

The Thompson House. Little Munro Bay. Whangarei Heads.

Designed in 1974 by Graeme North

NZIA Auckland Award, 2017 for Enduring Architecture

Acceptance speech

By Graeme North

When you do stuff in your 20s you don't really think of what might be happening more than 4 decades later, do you?

It must be unusual for a designer to get to see one of his buildings receive an enduring architecture award. It certainly has to be a consequence of being too old to die young. It also has to be a consequence of doing such a design at the start of your architectural career.

During my stint at the Auckland School of architecture I took a couple of years off in the early 1970s.

In that time I designed my first earth house and also helped build it.

While I was doing that I met Tucker and Anita Thompson.

They had just purchased what was regarded as a useless or near useless section in Little Munro Bay at Whangarei Heads. The site was very steep, and had huge rocks poking out of it, along with a few substantial trees. It was just possible to drive onto the site and reverse off, but there was nowhere on the site that looked suitable for a house.

I sat on the site, amongst the enormous rocks, and had a vision of a large segmented scalloped canopy floating between them, with a house sheltering beneath.

Yes I said, I reckon we can put a house up here. Being young and unaware of things that can go wrong certainly helped.

A surveyor was engaged to take site contours and plot the location of the rocks, and the trees.

I built a model of the site.

Excavation of the site was not feasible, but I worked out a floor plan over five levels that could sit beneath my canopy and form an extraordinary house, fitted between the rocks, and the trees, sitting in a majestic landscape.

How to build the radiating canopy I had envisaged?

A few years before I had heard how aircraft hangars were built in the UK during the Second World War. Cement soaked hessian was draped over steel supports, and wire netting and cement plaster applied. Ah ha!

Around that time treated timber poles were just starting to be used for utility poles. Another suggestion use for them was for building with on difficult sites. Ah ha!

I built a scale model of the house on to the site model.

Tucker and Anita were thrilled. They were going to build this house themselves.

I sketched a few details on how the poles went together and how the ferro-cement roof would be built, and also how the roof could be cut and tucked into the face of some of the rocks.

I went to see an engineer, Don Dunning, who had done calculations for my first earth house. He worked out some footing details and ran some structural checks, and off it went to the Council.

The Whangarei County Council issued a Building Permit on the basis of only the plan, and the model and a few details.

All the Council wanted was that the project must be overseen by the engineer. Elevations and other details were to be provided to the Council at the end of the project. Those were the days.

Geo-technical suitability was undertaken. That meant going up the hill with a crowbar and loosening all the large rocks on the mountain side above the house that could be shifted.

They rolled down the hill onto the beach below, but were either deflected by the huge rocks that the house was to sit amongst, or they bounced clean over the site, or ran each side of the site. Comforting!

The vertical poles were to be ground embedded. The first ones are still lost somewhere in the New Zealand Railways system.

Poles were not easily come by then, so while more were being sourced, the holes for the poles were filled with reinforced concrete piles that the poles could bolt to.

The next lot of poles arrived. Up went the verticals, on went horizontal poles as beams for the roof, the very delicate cement soaked hessian was carefully draped to shape, reinforcing mesh put in place, and a team of professional plasterers came to plaster it.

They were so scathing and disbelieving in the system that they tried to make it collapse by jumping all over it, but obviously they were not successful.

The house was roofed, and then closed in and completed.

Anita was a studio potter and made some of the tiles, knobs, light shades and other fittings for the house.

The roof had two small leaks where the roof abutted the rocks. One was where water trickled down the rock face, and out the plug hole of what proved to be a fortuitously placed shower. The other oozed a bit of water down a rock face by the entry and kept the original vegetation on it alive.

There are so many stories and no time to tell them, but I do recall going there one day with a friend's dog who raced into the building with his usual enthusiasm, and came to an incredulous halt when he realised that he was facing a forest of poles. He started to do what dogs do to poles.

I went back to architecture school.

One of my lecturers was designing a house in Whangarei. I told him I had already designed one house up that way, just completing another. Oh he said, he would look at the latest one that coming weekend. Nothing was said the next week. A couple of weeks later, I asked him what he thought of it. "Not much!"

There was a really unattractive side to this guy and I copped it, both then, and later.

Other people loved the house. I took my mother to see it. She was not a very demonstrative person, but after looking through the house she said to me “Graeme, you must promise me one thing - you are not to give up architecture!” “I haven’t Mum!”

This house has been on TVOne’s Open Home series, and it has featured on a BBC series on Extreme Houses of the World.

But after all these years nothing gives me more pleasure than this acknowledgment by my peers.

That it is for work done over 40 years ago does seem a bit strange.

I must give thanks to Tucker and Anita Thompson the first owners, and builders. Anita is still alive and thrilled this recognition has happened. Don Dunning, the engineer, had faith in my youthful ideas but he is no longer with us. Intermediate owners Karl and Robin Leiferling really enjoyed the house. The current owners Sue Rishworth and Chris Farrelly truly love it. They have done such a fantastic job of restoring the house, making it look wonderful again. Best of all, they are here tonight, so I will ask you to acknowledge them. They regard their ownership role as being that of kaitiakitanga. I hope that NZIA comes to grips with this idea, and soon.

The 1970’s was a great period – everything was possible.

People tried stuff out.

Councils would let people build off some floor plans and a model dreamed up by some crazy bearded kid.

No one had done a draped ferro-cement roof, or built into and around and over large rocks, using poles in this way.

It would be close to impossible to get a Building Consent for this building now, or for many of the buildings I have done consequently come to think of it.

It should not be like this.

Finally, one interesting thing for me is that this building is not one of the many earth buildings I am now more known for, but it is still, in so many ways, a natural building. It sits lightly on the land. Its structure is of timber with wood for cladding, flooring and finishing, and it uses the natural living rock as some of the external and internal walls of the house.

So thanks everybody.

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