

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Carpet and curved doorways

Rebecca Boswell

A few weeks ago, Charlotte shared with me her new floor plans for the gallery. Her drawings showed an addition of a central corridor and walls which divided the space into a sequence of rooms. In her plans, doorways would be brought below ceiling height but heightened again with semi-circular arches. The entranceway would become enclosed with an extra wall and carpeted. Definitely her plans to renovate the long “L” shaped gallery space into a series of rooms would suggest a new reading of space, but the changes appeared minimal. Now, with renovations underway and plastering complete, she shows me a video of the space in its new configuration: and the effect of her reordering of space is palpable. Small rooms off a central hallway...curved doorways...the transformation communicates a feeling for an arrangement of space that is surprisingly familiar: more referential, personal and infinitely more inhabitable than its earlier iteration as a gallery.

With simple alterations to the floor plan, and by bringing in a handful of new textures, the new interior of *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* has converted the space to an expression of domestic architecture. I suspect that if I visited this exhibition, my appraisal would be focused on the elements that make it resemble a home interior. And upon leaving the exhibition, any judgment of taste would concern itself less with the logic of the artwork, or changes to the institutional “white cube”, but instead with the language of design.

Charlotte tells me that at the start of the exhibition there will be a cream waffle carpet in the entranceway and I imagine it making an immediate impression, even if it is a bit boring. She says she chose the carpet because it reminded her of “The type of house that gets vacuumed daily, that has tasseled curtain tie backs and white couches with covers on them.” The plush quality of the carpet links to hierarchies of comfort and taste in home decorating, yet in *Like stepping from concrete to carpet*, the language of design is sometimes at close comparison to the kinds of material and spatial decisions made in gallery practice. The entire gallery, Charlotte says, will be painted in “Double-Alabaster” which is a popular shade among home decorators who want a look that is “gallery white,” I wonder if in the gallery it will have an inverse effect and that’s perhaps why she chose it.

In *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* there are three standard-width doorways with an arch, but it feels like there are more. Openings appear to multiply when they get seen in reverse; their incised-windows creating new impressions of the space just vacated. Originating with the Romans, the semi-circular arch is an archetypal form of classical architecture. Here, like any Western city it is typical to see rows of window architraves carry the molded or brick image of the arch across the facades of neo-classical buildings. The arch is an example of our lasting pre-occupation with European heritage and standards of taste expressed in design and architecture. In *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* the ornamental doorways remind us that the manifestation of this relationship in New Zealand has often been through the surface application of style and decoration.

Domestic architecture in the first decades of the 20th century in this country was focused on housing styles that reflected an English way of life; though two of the most common designs during this period — the villa and the bungalow — came not from Victorian England but from the West Coast of North America.ⁱ American publications promoted easy architectural solutions such as attaching bay windows and classical porticoes to the simple box-shaped houseⁱⁱ and carpenters took from US-sourced pattern books endless variations of ornamental woodwork. The one-story, wooden bungalow designs were imported as kitsets from America, and were popularised by draughtspeople, who produced books of standardised plans.ⁱⁱⁱ During the 1920s, Californian bungalows quickly became the predominant style of house being built in New Zealand.^{iv} Thus we acquired distinctively American versions of English eclectic Victorian styles, revised to suit our social conditions, adapting English masonry models by way of translation into wooden construction by American architects and builders.^v It was homebuyers and builders in New Zealand, *not* architects, who decided what “ordinary” house design looked like in the first half of the 20th century. The economical kitset design of the bungalow appealed to a self-made, do-it-yourself aspect of our cultural identity that belonged to a white colonial-settler heritage. The accessorisation of English housing designs being equally a part of this appeal, providing a viable method of ensuring that old world aesthetics were a part of the cultural imagination.

The floor plan of *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* also incorporates two key aspects of design that did emerge during the era of the villa and bungalow in New Zealand. The villa saw the introduction of a central hall, which demarcated public from private spaces, and the bungalow design became more open-plan than its predecessor, with a spacious entry hall and double doors connecting living areas. While the villa hallway was a British import that was drafty and unhelpful to the local household, the open-plan approach began to allow for a more relaxed way of living that existed anyway, and would be further developed in modernist and state housing designs in the following decades to more adequately reflect people’s everyday relationship to the outdoors.

The arched doorways of the exhibition are also reminiscent of a more outspoken imitation-of-style in suburban architecture. In New Zealand, houses with arched entranceways or interior passageways also have concrete stucco exteriors, ceramic half-drainpipes and near-flat roofs hidden behind parapets. They are a product of the “Spanish eclectic” or “Spanish Revival” style, an iteration of the Californian bungalow that arrived in the 1930s and which were, alongside the modernistic styles, a design that brought the sun into interiors with floor plans that wrapped around a central courtyard (or a walled garden in the local versions). Without any claim to cultural heritage or tradition belonging to the people here, the style was not popular in domestic housing at first, yet it enjoyed several resurgences during the century, appealing more perhaps to a wealthier population — becoming more ostentatious in look and feel.^{vi}

The houses of the early 20th century were imported models demonstrating Victorian values such as pride in property and appealing to the image of the “self-made man.” Their popularity here among the second generation of settlers was a part of that group’s nostalgia for standards of tradition and taste of England, and for the design’s ready-made, DIY simplicity, via an American market. Through simple interior adjustments to the gallery space, *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* prompts us to consider where some of our loaned aesthetic sensibilities come from and how our cultural enthusiasm for DIY home renovation belong to a certain set of cultural values such as property ownership that have been propelled not by tradition and heritage, but by imitation and decoration.

ⁱ Bill Toomath, “From villa to bungalow to jazz modern: New Zealand houses between the two world wars,” *Stout Centre Review*, (August 1992): 12, accessed February 15, 2017, <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/jnzs/article/viewFile/273/199>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremy Salmond, *Old New Zealand houses 1800-1940* (Reed Methuen, 1986), 9.

^{iv} “Bungalow History,” *Renovate: the technical resource for industry*, accessed February 13, 2017, <http://www.renovate.org.nz/bungalow/history/>

^v Toomath, 14.

^{vi} More recently, “Mediterranean style” houses as they’re now commonly referred to — with their complex roofs, plastered exterior walls, internal decks and small eaves — were unfortunate enough to be included in the house types built with poor construction during the “leaky homes” crisis of the 1990s.