

Pandora's Letter-box

The postman pushed past the fresh nightly debris on the way to complete his daily duties. Mouths open wide, his panting from dehydration, and the letterboxes with anticipation. Extra mouths of recent, but less to go around. Up and down View Road things were happening, number 29 was converted to 29A, 29B, and 29C, before further evolving into 29A1, 29A2, and 29A3. So many new letterboxes but no one's writing to anyone, bar those who want something. Hey, bill's up! Hey, let me sell your house! Hey, you seen my cat! Most letterboxes gape as he walks past, left to chew on the remnants of a never-received phone book or discarded rubbish. Yet, he loved them. Each one contained a little story, some reminding him of the past, and some giving him thoughts about the future.

27B, 27C, 27D, and 27E sit proudly within their faux rock wall, but no one is quite sure what happened to 27A. Its disappearance has gone unnoticed, even with the glaringly obvious hole in the alphabetical order. It may have left, fed up with being hemmed in on all sides by its fellow letterboxes, or perhaps, more ominously, it might have been entombed within the rock wall it once sat atop of.

Tombs might be the antithesis to modern profit-driven culture. No measurable function outside of spiritual devotion, a tangible reminder of death in a culture determined to ignore mortality. Ancient tombs especially epitomise this although, ironically, have through their longevity and recognisability become tourist icons. The postman wondered if the people buried within these tombs were gratified or offended by the popularity of their final resting places. Some such tourist-laden tombs include; The Great Pyramids of Giza, The Taj Mahal, and the Mausoleum of the first Qin emperor. If you were to believe the rumours, the Great Wall of China might be included in that list. The story goes that the bodies of the deceased workers were buried within it to save time, and with estimates claiming that as many as 400,000 people died whilst building the megalith, you can maybe see how the myth got started.¹

If it could've happened once then it must've happened twice. 27A lies buried within the Great Wall of View Road, the postman felt sure. Maybe if it had happened years ago then 27A would be seen as a deity, with 27B-E labelled as disciples to guide it through to the afterlife, the rock wall flooded with tourists determined to get their fill. With the wisdom modernity has earnestly given us, it now seems more likely that 27B-E belittled and then forgot their former leader, as poor 27A was crushed under the weight of unflinching progress.

The set of letterboxes at number 25 are of a similar vein, a matching set to display conformity and efficiency. Like miniatures of the houses they champion, they are slender, free-standing, and alarmingly flimsy. The letter boxes must be some 50 years old by now - if you were to carbon date the mould - but their on-trend forms suggest otherwise. On the bottom of each is a semi-circle slot presumably for stowing newspapers (although the Pepsi bottle rammed in each of them suggests that the occupants of the flats were sick of receiving circulars and instead of splurging on a sticker suggesting that, they found a more DIY approach).

These semi-circles, or upside-down arches, are in as 'soft-core postmodernism' makes a triumphant return. Arches began not as an aesthetic decision, but as a

1. Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*

method of spanning large distances. Then, after a reign that lasted thousands of years and hundreds of cultures, arches went away due to the popularisation of steel. Postmodernism later sought to right the wrongs of modernism and resurrected the arch. And again, another trend took them away until now they're back. History can be categorised into a time of arches and no arches.

The duration between their disappearance and resurgence is shortening. We are spiralling inwards ever-faster, and unlike the clearly defined point that draws the arch, no one quite knows what lies at the centre of the trend vortex.

Further on are two more letterboxes; 21A1 and 21A2. Despite sharing, and easily fulfilling, the same purpose the first definitely has a superiority complex over the second. First, it's 21A1. Not only does it have an A in its name, but it is A1. Second, it is a small, chic, black object compared to what it rules over; a sad, bedraggled, uncared-for thing. Lastly, plastered on the side of it is a sticker that reads 'Best of the bunch at the NZLBA Awards (New Zealand Letterbox Association).

All is now clear. These awards have imbued 21A1 with a holier-than-thou aura that 21A2 could never dream of achieving. But, why not? Both fulfil their function of holding a roof over the letter's heads. Besides, who's to decide what is good? Does 21A1 appeal to the judging panel for following design principles and the use of luxurious materials? If the judges were to suspend prejudices, could 21A2 not be seen as beautiful in its own light, the years enhancing it, locating it, and softening it? Would 21A2 appeal to a less showy public for its humility, approachability, and affordability? Does another set of awards have to be established called the NZAFAALB's? (New Zealand Awards For Agreeable & Approachable Letterboxes). He was unsure. The point of awards after all is to reward a select few for furthering letterbox discourse, and maybe the increase in awards reflects the growing uncertainty surrounding one singular opinion on good letterbox design (or simply points to the monetary incentive awards offer). If both 21A1 and 21A2 could be rewarded with awards, then this might be indicative of culture moving past one correct 'answer' to design. As well as moving past a singular collective solution to design, certain previously crucial rituals and objects are becoming obsolete. As culture splinters onwards, some are left behind.

If the lone letterbox at number 19, sitting unsecured and shakily atop its wall, was pinched what would happen? Would the next postman, after he retired, get lost between numbers 17 and 21, resigned to find a number 19 on another street? Would people arriving for birthday parties get lost, unable to find the balloons that would usually be tied to it? Would postcards sent from Poland go undelivered, forced to make the trek back to their un-wanting sender?

Most likely, no. The world is far removed from mid 19th century when the letterbox was introduced.² Parcels are left on doorsteps, phones guide guests to parties, and postcards are sent digitally. For letterboxes, the world, and their influence in it, is shrinking. Over the past 20 years NZ Post had seen a drop in delivered mail from 1 billion items annually to 260 million, with that number estimated to continue falling over the coming years.³

So far, letterboxes have been reactionary. A letterbox was only needed if someone needed one. But, who better to restructure the mail system than those who sit on the streets all day? Or to pioneer new ways to deliver mail than the ones who've been doing it for 170 years? Simple sentiment for a complex issue.

2. National Postal Museum, *Household Mailboxes*

3. Radio New Zealand, *Less Mail, fewer employees needed - NZ Post*

The postman couldn't think of an answer to help the letterboxes. Maybe they're are doomed to be immortalised, relics of a world they've long outlived. Maybe if they can keep up with trends then they'll stay superficially relevant, like ghosts haunting the backgrounds of culture. Maybe if there are enough awards then people will believe that the letterboxes are constantly innovating, pioneering the way forward to a better future. Maybe they'll simply fade away, automatic doorstep deliveries replacing their only purpose.

Inevitably each of these four predictions will come true. They are easy to make, simply by projecting forward through looking superficially back. But there is another, fifth, option; The fabled 'new direction'. Characterised by educated naivety, it is discovered not predicted, stumbled upon not logically justified. When it looks back it is interested in principles, beliefs, and emotions, not trends, awards, and fears. The first four predictions are borne out of rational thought experiments which are unable to factor for naivety. It is this cultivated faith that must be cherished and venerated. It believes in its own innovation but is distinctly defined by tradition. This ethereal fifth option sits in our peripheral vision, we know it's there, but god forbid if we try to understand it. It needs to be looked at sideways, chanced upon, and revealed. Just as the people of 1928 had no idea that sliced bread was about to revolutionise their world, who knows what's lurking around the corner for the letterboxes.⁴ It could be their extinction or their revitalisation or, more likely, both.

What a time to be a lover of letterboxes.

Word Count: 1470

1. Waldron, Arthur. "The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth". Cambridge University Press, 1990.
2. National Postal Museum. "Household Mailboxes" (2012) https://web.archive.org/web/20121104032443/http://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2b1b3_mailboxes.html
3. Radio New Zealand. "Less Mail, fewer employees needed - NZ Post". (2023) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/business/492701/less-mail-fewer-employees-needed-nz-post>
4. Latson, Jennifer. "How sliced bread became the 'greatest thing'". Time Magazine, 2015.