

15 YEARS

15 PROJECTS

RTA STUDIO

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This publication marks the occasion of RTA Studio Ltd's 15th anniversary, from humble beginnings in July 1999, to the firm as it exists today – a busy urban practice with projects around New Zealand, which has garnered international and national recognition. It's a time to pause and review the body of work created, and to thank the fantastic clients, talented staff and supportive families who have helped bring it all to fruition. The 15 projects selected for this book, chosen from several hundred completed jobs, represent or illustrate in some way the practice's output and the thinking behind it.

Thank you to our writers, who need no introduction in architectural circles. Both are known for the rigour and quality of their work. John Walsh is the author of three books on New Zealand architecture; he edited *Architecture New Zealand* from 2002 to 2011, and is currently communications manager, New Zealand Institute of Architects. We hope you will enjoy his candid and wide-ranging interview with RTA's executive director, Richard Naish.

Andrew Barrie, professor of architecture at the University of Auckland, is an architectural critic and designer, formerly based in Tokyo as a project architect in the office of influential Japanese architect, Toyo Ito. Andrew is a regular contributor to architectural journals and his design work has won many awards. His essay, 'Opportunity and Invention', is provocative and insightful, positing RTA as the country's most "aggressively contemporary" practice, one that is producing bold yet sensitive work.

Architecture is a team effort. To all the clients: We couldn't do it without you! Thank you very much for choosing RTA Studio. We have enjoyed taking this journey with you.

Warm thanks go to former RTA Studio director Tim Melville, whose technical expertise and enthusiasm helped make RTA what it is today. Special recognition goes to Ben Hayes, employee of ten years' standing and new director, for his communication skills and diverse talents, and also to project director, Ben Dallimore, for his reliable, can-do attitude and attention to detail.

To the photographers – Patrick Reynolds, Simon Devitt, Stephen Goodenough and Becky Nunes – thanks for your professionalism, passion, clear eyes and open minds. To the staff, past and present, we salute your hard work, dedication and love for what you do.

July 2014

Like most -isms, architecture is just one of the disciplines to make use of contextualism, which can be defined as a doctrine that emphasises the importance of context in establishing meaning or solving problems. For architects, this is usually understood as a design approach that seeks to integrate new architectural forms into existing urban patterns, but the implications of this approach extend beyond the purely formal. In addition to the relationship between a building and its surroundings in the city, contextualism also suggests that good architecture takes into account the relationships between a building and its cultural, economic and social background, and also between humankind and architecture more generally.

And as in philosophy, linguistics, and other fields, contextualism in architecture is not without its critics. The most famous (and shortest) refutation of contextualism was Rem Koolhaas' "fuck context". This bon mot from his 1995 "Bigness" essay is, ironically, often repeated out of context; Koolhaas was not advocating an urban-scale "hump 'em and dump 'em", but describing the effect on the city of buildings over a certain size. Here in New Zealand, we seem more comfortable with contextualism, with many architects preferring to explain their work as some kind of response to its setting. For most local architects, that setting is the natural environment, and it is not going too far to say that Kiwi architects are obsessed with landscape. Even in our big cities, architects often focus on the landscape rather than the built or social aspects of the environment as their primary context. The ground-breaking International Terminal at Wellington Airport, a 2010 building that represented a major step forward in the history of New Zealand architecture, was described by its architects as "rocks" referencing the rugged coastline nearby, despite the building being pressed up against the most abstract context imaginable – a two-kilometre-long flat slab of runway concrete.

New Zealand's leading contextualists, RTA Studio, are not averse to throwing a few landscape references into the mix. They describe the AUT Auditorium as alluding to local geomorphology. The tilted stone base of their Wanaka House is "reminiscent of the local rocky Central Otago landscape", and establishes a "new landscape" for the building. For the most part, however, their buildings are profoundly urban. Creating such architecture is difficult – knitting buildings into existing social and urban fabric requires a sensitivity that seems rare in this country.

The need for sensitivity means that architectural contextualism often implies a certain aesthetic timidity, being associated with an earnest, brown-bread approach that carries with it a focus on many of the other 'classic' architectural concerns – the careful composition of space, the highly crafted assembly of materials, and fastidious detailing. RTA Studio's work is indeed thoughtfully resolved, but their sensitivity is quickened with bold architectural gestures. Their projects are characterised not by an insipid layering of references, but by prismatic forms enlivened by vivid materiality. The firm makes extensive use of weathering steel and cast concrete, which gives their projects a raw, improvised quality that meshes with the grittiness of

the urban fringe sites where so many of their buildings are located. At other moments, intensity originates not in the rough but the smooth: the abstracted weatherboards and fretwork of the House for Five and, for example, the perforated veils of the Mackelvie Street project, invest these buildings with the crisp-edged purity of paper models.

Defying 'classic' approaches to tectonics, the purity of RTA's forms heightens the effect of their materials. Extraneous detail is eliminated, though not to create a pared-back minimalism but a smooth intensity. This mysterious seamlessness is, I would argue, characteristic of the contemporary condition – think of the way an iPhone combines a mute exterior with seemingly inexhaustible functionality, or the way new loom technology can weave complex clothing items as a single piece. Our most exciting new objects combine aesthetic effortlessness with functional plenitude. The outwardly simple is inwardly sophisticated. Problems are solved, but seemingly without exertion. Relentlessly seeking this quality for their buildings has made RTA Studio the nation's most aggressively contemporary architectural firm.

The work in this book spans 15 years of concentrated activity and invention. Much of RTA's early work was extraordinary projects created from unpromising commissions. Faced with tightly constrained sites, limited budgets, or the need to reuse existing buildings, the practice created buildings of remarkable strength and clarity. More recent projects have freed RTA from such difficult circumstances. Celebrated projects such as Ironbank and the AUT Lecture Theatres marked a step up to large-scale civic and commercial projects. Ironbank, an award magnet, is established as one of the nation's defining buildings of recent times, and a wall full of awards testifies to the consistent excellence and inventiveness of RTA Studio's approach. The firm is now building much of their work outside the Auckland region. We can look forward to these new freedoms and new contexts leading to new solutions; RTA Studio's opportunity is now to redefine not just our local cityscapes, but the future of New Zealand's architectural scene.

JOHN WALSH How and when did you decide on architecture as a career?

RICHARD NAISH It was a bit of a late decision, at the end of my 7th Form year. I was reasonably good at art and have a problem-solving sort of mind. Just in time, I thought architecture would be the thing to do. I did an intermediate year at Waikato University then applied to Auckland University, but narrowly missed out and was on a waiting list. Days before the university year started, someone must have pulled out, so they let me in. I took to it like a duck to water.

JW Who was teaching there when you were there?

RN Prof. Wild was the Dean. Sarah Treadwell taught me in first year, and I really enjoyed her courses. I also studied with Claude Megson. There was always the pro-Claude camp and the anti-Claude camp but I thoroughly enjoyed a year or so with him. Ross Jenner and Mike Austin were at the School, and I had some very good external tutors, such as Pete Bossley and Patrick Clifford.

JW What happened when you graduated?

RN The '87 Crash had destroyed any prospects of gainful employment, so I played a lot of darts and Scrabble for a year, and did a private job. I knocked on a lot of architects' doors and eventually got one of the few graduate jobs, at Jasmax. I made a model of the Museum of New Zealand with Pete Bossley and then worked quite closely with Pip Cheshire on a range of projects. Jasmax was a really good training ground. After a year, I decided to go to London. Great timing, again. The UK was in recession, but I managed to find a job with a firm called ORMS. A friend in London had given me a list of 20 practices that might possibly employ someone like me – everyone from Norman Foster and James Stirling to practices I'd never heard of. I got 19 rejection letters and one letter from ORMS asking me to come in for an interview. I think they had just got a project and needed a bit of help.

Design work at ORMS wasn't necessarily done with the directors, it was done with associates working with the younger architects and even graduates. So I got hands-on design involvement surprisingly early on. I was given a small project in the building our office occupied, just reworking some common areas and office space, but it got the attention of the directors and then I got thrown some great projects. I found myself in a position probably a bit senior to my years, but it was a fantastic experience.

JW How long did you work for ORMS?

RN Three years, with an eight month excursion to Africa in the middle of it. By the time I handed in my resignation I had run out of work visa, so I had to go. I met some great people in that practice, including Ben Hayes, who has been with RTA for a decade now, and is a director of the practice. Tim Melville worked for ORMS, and later we were to start RTA together. Tim was a year ahead of me in Architecture School, but we got to know each other very well in London. We talked a lot about starting a practice, but as it happened when we returned to Auckland we worked together at Jasmax for another four or five years. At Jasmax I got involved in commercial work and then in projects at AUT University, where I had a design role with Richard Harris.

JW Presumably you could have made a career at Jasmax, a big practice with many large-scale projects. Why did you leave?

RN I'd always wanted to have my own practice. I had talked about it for years, to myself probably more than anyone else. I started the new practice as RNA Studio. I had an apartment building in Ponsonby I was going to draw up, and that was the impetus Tim needed to jump ship, too, so we just changed one letter and the firm became RTA. Tim and I had complementary skills. I had worked more at the front end of design, although of course I had accumulated experience of the whole architectural process, and Tim's background was more in the technical side, in documentation and project management. At RTA we naturally settled into these two roles.

JW Did you have a manifesto for the practice, or at least a clear idea of what you wanted the practice to be?

RN Yes, absolutely. One of the first things we did was put together a business plan. We always wanted to start in the tradition and manner of a medium to large scale practice, and that shaped the plan. We set some goals around the type of work we were interested in. Right from the start we wanted to focus on public work as the ultimate destination, but commercial work and housing were, and are, also important. 'Public' ideally means buildings like museums and art galleries, but it includes educational work, too, and that has become one of RTA's areas of specialisation.

JW Where were you based when you started out?

RN On Ponsonby Road, up the K' Road end, above a bar. The next move was into Site 3 in Newton, where we went to four, then eight, then 16. We outgrew our tenancy and moved to the D72 building on Dominion Road, and were there for five years. Things changed. Tim left the practice and I decided I wanted a tighter studio environment, and a more urban location for the office. So, we've come full circle, back to Ponsonby Road.

JW Looking at RTA's history, two clients stand out – AUT University and Samson Corporation.

RN Tim and I were known to AUT from our time at Jasmax, so RTA was able to pick up some crumbs from the AUT table. We did small jobs that inspired confidence in our ability, which led to larger projects. With Samson, we'd probably completed 20 projects before we started on Ironbank, which is our biggest project to date.

JW While running a busy practice, you've also found time to complete two houses for your own family.

RN It was a bit mad, when I look back at it. With the first house we did, we bought the property and sold our existing house the same week Lehman Brothers collapsed. So, there we were, creating a suburban house for a family of five in 2009, in the middle of a financial crisis. I wanted to design a house for my family, but there were other motives as well. You can engage, or indulge, in a degree of experimentation with your own project. That helps with the development of your own architectural theories, and it also promotes the practice as a business.

In a way, the second house came about as a result of the financial crisis. We had finished a wonderful project, but found ourselves stretched, and the economy wasn't recovering. Rather than panic we thought we'd sell the house, buy a smaller site and do another house. It was another opportunity for experimentation – a house for a similar agenda but on quite a different site, sloping not flat, facing east rather than west. In retrospect, it has been a lot of hard work and I probably wouldn't do it again for a number of years, but it has been enormously rewarding.

JW RTA Studio seems to seize the opportunities for some adventure, even on small projects for commercial clients.

RN I guess it started as a sort of frustration. We wanted to be working on bigger, more glamorous projects so we'd make our little offerings as interesting as we possibly could. We'd try to squeeze as much out of them, intellectually and architecturally, and that became our approach. We're interested in challenging the typologies that we work with. Of course, clients need to be open to this sort of approach, and we've been fortunate to have clients who are.

JW Trying things that are different inevitably provokes mixed reactions. Your own first house, in Grey Lynn, won awards but also some notoriety, probably because of its formal singlemindedness on a highly visible site.

RN I think any challenging architecture is going to polarise the immediate community to some extent. If you don't push any boundaries you'll never get any progressive change. Some people are open to change and some aren't, but on a number of occasions when I've spoken about that house people have come up and said things like, 'I've always hated that house, but now that I understand it I really like it.' This tends to be the way with modern art, or modern literature, or modern architecture.

JW RTA considers the appearance of its buildings carefully. Sometimes that concern is expressed in the sculptural use of glass-reinforced concrete on façades, at other times the pattern is finer, even ornamental.

RN Yes, in our work a lot of thinking goes on about context. The big moves happen with form but there are also secondary moves involving the layering of material and pattern. The pattern is not on the building, it's of the building. It grows from the building's programme or its context, rather than being applied on the building. For example, the façade of the Mackelvie Street shops is derived from a Victorian pattern which itself derives from Moorish culture. The pattern speaks to the colonial development of Ponsonby Road, and I think it works on a number of levels, including on a purely decorative aesthetic level. But the façade pattern is also integral to the building's operation in terms of moderating light, ventilation and views.

JW Many architects are wary of pattern or ornament, but on the other hand the public seem to quite like it.

RN There's a lot to be thankful for with the modernist movement, and a lot not to be so thankful for. RTA is interested in making buildings that employ the philosophies of modernist planning and form making, but there's absolutely a place for a building being quite exciting. When you talk about context you can't ignore decoration and pattern. There's a wonderful mix between sustainability, contextualism and modernism. Sometimes a screen is necessary for environmentally sustainable reasons but it also offers something complex to the contextual layering of a building.

JW Why do RTA's clients come to the practice?

RN Well, that's a difficult question. First and foremost, I guess, because we offer a very professional service and deliver all of the things that people expect when they employ an architect. Hopefully, we're going to provide a building that solves a problem for a client, and deliver something magical as well. I don't really think of the practice as having one specific point of difference. I suppose we're a boutique, design-focused practice that's interested in the progressive nature of architecture, and grounded in the belief that a building has to deliver functionality to the client and, if possible, contribute in some way to the public realm.

JW It seems to me your practice has always been aware that even if a building doesn't have a public purpose, it's quite likely to have a public location.

RN Yes, that's right, and we really try to tease every public agenda out of a building programme that we can. Ironbank and Mackelvie Street are important buildings in terms of engaging the public. We like the idea that our buildings will catalyse some exciting urban reaction, even if it's small, in their locations.

JW Have you surprised yourself with how much of a businessman you have had to become?

RN A couple of decades ago you wouldn't really have wanted me running your business, but I've been forced to learn those skills. Tim took on a lot of that role when we were working together, but I had enough knowledge and understanding to be able to take it over quite comfortably. The hardest thing to manage in any practice is a continuity of good staff and a continuity of cash flow. If you have those two things then it hums along quite nicely.

I've had to become quite efficient with my design time, both when I'm working on conceptual work or in a critical or leadership role with others in the practice. On some projects I'll have almost 100 per cent authorship but others will be collaborative efforts, and that's the direction I want for RTA. We encourage people to get involved as much as they can in the design process, but business demands that sometimes I have to jump in.

JW Do you see a line or theme running through RTA's work over the past 15 years?

RN I think the common line that runs through it all is a strong focus on context. That, and a sense of engagement with the public realm, are probably the common themes. The challenge with context is how to design a building that might be contextually relevant in the future. I'm interested in future context, as well as past and present context, which is, of course, much easier to think about. By context, I don't mean just architectural or planning context. We're interested in the context of everything. For example, I've been heavily involved in the master planning of a public school in Kawerau, which will have a predominantly Māori roll. That context can't be ignored. The challenge is to respond to it at the master planning level so that the school's buildings can achieve a layered connection with the community, rather than resort to overt or clumsy gestures.

JW It seems to me you have always been quite ambitious and confident. For example, RTA was one of the first New Zealand practices to put itself forward at the annual World Architecture Festival. The practice has entered five times and made the shortlist each time. The C3 House won a category award, and both Ironbank and Mackelvie Street were highly commended.

RN I see the World Architecture Festival as a way to engage with world architecture and get a snapshot of current practice. You get a chance to see and listen to international architects. It's good research, it's inspiring, and to present at the Festival is exciting. It's reassuring to know we're doing something in this part of the world that measures up globally. I've also really enjoyed being on judging panels at the Festival. It's a great opportunity for dialogue and discussion with the other jurors and the presenting architects. Some interesting debates ensue.

JW You're also active in the New Zealand Institute of Architects. You've been a member of Awards juries, and were convenor of the New Zealand Architecture Awards Jury this year. Two years ago, you were one of the organisers of an Institute international conference.

RN I think that the collegial spirit among architects is alive and well in New Zealand, and in the areas where I've got something to offer, I'm happy to offer it. If we all hid away in our offices and never spoke to each other I don't think the quality of architecture in the country would be anything like as good as it is at the moment.

JW This book marks the first 15 years of RTA Studio. What do you think the next 15 years might hold for you and your practice?

RN You start to feel a little bit established by this stage of your career, but it's reassuring to know I'm still equally excited by a quirky little house project as I am by a multi-million-dollar institutional project. We want to focus on projects with interesting and challenging aspects. For instance, at the moment I'm working on early concept work for a museum in Auckland. It's probably going to be the world's smallest museum, but it is a museum project and that's so exciting for us as a practice. And there's a small house alteration in Christchurch. It'll have a modest budget but again it's an opportunity to do something layered, within the context of post-earthquake Christchurch. On the other hand, we have an airport project which hopefully changes expectations of an industrial building in that sort of environment.

So, for us, the goals are interesting clients, programmes and briefs, irrespective of scale and location. Along with the school at Kawerau a new Kura Kaupapa at Wairoa is probably the most challenging project I've worked on in the last two years. It's a school for 90 kids, Years One to 13, all under one roof. It's a V-shaped shed – we should call it the V-type school. It's right on the cutting edge of a significant paradigm shift in the typology of schools. I think education is one of the most exciting areas of public architecture at the moment.

JW Architecture can be a demanding profession and the 15 years of your practice happily coincide with the 15 years of your marriage. Obviously, you have a supportive family, who must have contributed greatly to your achievements.

RN Absolutely, it's a big part of it. To go back to some of RTA's early principles – Tim and I decided we were only going to work 40–45 hours a week and generally we managed to do that. Of course, you exceed that when you have to, but it's about keeping a balance as much as you can. It helps that my wife Andrea is fascinated by architecture, and writes about it, and is interested in visiting it and looking at it in the same way that I am. She also has a strong interest in art, and the kids have no choice about it. They just have to come along and look at it. We've got a trip to the States coming up, it's called the 'Art, Architecture and Disneyland' tour of America. We've got the fun park first, and after we've got that out of our system it's down the road, to Louis Kahn's Salk Institute.

AUCKLAND A modernist conversion of a Victorian warehouse created offices for the law firm Wilson Harle. Materials and finishes were carefully chosen to achieve a clear delineation between new work and existing structure.

COMMERCIAL





AUCKLAND Like a ship in a bottle, the sculpted ovoid form of the auditorium sits within an existing rectangular building. The design intention was to provide dynamic spatial experiences for staff and students using the theatre, as well as intriguing views from the exterior.

EDUCATION

2003

PROJECT 2



AUT AUDITORIUM







AUCKLAND Positioned in a niche between Edwardian and 1930s buildings, this retail/office building, with its glass reinforced concrete façade, was designed to respond to the differing proportions of its neighbours. The slatted timber rain-screens on the northern wing acknowledge weatherboard houses in the locality.

MIXED COMMERCIAL







AUCKLAND A single-storey stucco cottage, within the Devonport heritage zone, was extensively remodelled and extended. Form and materials were interpreted in a modern, yet respectful, manner: adding to the character of the existing fabric, while providing views and a variety of sheltering living spaces.

RESIDENTIAL











AUCKLAND A playful fit-out of a commercial office space for a retail advertising agency provides plentiful meeting spaces and flexible studio areas. The architects drew inspiration from the business of product packaging and marketing.

INTERIOR

2008

PROJECT 5









AUCKLAND In a gesture to the finely scaled historical neighbourhood, the form was fragmented to alleviate the mass of a medium-sized office building. 'Front door' (K' Road) and 'back door' (Cross Street) experiences were extrapolated and connected. Stacked office and retail spaces were organised into a working community around a courtyard within an ecologically sustainable building. Ironbank earned the first office 5 Star As-Built Greenstar rating from the New Zealand Green Building Council.

MIXED COMMERCIAL



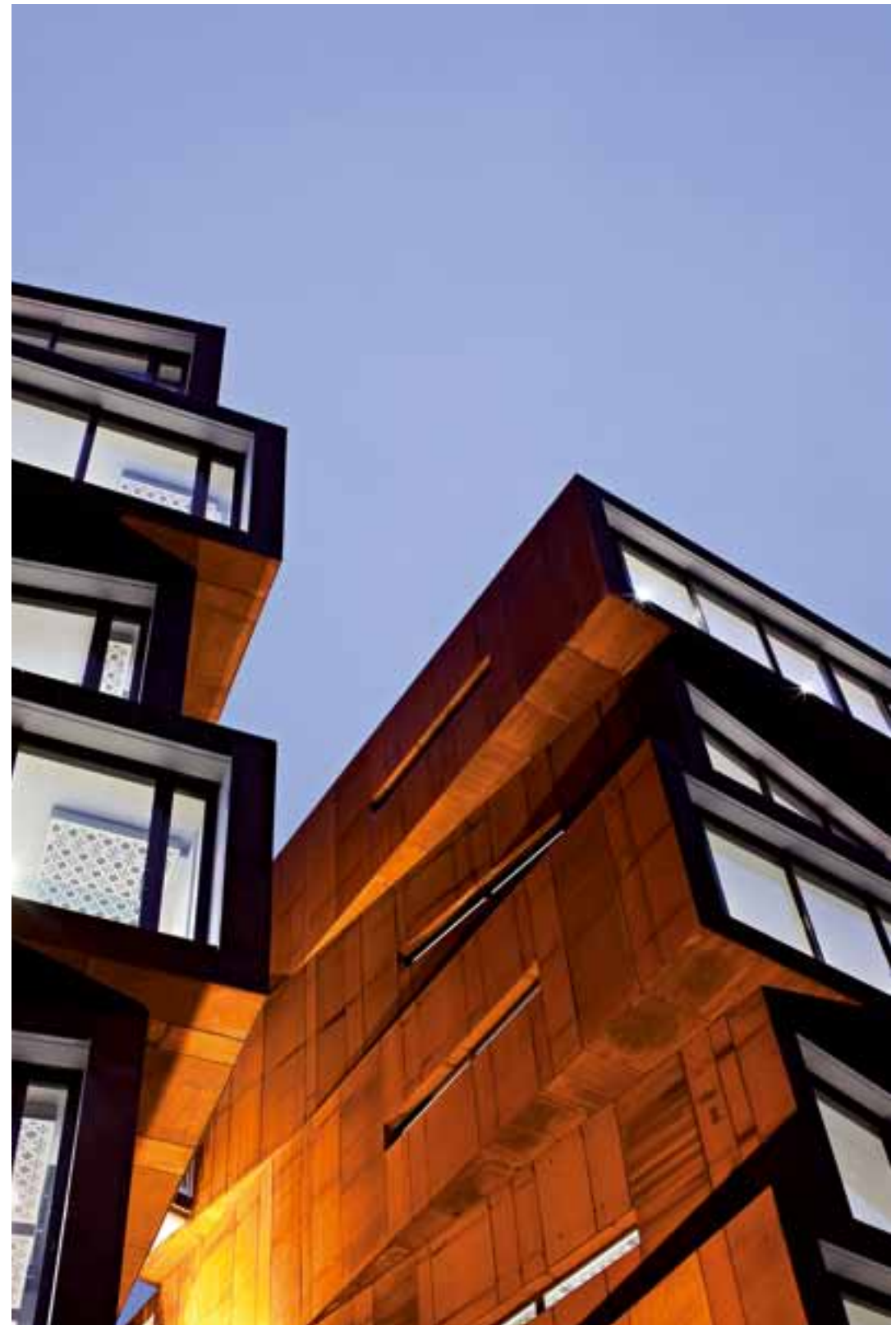










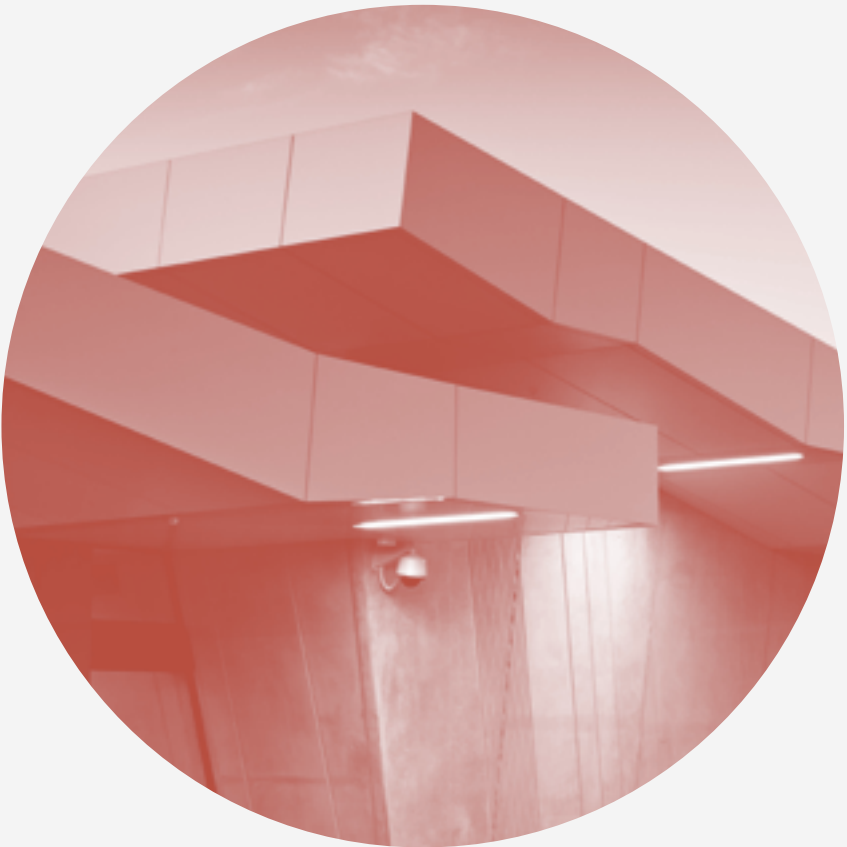


AUCKLAND The strong sculptural forms of the theatres help define the edge of the campus, emphasise links to transport nodes and create a public outdoor space. Two high-tech lecture theatres and a multi-function space co-exist harmoniously within the building.

EDUCATION

2009

PROJECT 7



AUT LECTURE THEATRES AND CONFERENCE CENTRE





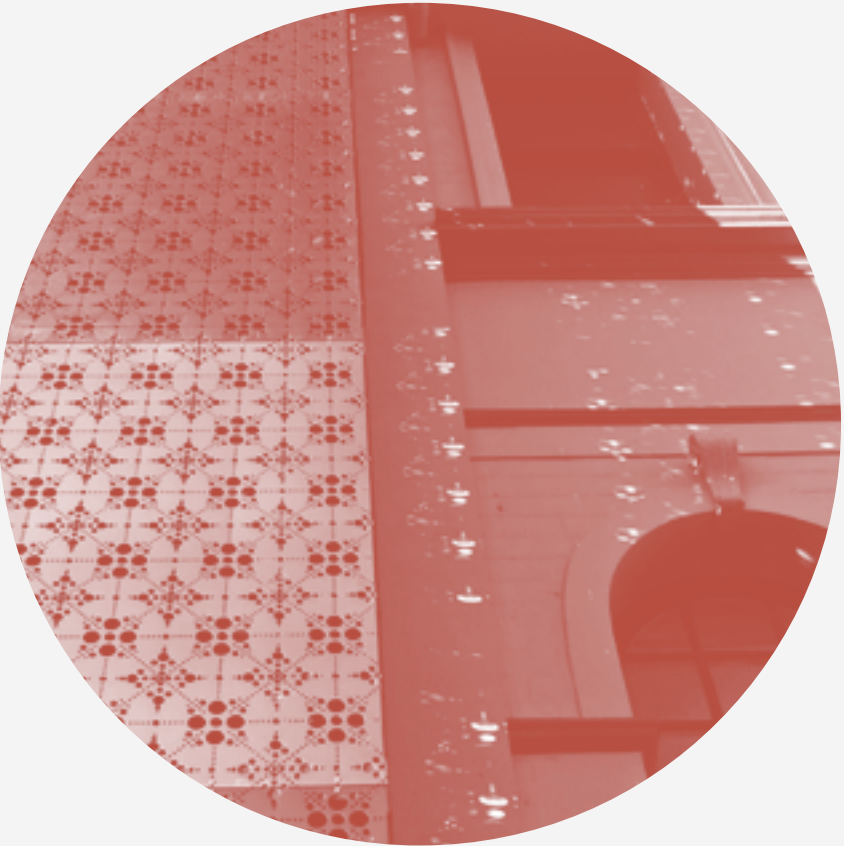






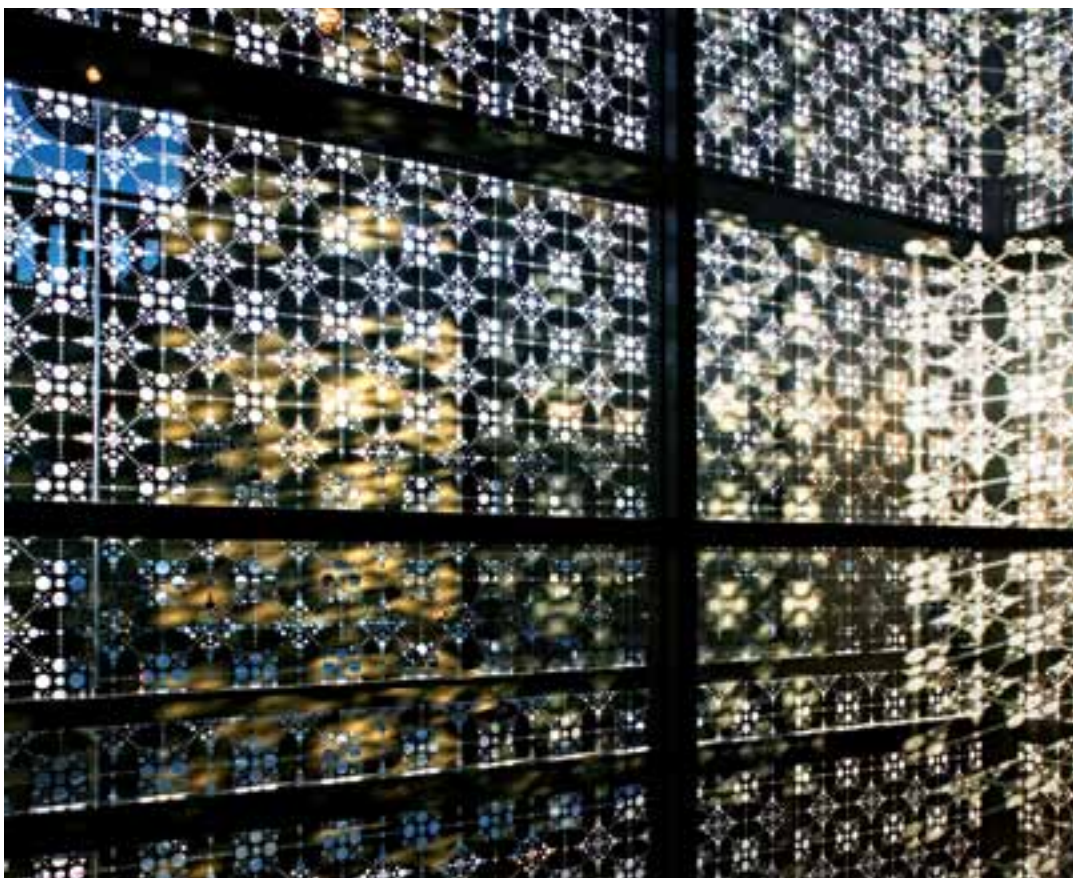
AUCKLAND The site was originally occupied by the Star Hotel, designed by Wade and Wade Architects in 1910. At the time of commission, only part of the hotel was still standing at the edge of Newton Road. The ghost of buildings past travels into the 'mixed use' future. An existing billboard was incorporated into the façade.

MIXED COMMERCIAL









AUCKLAND A family house in an inner-city heritage neighbourhood. Formally, the house makes a contextual response to its neighbours – typically century-old wooden bungalows and colonial villas. A courtyard plan provides an array of enjoyable indoor and outdoor spaces.

RESIDENTIAL















WANAKA Considerable research and development went into this project to respond to the visionary brief of the client. Conceived as a permanent family residence, the C3 House has a triple zero carbon footprint. It integrates visually with the landscape, through the recessive use of colour, material and form, to meet stringent planning controls.

RESIDENTIAL

2012

PROJECT 10



C3 HOUSE







AUCKLAND Commissioned for Saint Kentigern College's 60th jubilee, the MacFarlan Centre brings together the school's administration and student services in one central location. This new 'front door' for the College respects the existing architecture and expresses the school's character.

EDUCATION













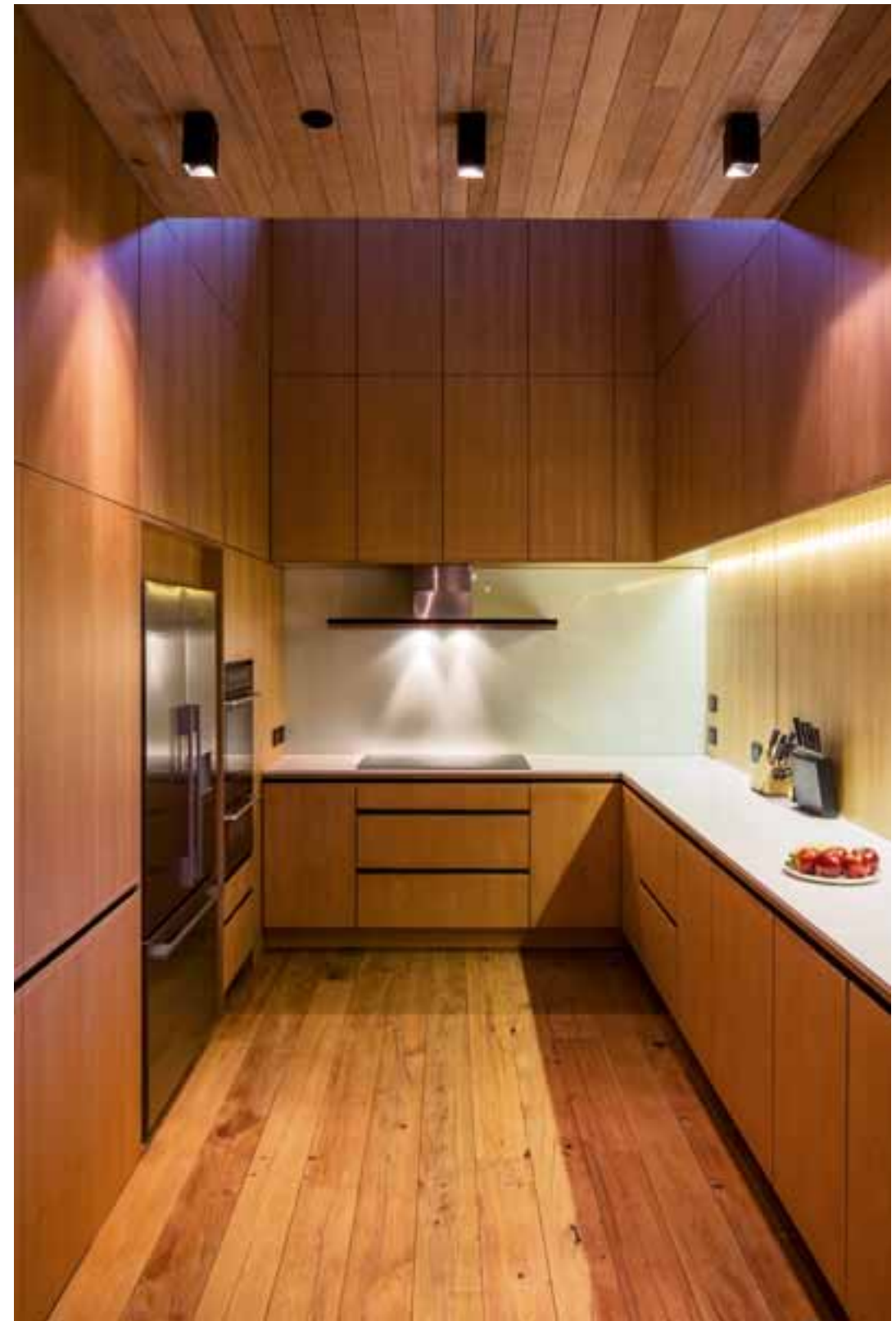
WANAKA A house which responds sensitively to its location and which, literally, springs from the rock beneath its site. The visitor is led through an arrival sequence which culminates in the controlled release of dramatic lake and mountain views. A palette of natural materials, and subtle control of light, convey a sense of honesty and simplicity.

RESIDENTIAL















WAIPIARA This elegant building has a singular rural form, which leads progressively through cellar door, café and then on to a family residence. The dark, raw timbers of the interior intensify the experience of the powerfully framed outlook to the vineyard and distant hills.

HOSPITALITY



PROJECT 13

2013

BLACK ESTATE WINERY

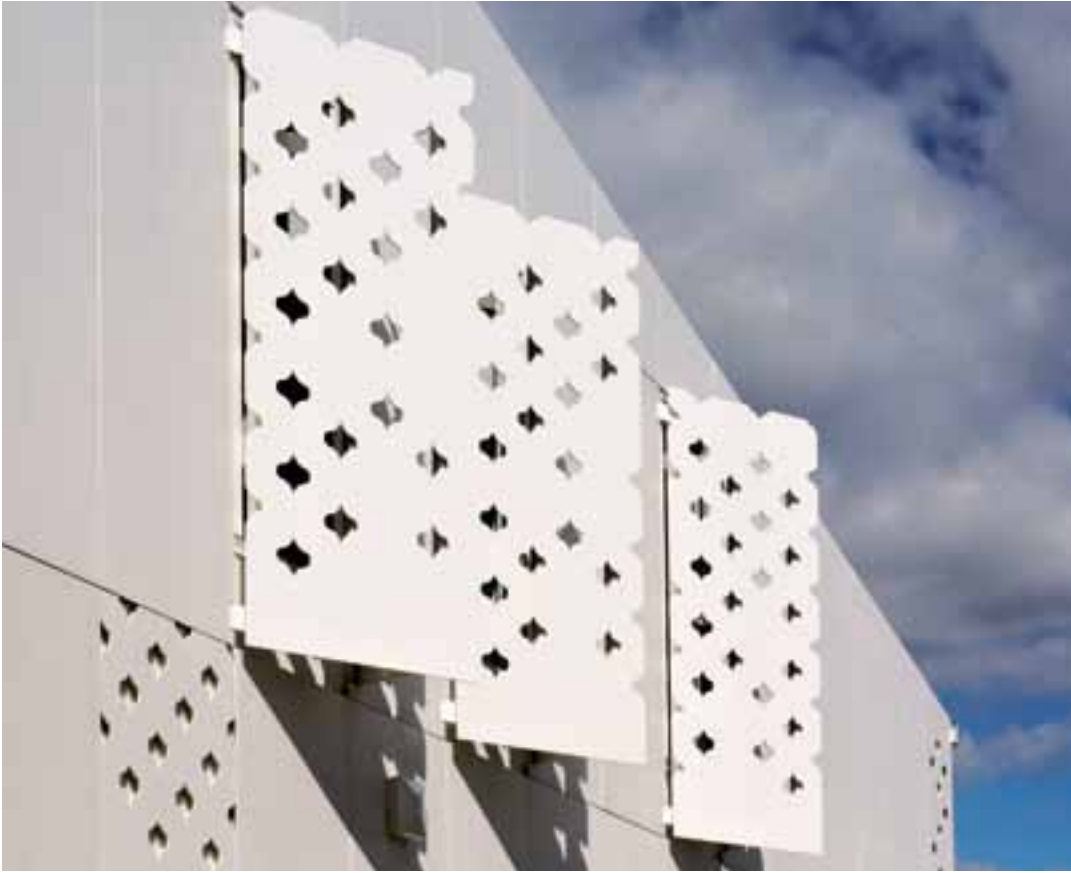




AUCKLAND With retail and office-based tenancies, this development responds to the scale and proportion of adjacent Victorian row shops within the chic shopping precinct of Ponsonby Road. By activating the rear of existing heritage buildings, the architects were able to develop additional retail frontages, and create new laneways and courtyards which have contributed to the regeneration of the area. A white cement sheet façade veils the forms; the perforated pattern is drawn from the decoration of surrounding heritage buildings.

MIXED COMMERCIAL









AUCKLAND A modern family home on a sloping east-facing site, set in an inner-city suburb among wooden villas and bungalows. The roof forms allude to those of neighbouring properties; the floor plan, in the shape of a capital 'E', gradually steps up the hill. Entry and circulation is via a 35m-long, spine-like corridor/gallery space, which opens onto two 'garden rooms' with adjoining courtyards.

RESIDENTIAL



PROJECT 15

2014

E-TYPE HOUSE







Adam Dwen	Leigh Macleod
Adele Loke	Leon Anderson
Alice Hammond	Maggie Yu
Allan Carella	Mahendra Daji
Andrea Hotere	Manuel Diaz
Andrew Kissell	Marcello Kim
Angela Sinclair	Marcia Wendelborn
Angela Still	Marie Breustedt
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Damian McKeown	Noor Keary
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Duane Coad	Rachael Lee
Elaine Dobie	Rakesh Lal
Emily Crossen	Richard Eaton
Erich Waldmann	Richard Naish
Farzana Gujarati	Richard Pearce
Gabrielle Code	Rochelle Mahon
Gareth Thomas	Roger Graham
Gary Mason	Sarah Cutler
Geoff Pitts	Simon George
Glenn O'Connell	Sophie Wylie
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