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## LOOKING ACROSS TIME: REFLECTIONS ON REVERSE CHRONOLOGY IN THE WRITING OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

*This paper reflects on the use of reverse chronology in the writing of a recent architectural history as a pedagogical device to improve engagement with a student or lay audience. Most histories or surveys adopt a chronological or thematic structure. Chronologies usually start at a selected point in the past and proceed forward to the present day. Reverse chronology starts from the vantage point of the present and explores backwards in time.*

*Conventional chronologies are often associated with the concept of Whig history, a view that portrays history as a story of progress and improvement culminating in the present: history is seen in evolutionary terms and often focuses on successes rather than surveying broader events and ideas, failures and dead-ends or even periods of passivity or maintenance of the status quo. It is argued that reverse chronology is more honest in reflecting the contemporary viewpoint and more clearly articulates the process of historical research as the researcher conducts an inquiry, delving into the past, uncovering layers of events, issues or attitudes. Misco and Patterson have argued that reverse chronology, through its detective story-like approach is particularly useful in education. It has also been argued by advocates that reverse chronology has a post-modern honesty about its methodology and the role of the historian author's point of view.*

*This paper also argues that reverse chronology has aspects that make it sympathetic in cultural terms to, for example, Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand who have a space-time concept that sees the past not as something behind the observer, but as in front. This is the opposite of the Western Judeo-Christian conception of time in which the past is behind and the future is ahead. Reverse chronology could well be of value in better understanding and interpreting the architecture and associated concepts of the indigenous people of our region, Australasia and the South Pacific.*

## Introduction

This paper stems from the author's recent use of reverse chronology in an architectural history. It reflects on that mode of history writing and argues that this narrative form is useful as an approach to history, in that it has pedagogical advantages and engages the reader more immediately than conventional chronological writing. It can dramatise the endeavour of research and detection and can also be seen as a more honest assertion of the role of the author as a guiding presence in the narrative. Reverse chronology may also have other advantages as it can be argued it is a conception of space-time, which is more sympathetic to that of some cultures such as the Maori of New Zealand. However, the aim here is not to explore wider notions of space and time or historiography but to focus on the use of reverse chronology as a pedagogical means in which the contemporary reader may better engage with history narratives.

## Modes Of Architectural History Writing in New Zealand

Reverse chronology is defined as a narrative starting from the viewpoint of the present and proceeding into the past. This is the opposite to the much more common chronological that starts at a point in the past and proceeds towards the present, such as in many surveys of national or world architecture. A prime New Zealand example is Peter Shaw's *New Zealand Architecture From Polynesian Beginnings to 1990* (1991, updated 2003 and retitled *A History of New Zealand Architecture*). Another common form of architectural history is the thematic, which focuses on issues and themes throughout history such as *Exquisite Apart, 100 Years of Architecture in New Zealand* (2005), the centenary publication of the New Zealand Institute of Architects which included essays by 14 contributors. A similar mode of writing history is the anthology of essays on a variety of topics (for example *Zeal and Crusade: The Modern Movement in Wellington* (1996)). Some architectural histories such as that of Wellington's architecture, *Raupo to Deco: Wellington Styles and Architects 1840-1940*, (2014), cast architectural history as the product of a collection of architects or firms, whereas this author's short history of the last twenty-five years of New Zealand architecture ("25 Years - Past and Future: The Last 25 Years" (2012)) did the opposite and attempted to name no architects or buildings, focusing instead on a variety of concerns (heritage, sustainability, Maori and Pacific identity etc.). The essay also made overt its limitations of scope and sources by explicitly seeing the past through one lens, in this case the magazine *Architecture New Zealand*, whose twenty-fifth year was being celebrated. Some architectural histories focus purely on the form and aesthetics of buildings and architectural history is portrayed as a succession of styles or building typologies or construction materials and techniques.

Two more recent and nearly contemporaneous histories of the architecture of the Pacific Ocean, from outside New Zealand, adopted different modes to grapple with the usual issues but also the vast scale of the region. *Architecture in the South Pacific: A Sea of Islands* (2014) adopted a regional approach, nation by nation, with a roughly chronological approach to each and some thematic breakouts (such as resort architecture in French Polynesia). *Art in Oceania: A New History* (2012), even vaster in scope as it included art as well as architecture, used a number of authors with different expertise to produce chapters that were themed by a mix of subject or issue as well as region or time. This is a complex structure that does not make for an easy historical summary of any particular subject, be it issue or island group, but it does reflect the complexity of the Pacific which covers nearly half the planet and is home to a wide variety of cultures and a complex pattern of settlement and evolution comparable to any continent.

### The Personal View

David Mitchell's significant text of 1984, *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture Since 1940*, seems regional (focused on one area or city of New Zealand per chapter) but each region is a vehicle to explore different periods and trends, issues or influences and the chapters form a roughly chronological timeline from Modernism to Post-Modernism. The book was the result of an earlier television documentary consisting of several episodes and it is easy to see the book's structure as an artifact of the series and the result of the presenter and crew's travel around the country. The book is also a precursor of a very common form of history now, 'the book of the television series'. These usually retain a chronological or thematic approach but the exigencies of television mean many popular histories are less detailed and comprehensive. Due to the constraints of time and the need for constantly engaging visuals, histories become more survey-like, jumping from site to site to illustrate key points rather than delving deeply into complex issues. Many documentaries employ a personable narrator who, to engage the viewer, acts as guide, speaks in the first person (rather than with academic detachment) and asks rhetorical questions. This is an approach that many historians who teach will recognise as that of the classroom due to its pedagogical value and overarching need to engage with an audience.

Another aspect of the rise of this style of history is 'the personal view' in which the historian will present a particular perspective that may well differ from that of scholarly consensus. As the latter approach to history seems in ascendancy, it is a reminder that the encyclopaedic approach to architectural history has diminished. Few now attempt this way of documenting architectural culture as it implies a singular all-knowing, all-encompassing world view. While the authoritative and omniscient encyclopaedia seems in decline however, the hyper-links and diverse possibilities of the digital world have improved on-line encyclopaedias such as *Te Ara - The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*. Here history is not one chain of events strung together by an author, it is a mass of individual events or themes that the website user navigates mostly on their own with some guidance suggested in the presentation of a variety of links. History can be consumed or construed by the navigator as they 'surf' or 'browse'. The effects of the internet and digitally structured modes of navigation on the perception of history is a complex subject beyond the scope of this paper but it is important to recognise that the contemporary student or lay readership of history may well come to the historian's printed narratives with experience of a more flexible and interactive engagement with historical information and the construction of history.

### Point of View

While it is important to consider the modes of architectural history writing, this paper is not a survey of those, but a reflection on the use of reverse chronology in the engagement of audience. There is insufficient space to consider the role of the narrative voice here, however reverse chronology is more overt in its point of view, starting with the reader in a shared present and then, in the manner of discovery, setting off on a voyage into the past. The more common chronological history seems to stand away from the experience of writer and reader and be normative and evolutionary, a steady stating of fact, rather than a shared inquiry.

The third person point of view is widely used in fiction and non-fiction with its omniscient 'God's eye view' and supposed objectivity and lack of involvement. This dispassionate voice and impersonal viewpoint is common and desirable in scientific and scholarly writing, however 'personal view' histories generally use the first person. This perspective adds to the drama of the narrative in that the narrator offers a more immediate point of view, tinged with conjecture and opinion, more entangled in the events of the story. It can be seen to be more honest than the adoption of a more distanced voice. The first-person narrator operates from one (generally human) vantage point and not having the gift of omniscience, attempts to make sense of the events or world in which they find themselves. It is also an active rather than passive voice that the reader can readily identify with as they enter into the new universe of the story.

### Reverse Chronology and Pedagogy

As the description of this plenary session ("After Unearthing the Nugget: Ways of Writing Architectural History") mentions, Geoff Chapple in a book on New Zealand's geology, describes geologists researching the Mesozoic era as "writing a great detective story. Like most detective stories it was written backwards...."<sup>1</sup> The detective story is not

unlike writing history, in its attempt to conduct an inquiry, establish facts, unravel past events and establish narrative synthesis whereby knowledge of the past is conveyed to an audience. This is pertinent to pedagogy.

Misco and Patterson's paper "An Old Fad of Great Promise: Reverse Chronology History Teaching in Social Studies Classes" (2009) is one of the few recent scholarly articles to address reverse chronology and focus on pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> The mode was popular in the late 1960s and 1970s and one can surmise that the counter-culture atmosphere of the period fomented an interest in a different approach to history, questioning establishment assumptions. Misco and Patterson assert that reverse chronology is more engaging as it "begin[s] with contemporary issues and builds connections to earlier events"<sup>3</sup> whereas with the chronological "student interest is dampened with a sense of historical inevitability."<sup>4</sup> This has been criticised earlier by Herbert Butterfield in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), as a historiographical mode that encourages a sense of progress and enlightenment, but also that same inevitability.

Misco and Patterson argue that the reader becomes explorer, "fellow inquirer"<sup>5</sup> alongside the teacher / author, rather than passive recipient, and that the technique promotes critical thinking in students and is (in what is now a contemporary buzz-word) disruptive: "reverse chronology can help disrupt uncomplicated instruction and foster more occasions of doubt and wonder."<sup>6</sup> Evans, Newmann and Saxe in 1996 argued the teacher could stand aside entirely and allow students to open up a variety of routes into the past, propelled by a contemporary issue, promoting individual meaning-making while entertaining problematic questions that contain disagreement, controversy, and grey areas.<sup>7</sup>

The technique, because it is unusual and picks apart or unravels the past, can also give a sense of the construction of history. This is sympathetic to the notion that there are many histories and that awareness of historiography is a crucial part of consideration of the past, rather than the passive and less critical consumption of the more smoothly linear and continuous chronological structure. Simpson in "Why the Past Comes Last" (1983) argues even more strongly that reverse chronology links ("chains")<sup>8</sup> the past, present and future more strongly whereas the ubiquity of the chronological casts the past as gone and quite separate from the present: a "chasm between the past and present" as Polos put it.<sup>9</sup> Simpson also argues that as reverse chronology reaches out from the known to the unknown it is "natural in a logical sense to students."<sup>10</sup>

### Reverse Chronology vs Time Running Backwards

Criticisms of reverse chronology are that it can be confusing and is at odds with the laws of physics: "How does it deal... with cause and effect? Or changes in construction technology? Or the evolution of land use? Or biographical context?... Ultimately some things inevitably happen before others."<sup>11</sup> This is to misconstrue the technique as time running backwards. Famous examples of this are two works of fiction, Kurt Vonnegut Junior's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1968) and Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991). Both novels have vivid scenes of massive destruction (the fire-bombing of Dresden and the Holocaust respectively) run backwards so that at Dresden bombers fly backwards, shrinking fires, repairing buildings, gathering up small steel containers and delivering them back to airfields where the containers are shipped to the United States of America, delicately taken apart by women and the "dangerous contents" separated into minerals to be "put into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again."<sup>12</sup> This celebrated paragraph seems plainly wish fulfilment for the central character's need to see undone the devastation of war and conveys some sense of healing.

Likewise in Amis' novel "time pours past unpreventably" towards the past and the main character asks himself "when is the world going to make sense?"<sup>13</sup> This novel can also be seen as an attempt to make sense of a monstrous aberration in European civilisation. Indeed Valentina Adami's 2008 *Trauma Studies and Literature* focuses to quite an extent on the interpretation of *Time's Arrow* and dislocation of time as elements in understanding trauma and the "breakdown of chronology, coherence and predictability."<sup>14</sup>

Reverse chronological narrative does not run backwards, rather, as Davis and Laushey identified in 1972<sup>15</sup> it steps back in time to particular periods or eras and then the story is told in the usual manner of time running forward. But what the techniques in these two cited novels can teach us is how people do not simply live with memories of the past stored away and fears and hopes for the future similarly filed. Human existence in the present is crowded with welcome and unwelcome memories and past experiences exerting pressure on our mental functioning while plans for, or premonitions of, the future equally squeeze into the present.

### Reverse Chronology and Culture

So far this discussion has assumed that the Western Judeo-Christian view of time and space is universal. In this model one perceives the past as behind us and the future as ahead of us and ourselves to be oriented facing the future. But this conception of time and space is not universal and indeed it is now well established by scholars such as Ranginui Walker and Anne Salmond that the New Zealand Maori sense of space-time is quite different. The Maori word for the future is *mua* which means “in front of, before, ahead” and also “the past, the time gone before”. The word for the past is *muri*, meaning also “behind, the rear, the back of.”<sup>16</sup> In this conception of space-time Maori see themselves as diametrically differently oriented in time than Pakeha (New Zealanders of European origin). As Walker puts it: “So the Maori faces the present and the past which are in front of him. In this time-frame he has before him the living, their forebears, the dead, the founding ancestors, the cultural heroes of mythology and the gods back to the primeval pair Ranginui and Papatuanuku.”<sup>17</sup>

Reverse chronology can assist in conveying a sense of the reverberation of events through time and human memory, from past to present as well as the colouration of the past from the perspective of the present. Just as Vonnegut's character Billy Pilgrim was frequently encouraged to bury his war-time memories and put his past behind him, until recently Maori too were encouraged to forget the events of colonisation, to put their loss of land and cultural erosion behind them and get on with life. But if one's orientation in space-time has the past always in front, how can one forget it or turn away? Again as Walker puts it: “...for Maori, what happened at Parihaka a hundred years ago is as real as if it happened just yesterday. Parihaka of course is an episode in history that the Pakeha would prefer to forget, and his conception of time helps to erase its memory. The Pakeha orientation of time is towards the future. The present is now and the future is in front of him. The past of course is behind, hence it is easy for the Pakeha to exhort the Maori who has lost so much to ‘forget the past.’”<sup>18</sup> Reverse chronology in this context can be seen as a conscious effort of seeing and remembering rather than the chronological's leaving behind and moving on.

There is insufficient space to explore cultural conceptions of time in this paper however they have been previously explored in the realm of Maori architecture<sup>19</sup> and as Walker indicates “this time-frame is the basis of marae protocol...”.<sup>20</sup> They are essential to understanding the architecture of the marae and the meeting house, two built forms crucial in Maori culture.

### ***Worship: A History of New Zealand Church Design***

When commissioned to write a history of New Zealand church design, *Worship: A History of New Zealand Church Design*,<sup>21</sup> this author, while familiar with a number of significant churches, was by no means expert on the wider history of church design in New Zealand. Similarly the ubiquitous white timber Gothic Revival churches are so prevalent that many New Zealanders take them for granted and a narrative structure was necessary that would engage the reader in the process of finding out more about them and why they are there. The adoption of reverse chronology in the text mirrored the author's research and journey of discovery in a way in which the lay reader or student could identify.

The Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 shattered Christchurch and the surrounding area leading to the destruction of many buildings including the Christchurch Anglican Cathedral, an iconic Christchurch building in the city's central square. A long debate about its demolition and replacement or reconstruction is still unfinished and before the law courts. Shigeru Ban's Transitional Cathedral (2013), widely known as the Cardboard Cathedral is a ‘temporary’ replacement for the cathedral on a different site that has also become one of Christchurch's first new buildings of architectural merit and a tourist attraction. The adoption of reverse chronology allowed the book to start with a current event and one of New Zealand's finest new buildings but also to immediately address a debate over the fate of the Anglican Cathedral that had become of national stature. It also allowed the author to ask big questions: why are we still building churches in a time of diminishing church adherence and dwindling congregations? Why are we building this type of church when the flourishing churches such as those of the charismatic movement are successfully using non-liturgical venues such as halls and cinemas? Why are there different kinds of churches? And why did such an irreligious country build so many in the first place?

The book's structure involved six eras: the present day, post-war Modernism, the period between the wars, the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the New Zealand Wars and the missionary period. In this way the reader is carried from the familiar, present day church practice that they see around them, in a series of steps, to the unfamiliar, a time when the task

of the missionaries was not in fact to convert Maori to Christianity, but to teach them the arts of civilisation so as to separate them from their cultural and spiritual practices and prepare them to learn the ways and religion of the European world.

A key task in reverse chronology is bridging the gap between different periods, preparing the reader for the next step back in time. For this, most chapters ended with a series of questions in the hope of encouraging the reader to turn the page and pursue the inquiry like a detective story. This is not to say that this mode is more compelling than a conventional chronology where the audience's desire to learn 'what happened next' is powerful, but it does mean the history is suffused with the spirit of inquiry. The chronological too may leap from era to era, but proceeds more steadily with a sense of gradual evolution as the reader of history, unlike the reader of a detective story, broadly knows the past and is safely ensconced in the present.

Like evolution, chronological history can chart multiple histories, developments and 'branches' but runs the risk of privileging some. Reverse chronology has risks as well: if the chronological can be likened to a tree (as Banister Fletcher did in his classic survey of world architecture that focused primarily on the West <sup>22</sup>), then the reverse chronological can be likened to exploring up-river where multiple tributaries exist. Here there is a temptation to end up at one, declaring that the metaphorical singularity or source, the essential truth or moment. In many histories that is not the case but in a history of New Zealand church design, there was one first formal sermon in the land, one first group of missionaries, one first church and there still exists one oldest church. But if one were to employ reverse chronology in a broader history of world architecture for example, the vast numbers of sources could easily become problematic to handle, like the metaphorical multiple tributaries or the roots of a tree.

The adoption of reverse chronology in this book was also an attempt to experiment with a structure that could be more sympathetic to the viewpoint of the indigenous Maori people whose culture, despite their minority status, does infuse a developing New Zealand culture. The author's church text and selection of churches took special care to greatly increase the number of Maori churches in the history. This is because, just as with other colonial introductions, Maori eagerly took to churches. They adapted them as vehicles for their own use in the advancement of material, social and cultural needs, but many of these buildings have been marginalised in previous accounts.

The author's belief is that this kind of cross-cultural conversation is at the heart of New Zealand's most interesting architecture. John Scott's modernist Futuna Chapel (1961) (and on the cover of the book) is a very important building in discussions of cross-cultural architecture in New Zealand, having a central post and rafter support struts derived from an ancestor's equally significant church, Rangiatea, erected in 1851. Architects as well as others, look across time for precursors and inspiration and it is hoped that the use of reverse chronology in this architectural history loosens any perception of the past being long gone and that time is seen as more fluid, across which, in the practice of architecture and history writing, connections are made and bridges built. As the book ends (including quotes from Christina Barton and Sarah Treadwell): "we should not see buildings as 'singular structures serving specific and fixed purposes'; rather, 'as a fluid process of reinvention and remaking'. This is a reminder that, while our churches may be seen as singular and solid things, the ideas behind them are not: they flow and transform between cultures and generations, and reverberate forwards and backwards through time."<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald, in his classic novel of human material achievement and ultimate failure in other realms (*The Great Gatsby*, 1926), wrote that, like Jay Gatsby, none of us can transcend our pasts: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."<sup>24</sup> It is human nature that we look backwards into time; the past is inescapable and, as in the Maori conception of time, "The Maori space-time construct can be thought of more like a constellation with the past and the people of the past always felt in the present, like the constellations of the sky to the voyager – enmeshing, surrounding, always before you, always behind, forming patterns that can be interpreted in various ways."<sup>25</sup> Although we generally structure our histories to march forward chronologically, this author argues that it is more realistic and engaging to overtly represent in narrative our mining backwards through time in the apprehension of what has gone before and this can assist in making more sense of the world. It is also this author's experience of writing history in New Zealand that it often creates more questions than answers. *Worship* looks backwards into the past asking the question: why? Published in late 2015 the book has had only a few serious reviews so far, so no objective comment can yet be made on the success of its mode of history writing. But time will tell.

## Endnotes

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- 23 McKay, *Worship*, 287.
- 24 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1991), 172.
- 25 Bill McKay, "Maori Architecture: Transforming Western Notions of Architecture," *Fabrications: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 14, no.s 1&2, (2005): 6.