

Looking Away

Christchurch's Ravenscar House

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The first Ravenscar House was designed by architects Kerry Mason and Tim Loughnan of Warren and Mahoney and built in 1999 atop Scarborough Hill, overlooking the city of Christchurch and the coast to its east. It was home for a wealthy couple and their eclectic collection of New Zealand art. Falling victim to the city's earthquake of 2011, a new Ravenscar has been made, relocated on flat lands in the city's cultural precinct. Opened in 2022, the sequel was conceived by architects Patterson Associates as a "successor to and reminder of" its forebear.¹ Its new location reflects its new purpose: the building operates as a public museum displaying the collection previously housed on the hill.

The setting of the new Ravenscar House brings into focus the historical inflection of Christchurch's mythos. In other parts of New Zealand, beaches and sea views are synonymous with aspiration and identity (a Pacific identity), but Christchurch's city centre is found away from the edge. It turns its back on the coast, withdraws even, and shifts its gaze inwards. It refers to its southern (sparsely populated) island as "the mainland." This tension between centrality and irrelevance casts

Christchurch as something of an island within New Zealand itself.

Nowhere is this inward gaze more clearly felt than in the new Ravenscar building. The hermetic presentation of the architecture to the street is particularly un-house-like. The unadorned prismatic form of the building neutralises any casting of shadows or discernible movement of light across its skin, affecting a sense of immunity from time. Presenting a blank face to the world, Ravenscar instead looks to an internal courtyard at the centre of the plan; writ large is the local picturesque inclination to survey proximal gardens and diminutive waterways rather than expansive ocean views. A circuit of the visually hermetic building brings several factors to mind, inviting an awareness that whether explicitly or implicitly, the nature of the scenographic tableau is far more complex and nuanced than a routine display of art and objects.

Nomenclature features centrally in the discussion of the building: it is a house by name; so termed to meet the planning requirements of its residential zoning, its construction was funded with an insurance payout on the proviso of its house status, and in every piece of literature relating to

1.

Sally Blundell, *Ravenscar House: A Biography* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2022), 7.

2.

Blundell, *Ravenscar House*, 159.

its conception, design, and museological ambitions, the term “house museum”² is applied. Design architect Andrew Patterson has commented “... all the stars aligned to a house museum.” In her book on Ravenscar, Sally Blundell cites various precedents: Sir John Soane’s house (London); Jim and Helen Ede’s Kettle’s Yard (Cambridge); the Lyon Housemuseum (Melbourne); and so on. In each case, the collectors had lived in the buildings as they assembled, displayed, and lived amongst their collections.³ But no one has ever lived at the new Ravenscar. The building operates as an island in the city and museologically as a metonym: for the lives of its benefactor collectors, for the original Scarborough building and the earthquake that wrought its fate, and for a period of New Zealand modern art.

Ravenscar House asks us to question the effect of “place” on culture, memory, and national identity: how should we consider an inward-looking building in an inward-looking city? Turning away from the country at large but towards local history feels expansive and reductive all at once. In apprehending the role of simulacra, as the ghost of one building becomes manifest in another, we are asked to explore the respective natures of domestic

and museum space in an effort to discern what, exactly, Patterson has designed for Ravenscar’s audiences?

3.

John Soane, *Crude Hints Towards an History of My House in Lincoln’s Inn Fields* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015); H.S. Ede, *A Way of Life: Kettle’s Yard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Jaynie Anderson, *Unconstrained Passions: The Architect’s House as a Museum* (Kew, Vic.: Lyon Housemuseum, 2016).