environment and the visitor gain through an appreciation of the former. It is one function, therefore, of the visitor centre to engender, normally via an interpretative programme or display, an appreciation of the environment, its conservation, and preservation. To this end there has been considerable success if we are to go by a study conducted by Kay Booth, which indicates that people give the preservation/conservation ethic precedence over all other uses of a national park or reserve. It is also worth noting that visitor centres figured highly as a means by which such an awareness was conveyed, (see graph). A kind of mutual relationship is established between the environment and its user, which is reflected in the term 'visitor centre' in that a two way dialogue exists between the land and the visitor.

As suggested, maintaining the conservation and preservation ethic is not the only function of the visitor centre, although it may be the primary one in political and managerial terms. Despite this, it is important to realize that they perform more practical, down to earth, functions. Among these should be included administration, orientation, communication, and service information, (weather forecasts, ground conditions, and the location of services and amenities). But even this type of information is a management tool in that ultimately decisions have been made as to how movement and access to preserved lands is to be coordinated to the mutual benefit of both the environment and its users.



The visitor centre acts as mediator between the objectives of the sponsor, (via management), and so the balance between preservation and recreation is determined.

Herein lies the dilemma, well known to park administrators and the like. The problem is in the paradox that arises when on the one hand, land shall be preserved, (in National Parks and Reserves), in its natural and pristine condition without any modification whatever, while at the same time unimpeded public access shall be permitted, provided they accede to the laws governing the land concerned. In national parks, for example, one can safely say that preservation shall prevail over use, where, in section three, subsection 2d of the National Parks Act (1980), it states that, 'Subject to the provisions of this Act and to the imposition of such conditions and restrictions as may be necessary for the preservation of the native flora and fauna or for the welfare in general of the parks, the public shall have freedom of entry and access to the parks, so that they may recieve in full measure the inspiration, enjoyment, recreation, and other benefits that may be derived from mountains, forests, sounds, lakes, and rivers.'

It is this section of the act upon which park management appears to be centred. Here park management has to marry the interests of the sponsors, in preserving the land perpetually in its unaltered state, and those of the public, who desire to see the preservation/conservation ethic upheld while given free access. It is the visitor centre that embodies the meeting of these interests. Out of this interface emerges a type of undocumented contract whereby all parties agree to abide by each others interests. It is as if the sponsors are saying, 'We will give you access if you harm not the land', or as the parks people are fond of saying, 'Take only photographs, leave only footprints.'

In National Parks therefore, we can say that the primary task of the visitor centre as management tool is to implement the terms of the National Parks Act. Needless to say, it is the task of any visitor centre, regardless of its designation, to service the objectives of its sponsor. The point that is being made, as far as the landscape designer is concerned, is that in order to understand the function of visitor centres one needs to understand the function of the land that is served by them. Once the function is understood with regard to the sponsors intent it is then, and only then, that one can begin to focus upon a centres' localized functions. One must reiterate the importance of understanding that not all land served by visitor centres share the same functions, and these need to be discerned accordingly. For example, the Electricity Department, (now Electricorp), established visitor centres in association with its hydro projects on land clearly not designated for preservation. Where similarities do exist between, for example a, visitor centre in a National Park and one aside a dam, is in the relationship the sponsors and their managers wish to establish between the land concerned and the public who use, or perceive it.

In this sense, visitor centres come to symbolize, in much the same way as flags do, the presence of an institution, and therefore its attendant meanings. A visitor centre is thus an embassy and its managers ambassadors for their sponsors. The sponsors are, via the state, ultimately the public.

In other words, a major function of visitor centres is one of public relations in that they act primarily as a medium by which a certain, predetermined message is conveyed, whether it be preservation or power. As a medium, visitor centres are no different from other mediums in that they act as a ground upon which a message is told. However, where visitor centres differ from other mediums lies not so much in the message, for their story can be told in many mediums, but rather in the form and context of the medium.

NOTES

1. Sharp, G.W. Interpreting the Environment.
p354.
2. Visitor Centres. Park Ranger block course
study. Lincoln College, 1977. p1.
3. J. Bos in a letter to the author, 1987.
4. ref. B.F. Skinner, 1904- Behavioral Psychology.

PART 2

Form, Context & Content

Before proceeding, it may be necessary to define the terms; Context, Content, and Form. Although their meanings have been suggested in the previous chapter, one feels there is a need to elaborate.

Context:

The O.E.D. defines context as those, 'parts that precede or follow a passage and fix its meaning,' and then goes on to cite something as being 'out of context,' and therefore devoid of meaning and 'hence misleading.'

It also cites something as being, 'in this context' and is so connected to its surroundings.

In other words, there are two basic, but interrelated definitions, the former abstract, the latter concrete.

The abstract concerns a things 'place in time (history). With visitor centres this means their place with regard to antecedents, and to a lesser extent perhaps, influence. The concrete concerns their place in space. That is the physical setting of a visitor centre and why it is where it is, and not elsewhere.

Both meanings combine to give meaning, just as a word is given meaning in a sentence and in accordance with the experience of its reader.

Content :

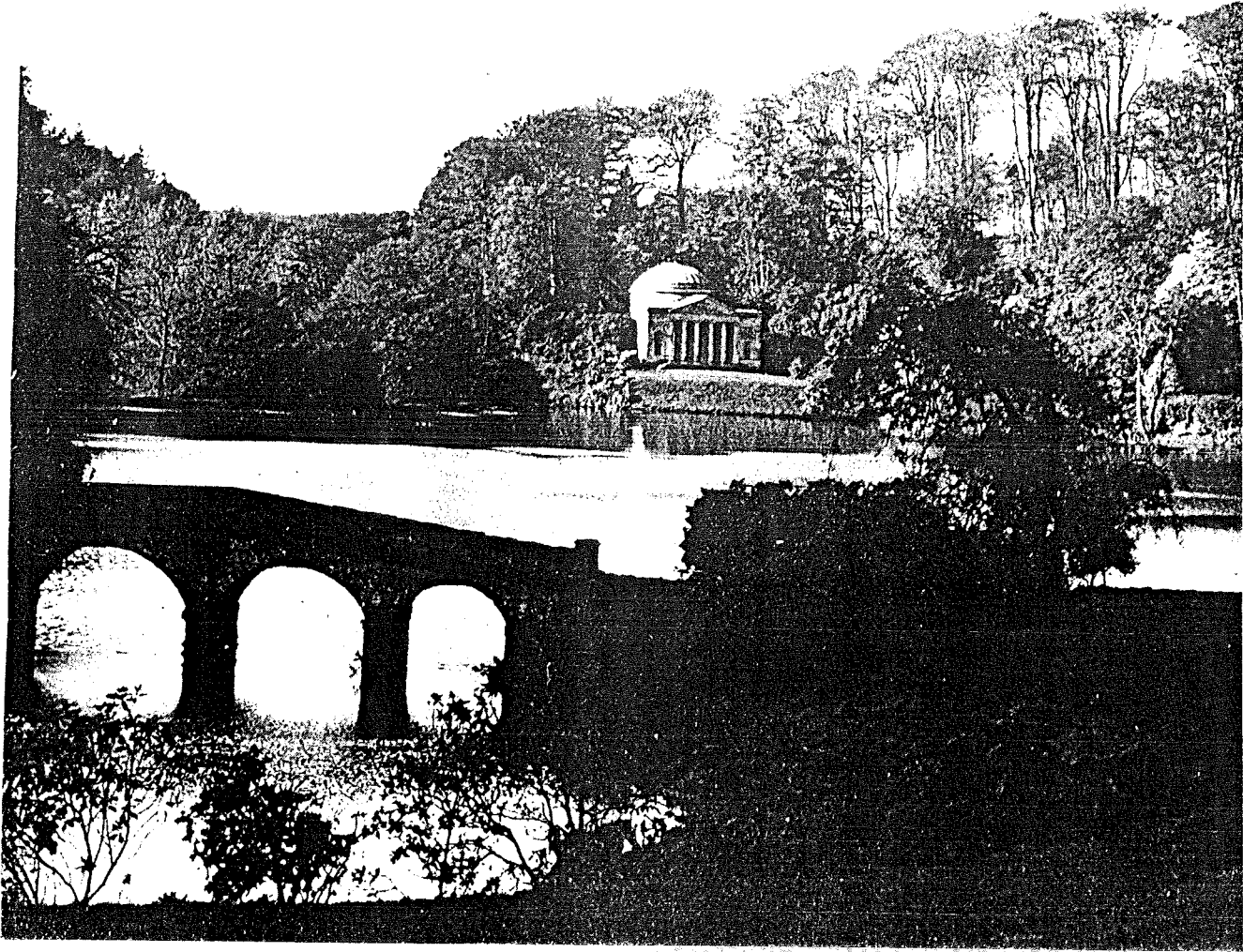
This equates with the idea and the philosophy that will ultimately be expressed in, and via, form. Content is inextricably rooted in context, since no idea is without antecedence or influence. However, with the mind being the province of content it is necessary to understand the role that consciousness and unconsciousness play in the realisation of ideas. In other words, all ideas have origins, (context), whether we are aware of them or not, and these are ultimately manifest in form, if expressed.

Visitor centres, therefore, represent the culmination of certain ideas, regardless of whether they were consciously, or unconsciously, arrived at. Furthermore, they will always be combined.

Form:

This is the tangeable expression of content. All action or manufacture is, or becomes, form. Since we express an idea via form, we in fact communicate. Consequently, visitor centres communicate, via form, the ideas of their protagonists. Their ideas then become tangeable and therefore substantial.

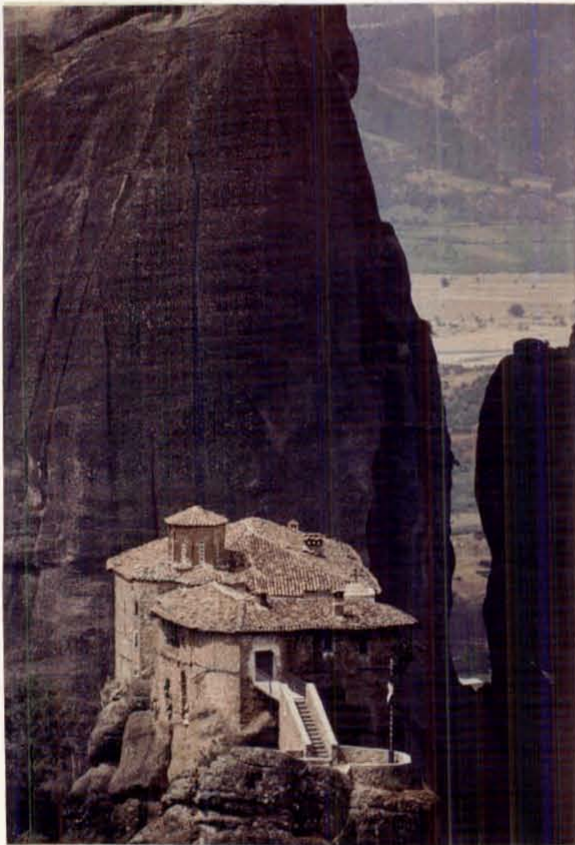
Thus content and context collude to give rise to form, the agent of which is perception.



The Pantheon at Stourhead realises content and context very well. The building and its setting illustrate the Pastoral Idyll as exemplified in Virgil's Aeneid. Many visitor centres replicate, albeit less consciously, this pastoral image, especially with regard to their position in the wilderness, and the allusions to a Golden Age or Paradise that can be easily equated with the preservation ethic.

Perhaps one of the distinctive features of visitor centres as a medium is that their form and context can contribute considerably to the message that they convey. This is not always fully realised in practice and consequently many opportunities unique to visitor centres are lost.

One of the most underrated and underutilized characteristics that visitor centres potentially offer is the experiential encounter which is so much a part of the environmental experience. Nothing reinforces the message more effectively than actual experience of it, and although most visitor centre managers are aware of this, the experiential is rarely utilized to full effect both indoors and out, especially within the immediate vicinity of the centre. Here a landscape professional can play a major role in helping to fully exploit this potential to the benefit of all concerned. This can only be achieved via a thorough comprehension of the content, context, and form of visitor centres.



This manastiry a Meteora in Greece demonstrates the totality of experience that is mutually affected by both the environment and the built form. Visitors here cannot help but be physically and emotionally involved with both the environment and building where total integration arises out of complementarity. New Zealand visitor centres rarely achieve such integrity if for no other reason than timidity, comfort and perhaps and excessive preoccupation with safety.

Because of their unique settings, and the role they play, visitor centres represent an important interface between the land and the people they serve. Visitor centres also act symbolically in that they physically manifest the ethos that has been invested into the land by, ultimately, the very public it serves.

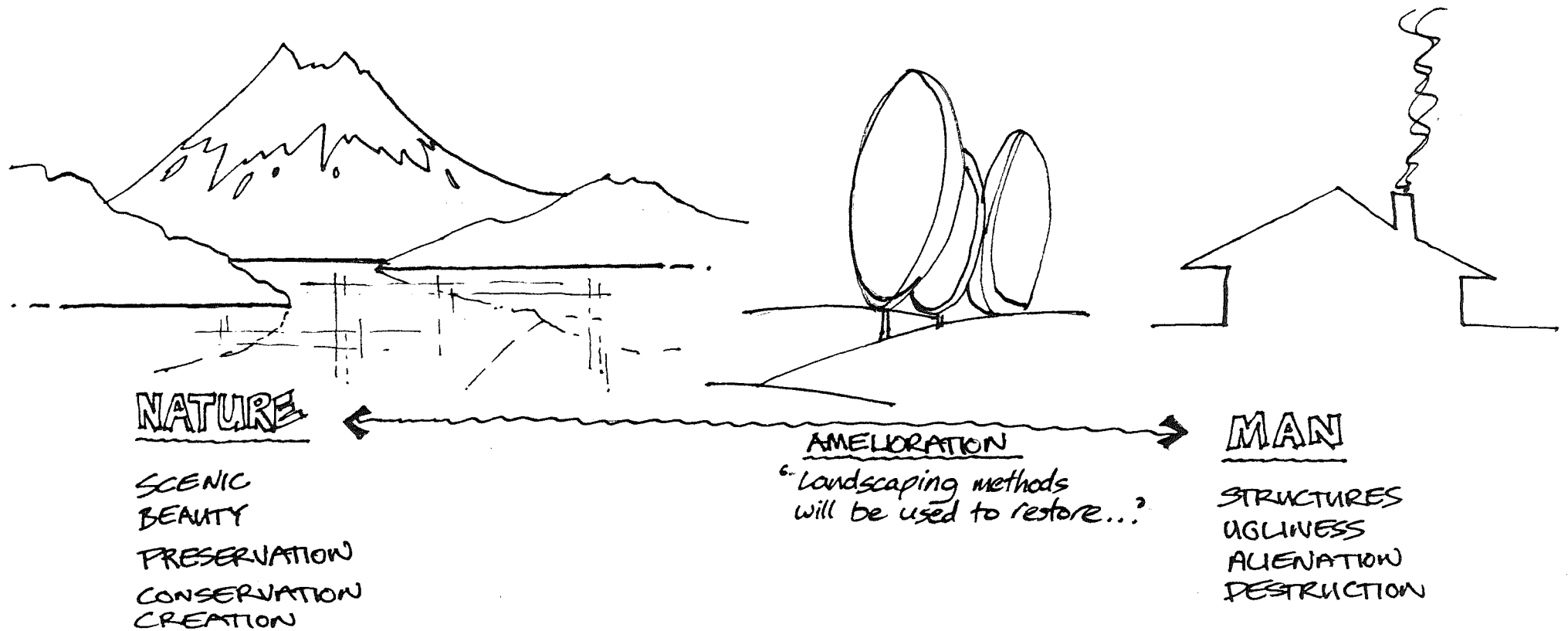
The form and context, is therefore, very important if it is to convey convincingly, the message accorded it. It is for this reason that an understanding of the message equally as important, so that it can be conveyed via the form and context of the visitor centre. Needless to say, form, content and context should be highly interdependent and a major problem with visitor centres is that this interrelatedness is not always well conceived and implemented.



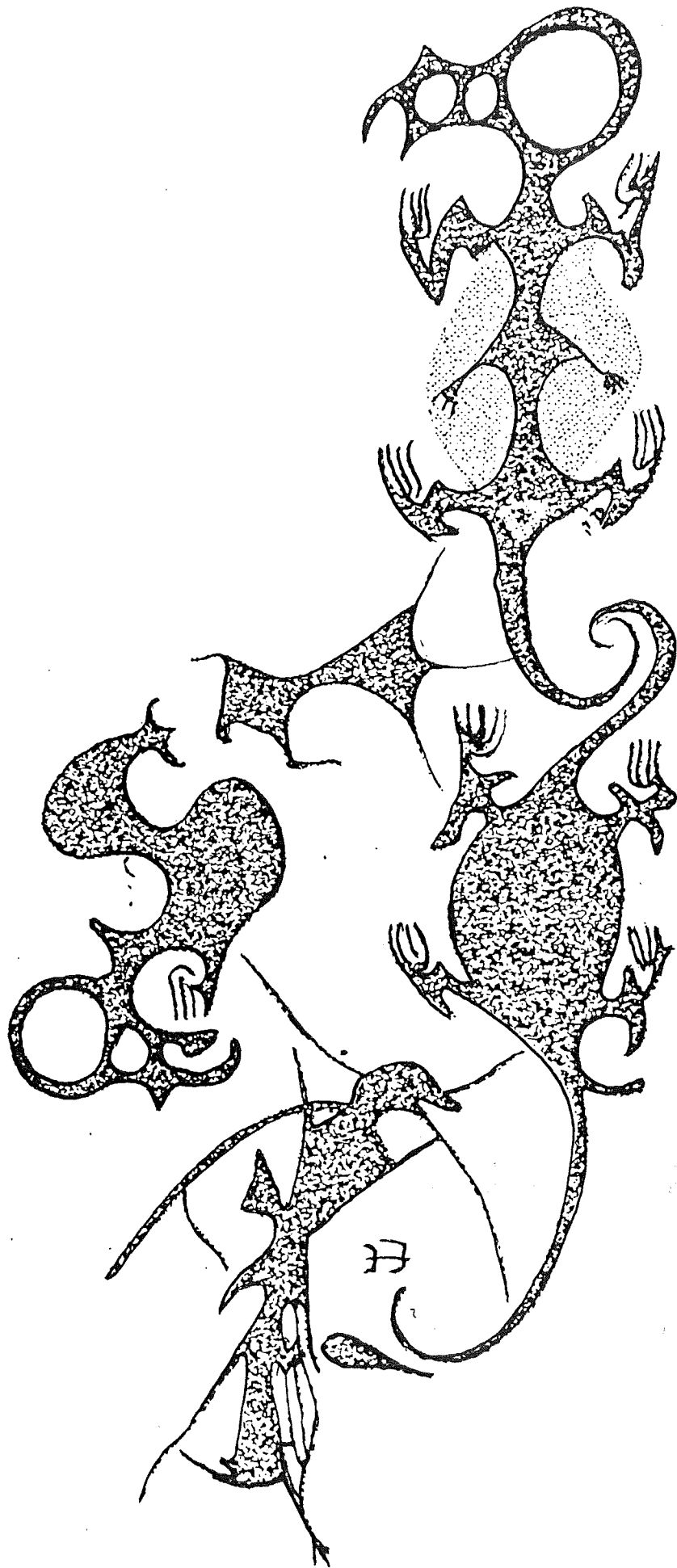
Mt Egmont from the Southward. Charles Heaphy, 1840.
Any medium is an interface between a need to convey an idea (content) from one person to another. Visitor centres are examples of medium as interface, as is this painting by Heaphy. Here the artist symbolises, via almost perfect geometric symmetry, (form), the mathematic truth of idealism, often exemplified by his classicist predecessors, such as the painters Pousin and Claude, thus giving the work context. Visitor centres are the paintings of the sponsors, their management, and ultimately, the visitor.

As we have discussed, the message can be broken down into two related areas. One is the philosophic whereby perception is manipulated in order to create a preconceived, desirable, 'landscape' paradigm, or world view. The other is the more pragmatic and centres on literal and practical information for the physical well being of all those involved, whether they be the managers or visitors, not to mention the land itself.

In places such as national parks, the form and context of visitor centres will be determined by the relevant management plan for each park or reserve. Management plans are rather like District Schemes and are a statutory requirement, under the National Park Act (1980). The prime aim, with regard to visitor centres, (and other buildings and structures), is that they should, if practicable, be sited outside park boundaries, and if not should be designed with the least intrusion and disturbance as possible. 'Buildings will be designed to harmonize with the natural landscape and not dominate or compete with the natural features,'¹ and that, 'An effort will be made to achieve a degree of unity of style in architecture within a park, and consideration will be given to construction materials and colour schemes which produce low-key building appearance. Landscaping techniques will be used to restore the appearance of areas where construction has taken place.'² This is the view promulgated by the National Parks and Reserves Authority with regard to form and physical context. Notice also that it reinforces the sponsors message regarding the conservation ethic and paradigm. However, not unlike District Schemes, management plans are also subject to review with regard to nonconforming proposals. Needless to say, visitor centres in areas other than national parks are also subject to statutory constraints, namely those outlined in the appropriate District Scheme.



The Parks Act (1980) establishes a dichotomy between man and nature, manifest in the stated need to ameliorate our presence.



The National Park Policy on form and context is of particular interest, by way of example, in that the shape and setting of visitor centres strongly reflect a particular landscape paradigm. The origins of this paradigm are firmly rooted in an occidental view of the world, as opposed to, for example, a Maori view. National Parks and reserves are very much a western concept and put very simply, were borne out of a need to counter the rapid alienation from nature, as a consequence, no doubt, of the industrial revolution. In those parts of the world not generally regarded as western, the concept of a national park, let alone the need to interpret it, is a foreign one. 'The visitor centre will explain the park in physical displays and conceptual terms. The term, 'National Park' is new to Arabia, and often difficult to explain.'³ Conceptually then, a visitor centre in this sense comes to symbolize a kind of cultural imperialism whereby one particular view of the land is expressed. This is almost exclusively a Western view, regardless of context.

Needless to say, there are a multitude of views in which each culture has a medium to express their perception of the land. and so generate a landscape. The means, (form), to manipulate perception so as to create a landscape, (content), can be numerous and varied, and yet the intention is essentially the same. The intention will always be either to change or maintain, or reproduce, a world view or landscape. The visitor centre for other cultures might simply be a book such as the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, or in the case of the classical Maori, an animistic view rooted in the oral tradition. True, a visitor centre may present a cultural view such as the Maori one, but in fact it is really only an anthropological interpretation represented in a western mode.

Opposite: *The Opihi taniwha. Maori art mirrored their landscape paradigm and where it was located represented their visitor centre.*

Even when a landscape that differs from that of the sponsor's is presented, it is a tendency of visitor centres to do so in a compartmentalized manner. Visitor centres do, in fact, appear to treat the entire landscape in such a manner, that in keeping with western paradigms, the landscape is reduced to its base components. Most visitor centre landscapes will be presented in a reductionist, and usually, exclusively, empirical mode whereby the elements of, for example, geology, botany, birds, (via the taxidermist in a rather delectable irony, given National Park policy), insects and history are clearly delineated. While this is not a bad method for clarifying environmental processes, it does not always effectively interrelate them, and so the story is told, in fragments and is not necessarily fully understood. David Eggleton observes this phenomenon in his poem, 'Painting Mount Taranaki', Where he writes that, '.... not one story seems complete on its own, even tying up the numbered dots proves less efficient than you might at first think and, anyway, this absurd reductionist format is one which can only begin to hint at the complex, underlying reality.' In fact, a visitor centre may tell us more about ourselves and those who sponsor and manage them, rather than about the land they serve.



Contents

	Page
PART 1	
GENERAL INFORMATION	7
ROTOITI LODGE	10
DISCOVERY	11
SPORTS AND RECREATION	21
Walks	21
Tramping	24
Mountaineering	24
Ski-ing	36
Hunting	39
PART 2	
WEATHER AND CLIMATE	43
GEOLOGY	47
BOTANY	50
Vegetation	50
ZOOLOGY	64
Birdlife	64
Insects	74
Mammals	80
PART 3	
APPENDIX	
List of Birds	71
Botanical Key	87

Above: A typical contents page from a Park handbook strongly reflects the interpretative layout within the visitor centre. The reductionist format is indicative of the way we view nature.

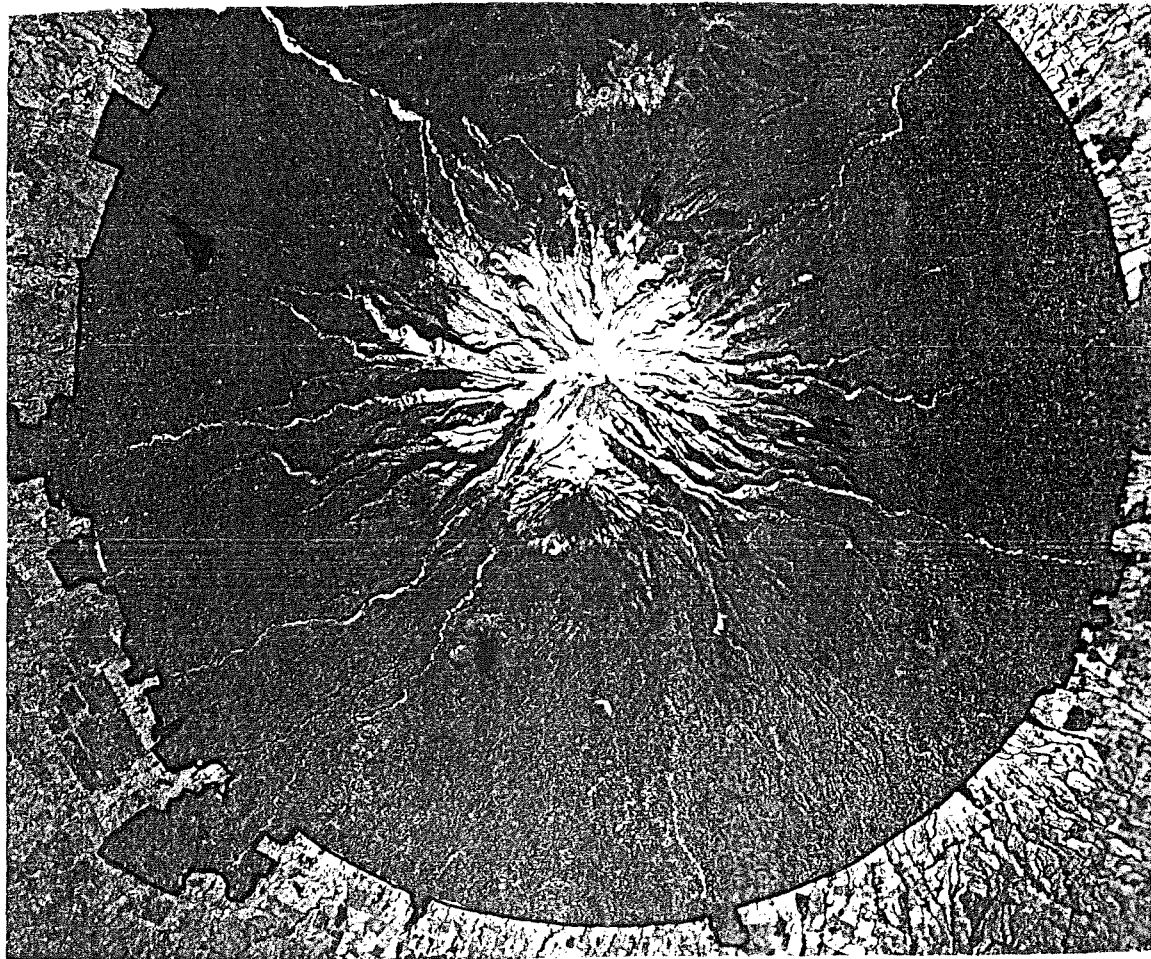
Opposite: Preservation taken literally typifies the content of many visitor centres, giving rise to a contradiction in terms between what the centre stands for and how it expresses it.

This may be quite valid, since when we are talking about landscape we are referring to that which originates and resides in the mind. When we encounter the land, we bring with us a landscape, or, in other words, a preconceived image of what the land means to us. The visitor centre can either reinforce that image, modify or perhaps even create a new one, which is of course, a primary role. They are in the business of manipulating perception in the hope of eliciting a response that is mutually beneficial to all parties. In national parks, that response would be, in the words of the sponsors, '... to promote public understanding of the policies and programmes of national park management and of the principles and benefits of nature conservation.' As any behavioural psychologist will tell you, the best way of achieving a response is via reward, which in this case emanates from, '... the opportunity to gain an understanding and appreciation of the park and its natural, historic and cultural significance., ' and to provide any additional, (orientation for example), information that will '... assist visitors to obtain the greatest possible benefit and enjoyment from their stay in the park' All of which of course is aimed at instilling the conservation ethic, and in effect, the visitors perception is 'landscaped' to that end.

The problem is that visitor centres, although explicit in their aims, quite often fail to fully exploit opportunities that their context presents. One can only suggest that this is because the designers of visitor centres are burdened with their 'landscape'. One hastens to add that this is true of all designers, but what may differentiate the good from the bad is an awareness that there exist optional or alternate landscapes. Consequently, visitor centre context and form reflects this and while this may, to varying degrees, be successful, Eggleton's, 'complex and underlying reality', may or may not be inadequately expressed.

Opposite: *An aerial view of Mount Taranaki, (Egmont), graphically illustrates the western desire to compartmentalize land. The form, context and content of visitor centres echoes this view.*

The visitor centre content, context and form well echoes the western penchant for compartmentalizing information. Consequently the landscape replicates that of its pregenitor. Not only are the interior interpretative displays compartmentalised, but the visitor centre itself and the land it serves is also. National Parks and the concept that gives rise to them epitomises the western desire to allot land into specific and often singular functions, whether it is designated pastoral, production forest, urban residential or industrial. The form and the context of national parks would, for all intents and purposes, appear to delegate the conservation ethic within their bounds, as if it were of lesser or no importance beyond them. The visitor centre, by its very context, and its content, most certainly reinforces this by promoting a reverential response to its land. It is likely a visitor centre will be one of the few buildings actually located in a park and as such assures a very privileged status, this reflecting the very specialness of the land in which it is sited.



In one further way, its context promotes the land as a compartment in that the visitor centre can evoke a sense of respect and deference for the land upon which it is set. It not only achieves this via context, but also by representing or symbolizing the centre as authority on behalf of its sponsors. The stereotype of a park ranger, for example, often infers the heroic and the visitor centre is where you go to meet them. As guardians of the environment, imbued with special knowledge of it, (their landscape), and in combination with their uniforms and frontiersman, 'man alone' image, they become the high priests in the church of conservation. Like all good church goers, we may well attempt to emulate the image. It was the wilderness, according to Theodore Roosevelt when speaking of Yellowstone National Park, that promoted, '... that vigorous, (sic), manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone', and so he went on to say, that '...we need a greater and not less development of the fundamental frontier virtues.'



The virtues of frontiersmanship is reinforced by the visitor centre outpost. This image corresponds with a conflict of National Park definition between the colonies and the old world - supposedly devoid of frontiersmen.



The interpreter today assumes the role of the medieval priest. The priest's task would have been to interpret the Bible in order to sustain and reproduce a certain paradigm, just as the park ranger or interpreter does today with regard to the land, his or her chapel being the visitor centre.



In medieval times, pilgrims travelled to the great European cathedrals to view the relics and to seek penance. In today's secular society our cathedrals are our wilderness areas and the visitor centres that serve them become the chapels that house the relics of the 'new religion'. Chiny.

Because the visitor centre is likely to be relatively isolated within, and being associated with a wilderness, it can also assume an aura not unlike a temple or a similar numinous retreat and so promote 'virtuosity'. You only have to enter one to detect the hushed and reverential tones of its guests, and in this respect differ little from any other institution of virtue, notably those associated with education such as libraries, museums and churches. This is particularly so in the more modern visitor centres with their low lighting, muted colours, and plush trim. Thus the deference a visitor centre invokes can be extended to the land it serves.

The notion that the visitor centre is a retreat is also a valid and an important one. Firstly it evokes a sense of sanctuary and sanctity. After all, this is what a national park is, that is, a sanctuary or place of refuge for the preservation of unmodified nature. So in terms of form, content and context, why should not a visitor centre represent a microcosm of its host. Let us not forget either that the term sanctuary, in its pure etymological sense, is synonymous with holy refuge. With regard to content, and therefore form and context, visitor centre landscapes are highly analogous to many religious concepts, such as purity, (pristine wilderness), sanctuary and even purgatory, where pilgrims from the urban wasteland come to have their souls purged. This is borne out in various surveys of visitor motivation such as that by Devlin (1976) and Hendee (1968). They noted six or so categories of motivation most of which allude to some kind of numinous or transcendent relationship with the wilderness. These are as follows :-

Devlin	Hendlee
1 Exit civilization	Spartanism
2 Aesthetic - religious	Antiartifactualism
3 Physical challenge	Primevalism
4 Socialbility	Humility
5 Simple lifestyle	Outdoorsmanship
6 Individual/intellectual	Aversion to social interaction
7	Escapism

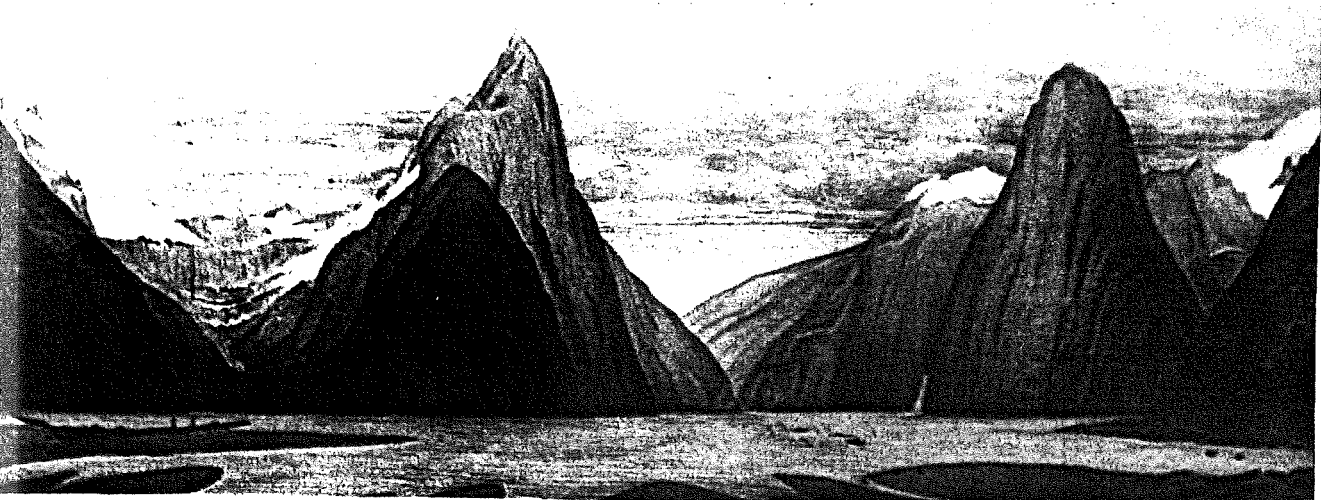
(From K. Booth, 1986)

Note too, how well these motivations concur with Roosevelt's, 'frontier virtues' and the puritan ethic.

There exists a kind of antithesis between the city, representing the physical and the temporal, and nature representing the metaphysical and the transcendent. This dichotomy has its roots in the origin of the National Park movement and in new concepts of wilderness that evolved during the nineteenth century, which no doubt arose as a consequence of, and as a counter to, the industrial revolution.

The wilderness, and therefore nature, came to symbolize the puritanism that arose in reaction to, and as a consequence of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution became synonymous with filth, sin, corruption, crime and overcrowding. Thus its antithesis was established in an unmodified nature that had bestowed upon it a redemptive status. In other words, the city was bad, nature good.

A polarity emerged, therefore, between nature and the city and the distinction between purity, (both spiritual and physical), and impurity has been actively reinforced ever since. For example, one only has to witness the enthusiastic eradication of things exotic from national parks in the name of purity, to see what is meant, not that nature makes any distinction.



John Buchanan's painting of Milford Sound (1863), represents the elevated status that nature had acquired since Constable and Turner had responded similarly at the outset of the industrial revolution. Consequently man disappeared or was made miniscule in the face of nature, his domain being the city. A polarity therefore arose that persists to this day and is one that visitor centres, in form, content and context, actively promote.



Gustave Doré's *Dickensian London* illustrates the squalor of industrial society. It is little wonder that nature assumed a new importance and so the concept of preserving nature in national parks emerged at about this time.

The distinction or polarity resides within us as individuals and thus becomes our 'landscape'. It is one that visitor centres attempt, doubtless with the best of intentions, to manipulate. It is manifest in the form and context of visitor centres in that they themselves are considered exotic, and by implication, man himself exotic also, in that he is separate from nature. Exoticism is to be minimalised so as to '... soften the impact of man made forms and to blend the visitor centre in to the landscape, even to the extent of hiding all but a small part from view',⁵ and colour is to be '...as close as possible to the predominant colour of the surroundings'.⁶ Thus, in the interests of preservation our presence is denied and yet concept of preservation is exclusive to us. Odd too, that harmony is equated with disguise as opposed to balance, perhaps best expressed by the Chinese concept of Ying Yang, or complementary opposites.



The principle of the horizontal complementing the vertical so as to create visual harmony is a well known one. Here the built form actually becomes the landscape by virtue of its location as it punctuates the transition between land and sea.

Opposite: *The Sanders house, by Queenstown architect John Blair, is a striking example of complementarity where the built form engages the environment rather than competes with it. It does not attempt to mimic its surroundings as so many visitor centres do, and yet its form hints at the tectonic forces that gave rise to its surrounds, and so the building in its entirety, begins to interpret local natural processes.*

Opposite: *The principle applied at the Waiouru Military Museum. Note how the environment abuts the building.*

Disguise infers contrivance at best and deceit at worst; this after all is what the word means. One might consider that the opposite to some thing might be the best way to define it. Nothing defines the ocean more than its antithesis, the land, and so one might argue that in order to enhance the definition of land its opposite could be upheld, which may well be the visitor centre, as envoy from the antithetical city.



Too often , disguise leads not to harmony, but rather toward competition, with the natural landscape. Although tertiary colours may camouflage a building and so be desirable, they also tend to compete with their surroundings if care is not taken in their application. This is not to say that tertiary colours should not be used, only that they should perhaps be contrasted, which may seem a paradox. Contrast can, however, be achieved , by juxtaposing flashes of primary or secondary colour with tertiary. Alternately tertiary colour can be juxtaposed with exotic texture or, indeed with overall architectural form. This has been achieved with considerable success with the visitor centre/cafe at Pelorous Bridge in Marlborough, where a secondary colour, (orange), has been used in the fascia and guttering, contrasting and delineating the building from its surroundings. Contrast like this, helps define and distinguish the architecture and surroundings, and ultimately complements it.



Remove the paling fence, the surrounding houses and there would be little to distinguish the suburban house, (opposite), from most New Zealand visitor centres, such as this one at Mt. Cook, (above). To be fair the centre at Mt. Cook is currently undergoing extensive renovation, yet in its old form, still represents a little piece of suburbia in the wilderness. The flag, a symbol of the sponsors may be all that distinguishes this from its suburban counterpart. Note also, the chalet type construction, the form of which mimics the mountain backdrop.

Definition is, important for other reasons also. Given the context of most visitor centres, it is important to create and promote the feeling of sanctuary and refuge. This has already been discussed in philosophic terms, but on physical terms is important too. Buildings in a large scale open landscape denote refuge and therefore engender a sense of security, in perhaps, the primal sense.⁷

Many visitor centres currently fulfill this function, if for no other reason than in architectural form. The form of many of our visitor centres tend toward the domestic in terms of scale, dimension, materials, and of course, form itself. This may be very reassuring to visitors in wilderness landscapes, even though one suspects that many of these visitor centres were not consciously designed with a sense of refuge in mind.

Many of these visitor centres reinforce their domestic appearance in the landscape treatment adjacent to them. Often the only difference between a visitor centre and a suburban bungalow, besides and in spite of the context, is the substitution of exotic plants for natives. These are commonly arranged in cahoots with a neat little rock pile(s) using plants that although native to New Zealand, are not always native to the immediate locale of the visitor centre. All this is set in a verdant moat of lawn, so as to keep nature at bay it would seem, and so appear incongruous given the sponsors intent.



Although these details appear to be trivial considerations, they are nonetheless important in that how we set our visitor centres into the landscape will without a doubt, reflect our attitudes and relationship to, and with nature. It is as if we are somehow ashamed of our status in nature where our role is a somewhat deterministic one. In other words, we have yet to acknowledge our anthropocentric view of the world, and yet at the same time recognise that we are a part of nature and not separate from it. This may seem a paradox since anthropocentrism and nature are considered antithetical, and yet it is we who have created the dichotomy. Such a view suggests that nature is absolute and has intrinsic values whereas in fact it is we who generate and impose this view, however noble it might seem. Therefore, the values we place on nature have their origins in the human context and are therefore necessarily, anthropocentric. 'We must now recognise ...' writes Simpson, '... that nature is not an absolute subject to only one truth; rather, it is the product of our daydreaming.'⁸ That is, we have considerable power to decide whether nature should be modified or otherwise. In national parks we choose the latter, but in making that choice, we are still determining the environmental outcome. Yet visitor centres and the landscape they promote often fail to acknowledge that choice. In this way the form, content, and context of visitor centres are deceptive. They can be likened to an actor or actress who wear a costume (form), and read the lines (content), on a wilderness stage (context). In the end though, it is we who write the play, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Perhaps, with this in mind, the first step to understanding visitor centres is to understand ourselves. In this play, the actors, (visitor centres), are neutral. They do what the script demands. The play acts as a liason between the producers, (writers , directors etc), and the audience or visitors, and yet ultimately the producers and the audience are of the same stock. The difference is that the writers try to tell the audience, via their play something about the human condition, and that is what the audience wants to know. There is a revelation involved and possibly, in the end, mutual redemption. This is how visitor centres work in that they tell us about our place in a certain environment via revelation, which in turn conditions our actions to benefit mutually the land and ourselves. However, a play is only meaningful if the producers and actors work together to convey the message.

NOTES

1. General Policy for National Parks. Section 25. National Park and Reserves Authority, Wellington.
2. ibid.
3. Carving Out a New National Park for Saudi Arabia. Landscape Architecture Magazine, Vol.70, 1980. p284.
4. Quoted by J.W. Simpson in 'A Tale of Two Parks' Landscape Architecture Magazine May/June 1987, Vol.77, No3.p63.
5. Visitor Centres Park Ranger block course study, 1977. p8.
6. ibid p12.
7. See Appleton, Jay. The Experience of Landscape.
8. Simpson. 'A Tale of Two Parks' p63.

PART 3

Not Putting it on the Ground

Most of the practical aspects of designing visitor centres are, in essence, no different from other design problems. Design methodology has been well discussed, debated and documented in the past. Historically visitor centres have been designed in the do it yourself spirit that arose in response to our pioneering origins. Noble, and at times ingenious, this may have been, such is the nature of current society that ad hoc solutions are no longer perceived as adequate. Although content and context may remain the same, the wrapping or form has gone upmarket. The land that visitor centres serve is undergoing ever increasing pressure from visitors who are for the most part well educated and sophisticated and, consequently demand a quality landscape experience. Visitor centres are no longer isolated in as much as that they have to now compete with, and no doubt complement, other forms of media. Because of the rapidity and vast quantities of information available to us, the scale and dimension of the world is quickly diminishing. Visitor centres can no longer operate in isolation to the rest of the world, as they may have done in the past. Nor too, can the land they serve be viewed in isolation from that which surrounds it, whether it be local, regional, national or global in scale. No longer, too, can land be compartmentalized according to specific functions, despite current government thinking. Visitor centres are going to play an increasingly important role in managing our perceptions and use of land, at all levels, at all scales, and in all places. Perhaps more importantly though, is that visitor centres exist in a continuum of change, (time), and as such are themselves forever changing. Specific design guidelines of the what, where and how to variety are of limited use unless they can take account of this continuum. Otherwise they imply a beginning and an end (product), and any design that is implemented on this basis is, indeed, imperiled from the outset. Thus, process must be emphasised, as well as the product.

In fact there are no certainties in design other than uncertainty itself. To give hard and fast rules and guidelines will only compound the problems of visitor centre design, not resolve them. The solutions emanate from the shedding of dogma, doctrines and preconceptions in such a way as to permit us to stand back and determine from where do our presuppositions originate. The following poem by William Carlos Williams illustrates this concept well where in order to understand it one needs to stand back a little:

so much depends upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

William Carlos Williams
The Red Wheelbarrow 1923¹

or as Laotzu would have it:-

'Thirty spokes are made one by holes in a hub
By vacancies joining them for a wheels use;
The use of clay in molding pitchers
comes from the hollow of its absence;
Doors, windows in a house,
Are used for their emptiness;
Thus we are helped by what is not,
To use what is.'²

NOTES

1. The Norton Anthology of Poetry. p481.
2. McLuhan, M. Quotes Lao Tzu in The Medium is the Message. p48.

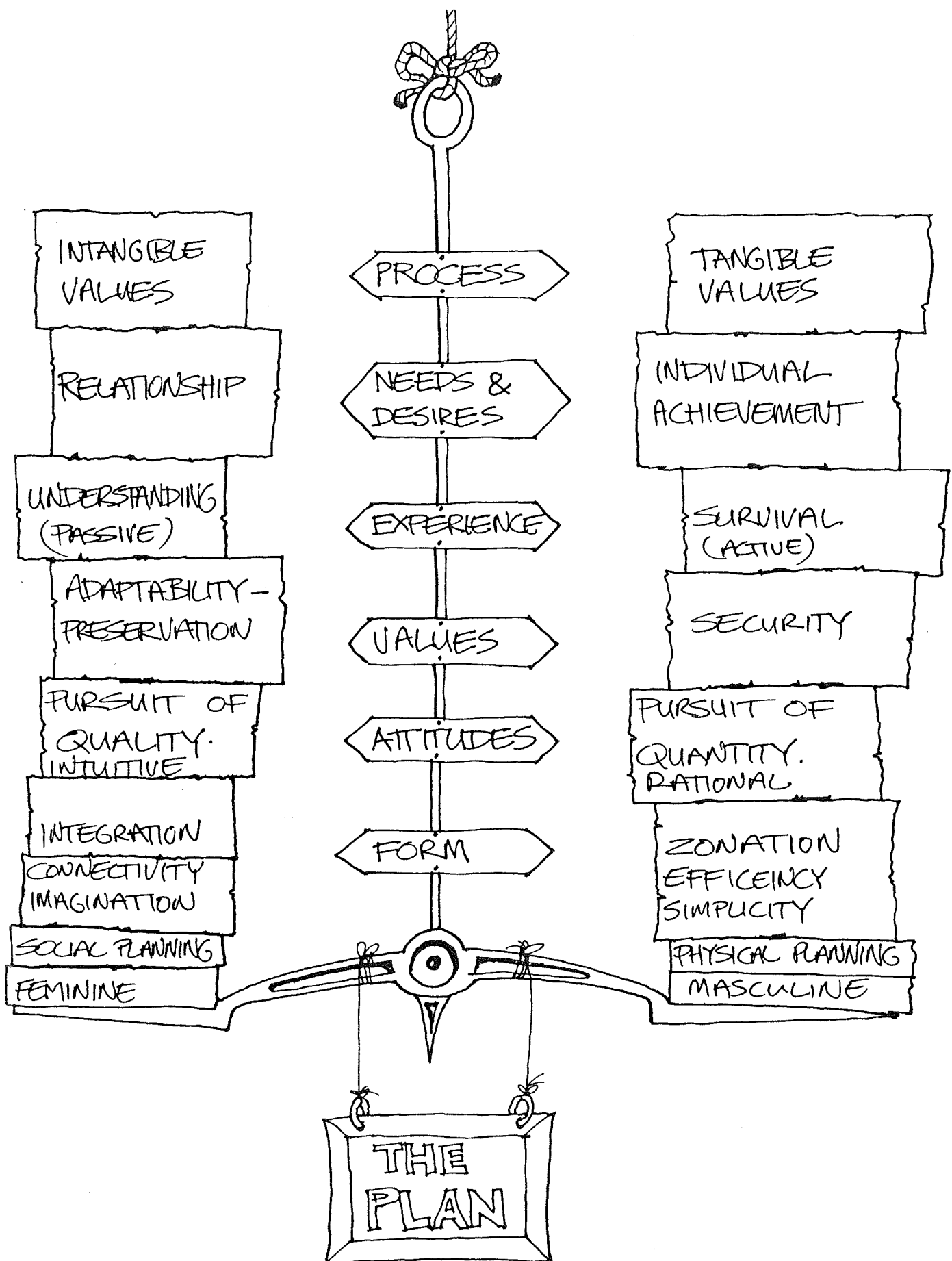


All guidelines are simply worldviews or paradigms. Guidelines infer rightness and wrongness, and in themselves invoke authority, and yet there is no authority other than social sanction. In this respect visitor centres are just as much a product of their society as are all things. Visitor centres only evolve the way they do because there is a demand for them and the landscapes they generate, and because society deems such a paradigm appropriate. Every New Zealand garden has a native patch and with visitor centres the native patch is just a bit bigger. Here Urewera reflects social guidelines that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to implement twenty years previously. Note the flashes of colour that would have been anathema in a national park in earlier years. However, also note the front lawn.

Role of the Landscape Architect

Landscape architects and alike have two major roles to play with regard to visitor centres. One is the practical, focusing on the visitor centre form, that is, its location, shape, layout, materials, scale and dimensions. The other concern for the landscape architect is one that is hardly, if at all, realized, and that is as interpreter of the landscape. Both roles involve design. One the design of form, and in physical terms, the context, and the other the design of content. The former concerns the physical landscape and is what most landscape architects are involved with in visitor centre design. The latter is the conceptual and affects our perception of the environment and thus creating a landscape. The two are inseparable, any distinction being one of emphasis.

If there is any one problem confronting the landscape architect, it is without a doubt, their image. In other words, few understand the role landscape architects play or can play, the popular image being that of exterior, (landscape) , decorators who clean up after the real work has been done. Theirs' is an often redemptive, reactive role, or so it is commonly perceived, and so their task is becomes one of amelioration, and so, '... the landscaper, (is), called in to efface the ediface and erase the architect.'¹ This is unfortunately the case with most visitor centre design in that the landscape architect is too often called in at a stage when most of the decisions have been made. He or she is seen as the redeemer whose task is to fit the new visitor centre into the landscape, once it is complete, which is rather like painting a polar bear with stripes so as to fit in with a heard of zebra.



Design is often a matter of striking a balance between extremes and this is usually achieved by combining complementary opposites. Visitor centre designs often emphasize one extreme without countering with another, resulting in many lost opportunities.

Diagram adapted from one presented by Clive Anstey, 1987.

In order to resolve these problems, the first task perhaps, is for the landscape architect to market their skills and abilities so as to ensure a position at the outset of a visitor centre proposal. Too often, it appears, consultants are brought in on a project sequentially as work progresses rather than at the initiation stage. Reductionist thinking, it seems, not only pervades the way we respond to the environment, but also in the visitor centre design process. Consequently many visitor centres appear fragmentary with regard to their context and form, and needless to say, in their content also. What is more, they often tend toward the quantitative, the patriarchal, the rational, the zoned and the sequential, all of which is characteristic of the inherent design process. There is little in the way of the feminine, the intuitive, the emotive, the spiritual, the imaginery, and the romantic, all of which might imply lost control. To lose control, especially in the preserved land context, would be disastrous and so a rationalised approach to management is essential !

The solution would appear to be one of striking a balance between any polarities that exist in the design approach. The problem is an over balance in favour of the rational and pragmatic. While these are important and should not be dismissed, they should at least be countered. It is only by balancing opposites that harmony will be attained and in visitor centres this will remain elusive until counterpoint is recognised and achieved. This Alexander Pope observes in the following verse where;

Extremes in nature equal ends produce,
In man they join to some mysterious use;
Tho' each by turns the other's bound invade,
As, in some well-wrought picture, light and shade,
And oft so mix, the diff'ence is too nice
Where ends the Virtue, or begins the Vice.

Pope. A Essay on Man
Epistle II IV
lines 178 - 183

The question of balance has to be reversed attitudinally so that the role of the landscape architect now becomes one, not so much of pragmatic visitor centre design, but rather of attitude design. That is, one might argue, that all of the problems associated with landscape design reside not in the physical environment itself, but rather in the minds of those who impose or have imposed upon it, within this arena, the landscape architect and his or her peers can act as a mediator, arbiter, intermediary, director, and perhaps most importantly, as provocateur. The biggest problem facing anybody at all, who is involved in any design, must surely be other people, or more precisely, their attitudes, to both the designer and the design process. The first task, then, for the designer is to collect the data, and this needs to be in the first instance, an assessment of the perceptions, and attitudes of not only the clients, but of oneself also. It is only by understanding the attitudes, perceptions, and therefore landscape, of those involved that visitor centre form, context and content will be resolved.

Thus, a hitherto little recognised role of the landscape architect can come to the fore, namely that of interpretation. Here the landscape architect can play an active role in not only designing the visitor centre itself and its environs, but also help create the perceptual landscape via interpretation. This interpretation should be continuous and would have as its chief aim, revelation of ourselves and how we relate to and perceive the environment, rather than to treat nature as possessing intrinsic values. This role would be one that liberates through appreciation of ourselves and the environment and in so doing expand our options for response. The greater the options, the greater the choice, and through choice comes freedom from constraint. It is constraint which generates the problems in any design issue and although applicable to form, it is far more so to perception and imagination. Resolve the latter and so the former.

NOTES

1. Barnett, Rod. House and Garden . A Discourse of Landscape in New Zealand. p79.

PART 4

Case Studies

Introduction

The purpose of these case studies is to act as jambs upon which the lintel of my argument rests. That is one reason why I chose two case studies. A further, and less flippant, reason is to compare these two visitor centres so as to reinforce my critique by weight of numbers. The two visitor centres were chosen on the basis that they were relatively new and so were indicative of current attitudes. Needless to say, the old attitudes are still with us, and it is not that they are necessarily bad, but rather that they should be elucidated. Also it is important to determine the prevalence of traditions and conventions, (historical context), that were emerging in latest designs.

Ideally, one should contrast the old with the new, but this apart from anything, was not practical for logistical reasons. Nonetheless, it appears that many of the attitudes from the past are still prevalent and although the form of visitor centres may have changed, there seems to have been little contextural and content change. Even so, it is generally the architecture that has altered, perhaps one ventures to suggest, in keeping with contemporaneous style rather than with new ideas in landscape. Yet form alone, although at times impressive, is not enough to address the complexity of visitor centre landscapes. One feels that form is somehow equated with innovation and consequently may usurp the old, but this only occurs in body alone. With increased visitor demand in terms of land use diversity, not to mention ever increasing numbers, visitor centres are going to become an important stage upon which the play between people and the land is enacted.



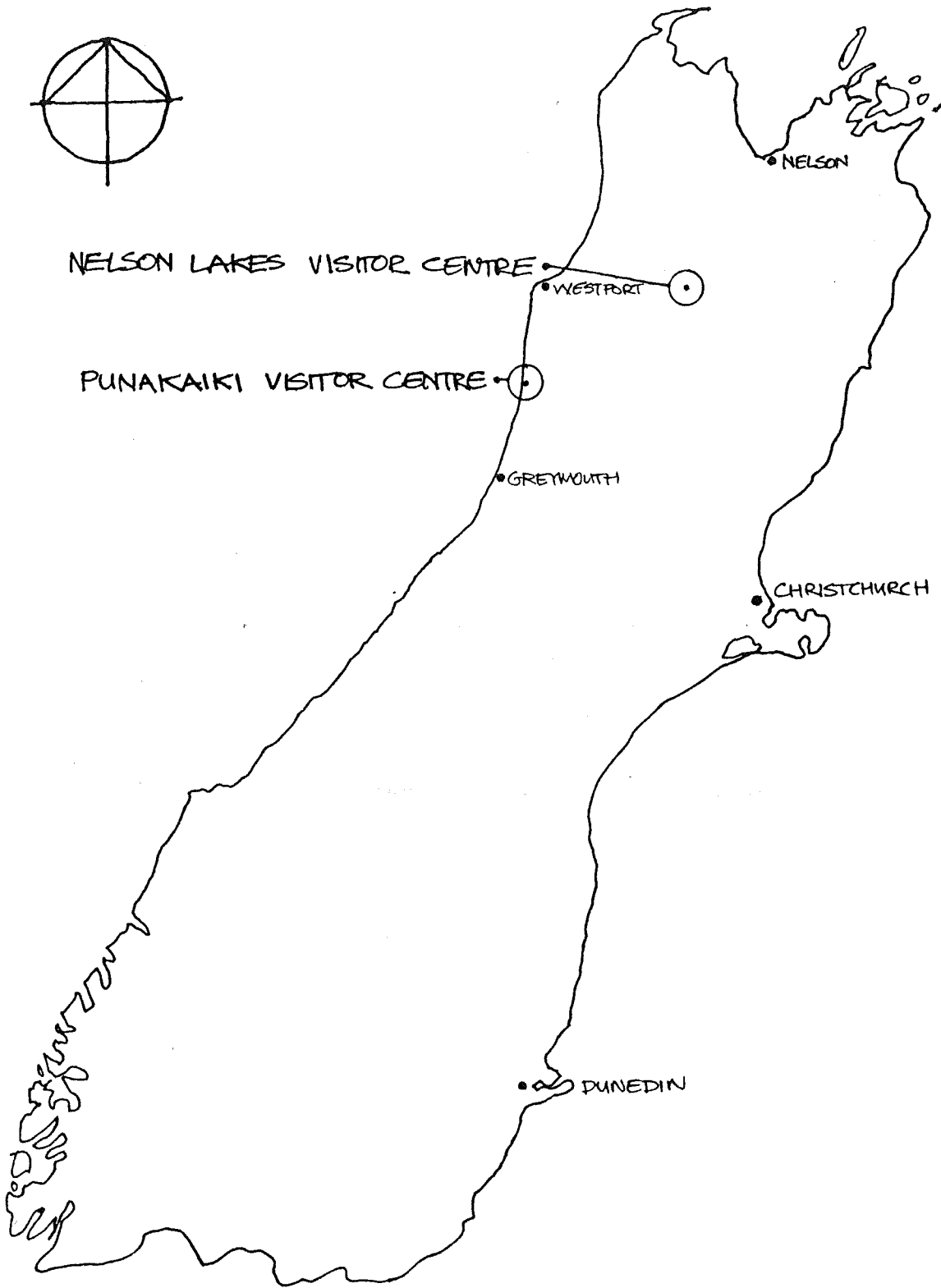
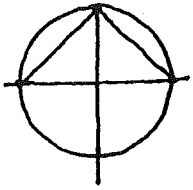
The old. Many of the ideas resident here are reproduced in modern visitor centres. While architectural style belies its era, its domesticity still reigns supreme, both in landscape and architectural terms. Despite variations in form and context, the creation of certain landscapes, via interpretation, remains relatively homogenous throughout the country. This can be attributed to the easy flow of ideas via common forums, and what often occurs within the national park system, the interchange of management.

The two chosen visitor centres are the Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre and the Punakaiki Information Centre. The Punakaiki information centre is designated so, as distinct from a visitor centre, because it is not permanently personed, whereas the latter is. However, the distinction really ends there, as the function of both is exactly the same. No doubt when the new visitor centre at Punakaiki is erected the distinction will no longer apply.

The Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre was chosen because it was the newest to be established at the time of writing, and in fact was not quite complete, Newness was a criteria as it was thought that this would reflect latest thinking on visitor centre landscapes. Punakaiki was chosen on the same basis.

The main physical differences between the two include : size- Nelson Lakes is much the larger combining information, administrative and amenity facilities.
Punakaiki is primarily static information and amenities.

location- Nelson Lakes is essentially a regional park with relatively low, albeit long term visitation. It is located off a regional highway with low traffic densities and is not seen from the road.
Punakaiki is located on a major highway which also functions as a major tourist route. It has a much greater range of visitors, in large numbers, but compared with Nelson Lakes, are highly transitory. It also serves a well known tourist attraction, that is, the 'Pancake Rocks', which are close by.



VISITOR CENTRE LOCATION FOR CASE STUDIES.
SOUTH ISLAND

Both visitor centres are administered by the same authority, that is the Department of Conservation, who, at the time of construction were the Lands and Survey. Perhaps it is worth noting that visitor centres nationwide, are for the most part developed autonomously. In other words, there is no one central authority or policy regarding their design other than the general principles outlined in departmental policy regarding buildings in the park, and even these are not detailed except in individual management plans. Therefore, for the most part, visitor centres are developed at local and/or regional administration level. The advantages, aside from the logistic, are that there is a high input of local knowledge, resources and expertise. The disadvantages are a likely paucity of ideas from beyond regional bounds coupled with the tyranny of consensus. The result can be, but is not necessarily so, a monument to mediocrity which of course, celebrates its makers.

Nonetheless, both have their successes and their failures. Both are very much products of social, historic and physical contexts as indeed are all human endeavours, and so become artefacts commemorating our relationship to the land.

These case studies will, hopefully, reveal a little of what they mean and what was meant. The views expressed are an opinion and are proffered within the context of what precedes.

CASE STUDY ONE.

NELSON LAKES NATIONAL PARK VISITORS CENTRE

At the time of writing, the Nelson Lakes National Park Visitor Centre was one of the newest in the country, and yet in terms of content, context and form it is little different from its predecessors. This is not necessarily a bad thing, if for no other reason than the feel of familiarity it exudes, which to the visitor in the wilderness must be reassuring. It has a homely, domestic air about it, even if it does resemble the hideaway of the metropolitan 'nouveau riche'. The plush and hushed interior certainly reinforces this image, not to mention the reverential tones it solicits. One hastens to add that this may not represent intent and is no doubt incidental to the stated priority of protecting exhibits from damaging ultra violet light in addition to urging visitors to experience the environment rather than to simply just view it.



This visitor centre, like all human constructions, represents a monument to the tenacity and persistence of ideas and preconceptions that have their origins in history. Most visitor centres have, quite strong historic, and therefore contextual, links and here they are particularly strong. Here, one can employ a genetic analogy or perhaps a Darwinian model whereby the ideas or genes that are the most conducive to survival are passed on from one, (parent), to another. The parents here, of course, are antecedent visitor centres, as are the attitudes that accompany them. This can never ever be avoided. Naturally an evolution occurs when new ideas are brought in, bit by bit, so that the visitor centre can adapt and therefore survive, in accordance with ever changing conditions, but this appears to be a very slow process.



Compare this, and other photographs of the Nelson Lakes visitor centre, with that of its antecedents at Tongariro, (p.65), and Mount Cook, (p.50). Architecturally it may differ, but the spirit, manifest in the surrounding landscape treatment and interpretative displays at the older centres, lives on here.

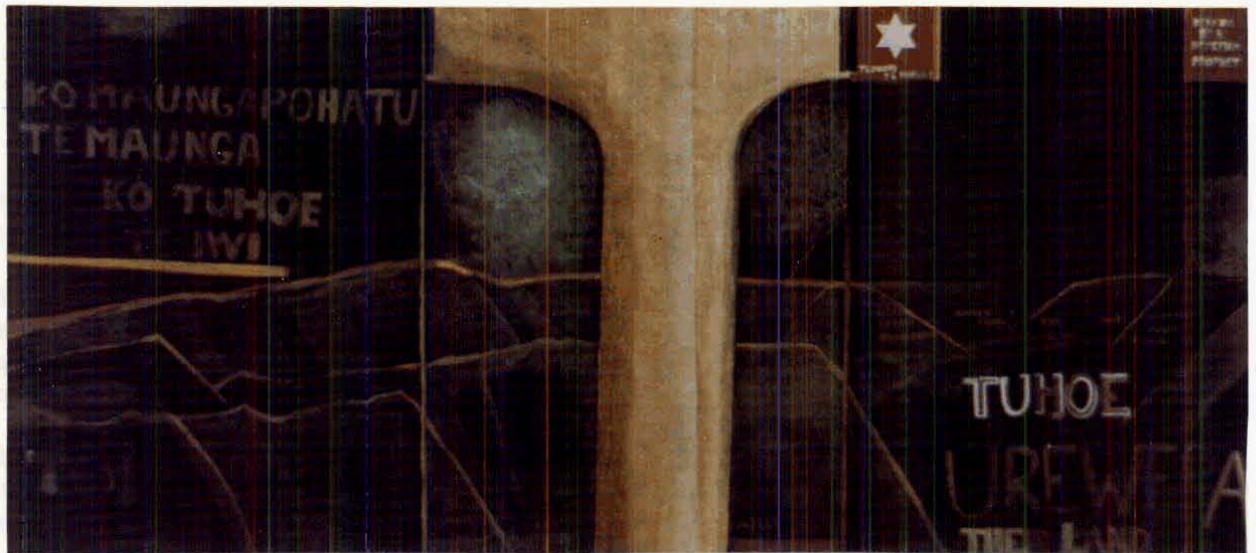
The visitor centre at Nelson Lakes is quite conservative and perhaps, reflects its regional location and clientele. It is pragmatic in that its ideas have been tried and found to be true, at least in the minds of its protagonists, who not only include administrators and designers, but by all accounts, the visitor also. This may well be appropriate given its rather isolated and not very visible location. Its users are more likely to hark from the Nelson region rather than be international tourists, and so the response, not inappropriately, tends toward the parochial. Locals could possibly perceive it as being theirs in a not too dissimilar manner echoed by the bevy of baches that fraternize with the centre, and so exude an air of camaraderie that once characterised small resort New Zealand of yore. Idiosyncracies aside, this centre seems, either consciously or otherwise, to be upholding a native tradition which is hinted at in a design brief which states that, 'The exterior has welcoming verandahs which should encourage use, and also provide a link with historic New Zealand rural building'.¹ This, in addition to the note that, '... any increase in visitor centre numbers should not generally be great.' And they probably will not be given the parks location.



The main entrance. An opportunity is missed in generating a landscape experience, c.f. Meteora, p.30.

In landscape terms then, the Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre is loyal to its customers. In its form and context it covertly promotes an old ideal spiked with a dash of nostalgia for a 'bach at the beach' landscape replete with sandflies, (as big as rats), sunburn, washouts, barbeques, kerosine cookers and so on. It gives its indigenous visitors what they have come to expect from a visitor centre in a National Park, that is the rundown on, to quote the design brief, '...plate tectonics and the alpine fault, glaciation, lake formation and deposition, vegetation, colonization by man and the resulting modifications, park ecology, climate etc.'² In short, the visitors' landscape is reinforced in the belief that an empirical, and indeed positivist, understanding of the environment will lead to its appreciation, which in turn will satisfy the sponsors management objectives. These are that, '...the centres' primary function is that of providing a platform for public service, information and education with the aim of enhancing the public support for the conservation ethic (= the wise and balanced use of our resources) and (the) National Parks role in that concept.'³

While no one need dispute their intent, one should question the method, which in this and most other visitor centres is rather limited and at times narrow. Many opportunities are either missed or not fully realised and so our landscape, consequently, becomes a fragmented one. The Nelson Lakes landscape, and indeed the landscape of conservation, is, as previously suggested, heavily bias toward the empirical and the positivist; as if there were no alternate way of conveying the context and content. By comparison, the visitor centre at Urewera at least attempts to rectify the situation by including a Colin McCahon painting in its display, even if it does depict a pakeha version of a Maori landscape. But even here the landscape is treated in unit terms in that the painting is considered as much an artifact as are the rocks, wood, bugs and birds normally encapsulated in visitor centres. That is the museum or mausaleum exists in what is otherwise a living entity. It is as if the sum of the parts precludes the whole. The national park is too big to include in the museum, so the museum goes to the park.



Colin McCahon's Urewera mural, (1975), is a praiseworthy attempt to demonstrate that the environment can be interpreted in many ways, and so create diverse landscapes.



The compartmentalisation is reinforced by the distinction made and indeed emphasised in the Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre where it was, '...decided not to make a big feature of views on the basis that we aim to encourage people to experience the outdoors - hence the views are intended only to reveal that there are views to be had....' While this concept has merit, especially with regard to fostering anticipation, it also reinforces delineation between the outdoors and the in.

Here is where, perhaps, the greatest opportunities are lost, as indeed is the case with most New Zealand visitor centres. The transition between the manufacture of the landscape and the subsequent experience of it, is probably the most formative in consolidating the landscape. It also represents the critical interface between a visitor and their landscape with that of the visitor centre and its landscape. The visitor centre and the environment it serves fail to shake hands, even though a gesture is made in this direction by using materials that are, '...sympathetic to the environment,' and by, for example, adopting a roof form that reflects '...to a certain extent the mountain backdrop'. The failure to enhance the transition between the interior and exterior, both in landscape and literal terms, is further reinforced by the magic moat of mown grass that symbolizes mans subjugation of nature, surely and irony given the sponsors intent. But then, again perhaps it is not so much an irony as it is a symbol also, in that the fate of the land is very much in our hands. That is the visitor centre symbolises our anthropocentric view of the land in that we have ultimately chosen how to use that land. The visitor centre itself represents this as a microcosm or metaphor of the land it serves. That is the national park is in itself an island of wilderness surrounded by, 'a lawn', just as the visitor centre is an island in the wilderness surrounded by its lawn. Both house the precious and both are under siege. Both are compartments, nodes or modules and both are just as much a product of our thinking and as such says more about us perhaps than the land itself. We can never ever avoid this, but on the other hand nor should we attempt to deny it either.

The Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre, like most others symbolizes mans subjugation of nature rather than subservience to it. No where is this more apparent than in the suburbs and we have here, alive and well, the body and soul of the suburban ethos, where hebes and tussocks, (because they are native) usurp marigolds and roses. Rocks are there too, because they are natural also, as are the timbers, (stained, not painted), and the mounding. Here is home, a safe house or a sanctuary within a sanctuary. In the game of snakes of ladders that one plays by venturing into the wilderness, this is home base, and one might sigh with relief.



A lawn surrounding the visitor centre acts as an unintended metaphor for the park itself, c.f. The theory of Island Biogeography, MacArthur, 1967. Also see aerial photograph of Mt. Taranaki, p.39. The lawn in combination with rocks and hebes also represents a powerful and tenacious icon now entrenched in the suburbs, but at one time the hallmark of a pioneering psyche where man confronted nature. The visitor centre becomes a park within a park, the former replete with relicry from the latter.

This is by no means a bad thing, if not at times a little comic, but one can not help feeling that it does need acknowledging. If acknowledged, then perhaps a more lucid design will result rather than the present situation where a slightly disconcerting result is arrived at via a somewhat timid mixture of the contrived and the natural. To resolve this, the context needs to be recognised and addressed. To this end, I leave the final word to Rod Barnett, and even though he is referring to the New Zealand garden ethos, it is nonetheless an one that is equally at home in the visitor centre context. He writes that, 'The first New Zealand gardens showed Nature tamed, organised, displaced. There was a distinction between what was familiar and what was, like the natural New Zealand wilderness, profoundly other. The settlers did not, to their dismay, find a Garden of Eden in New Zealand. They had to make it. Accordingly, a clearing was hacked out of the wilderness in which to situate the house - an activity which can be seen as a metaphor for the architectural suppression of landscape in this country. The house is commonly seen as a symbol of the stand against an unaccommodating wilderness. The sign of domesticity was not, however, the dwelling, but the wilderness "tamed" in the garden, the natural landscape reorganised according to human desires, The displacement of wilderness can be seen as a Victorian projection of the wild within ourselves, the tamed garden and assertion of control and a haven for the self.'⁵

NOTES

1. Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre proposal. s5:1.
2. *ibid.* s2
3. In a letter from J.Bos, N.L.N.P. Ranger
4. *ibid.*
5. Rod Barnett. House and Garden. A Discourse of Landscape in New Zealand. p78.



A clearing in the wilderness is something that many visitor centres unconsciously emulate. The parks they serve though, now represent the reverse situation- a wilderness in a clearing, and so an idiosyncratic landscape typical of colonial society emerges.

CASE STUDY TWO.

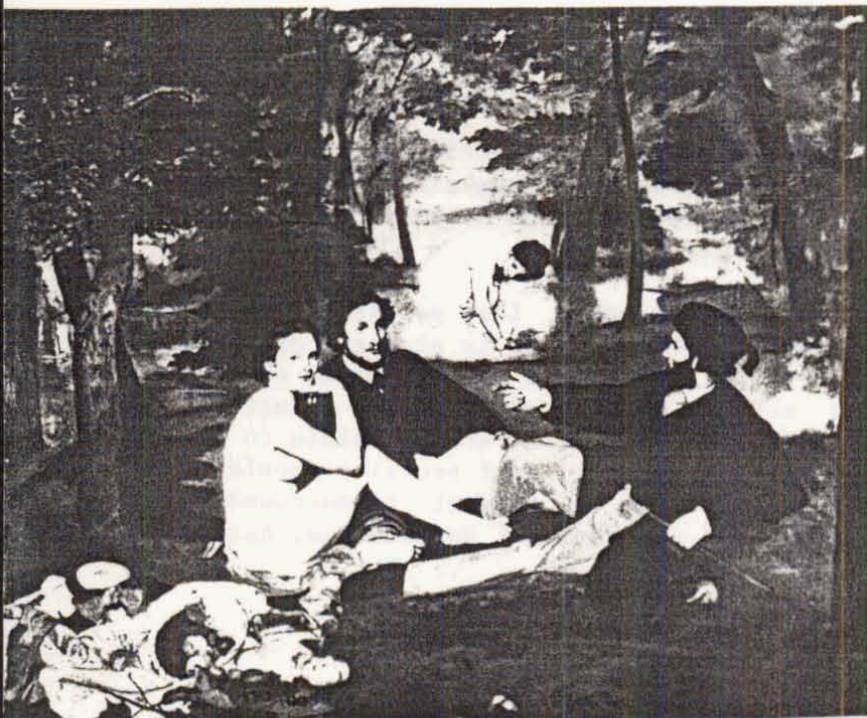
PUNAKAIKI VISITOR CENTRE

A glance through the design brief for this centre and indeed, that for Nelson lakes, is very revealing regarding design and management context. It is significant in that it quite succinctly represents the history and presuppositions that contribute to a visitor centre design. Changes in context and content have changed little over the years and so a pragmatic approach appears to prevail, as this seems to best serve the interests of management and visitors. Its critical base is clearly modernist and therefore the result tends toward the quantitative, the rational, the functional, and the compartmentalized. It also hints at the existence of intrinsic and therefore absolute values, that form such an integral part of the sponsors' psyche. That is, the National Parks Act (1980) upholds this absolutist view when it states that natural features are inherently, '... so beautiful or unique....' The Punakaiki brief reproduces this view and urges its maintainance when it refers to an area has having, '...very high natural values....'¹/₂ My argument is that the values are ours and as such become presuppositions that we cannot but impose upon the environment, and this then becomes the landscape. All briefs, regardless of application, are in fact a set of images or landscapes, the function of which is to realise what we believe. Punakaiki, and Nelson Lakes, are no exceptions, and as such represent certain beliefs given form.

Evident, also, is the sense that people and nature are separate entities. This is strongly apparent in the desire to ameliorate our presence and so, 'Materials are to be natural - timber (vertical cladding) and colour schemes are to relate to the surroundings.' Also, '... roof profiles should be sympathetic rather than in contrast to surrounding forms, land and vegetation.' Nonetheless, nature is kept at bay.



This centre has many similar characteristics to the one at Nelson Lakes, notably the lawn situated adjacent to it, albeit there for the perfectly practical reason of a provided picnic spot. Nonetheless it works better here for perhaps two main reasons. One is that it does not attempt to deny itself. That is, it is large in scale by comparison to the visitor centre itself. The other reason is that it adjoins rather than surrounds the visitor centre as it does more or less at Nelson Lakes. The visitor centre has a feel also, of being located in a fortuitous clearing in the bush, one that is arrived at on the West Coast road, and this bestows upon the centre a rather 'Arkady - in Aotearoa's' feel. The building itself reinforces this image in that its form is reminiscent of the cave networks that characterise the region and so instills a sense of the arcadian grotto that one might fall upon in some golden age wilderness. In this sense it still evokes the image of sanctuary. This is reinforced by its apparently cavernous interior that, in cahoots with its lush and fecund setting, is somewhat suggestive of bacchanalian revelry.



Manet's Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe, (1863), is hinted at, albeit subconsciously, at Punakaiki's visitor centre. The paradisaical garden image persists to the point where the park itself becomes an outsized Eden for which the visitor centre becomes the gateway.



Although the architectural materials are organic in origin, and the forms allude to surrounding features, the landscape experience does not quite reach its full potential. That is, the visitor's experience is relatively homogeneous as they move throughout the complex, and the building is not always in tune with its setting.

This is further enhanced by the centre's proximity to eating establishments and so in addition to the walk to the rocks, a visit here becomes more of an experience rather than an academic exercise. As a result the visitor may feel more a part of nature rather than apart from it, for a greater range of their more base appetites are pandered to. Herein lies hints of success in that the Punakaiki Visitor Centre affects a bit more than the intellectual, empirical response that so dominates other centres. Nonetheless, this is probably more a function of its setting, rather than anything else. Sure, the interpretative display within the centre is hardly differentiated from that of others, but in terms of form and context, it begins to emerge as a holistic experience. It still has a way to go though in that the environment is not as experienced as it could be, especially with regard to its entry from the road. Nor does it overcome the problem of transitions from the exterior to the interior exceptionally well, perhaps due to the difficulty of actually incorporating its surroundings into the architecture.

In this respect Punakaiki is quite successful in that the experience is, in geographic terms, a relatively compact one, and it needs to be so given the predominant visitor type. It also well meets the management objectives in that large numbers of visitors can be controlled with relative ease. They can also be concentrated into a relatively small area and so not be detrimental, because of user pressure, to the greater environment. Nor to themselves since most are not well enough equipped to venture too far into the wilderness. At Punakaiki the confinement that the natural features, such as the dense bush, the sea, and the cliffs, naturally help to corral visitors into an area that is of mutual benefit to all concerned. So not only does the centre need to respond to the environment, but also to the whims of the visitor. They in this context are an extremely varied lot compared to those who visit Nelson Lakes, and combined with considerable fluctuations in frequency and magnitude, demand a centre that is highly flexible and resilient. Punakaiki is one area that is likely to experience a very rapid and an ever increasing visitor load. It is perhaps timely, and fortunate that the area is now designated National Park and will thus acquire a new visitor centre. If managers and designers are to resolve the problems that visitor influxes incur, then Punakaiki is one place where process will need to prevail over end. This will be entirely within keeping of the natural dynamics of the area, and so management could, by way of analogy, become, in itself, an important interpretative tool. But this and other problems will only be resolved by acknowledging and subsequently marrying, context, content and form.

The totality of experience is perhaps all the more important at Punakaiki since most of its visitors are nearly always in transit. This is an important distinction between Nelson Lakes and Punakaiki, in that at the former the visitor centre is more likely to be used as a staging point from which a more extended period of first hand environmental experience is likely to occur. At Punakaiki most visitors, of the tour bus variety, are, by necessity, blitzed and one doubts if they would expect anything less. Because the visit is so short term it has to be memorable if it is to be of value to the visitor, while serving the objectives of the sponsors and management.

There is still a sense of timidity on the part of the architecture in that there is some denial of its physical context. That is the building, and to a lesser extent, the surrounding landscape treatment is somewhat inorganic in that it does not respond well to surrounding environmental stimuli. In other words the building, although visually satisfactory and shelter evocative, is not quite sensual nor spiritual enough, and consequently the visitor experience is never fully realised. By sensual and spiritual, it is meant that the building and its surrounds should respond to environmental stimuli in an organic manner. If the centre becomes sensitive to its environment, it therefore becomes organic, and perhaps even animated or anthropomorphic. The form needs to replicate the senses, and so appeal to the atavistic within us. This is especially appropriate at Punakaiki given its indisputably primal setting.

Given the atavistic response that the Punakaiki environment elicits, one would have thought that spiritual allusion would have been a natural design consequence. If this were considered, then the visitor centre would appear borne of its surroundings, not as it is, an addition to it. This is understandable in the light of its empirical content which appears to override a multitude of options. Since most visitor centres are uniquely placed within the experience that their sponsors extol, few seem to fully capitalise upon it. The reason they do not, it seems, is that the interface between the people and their land is conceived as a predominant abstraction of pure information.

NOTES

1. Punakaiki Information design brief. s2.2
2. ibid. s3.2.
3. Barnett, Rod. p78.

PART 5

Conclusion

While I concur with those who maintain that visitor centres should not become the primary attraction, I do believe that their role should be a complementary one. It is only through complementarity that clarity, definition and function will be achieved. Current approaches appear to be somewhat sheepish and effacing, and this seems to be a result of a lack of contextual understanding about where one stands. Although roles are themselves well defined they are simply known rather than well understood. It is all very well to state ones objectives, but it needs to be asked, why it is that they are important and what are their origins. Visitor centres, like any human construction, will invariably testify to our condition. Like all testimonials, it is not necessarily what is said that is important, but rather what is not said. If one has difficulty in understanding what is being said, then imagine you are an archeologist 2000 years hence, who has just unearthed a visitor centre. Then ask these questions :-

Who built it ?

Why was it built?

- and perhaps most importantly, because this is why archeologists do their work; What kind of society was it that made the visitor centre ?

On the evidence before him or her, would the archeologist make the correct interpretation? As a designer, I believe it would be our role to ensure that it is.



The old (above), and the new (below). The visitor centre at Waitaki hydro alludes well to its surrounds, drawing on local environmental form, and one imagines, organically responding to it, as if it were a living entity. The environment also pervades it thoroughly, and may well be amplified and so enhances the visitor experience. It is also unique, whereas the one at Craighburn, (above), is rather more rudimentary and almost totally denies its surroundings.



Obviously, the skill, and therefore the true test of the visitor centre designer is one of striking a balance between the visitor centre itself, its managers, its visitors and its sponsors, all of whom, in some way have undertaken a relationship with the environment. As with all relationships there exist certain rules and conventions that determine the behaviour of all parties, the outcome of which may be either success or failure. The visitor centre could and should play a pivotal role in creating and sustaining the rules and conventions of this relationship between the environment and its users. It can act as arbiter, as conciliator, as advocate, as mediator, and ambassador, and as such needs to affect a sympathetic stance between the environment and the people.

If my description of the visitor centre sounds organic, then that is fully intended, and is perfectly justified given that the relationships spoken of are none other than ecological ones. In other words, visitor centres represent the abstract and concrete relationships that humans have in, and as part, of nature. Unfortunately many visitor centres promote an inorganic stance by separating we from nature. If there is one over riding criticism of visitor centres, then this is it. To solve this problem, we need not look at visitor centres so much as to interpret ourselves, for it is within our perception that the landscape resides. There is no boundary between people and the environment and one hopes that one day the visitor centre will reflect this. Then and only then will the conservation ethic become inherent in us upon the realisation that nature and we are one. By then, maybe, the visitor centre will become redundant.

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