

Oceanic Follies

The Island Architecture of Raoul and Venice

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The Island Architecture of Raoul and Venice

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“When the New Zealand writer Janet Frame was 7, she found in her school reader an adventure story, ‘To the Island,’ that she read as ‘To the Is-land.’ Though corrected by her teacher, she accepted the word thereafter as meaning what it said, the Land of Is, not the Was-Land, not the Future.”¹

Part One – The Island Folly of Venice

In 2016 the New Zealand Institute of Architects sponsored a pavilion at the 15th International Venice Architecture Biennale. Under the creative direction of Charles Walker, the exhibition would set out to establish New Zealand as innovative, creative, forward thinking, and bold, and with Venice is at its heart.² The architectural compass for this project was found in Italo Cavino’s novel *Invisible Cities*, in which Marco Polo admits to Venice as his one true experience. But this might be read as antipodean genuflection on the part of Walker, as under his direction New Zealand’s buildings are lost in a haze of island evocation: memory, longing, prospect, refuge, hospitality, making and unmaking, and so on.³ The installation acted on this elicitation by suspending generic island sculptures off thin threads to form a weightless archipelago displaying modelled versions of a New Zealand architecture. Folly.

Part Two: The Island Folly of Raoul

In 2017 I accepted an invitation from Michael O’Sullivan to be part of a team of three to erect a prefabricated hut the architect had designed for Raoul Island. Commissioned by New Zealand’s national weather authority, MetService, the brief called for a shed for storing the explosive hydrogen gas used to inflate weather balloons. In a term used on the architect’s website, I become a “co-conspirator” to the project.⁴

Raoul is the largest land mass in the remote Kermedec Island group, some 1,000 kilometres north of Auckland, and it geographically anchors the northernmost boundary of New Zealand’s territorial sovereignty. Here, three distinct architectural moments are discerned.

“Was-Land” concerns the history of Thomas Bell, who occupied the island from 1878 until his eviction on the cusp of WWI. His architectural legacy is one of memory recorded in exotic flora, pot-marked terraces, and grainy photographs. “Land of Is” begins in 1937, with the decision by the New Zealand Government to permanently occupy Raoul as a collection point for meteorological data, and an associated

1.

Helen Bevington, “The Girl From New Zealand,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1982, Section 7, 14.

2.

Charles Walker, quoted in “Future Islands,” Te Kahui Whaihangā New Zealand Institute of Architects, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://www.nzia.co.nz/explore/venice-architecture-biennale/2016-venice-architecture-biennale/about-future-islands/>.

3.

Charles Walker, “Future Islands.”

4.

“Raoul Island Hut,” Bull O’Sullivan Architecture (B/OS), accessed October 1, 2024, <https://bosarchitecture.co.nz/projects/raoul-island-hut/>.

need for accommodation quarters and support structures. In this model, Raoul Island is presented as an idealised garden-landscape where the remaining buildings serve as famine follies in that they provide necessary material support to DoC staff but are otherwise denied architectural signification.

“Future-Land” arrives with the erection of the hydrogen hut. The decision to add a new permanent object to an environment that is otherwise denying occupation found its argument in pragmatic health and safety requirements. But in the tradition of the picturesque garden folly, Raoul Island’s hydrogen hut presents as an ornamental addition to an orchestrated landscape.

Part Three: The Ocean is a Folly

In Janet Frame’s 1966 novel, *A State of Siege*, Malfred Signal retreats to a New Zealand island to reimagine herself but finds in the isolation existential terror. It has been observed that *A State of Siege* is built on archetypal trappings of a settler narrative: “There is landfall, an island, an arrival, and an overriding concern with the relationship between self and place.”⁵ As such, it is a novel that is concerned with New Zealand’s representation of itself.

This view, I suggest, shares John Ruskin’s notion of pathetic fallacy with Venice and Raoul as alternative island architectures, one compelled to seek fame and acclaim in a crowded urban island, the other existing beyond the horizon in a promise of better weather.

5.

Jan Cronin, “Encircling Tubes of Being: New Zealand as Hypothetical Site in Janet Frame’s *A State of Siege* (1966),” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23, no. 2 (2004), 79–91.