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# CONCERNING CONTEXT

When a building appears to ‘fit’ and add value to the public experience, it’s usually because the maker or designer appreciated something about its context. Climate, landscape, streetscape, materials and building traditions are some of the tangibles of physical context. While culture, economics and social connection are some of the less visible contextual elements, they are no less important. In these pages, six architects discuss their approach to designing for context across different sites in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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### TREE CLIMBER

“ Conceived as a modern-day tree house, this two-bedroom home with artist studio deals with a challenging site almost completely covered with native bush, on a relatively modest budget. Our formal response needed to be as compact as possible, both to minimise tree removal and to provide a highly efficient floor-to-wall ratio, inspiring the resulting cube form. With surrounding trees providing a variety of spatial connections, we created a stacked plan with the cooler, sheltered bedrooms and artist studio on the lower level, an open-plan living zone with extensive glazing at the mid-level, and a large, private roof deck at the tree canopy level.

We have created a restricted palette of materials to connect directly to elements of the bush – a warm plywood and recycled rimu interior evoking cut timber, with the red cladding and black joinery referencing the abundant native berries and ponga trees, among others. The strikingly patterned cladding is simple, elemental and somewhat industrial, with a nod to pioneering built form in the New Zealand bush, being largely corrugated iron. ”

Crosson Architects  
**Photo** Simon Devitt



### TOWNHOUSE TYPE

“ No context is still context: even an empty site is defined by a city’s grid pattern of property boundaries with its set dimensions, proportion and orientation. This informs how outdoor spaces and building blocks are arranged, with respect to mutual privacy, light and views within the site and for neighbours. For these Christchurch townhouses, the act of rebuilding a demolished structure to insurance equivalence – of similar scale and footprint – helps to reinforce the city’s collective memory of what the area was like historically. To emphasise this, we have designed steep gable roof forms to relate the new buildings to the rhythm of the residential street.

A local post-war tradition of natural river stone colours, contrasting with white painted blockwork, is reimaged in the new concrete dwellings and their carefully placed windows. Their solidity not only connects to past building traditions, but also offers a sense of permanence as an antidote to the disruption of the 2011 earthquakes. ”

Nicholas Faith, Athfield Architects  
**Photo** David Higgins



## RURAL DAYS

“ When designing in a rural setting like Tasman Bay, the form of the building as an object in a landscape is an essential consideration. Rural sheds are almost universally enjoyed for their honest response to function and their mute simplicity. This is often because there are few windows and little sense of occupation. When a typical suburban house is placed in such a setting, this magic is often lost, and the romance of the landscape somehow diminished rather than uplifted.

This studio and guesthouse sits 200 metres from the main house. In contrast to the hidden and recessive house, the client was interested in creating a visible and expressive building in the rural valley. So we have designed a very poetic and sculptural response to the setting, inspired in part by the critter sculptures of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, and with allusions to tents and birds. The local cross-laminated timber factory – the first in the Southern Hemisphere – offered the ability to make the large, triangular timber planes to achieve this tiptoeing form, with its flap-like building planes. ”

Hugh Tennent, Tennent Brown  
**Photo** Paul McCredie



## URBAN EXPERIENCE

“ Designing residential in the urban context can be difficult – the public versus the private realm, smaller sites, and creating a home in a gritty urban environment are all challenges that need to be overcome. Balancing daylight access, views and outlook with the necessary degree of privacy is vital. We try to give back to the street rather than put up a wall at the property boundary. We achieve this by creating, for example, controlled glimpses through the building to the spaces beyond, changing and adaptable façades with sliding screens and panels of opaque glass, and flexible courtyard spaces to the street with greenery.

It is also essential to enrich these intensely urban sites with some of the amenity gained from living in the suburbs. An outdoor green space, no matter how small, has a big impact on the lives of the occupants. And the surprise when you transition from a busy inner-city street, through the building and into this private and protected green space is vitally important. ”

Andrea Bell and Andrew Kissell  
**Photo** Simon Devitt

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### COASTAL IDENTITY

“ The process of shaping design is always a dialogue between form and context, whether through assimilation or juxtaposition, or somewhere in between. These relationships are crucial to the success of a building. For this Coromandel Peninsula holiday house, we had a broad beachfront to engage with and a large sand dune along one side of the site. Beginning with these two elements, we wrapped the house around the mound to part-conceal its two stories and to create a courtyard sheltered from onshore winds.

By referencing the bach culture of the area, we have worked with traditional forms and details, and been respectful in how we have reinvented them. The low-lying roof, recessed verandas and outdoor roof structures provide a human scale appropriate for the beach and casual holiday life. Natural metaphors from sand patterns and landforms are reflected in the roof geometries, with cedar shutters and weatherboard greying out to the same bleached colours of the local sand, rock and native grasses. ”

Studio2 Architects  
Photo Simon Devitt



### APARTMENT COMMUNITY

“ This medium-density housing development fits onto a small, 564 square metre corner site on Mount Victoria, Wellington. Eight (mostly) single-level apartments are arranged over three stories, sitting atop an in-ground car park. We have built up to the street edge of this very typical Wellington city fringe neighbourhood, which has an eclectic mix of tall, narrow Victorian houses, small cottages and 1960s and 1970s housing blocks.

In reference to this existing character and scale, we have designed the building to read more as a village than a housing complex. Large veranda frames contain the decks and windows of different apartments – devices that articulate the building’s character and add shadow and scale to the elevations. To define a strong corner, we have intertwined a corner clock tower with an internal staircase, connecting residents with views of their neighbourhood. There is a level of rhythm and detail that abstractly relates to the original villas while at the same time helping the transition in scale from the four-storey 1960s block next door. ”

Parsonson Architects  
Photo Jeff Brass