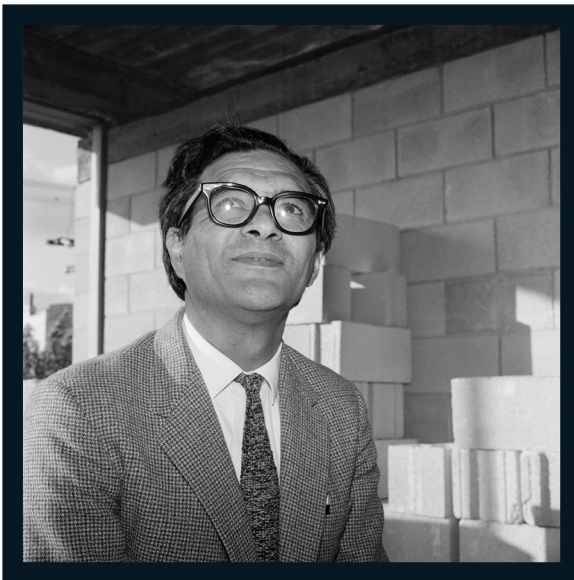


JOHN SCOTT WORKS

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DAVID STRAIGHT



*To the Scott whānau, for their
gracious support for this book.
Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.*

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID STRAIGHT

One Sunday in September 2016, I sat on the steps of John Scott's Aniwanīwa Visitor Centre, lost in equal parts wonder and disbelief. The building sat silently, nestled back from the road into the forest of Te Urewera, only its humble façade facing out. It was as if it had become part of the forest; small plants had sprouted in the leaf litter that had collected on its concrete platforms, and birds fossicked for food.

As I sat on the steps I found myself, perhaps for the first time, thinking deeply about a building and the effect of architecture: the way it can make you feel as you walk through it, the way light and space alter your emotions and senses, how landscape and materials can tell a story. We often pass through architecture without really noticing it. We don't read it as we do a book, we don't stop and consider it as we do a painting. Yet a building with a depth of consideration for context and place like the Aniwanīwa building can possess the same vitality as a great work of art.

The longer I spent ruminating on the steps of Aniwanīwa, then walking through it, watching the light, the more the building started to make sense. I felt that I could understand what Scott was thinking when he designed it. Te Urewera is an immensely powerful landscape with a strong history, and I was struck by the way the building called me into the forest, moved me along platforms, lifted me up a series of stairs and offered a sort of intimate communion with nature, with Te Urewera. It invited me inside the forest with a level of respect for nature that is so rare in architecture.

Often we consider the landscape from afar; we sit back and regard it almost as an object, a thing. The Aniwanīwa building opposed that idea and seemed to suggest: if you want to know this place, first you must come in here. The building was designed with a consideration of the landscape in which it was situated, its context. It referenced the stories of local mythology and history, as well as an innate Māori understanding of process and respect. But that, I've learned, is par for the course with John Scott; his was a humane, humble and respectful form of architecture, immensely intelligent, playful and clever.

I sat on those steps, in the quiet sun, and became profoundly sad. The very next day the Aniwanīwa Visitor Centre was to be demolished.

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Prior to this experience, I didn't really know much about John Scott's work, or much about the man. I had a cursory knowledge of the Futuna Chapel, in Wellington, and years earlier I had stayed a night in the Martin House, in Hawke's Bay, but I was curious about the stories I had heard about him, a modernist who designed buildings with strong reference to the indigenous culture of this land.

Witnessing the demise of this important building had a lasting effect on me. The demolition of the Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre is another example of the loss of modernist architecture both in New Zealand and around the world. It made me impatient to document, while I could, a history that is often too easily forgotten. I decided to photograph and record John Scott's work as a way of acknowledging and celebrating one of New Zealand's great architects and his contribution not only to New Zealand architecture but also to a wider contemporary culture.

Despite his stature, very little has been written about Scott, and what does exist is often difficult to find outside academic institutions, old and hard-to-find books and the odd video clip. Much of what is known about him is through a sort of oral history. There is no biography, no monograph to set out why Scott designed the way he did, and what his work means. As a result, he has become something of a legend, a sort of mysterious figure. This is the first book to look at Scott's work collectively. It takes a selection of buildings that span his career, and looks for the essence of his work, the moments that add up to a whole.



MARTIN BACH, 1974-75

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In 1973 Robin Dudding's literary journal *Islands* published a conversation between Scott and architect Ming Ching Fan titled 'Of Woolsheds, Houses and People'. The essay was a rumination on their work and their ideas about architecture. In it Scott stated: 'When you come away from a building and feel pretty excited, not because of the building, but because of something that has gone on within you while you were in that building — then you are getting pretty close to architecture.'

This seems to me a perfect frame of reference for understanding John Scott's work. His architecture is not about the monumental, or the ego, but rather about people and how they experience the spaces they occupy. Obviously Scott was very conscious of the way our physical environment can affect how we feel. He designed spaces with people at the heart, distinct rooms that alternate between open, lofty heights and low, intimate nooks — they seem to reference mental states and human needs. He seldom designed simple open-plan boxes or linear space; more often he would work at the edges, pulling boxes apart and letting the outside in through carefully placed windows. He thought deliberately about where the building was situated and how it would connect with the surrounding landscape, often spending hours or days on a site observing the landscape and watching the sun move so he could understand sight lines and how light would transform the interior. That connection with land and the philosophies around his intent is something innate. In that *Islands* essay he also said '... I think it only becomes

an important building — any building only becomes important — when it completes its purpose, lifts the person onto another plane or complements that person's purpose, or the purpose of this group of people'.

Scott's is an experiential form of architecture. Understanding it does not rely solely on the visual sense; you must enter the space, you must walk through it. The Finnish architect and teacher Juhani Pallasmaa talks about 'ocular-centrism' in architecture, whereby we perceive architecture through the eyes rather than the other senses. This is possibly true of a lot of modern architecture, but for me Scott's work is the antithesis of this; you cannot understand these buildings through the eyes only. They don't present themselves as easily read objects on a two-dimensional photographic plane. There is movement in them: you are taken on a journey from high to low, from light to dark; there are thresholds to cross and transitions in thought and feeling. These metaphysical and philosophical moments excite me as a photographer. A lot of my photography is a response to something that is understood by walking, by moving; the change in a building's physical space, and the light within it, provokes a reaction. The photographs in this book are a response to these ideas, a series of moments that make a whole.

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John Scott was of English, Irish, Scottish and Māori ancestry. His career was prolific. He designed well over 200 projects in his life — ranging from churches, schools and public buildings to private homes — before succumbing to heart complications at the too-young age of 68. Most of his life was spent in Haumoana, Hawke's Bay, and the majority of his work is found in Hawke's Bay. It was the context of this place, the East Coast, that seemed to inform his work. Scott responded to not only the landscape and people, but also to the vernacular buildings of the region. He considered the woolshed a symbol for all New Zealanders, a building 'that's grown out of our needs, our requirements, our kind of way of living ... It's important because it was generated here.' The intention of his work followed



THE BROW, 1967



ST CANICE'S CHURCH, 1975

this idea: that buildings are based on the requirements of the people, that they respond to specific needs and to the context of the place.

One of the most contested aspects of Scott's career is to do with the influence of te ao Māori in his work. Was he a Māori architect, or was he an architect who was Māori? The essays in this book add to this conversation. As I see it, we all approach the world informed by our personal history; our experiences shape how we see and how we make sense of the world. This is certainly true of Scott: you can see how experience informed his work, from the sometimes-dark interiors that are said to reflect his time living in a large English-country-inspired homestead called The Grange, to the connection to land and place, something at the heart of te ao Māori.

It is my opinion that this ancestry, this history, is at the heart of his work. His buildings can be read as an expression of his thoughts and beliefs, and as a way of making sense of the world around him and suggesting how we might live. You can see the manifestation of Māori ideas very clearly in some of his public buildings, and in elements of his houses, many of which incorporate and reference the pou tokomanawa and have forms that reference the wharenuī. Not only are the visual symbols of te ao Māori to be found here, but more importantly there are also philosophical ideas about how we live, about a communal way of living and the importance of all people rather than the individual. Not all of Scott's work can be read entirely through the lens of te ao Māori, but to not acknowledge it in his architecture would be a mistake.



ROWE HOUSE, 1977–78

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Photographing the buildings in this book was a sort of treasure hunt, a pass-the-parcel of addresses and phone numbers, of hints and speculation. Some are well known and easily accessible, but many have never been photographed and published. Like everything these days, a lot of information is online, and so I trawled through online searches, looking for past real estate listings, or houses available for rent, always cross-referencing them with the information I already had, often by the way of Craig Martin's excellent John Scott website. If I found a house I would put a letter in the letterbox telling the occupants what I was doing. Not all of my detective work was successful, and some buildings remain frustratingly elusive, but thankfully most owners responded to my requests. There was a spark of delight when I found a new building, as if it were some rare, long-forgotten object. My natural hesitancy about talking to owners lest I intruded quickly faded as I learned that the people who live in Scott houses are as curious about his work as I am and are incredibly proud of his work, too. Many passed on names or addresses, sent Facebook posts and made phone calls on my behalf.

It can't be overstated how many people who live in homes designed by John Scott love them. They have shown the greatest goodwill towards this project. Owners would often have dossiers of information, details from past owners, plans and drawings, and magazine clippings if their house had been featured in the press. Les and Lorraine Arrowsmith, for example, commissioned a house from Scott in 1979. The first time they met him, he turned up late in the evening and sketched the idea for their house on the spot. It was remarkably similar to the finished

version. They kept this sketch on their wall and passed it on when they sold the house, figuring it belonged there. The sketch shows stick-figure versions of the Arrowsmiths lying on the window seat, legs intertwined, obviously enjoying their new home. It wasn't until the last week in the house that they acted out the sketch, lying on the window seat as if in final homage to the house they loved. As with all the home-owners I met, their fondness for Scott and their house is wholehearted and sincere.

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It's a daunting proposition creating a book on a subject that other people know a lot more about than you do. Scott has had his devoted fans for a long time; people who have studied and researched his work, who supported and championed his buildings, and who knew and worked for him. I have come to the party late. I've felt a sense of apprehension and a responsibility to do this work justice. I don't know everything there is to know, and there will be stories that have been omitted, buildings I have not included. I'm not an architect, or an historian, and what I know of Scott's work is primarily through experiencing it. My approach is one of curiosity and a desire to learn, a response to something I've felt and noticed in his work.

Luckily for me, however, there are people who *do* know. I asked five writers, thinkers and practitioners to add context to the images in this book. Their eloquent essays offer depth to the John Scott story. Bill McKay and Julia Gately of the University of Auckland add insight into the architectural moment in which John Scott worked. Hana Scott, John's granddaughter, reflects on the family history and the ideas that can be found in his work. Douglas Lloyd Jenkins looks at three families who commissioned Scott to build their houses, and tells their stories of working with him. And finally Greg O'Brien writes a moving piece about the Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre and the events of that weekend in September 2016.

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'To be relevant in one's time is all I hope to be.' Scott stated this at the end of that *Islands* interview when asked how he saw his work. At the heart of it all he wanted to create something for people, not just the individual, but the community. Scott was aware of the limits of architecture, but he never gave up striving for something meaningful, something greater than the individual, something essential. His work is still relevant, possibly more so than ever. The incorporation of ideas from te ao Māori are only now becoming accepted more broadly in New Zealand society. At a time when relationships between Pākehā and Māori were strained, Scott designed buildings that in their own way attempted to bridge that gap. His position in New Zealand's architectural and cultural imagination is significant. This book sets out to acknowledge and celebrate that place.