

Paperboy

Architect Rewi Thompson's lasting legacy: The new state house

*by Michael Barrett / 15 June, 2017
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Architect Rewi Thompson's warm, efficient, affordable model homes are on their way to becoming the new state house. It's just a shame the ingenious man who designed them isn't around to see them come to life.

Aotearoa lost an original thinker last year: Rewi Thompson, an architect, teacher, family man and rugby fan. He loved what he did; he had the architecture bug. “He never stopped working. Architecture was a life choice, not a job,” his daughter Lucy says.

He died aged just 62, but Thompson’s many and varied accomplishments outweigh his years. In fact, his biggest project is only now coming to fruition: a series of model houses that could become the new state home. Developed with his colleagues at Isthmus Group and named Everyday Homes, 59 of these efficient, warm, affordable dwellings are being built on Housing New Zealand land in Northcote, a pilot project that could lead to many more being built across Auckland. An architect whose visionary projects were sometimes too abstract to be realised has turned out to be one of the great hopes in the search for a solution to Auckland’s housing crisis.

Thompson was born in 1954 in Wellington, but with strong connections to his Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Raukawa heritage. A graduate of the University of Auckland, his work was rich with ideas about land, people and culture.

In an email exchange last year, I asked him what he thought an ‘only-in-New-Zealand’ architecture might be like. An “idea about biculturalism” was how he described his approach. “I’ll put it like this,” he wrote. “We, as Kiwis, need to start talking and listening to each other a lot more. The other issue, I believe, is that we need to share a lot more. Culturally, as a society we are very young and I believe we should take advantage of our situation.”



Thompson’s own home, Kohimarama, Auckland A sculptural statement that turns its back to the street. “It does not ‘gaze’ upon the landscape, as houses and people often do to appropriate status or ownership, [but] it occupies it in an assertion of rangatiratanga.”

You could say Thompson’s career was bookended by significant housing projects. The first, his own Kohimarama home, was built in the 1980s. It is a singular piece of architecture, a ziggurat stepping up into the trees, the plywood face more like an inscrutable, windowless cheek turned to the street. It was his favourite building, he humbly ventured last year, because of the “many basic values it expresses”.

“The main value concerns whanaungatanga – the way of the family,” Thompson wrote to me.

“Creating a whare was something I was determined to do: build a home for my family, a single space that would nurture, shelter and protect family. It is not grounded; it is elevated among the flowers of the pōhutukawa and away from the dangers of the street.” The home’s blank face has invited different readings. “[It] does not ‘gaze’ upon the landscape, as houses and people often do to appropriate status or ownership,” writes Deidre Brown in her book *Māori Architecture*, “[but] it occupies it as an assertion of rangatiratanga.”

Thompson designed the Everyday Homes to have a less formidable presence. Instead, they were created with both economy and comfort in mind. David Irwin, a founding director at Isthmus Group who worked with Thompson on the masterplan for the upcoming Northcote development, believes Thompson was ideally suited to designing Everyday Homes, which turned out to be his last project. “The approach was to design houses around people, and that’s what Rewi did. Rewi’s explanation was that this is an everyday home for everyday people. It had to be warm, dry and healthy. It also had to be simple, easy and affordable to build, and reflect our particular way of living. It’s a standard repeatable New Zealand house for all, and that’s something that hasn’t been done since the 1950s.’



Left - Thompson’s own cardboard models of the Everyday Homes, with different rooflines to prevent monotony. Right - A rendering of one style of Thompson’s

The Everyday Homes – designed from a series of modular parts and with a variety of configurations, including higher-density models – will replace Housing New Zealand’s collection of older state houses in Northcote, and perhaps a number of other suburbs. The development, managed by Homes Land Community (formerly the Hobsonville Land Company, a subsidiary of Housing New Zealand), coincides with an upgrade of the suburb’s town centre being led by Panuku, Auckland Council’s development arm. The Northcote of the near future will contain up to 1200 dwellings compared to the 300 there now. Four hundred will be for social housing, while the remainder will be a mix of affordable units and dwellings to be sold on the open market.

Thompson seemed destined to stand out from the start. Patrick Clifford, a director of Auckland firm Architectus, met him in his second year at architecture school. He recalls Thompson arriving a week late (he’d been in the Worsler Bay crew at the surf lifesaving champs), wearing pink jandals and a Hawaiian shirt. Pink was a colour that would earn the budding architect some early notoriety. Architect David Mitchell, one of Thompson’s early tutors, recalls a design for a bach above Piha. “Everybody was being incredibly careful with the bush, but Rewi had recently found a pink highlighter, so his design was for a bright pink building on this green hill. It looked bloody fantastic! I could see that the other students didn’t know whether to admire or deplore it. I, being a simple, emotional responder, loved it.”



Te Aho a Māui, Wellington A monolithic split maunga by Thompson above Civic Square.

For Brown, a colleague and friend of Thompson’s when he became an adjunct professor at the University of Auckland, the architect’s modesty and “special ‘kāumatua’ qualities of openness, and generosity of actions and ideas” allowed him to find inspiration in a number of often-unexpected places. “He was very focussed on the centrality of family, and inter-family relationships as a network for creating neighbourhoods,” she says. “The land was not just a surface to him. It was whenua. He felt that the current built environment was largely superficial in the way that it addressed its inhabitants and the land, and that a much more powerful

architecture could be achieved through understanding sites as cultural networks, communities, greater topologies, waterscapes, spiritual worlds, the non-human animal world, and histories.”

Thompson put these approaches to work in some prominent structures. Wellington’s City to Sea Bridge, designed with architect John Gray and artist Paratene Matchitt, is unlike any other bridge anywhere. *Te Aho a Māui*, his reimagining of Aotearoa’s creation story, sits nearby, a monolithic split maunga. In Auckland, at ōtara’s town centre, Thompson employed Pacific-inflected visual cues, while at the Ngawha prison in Northland, he saw an opportunity for customary architecture to assist with inmate rehabilitation with a view to the landscape from many of the spaces. “He reasoned that even if an inmate’s movements are restricted, an outlook to the wider world can engage mental, physical and spiritual recovery,” wrote Brown, in *Māori Architecture*.



Northland house This holiday house was designed by Thompson for private clients on a site near Opononi. It is elevated so it appears to almost float above the foliage, and features shared spaces upstairs where bedrooms bleed into living spaces.

There's also one that might have been: a competition entry for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, a giant feather laid across gallery buildings designed with the late Ian Athfield and American architect Frank Gehry, who would later go on to design the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, reversing the fortune of the Basque city and starting a quest to replicate the so-called "Bilbao effect" in cities the world over.

Of all the potential solutions touted to Auckland's housing crisis, Thompson's Everyday Homes looks like one that will genuinely make a difference. It's just a shame the architect didn't live to see it. At the Isthmus Group's offices, his seat is still empty, and you get the feeling it may be for a while yet. "Rewi not being here now is New Zealand's loss," says Irwin. "I'm sure there will be someone else, but no one will ever be Rewi Thompson.

"I think that connection with the land, that connection with the culture and people first generates an architecture, and that architecture is New Zealand architecture."

THE NEW STATE HOUSE

Thompson's people-centric designs are being rolled out as a pilot project in Northcote Point, with the possibility that many more will follow across the city.

Everyday Homes are highly rationalised, economical boxes designed for efficient building, and warm, dry and healthy living. Plan-wise, living spaces are downstairs and bedrooms are above. There are also medium and high-density iterations.

At the front door of the standalone homes (see opposite), there's a small entrance area which also allows the lower floor to be closed off from the stairs for efficient heating. The kitchen is neatly tucked away in the back corner.

Bedrooms are upstairs, on the northern side, and the hallway is an additional buffer zone.

Throughout, ceiling heights are 2.55 metres rather than the standard 2.4 metres, and parts of the houses, such as the strip windows, were designed as modules that can be dropped into place for more efficient construction.

Different roof types distinguish one house from the next in a street. The usable space of each lot works from boundary to boundary, rather than from front of house to back of house.