Descriptive geometry is generally not taught in schools of architecture these days and so is often poorly known by the readers of this magazine. Nevertheless we can assume that some smart Greek probably said something to the effect that the centre of an object is defined by its edges. Centres are where things are now. They represent, at least, the known and the familiar; at worst they represent the default, secure in its ordinariness and protected from novelty by its far from edgy location. Edges, by contrast, are where new things happen. If one recalls the amoeba (from the Greek amoibe, meaning change, because the organism can change its shape) it is the shapeless foot on the extremity, the pseudopod, which, throwing itself outwards, gradually pulls the whole in a new direction. Taking our cue from the amoeba, to find out where something is going we’d do better to look at the periphery than at the centre.

Having been invited by John Walsh to be a guest editor of this issue of Architecture NZ it seemed interesting, or at least potentially interesting, to move away from the centre that the magazine naturally occupies most of the time and to see what was happening on the edges of this country’s architecture. At the outset the intention was to feature only people who had not appeared in these pages before: if not a salon des refusés then perhaps a salon des inconnus, people whose inclinations kept them away from the mainstream and therefore freer to pursue personal agendas which might nevertheless speak of a different and perhaps new kind of architecture that might return to inflect upon the main body.

But this proved too difficult. No searching of networks could turn up enough unknown players to make an edge team, although they’re perhaps these outsiders are still out there somewhere, ready to be exposed to a wider public by this issue… In the end, therefore, there is a mix: some young intellectuals with bright ideas; some older architects no less passionate now than they ever were about what it is that makes architecture important; and some eccentrics who just want to do it their way, architects indifferent to style or fashion but driven by a personal vision of what a life in architecture means.

And then there are those who not only aren’t members of the Institute but are not even architects: we shouldn’t forget that the ability to make remarkable buildings is not confined to the profession, and that it is sometimes beneficial to look to others who are fuelled by the intensity of their creative visions and sometimes, perhaps, assisted by not having had an education in architecture. Those who don’t know the rules have to make up their own.

As well as dealing with a number of architects or architectural practices this issue also features some projects drawn from architectural education. If, notwithstanding the evidence contained in this issue, there is insufficient edge in New Zealand architecture, then it is in the process of architectural education that the origin of this lack might be sought. The recent report, Understanding Architectural Education in Australasia, noted the normalisation process imposed by accreditation systems, the essential hurdle that must be surmounted every five years if an architectural programme is to remain internationally recognised. As the burden of the next accreditation visit bears down on school managements, and as the need to increase research outputs distances staff from the essential role of engaging with students, the opportunities for experimental teaching practice may diminish. It is encouraging, therefore, to see here a number of examples of teaching which, at least for New Zealand, are attempts to do things differently.

Artistic creation is born of resistance to one’s era. Architecture takes its material from life, but although this is its source, it is at the same time its enemy. Pragmatism and a complaisant acceptance of what is, or what is accepted, is the antithesis of the creative process which lies at the heart of architecture. To be threatened, stimulated and sometimes angered by what is outside can provide a potent source of creative energy. It was this sense of individual purpose that was sought when considering subjects for this issue of the magazine.

The pull of gravity is always towards the centre. But gravity is the force which that weighs us all down; sometimes the imagination needs to be freed from that ponderous attraction. Away from the hegemonic pressure of the centre, on the remote fringes where things are less conventionalised, architecture can be lighter. Its smell and taste and colour can be more intense. These are the highly personalised and somewhat distant realms that this issue of Architecture NZ seeks to identify. Experimental and ingenuous work on the edges may occasionally be – and many of the ways of working in architecture shown here represent either blind alleys, or are too idiosyncratic for easy replication. But each is an example of that worthy cause: the battle against the bland. We could do with more of the architecture, and more of these architects. TONY VAN RAAT
The Afternoon House series is an ongoing research project leveraging belated or obsolete architectural techniques and ideas to explore the way that architecture makes world-order perceptible. What is the nature of the world, and how do we fit into it? Is it a chaos to be protected from? An ecology we must not upset? A pleasure-garden to marvel at? A blank canvas? A pool of resources with economic value?

Architecture answers this question over and over again. Andrea Palladio, for example, believed in a stable and orderly world, with humans its most important occupant. Thus his Villa Rotonda is an orientation device, a compass rose inhabited by a rational and dignified subject. Postmodern philosophy, by contrast, tended to describe the world as essentially incomprehensible. For some this was intoxicating, a world of unrestricted play; for others it was frightening, a world without ethics or purpose. This view, premised on disconnection and fragmentation has given way in the twenty-first century to interconnection and complexity: ecologies; networks; programmes.

Afternoon House II is a revision of Palladio’s Villa for a world the architect could not imagine. It consists of a black shell of layered in-situ concrete, enclosed, partitioned, and furnished in light timber and fine steel joinery. The shell is formed by linear rhythms of solid and void. One rhythm establishes three semi-circular spaces: a library at the east end; a salon; and a dining room. As these spaces intersect with the niches, vestibules, and skylights of the longitudinal corridor, they break up the mass of the house, allowing the afternoon sun to break in. Complexity develops as simple rhythms slip in and out of phase with each other, converge and interfere. Although each pattern is rigorous and repetitive, no two of the resulting spaces are identical.

This abstract geometry played out in plan may seem to be an intellectual exercise. After all, nobody experiences a plan, do they? In response to the high level of conceptual abstraction in late twentieth-century architecture, a number of architects have emphasised the direct realities of perception – the warmth of sun on stone, the fragrance of a garden drifting in through a window, the weight of a door. This school is sometimes referred to as ‘haptic’ or ‘phenomenological’. But this is a misunderstanding of perception (to say nothing of phenomenology). Perception is a cognitive operation. Your eyes, for example, are not cameras sending fully-formed pictures to the brain. Sight is an active process. Streaming data from at least two types of optical sensor in the eyeball, the brain constructs an approximate working model which is continually being refined or redefined. New sensory data is either assimilated to the model or requires it to be updated. Gaps, ambiguities, or contradictions in the model prompt the brain to direct further sensory resources to the problem. The sense that you are seeing one cohesive world is an illusion your neural systems work very hard to produce.

No perception is ‘direct’, and there is no reason to accord simple perceptions a greater degree of reality than complex perceptions, like that of a plan. Although the plan is not sensed directly in the way that heat, darkness, or solidity are sensed, it is nonetheless perceived. It is not a matter of the mind against the senses: it is incorrect to oppose cognitive order and sensory experience. Experience is also cognitive and order sensory.

Palladio wants the body’s model of the Villa to coincide directly with the geometry used to construct it. This order is to be disclosed as quickly as possible: lucid geometry presented directly to the mind’s eye. Beyond seeing the house, he wants us to recognise it (believing, wrongly, that in this way the rational mind, feeding on sensory data, had access to ultimate natural realities). The perception of architectural order in Afternoon House II is the slow subconscious piecing together of consistencies and inconsistencies, repetition and difference. It may take some time – many visits, or the intimate engagement of long-term inhabitation – to form a coherent model. Rather than a centring machine like the Villa Rotonda, Afternoon House II is carved by orders that originate at a distance, and are only passing through on the way to somewhere else.

Afternoon House II, hand drawn, generated in plan and devoid of context, is belated in every respect but one: insistence on a world of complexity perceived from within, not Renaissance anthropomorphism or postmodern fragmentation. It aims to be the inverse of architecture that is radical in form but conservative in substance.
Carl Douglas: Afternoon House II (2006/09); pencil on film.