

Ether: an atmosphere of possibility Kerry Francis, UNITEC *

This paper explores a period of architectural student culture in the early 1970s in Auckland, New Zealand, and its influence on New Zealand architecture. The 1971 AASA (Australasian Architecture Students Association) Congress was organized by students for students. Located at Warkworth, a rural town 35km north of the city, this Congress had huge ambition. The organizers invited Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, Serge Chermayeff and Warren Chalk and planned and built shelter and services to sustain their community on site for five days. The event was influenced by the new social phenomenon of the live-in music festival, as it was architecturally by the current trends of mobility, spontaneity and techno utopianism of the British (Archigram and Cedric Price) and the equally potent Whole Earth potpourri of commune, Buckminster Fuller, Ant Farm, and hand-made house-building that arrived from the United States of America.

This paper will review the tensions within the student group that arose from inviting such a variety of architects, and will establish the contradictory poles of the spectrum between Serge Chermayeff and Sim van der Ryn, who attended instead of Venturi and Scott-Brown. The Russian born, English educated Chermayeff then Professor Emeritus at Yale brought to the Congress a lecture on 'urbanism and broad frameworks' which lacked the resonant qualities generated by the Californian van der Ryn) whose involvement in the Peoples Park movement saw him well qualified for the embedded politics and the self build atmosphere of the Warkworth event. Similarly, on the local front, the interests of this student group will be discussed with reference to the neo-colonial formal and material strategies of their professional rebel counterparts, Ian Athfield and Roger Walker.

The following year, in late 1972, the students shut down the architecture school at Auckland University. Frustrated by the institution's lack of response to their demands for changes to the course structure the students went on strike and threatened to boycott the final examinations. This paper places the strike in the context of the Congress and argues that this cluster of ideas, this ether, fostered by the event at Warkworth, was subsequently carried over as critique and action into the domain of the formal architecture school programme.

PAPER

The late sixties were a time of upheaval in many areas of western culture. There are two overseas events from that period, Paris 1968 and Woodstock 1969, that influenced the narrative of change within the programme at New Zealand's then only school of

architecture at Auckland University in 1973. Sections of the student cohort identified with these two notable international events that challenged the relevance of existing educational and societal norms. While Auckland is a long way from Paris, it is no surprise that a couple of years later students presented with the opportunity to stage an architectural student congress should choose to address the currency and relevance of their education. Nor is it any surprise that they should take Woodstock as an exemplar and locate a significant part of their event out of the city.

The creation of a spontaneous self contained community is a challenge to every aspect of our Architectural upbringing. The prospects for self-revelation are immense. The Auckland Congress has given us an unprecedented freedom within the School to direct our own education. Let us not miss the opportunity.¹

Their manifesto, introducing the project to their student cohort, contained a quote from Reyner Banham that could be considered prophetic:

...from the end of world war two until about 1960, a few greying talents held modern architecture within a single stylistic and theoretical envelope and when someone like Hunderwasser offered to crap on the emperor's old clothes the effect was shocking - and revelatory. Suddenly everyone could see that they were old clothes; the clay foot gods fell (some slowly) and the war of the architectural generations was over before the banner of free speech was ever raised at Berkeley.²

This paper argues that the insights and experience gained by the students during their involvement in the 1971 Australasian Architecture Students Association (AASA) Congress were subsequently played out in their actions to force a redesign of the architecture degree course at Auckland University in 1972.

¹ 'Part Three, A Congress Proposed'. Publicity release by the organizers, 10 March 1971. Congress 71 Archive.

² Banham, R., 'Play Power' a review of Programmes and Manifestos of 20th Century Architecture, edited by Ulrich Conrads, *New Society*, vol. 197, no. 432, 7 January 1971, pp. 26-27.

The Programme

The Congress programme began on Sunday 16 May in the Chemistry Lecture Theatre at Auckland University with addresses from Professor M.K. Joseph and Kendrick Smithyman from the University English Department. Both were well-known poets and they delivered appropriate examples of their verse that contextualized the local atmosphere and creative culture. They were followed by Professor R.H. (Dick) Toy who delivered the essence of his thesis of Auckland as a water city. Toy enjoyed huge respect in the Auckland School. He had taught there from 1939 and held the Chair in Design from 1959 until his retirement in 1976. He was an imposing figure, a tall man with a shock of white hair and an aristocratic manner. Toy had completed his Doctorate at the University of Dublin in 1950 where he was influenced by the work of Patrick Geddes. Toy's presentation notes are headed "A Sketch Introduction to the New Zealand Scene"³. It may have been the title the organisers had given him as he did not address that topic in any specific national sense. Instead he outlined his topographical analysis of and suggested trajectory for the development of Auckland as a water city. On closer examination of his notes we see that he deliberately mapped out the passage of the lecture. It began in the "Cavern", the lecture theatre:

Start here

Wander a bit – out on the sea

up in the air

speculate too

leave you (in imagination) at Warkworth, Mahurangi Hbr⁴

Then, over the next 25 minutes, he took the attendees through the speculation of his thesis and delivered them to the Congress site. At that site that he dreamed of the possibility of the productive reconciliation of his identified dichotomies of body and mind, Maori/European, land/sea, earth/sky through community and place:

At Warkworth we shall be at one of these water spaces

³ Toy Files, Auckland University Architecture Archive [AUAA].

⁴ Toy Files, AUAA.

Perhaps their experiment in community there will discover some of the answers.⁵

In retrospect it was designed to be a carefully structured presentation to locate the event within a body of theory that Toy had constructed over the preceding twenty years. Toy, in effect, blessed the event. However, the reception of this lecture was generally negative. Toy's delivery was rambling and carried none of the visionary authority existing in the ideas themselves.

Serge Chermayeff followed Toy. As Professor Emeritus at Yale with a string of academic publications and two books behind him, Chermayeff was the Congress guest with the highest profile.⁶ He had been suggested as a speaker by the New Zealand architect Maurice Smith, who had taught with him at Harvard and who held him in high regard. Chermayeff's presentation was titled "On Urbanisation, Broad Frameworks and Commitment". In terms of the Congress's rural intentions this title would appear to going against the grain. Early in the lecture Chermayeff identified himself as a student:

What I want to talk about really is what I have done as a student during my 50 years of engagement with this peculiar non-profession, non-business, non-craft, pseudo-activity which has been described as architecture.⁷

He further identified his ongoing questioning of the boundaries of the discipline. He described contemporary life as a complex condition and then briefly sketched the trajectory of his own career path to conclude that:

...one comes into an area in which the frameworks of reference are very broad - biological, physiological and psychological – and you move away from the object as such into the examination of systems of structuring things.⁸

⁵ Toy Files, AUAA.

⁶ Chermayeff, S. and A. Tzonis, *Shape of Community: realization of human potential*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971. Chermayeff, S. and C. Alexander, *Community and Privacy; toward a new architecture of humanism*, New York, Doubleday, 1963.

⁷ Chermayeff, S., 'On Urbanisation, Broad Frameworks and Commitment' in J. Feary, K. Francis and H. Gillies (ed.), *Printout: Report on the AASA Congress Auckland and Warkworth May 16-21 1971*, Auckland, Wakefield Press, 1971, p. 9.

His subsequent references to cybernetics, the understanding of this complex contemporary condition as a series of ebbs and flows and the call for a more multi-disciplinary environmental design approach should have placed him in a feted position for the rest of the Congress, or at least engendered a rich discourse around these ideas. But that discourse never eventuated. Chermayeff's potential contribution was nullified by form – that quality which he so rejected:

I think if you have some kind of visible form of commitment you will produce excellent and suitable form, instead of producing by having a commitment to **form**, zero. **Purpose** must come first.⁹

The following evening, during a discussion on architectural education, local architect David Mitchell (30 years old and about to begin teaching at the Auckland School) accused Chermayeff of being a "crusty old tyrant."¹⁰ Mitchell's characterization and comments when viewed in print seem confused. The idea of practice as continual enquiry implied by Chermayeff's description of himself as a student in his original address and his opening comments in this discussion seem to align very closely with Mitchell's wish that graduates should "contrive to retain that questioning of what architects are and should be doing"¹¹. But perhaps it is Mitchell's description of Chermayeff's view as "particularly Olde English"¹² that gives us real insight into this reaction. Chermayeff was born in Russia but moved to England at the age of 10 where he was schooled at Harrow. He then moved to the United States in 1939 just prior to the outbreak of World War Two. He was a product of the English public school system and as a designer and architect had worked for/with and moved amongst the creative and financial elite of inter-war English society. I would argue that it was his manner of speech and behavior that Mitchell was reacting to more

⁸ Chermayeff, 'On Urbanisation', p. 9.

⁹ Chermayeff, 'On Urbanisation', p. 12.

¹⁰ Chermayeff, S. and S. van der Ryn, 'Education' in J. Feary, K. Francis, H. Gillies (ed.), *Printout: Report on the AASA Congress Auckland and Warkworth May 16-21 1971*, Auckland, Wakefield Press, p. 39.

¹¹ Chermayeff, van der Ryn, 'Education', p. 39.

¹² Chermayeff, van der Ryn, 'Education', p. 39.

than any disagreement with his ideas. This characterization of Chermayeff was pervasive.¹³ An article in the student newspaper *Craccum* after the Congress described him as:

...a hound dog faced 72 year old Jewish planner from New York who was a pompous old shit who said 1 or 2 good things which were suffocated in great mountains of verbal crap, and to make matters worse, he would resort to cheap put downs for people whose questions he thought were below his dignity to answer;...¹⁴

So the potentially rich discourse on broad frameworks – his work with Christopher Alexander and Alexander Tzonis, environmental design, to say nothing of the colourful career history – that made up the potential contributions, which Chermayeff brought to the Congress, were nullified by his manner. Unlike Toy, he made no attempt to engage with the substance of the event. He visited the Warkworth site on the Friday 21 May wearing a suit and footwear unsuitable for the mud where he spoke in front of a gleaming sisalation¹⁵ space-pod. The following day he flew to Australia where he delivered the 1971 A.S. Hook Memorial address to the Australian Institute of Architects Conference.

With Chermayeff at 72, Toy at 60, Smithyman at 58 and Joseph at 68, the students probably perceived them as old men. Perhaps in the eyes of youth they were the “clay foot gods”¹⁶ to whom Banham referred.

In contrast the Californian Sim van der Ryn was 36 years old. He was a late replacement for Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown and had also been suggested by Maurice Smith who described him as “[by] accounts, the best/most reliable of the ‘definition through involvement people’ ... He is into quick/short term building & would be/present a reasonable/active alternative to Chermayeff”¹⁷ While both Chermayeff and Toy spoke of

¹³ This event was re-enacted as a contribution to RE_CONGRESS 2006 at UNITEC, Auckland by a group of Victoria University students under the direction of Robin Skinner.

¹⁴ Cavell, F. B., ‘Architectural Congress: a meeting of warmth and poetic learning’ *Craccum*, vol. 45, no. 11, 10 June 1975, pp. 1, 3.

¹⁵ Sisalation is a reflective foil insulation made by laminating aluminium foil to kraft paper, reinforced with fiberglass.

¹⁶ Part Two, ...being the Theory of an Architectural Congress, Publicity release by the organizers, 10 March 1971. Congress 71 Archive.

¹⁷ Correspondence between Maurice Smith and Hunter Gillies, 5 April 1971. Congress 71 Archive.

broad frameworks, van der Ryn was about making and making now and of course he was more attractive to the student community. He spoke of his involvement in the 1969 People's Park Festival at Berkeley and his development of Faallones Institute, a design practice set up with former students from the architecture programme at Berkeley to assist schools and school teachers make physical changes to their learning environments. There was (political) theory and there was (design) practice, and they were bound together in a relatively short time frame with an emphasis on the value of the experience. Van der Ryn subsequently went on to become the State Architect for California in the late seventies¹⁸ and to write a series of books on ecological design and sustainable communities. He continues to practise in this field as a member of the Ecological Design Collaborative.

The Site: Congress in the country

The Congress shifted location on the morning of day three, Tuesday 18 May, to an abandoned cement works located in a river valley 48 miles north of Auckland. Here, amongst the gothic splendor of concrete ruins that had been reduced by air force target practice in World War Two, were nestled a colourful mish-mash of cardboard domes, shiny silver sisalation pods and scaffolding frameworks beside the edge of the shiny black surface of the fifty-foot deep lime-pit lagoon. A large plywood geodesic dome (6 m radius, 5/8 sphere, three-frequency, vertex zenith, alternate development) and a polyester paper-clad hyperbolic paraboloid provided larger spaces for presentation and discussion. The one complete Electropu "excreting unit" stood resplendent in bright yellow in a row of other seats where only draped sisalation provided privacy.

The notes from the inaugural organizational meeting of students the previous year (4 August 1970) show the intention to locate the 1971 Congress out of the city was established early:

CONGRESS IN THE COUNTRY, MAY, 1971

¹⁸ Roberts, J., 'The Sim', *Dwell*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2007, pp. 112-16. <https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=0MUDAAAAMBAJ> (Accessed 15 February, 2016).

We aim to attract the participator, rather than the observer.

We will attempt to create a suitable situation.

We will build a Congress Village.¹⁹

It is interesting here to note that it is the physical act of making (building) that was initially privileged but it was intended as a means to an end:

Shelter as the GENERATOR.

To the participants it will be the initial frenzied fantasy that (we hope) achieves COMMUNICATION and boredom, preparing for a further five or six days of intensive introverted study.²⁰

This strategy of collective village building was designed to open channels of communication and develop community so that the intended real substance of the event could flow; today we would probably call that real substance intellectual discourse. But while the act of building developed a community through a physical sharing of resources and labour it was precisely this context of construction combined with the unavoidable physical demands of being at an isolated (construction) site that pushed the desired intellectual discourse into the shadows. The six days at the cement works became not the intended "intensive introverted study", but rather a living celebration of physical work completing. Speakers came and went. Some stayed and some engaged. As was stated earlier, Chermayeff briefly presented and left for the Australian Institute conference. Notable New Zealand architects Roger Walker and John Scott and sculptor Tom Taylor spoke bravely from plinths of the concrete industrial ruins. But it was the physically engaging events at the site that had the most resonance for the attendees. Sim van der Ryn initiated a native American bone game that involved 30 or 40 students in vigorous activity for several hours. Waikato University Professor of Psychology, James (Jim) Ritchie conducted events to "make architects so aware of their bodies and senses that they could

¹⁹ Bohm, B., Notes on an Inaugural Congress Meeting, Congress 71 Archive.

²⁰ Bohm, Notes on an Inaugural Congress Meeting.

never live in buildings again.”²¹ All the while students continued to adjust and remake their shelter.

It was late in the New Zealand autumn. The sun went down at 5.30pm and the cold came in and so too did the darkness. High tide flooded parts of the site. It was a difficult experience but that difficulty was overcome by generous servings of hot food, music, theatre and the welcome heat of several giant bonfires. This community of 300 was bound together through a complex mix of joy and hardship. On the final day, Saturday 22 May, the students celebrated their collective success with an open invitation to the public. A hangi²² was put down by two locals. It is reputed that 650 people were fed.²³

The course changes

Fifteen months later, the Auckland University Academic Committee of 9 September 1972 approved for implementation in 1973 new programme content for the Bachelor of Architecture and the Diploma of Urban Valuation. These dates are significant.

The School of Architecture had been working on proposals for course changes since 1967.²⁴ In 1969 the Academic Committee had approved a report to change to a two-tier (three years general study plus two years specialisation) structure, all taken within the school, in line with overseas practice.²⁵ Despite the detail in the report, there seems to have been significant inertia surrounding the implementation of this new structure.

In late July 1972 the students at the Auckland University School of Architecture suspended their studies and organised a series of workshops to discuss their discontent with the programme and to decide on action to improve it. Dominant amongst their dissatisfactions were: the narrow (professional) focus of subjects within the course and the subsequent lack of recognition of potentially diverse roles within a changing society;

²¹ Ritchie, J., ‘See me, Feel me, Touch me, Heal me’ in J. Feary, K. Francis, H. Gillies (ed.), *Printout: Report on the AASA Congress Auckland and Warkworth May 16-21 1971*, Auckland, Wakefield Press, p. 2.

²² Hangi (earth oven) is a traditional Maori technique for cooking large amounts of food. Rocks are heated in a firepit for several hours. The embers are removed and the food, traditionally wrapped in leaves, is placed over the hot rocks and covered with earth. The hangi is “down” (cooking) for 2-4 hours depending on the amount of food.

²³ Austin, M., ‘Warkworth’ unpublished manuscript presented at RE_CONGRESS 2006, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, May 2006, unpaginated. Congress 71 Archive.

²⁴ Wild, A., ‘BArch Course Changes’, *NZIA Journal*, 20 December 1972, p. 351.

²⁵ University of Auckland Academic Committee Minutes 26 May 1969, Item 1. New Architecture Syllabus, p. 436. School of Architecture Report: Material on New Course. pp. 439-50.

design assignments with preconceived solutions that constrain more complex and diverse responses, and; the use of final examinations as the sole method of assessing a year's work.

In a typed broadsheet boldly titled "THE JULY REVOLUTION" these workshops resolved that, "Architecture Students should BOYCOTT FINAL EXAMS in 1972 in an effort to pressure some course changes."²⁶

These issues had been bubbling along for some time. The Architectural Students' Society broadsheet *ARK* was revived in mid-June 1972. It existed only from June until mid-August 1972 and appears to have been the most public forum for the clash of ideologies. The publication advertised films, art exhibitions and student events. But the most lively content was to be found in the comment section which invited students and staff to "throw their ideas into the ring for discussion"²⁷ And throw they did. Dissatisfaction in fourth year appeared to be the strongest. The comment section of *ARK* 72/2 contained a report by student Peter Walker of a meeting of this year group. In closing he articulated a collective desire for change, "A greater freedom to develop individual work patterns and thus stimulate creativity seems to be an essential and immediate requirement."²⁸

This brought a passionate response in the next issue from long-time lecturer Michael Brett, who identified the issue as conflict between professional training and the liberal traditions of the University and argued that, as the Architects Act 1963 required all practicing architects to have a "University Training" and with the Auckland course as the sole course in the country, then the school had a responsibility to train Architects.²⁹ This circular, pragmatic, argument presented a fixed position that was designed to shut down the discourse. Walker, of course, responded. He quoted Maurice Smith on the dangers of predetermined design solutions. Smith had taught at Auckland from 1966-68 before returning to MIT and had been instrumental in helping get both Chermayeff and van der Ryn to the Congress. He quoted Sim van der Ryn on the issue of values and on van der Ryn's own move to the country, and publication of:

²⁶ The July Revolution, Congress 71 Archive.

²⁷ *ARK: a weekly broadsheet of information and comment*. University of Auckland Architectural Students Society (Inc.), New Series: No 72/1.

²⁸ Walker, P., 'Comment', *ARK* 72/2, 1972.

²⁹ M. Brett, 'Comment', *ARK* 72/3, 1972.

...a 'Whole Earth Catalogue' type book called Farallones Scrapbook (see *AD 1/72* p5) OK; so Auckland had congress, but maybe some more and, continuing relief of this kind is required.³⁰

Both of these quotes reference the Congress event and alternative modes of architectural practice to those promulgated by the majority of staff in the School, and argued for by Brett. During the period Smith taught at the Auckland School he initiated a series of student design-build projects in the wooden villas that housed the upper year design studios. These projects left a legacy that continued in the annual rebuilding of work spaces within the big wooden studio that was occupied by second and third year students. They were experimental building opportunities where the students were encouraged to explore material, structural and tectonic/spatial possibilities. In this sense they epitomized an approach to open-ended design responses engaging both design and build processes. Van der Ryn's contributions at Congress were about his work with the Farallones Institute and his involvement in community design and building in the making of People's Park in Berkeley in 1969. These processes were also played out at Warkworth.

In the following issues of *ARK* the student reaction became more strident and finally resulted in the strike of late July. In the last issue of the "new series" of *ARK*, fourth year student Peter Joyce made an articulate and reasoned case for 'A Basis for Enthusiasm in the School of Architecture' and he referred to Sim van der Ryn's comments at the 1971 Congress on van der Ryn's alienation from the values of exploitation:

...the values of exploitation of the earth, money systems, exploitation of people, simply aren't consistent with the things I, and a whole lot of other people, believe and I can't create an architecture that reflects those values.³¹

³⁰ Walker, P., *ARK 72/6*, 1972.

³¹ Joyce, P., 'Comment', *ARK 72/8*, 1972.

Van der Ryn articulated an ethos that was embedded in the Congress event and that many of the students identified with. If our education was to continue to be relevant and to maintain enthusiasm, Joyce argued, then it needed to provide opportunities for students to develop personal capabilities and to respond to a “milieu of ongoing change.”³²

The University Calendar and the School of Architecture Prospectus for 1973 contained a new course structure. The intermediate year remained, available at any University within New Zealand, followed by four professional years within the School. Instead of the 18 set subjects plus studio, the offering ballooned out to 75 subjects, grouped into themed subject groups, plus studio. Within these groups were additional special topics such as the newly-hired David Mitchell’s “Vernacular and Popular Architecture” and Michael Austin’s “Polynesian Architecture”. The students now had the freedom to assemble a course that suited their interests and with it the responsibility to ensure an appropriate architectural education. The following year in 1974, the course offerings were restructured again, this time into two categories; core (compulsory) subjects and subjects other than core subjects. This re-organization could be described as a conservative restructuring of the 1973 content to rebalance the course towards a professional training paradigm. But the dominant result was that the student actions had catalyzed major changes, which resulted in a broad range of new course content.

Conclusion

The student group within the School of Architecture that began the revolt against their learning conditions in 1972 were in their Fourth Professional year, their final year of study. This year group contained the majority of the same of students who had organized, implemented and experienced the 1971 AASA Congress at Warkworth the previous year. As I have discussed, I believe the Congress failed to generate the atmosphere of “intense introverted study” that the organisers had desired and advertised. However, I now argue that the real value of the Congress revolves around the experience of collective action and, with that experience, a growth in individual confidence for the actors. There are a series of elements that tie together both of these events. The Congress was a huge

³² Joyce, ‘Comment’.

organizational endeavor, which instilled a confidence in the whole group that action at a scale beyond your imagination could succeed. This student group had organized for distinguished international speakers to come to New Zealand. They had organized the building and servicing of a whole community of 300 people (predominantly architecture students and architects) for five days in a remote location and everyone (well most people) had loved it. The insights from the 1971 Congress were two-fold: a recognition of the potential of collective action and, through the presence of Sim van der Ryn, a recognition of alternative practice models.

In 1972, when this same group of students was faced with the frustration and disappointments in their fourth year programme, they acted collectively. They repeated things that they had learnt from the Warkworth Congress. As at Warkworth, they created an event. They made their case forcefully but with discipline and maturity and they changed the way things were done. The 1971 Congress and the actions that buoyed it created an ether – an atmosphere of possibility – that provided the catalytic conditions for an enriched architecture programme and hence the learning environment at the Auckland University School of Architecture in 1973 which has continued in the subsequent 36 years.

Acknowledgments

Bruce Bohm, Julian Feary, Hunter Gillies, Peter Joyce, Barry Lonergan, Dave McBride, Nick Molloy, Rick Reid, Graeme Scott and Sarah Cox.