

## Savile Row fit

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Architectus introduce the young gentlemen of Auckland's St Kentigern School to the pleasures of bespoke design with the Jubilee Sports Centre.

Lord Macaulay, who certainly sent his children to exclusive private schools (known as public schools in England, of course), is reported to have had the irritating habit of prefacing his remarks with the words, "As every schoolboy knows...", followed by a fact so obscure that one could be certain that His Lordship was the only person present likely to have been familiar with it. There is no such risk, however, in stating that architects are well aware that Adolf Loos proposed that ornament was a crime and that sophisticated people avoided it, as he did himself in a number of ways and not least in his well-cut English suits, sober, perfect and beautiful. If these reports are correct, and every private schoolboy will be able to confirm whether they are, then it's probable that Loos would have liked the new gymnasium at St Kentigern School in Remuera, one of the latest productions of the Auckland office of Architectus.

Rather like the competitive rash of cathedral building which infected many European nations during the Middle Ages there has been a proliferation of gymnasiums in Auckland schools of recent years. Some of these, such as that at Dilworth School, for example, have been very good and Architectus has made its contribution, notably at Auckland Grammar. It may only serve to spur other schools, and other architects, to greater efforts to say that the St Kent's gym looks like the best of them to date, and it serves as an example of what seem to be some of the most prominent characteristics of Architectus' current work.

The building is of an unusual elegance and restraint. Situated on steeply sloping ground between the upper part of the campus and lower playing fields and parking areas the building acts effectively to order and manage the wider site. It links disparate areas of the school and forms either a part or an edge of major circulation routes through it. Quite apart from its aesthetic and functional merits the gym has become an essential part of the experience of being at St Kent's. This role of moderating and influencing a wider context is one that falls appropriately to architecture, and it's needed at St Kent's where the groups of pre-existing buildings form no coherent whole either by quality or arrangement. In recognising this and by consciously articulating this building to act well beyond its margins Architectus has maximised the impact of its work.

The gymnasium complex itself is of great simplicity, although, as Mies said, just because you like simple things doesn't mean that you're a simple person. It appears to be, and perhaps actually is, a direct construction of the diagram that was prepared to analyse its arrangement. This diagram reveals much of what one needs to know about the work although it might have included the row of toilets and changing rooms at lower ground level, below the main gymnasium space. These are admittedly of minor significance but the diagram would be more complete with them added.

Diagramming is a useful and currently popular way of setting out a programme and there is something impressive in the directness with which it's been applied here. A long, low top block acts as a pavilion to the main playing field and looks back

towards the centre of the school. Below it is the large gymnasium largely sunk into the sloping face of the hill and visibly triple height to the lower, open, east side. Its volume provides a dramatic surprise as you enter it from the necessarily smaller circulation spaces, a drama enhanced by the internal windows linking it to the pavilion block above. Along the south edge of the complex is a link block, triangular in section, which moves people down the slope and connects the upper and lower parts of the building and the site. Finally, below the gym is a small range of services fronting to the lower playing field. Nothing could be simpler than this illustration of the major elements of the issues to be solved.

The formal arrangement of the building having been settled by the diagram the architects have then moved on to matters of materials and finish. Here the overall effect is of dignity and restraint. The exterior is finished in zinc and pre-cast concrete, much of it a charcoal grey finish. Notably, the east face of the gymnasium is screened by a series of dished zinc-faced panels that give the building a commanding presence on this, its largest façade. Aluminium joinery is grey anodised. The exterior then is strong but essentially discrete, an exercise in good taste that might be almost overdone were it not for the bravura of the overall arrangement (perhaps not immediately visible but revealed as one experiences the building) and the appropriateness of such a distinguished treatment in the context of the selective nature of its clientele. The interiors are brighter but even here much of the accent comes from the self-colour of the timber flooring. Some stronger colours are reserved for the changing rooms and thus not immediately apparent.

This building is in many respects typical of the current phase of Architectus' work, and a logical outcome of the trajectory they've been following for many years. It is determinedly analysed, rigorously executed, rational, severe, poised. These are the attributes of architecture taken seriously by people who are tireless in their determination to leave nothing to chance. Like one of Adolf Loos' suits this building reveals at a glance that it has been made with scrupulous attention to detail for discerning clients who recognise quality and intend to project it. But these qualities are now so obviously under the architects' control that a new possibility arises. Are the strengths of this building the first signs of a possible weakness? Can the relentless authority that this practice is able to exercise in its work be a sign of a lack of spontaneity? Will Architectus move on to take more risks, to surprise us with something unexpected? I wonder if this might be the next page in the Architectus book. Will Adolf's jacket one day open to reveal a pair of candy-striped braces?