

BOOK REVIEW

THE NEW WOOD ARCHITECTURE

by Naomi Stungo

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This article has two purposes. Foremost, it reviews the splendid new publication by architectural writer Naomi Stungo called "The New Wood Architecture". Secondly, it is an exhortation to the New Zealand forestry and forest products community not to disregard or wane in appreciation of the unique qualities and values of the wonderful natural material called wood. Indeed, it was the influential American architect Frank Lloyd Wright who proclaimed "Wood is universally beautiful to Man. It is the most humanly intimate of all materials" (Wright 1975). In "The New Wood Architecture", Stungo presents a well-defended argument that wood will become the next major trend in world architecture. This message should be warmly received by the New Zealand forest industry as we strive to become one of the top five global suppliers of wood products by the year 2025 (New Zealand Forest Industries Council 2000).

If Stungo is correct, the resurgence of wood in architecture will be driven mainly by its less tangible attributes. The five parts to the book elaborate on this, with each describing another dimension to the new wood architecture ethos.

The section called The New Aesthetic explores seven modern buildings that have minimalist designs and are also highly expressive of their wooden building materials. The result is a pleasant contradiction. The modern, clean, functional forms, which run the risk of becoming destructive, hard, and monotonous, are softened and humanised by the use of natural materials such as wood. The visible use of wood products also creates a bridge to past traditions of timber construction, and that is another contradiction to modernism. Whereas Modernists have attempted to dissociate their buildings from history, tradition, and their associated meanings through a pure and unadorned built form, The New Aesthetic shows that it is almost impossible to build with wood and not create strong thematic connections to human history and the environment.

The section called Vernacular Updated is equally stimulating. Another seven examples illustrate the ways that the vernacular can provide new models by reworking traditional forms. Far from a return to the past, this section is forward-looking yet rooted in local culture and considerate of local climate and environment. From the time the first carpenters arrived in New Zealand from England and elsewhere, New Zealand has been a land where timber construction has dominated (Toomath 1996). Recently, however, a variety of monolithic building forms have taken root in our cities that are somewhat foreign, unrelated to local

culture, and in some cases peculiarly incompatible with our wet and windy island environment. Vernacular Updated challenges a re-think and re-expression of the local.

Three further sections investigate Green Buildings, Structural Possibilities, and Relating to Nature. The latter considers the essence of wood—its warmth, fragrance, and solidity. According to Stungo, wood results in "... the conjuring up of nature into the interior spaces". Psychologists have long recognised the human preference for environments that are natural (Kaplan & Kaplan 1982). The same relationship may well also exist with regard to natural materials such as wood in the built environment, as demonstrated by recent Japanese research (Tsunetsugu *et al.* 2000).

With less than 1% of New Zealand's timber harvest coming from natural forests and more than 90% of the plantation estate consisting of the commodity species radiata pine, there is the danger that we can lose sight of these subtle qualities of wood. Wood is much more than just an economical building material. This is convincingly demonstrated in "The New Wood Architecture".

There are 31 buildings featured in "The New Wood Architecture" from 13 different countries, including two examples from Australia. Sadly, there are none featured from New Zealand, which is an anomaly considering our vast forest resources and traditions in timber construction.

Surely, the responsibility to educate the community about the value and use of wood must rest with the forestry and wood products industry. As I read "The New Wood Architecture" the question came to my mind about how we can take advantage of this emerging trend and advance its development in New Zealand. As an industry, are we doing all we should to foster the new wood architecture in our own land?

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