

Lighten up

From Hackney to Hampstead, and Kentish Town to Tunbridge Wells, expatriate architect William Tozer opens up the old and heavy houses of Greater London.

by John Walsh

Any New Zealander whose work in London has entailed intellectual or, as in the case of this writer, physical engagement with the built environment must, at least occasionally, have felt oppressed by the weight of all that history. Layer on layer of generations lie in the cloggy city under a thin shroud of tarmac. Above the ground: the living-dead suburbs, with their grim Victorian churches, rownsome pubs, and door-beer-delashed houses. Then there's the air, no longer lethal, but never fresh, every breath well and truly past its expiration date.

Of course, it doesn't pay to be too vituperative about London: the city seems to have been on the verge of crapping out for centuries. As long ago as 1840, well before the High Noon of the British Empire, the historian Lord Macaulay was indulging in morbid speculation about the fate of the great metropolis. Macaulay anticipated a moment "when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's."

The Arts and Crafts sketcher in an antique London became a famous image, so familiar that in 1865, Punch, railing against contemporary cliché, declared that "the retirement of this vision is indispensable. He can no longer be suffered to inspect the traffic over London Bridge. Much warded at the present time in his own country, May return when London is in ruins." Kiwis are still much wanted (or at least needed) in their own country, but they haven't stopped going to London, some of them to sketch. The point of the pencil work, though, is not to present ruination, but to prevent it.

William Tozer, a graduate of the Architecture School at the University of Auckland (1997) and of MIT (1999), has been practicing in and around London for nearly eight years. After three years with the large firm Herzog and Mackay, he set up his own practice, William Tozer Architecture and Design, in 2002. It was, he says, "a brave or foolhardy thing to do". His work is mainly residential – "small-scale additions to existing buildings", as he puts it. And, as he adds, you could say, but often quite radical, and with not insignificant budgets.

Tozer's practice is not so far removed from that of those Auckland architects renovating villas in Mt Eden or Hone Bay. Some local architects are given to descriptions of their most opulent – so violent – houses as not merely opened up, but "blown out" or "exploded" – that they read like professions of masculinity. ("Oh, you work on villas, do you?") But Tozer is clearly reflective about his work, unabashedly citing as sources of inspiration Adolf Loos and Carlo Scarpa (who, presumably, never pretended to be a demolition man), as well as Gordon Matta Clark and Donald Judd. He does, indeed, and isn't afraid to intellectualise his practice, a practice just as likely to be equated with self-abuse in England as here. (Not for nothing did one of Lord Macaulay's successors, the eminent social historian EP

Thompson, title one of his books *The Poverty of Theory*.)

Tozer sees himself as a researcher not in the British tradition of object making and craft, but in "the European lineage of cultural engagement and placemaking". His clients are not traditional, either. Like him, "they're sort of outsiders – the newly affluent and immigrants". People getting out from under, who want to see the light.

[This reference is from David Bolton's article, "Contesting the Ruins of London: Macaulay's New Zealand and Others", *London Journal*, March 2004. On the Internet: <http://emmpage1.gold.ac.uk/londonjournal/march2004/bolton.html>



No. 5 2006 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER
NEW ZEALAND DOLLARS \$9.90



SEVEN NEW COMMUNITY LIBRARIES
LONDON BIENNALE, WILLIAM TOZER HOUSEWORK
JOHN REYNOLDS, LAURENCE ABERHART, COPYRIGHT(S)



"...He likes ideas and isn't afraid to intellectualise his practice"

"...Tozer is nicely reflective about his work"

Architecture New Zealand magazine, Sep/ Oct 2006, p. 80-84

