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Polynesians in Auckland

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares some recent films set in the contested terrains of Auckland – sometimes called the biggest Polynesian city. The film *Once Were Warriors* depicts the violence and despair of Maori life in the outer suburbs. Two more recent films (*No 2* and *Sione's Wedding*) focus on Pacific Island immigrants and introduce a new complexity into the usual discussion of settler versus indigenous, or brown versus white. It is possible to see these films as a reading of the occupation of the house and suburb through Pacific Island eyes, and this is contrasted with the depiction of housing in the *Pacific Island Design Guide* – a Government publication. There is, in the films, a certain acceptance and right of occupation of the fabric of the city which exposes the European norms that have shaped it.

The city of Auckland is endlessly changing and attracts the attention of nostalgic commentators, with increasing attention to urban design issues. The designs (and the designers) come from Europe while at the very same time the city keeps describing itself as the biggest city in Polynesia. This fact might have been thought to challenge some conventional urbanist assumptions, but the difficult question is in what way? Recent films are a means of seeing the city through Polynesian eyes and point towards a potential de-territorialisation of architecture in the city.

Polynesians make up one fifth of the Aotearoa/New Zealand population. New Zealand Maori comprise 14% of the total, while the rest are immigrants from Pacific Islands.¹ Up until the Second World War, Maori, the original occupants of the country, were rural dwellers, and following the war there was a migration to the cities in search of work.² This migration had several effects but it meant that the rural areas lost the young and energetic who were those who now contested the terrain of the city. At that time, work was found in the city centres, which in Auckland meant the inner city suburbs of Parnell, Freemans Bay and Ponsonby. These inner city areas were regarded as candidates for re-development and some public housing was built, but they have now been gentrified and privatised. During the sixties and seventies Maori shifted to the urban fringes where state provided rental housing was located.

State housing derives from the mid nineteen thirties when the newly elected labour government introduced a rental housing programme for those on low incomes. Much has been said and written about the decision to make the original housing individual cottages, every one to be different, and all to be built to the highest standards for the workers of New Zealand.³ Maori had special provision to purchase houses, which were distributed ('pepper potted') in these large areas of state

housing. However the numbers of Maori were limited and because many Maori were on low incomes anyway they were eligible for state housing which gave "a result more characteristic of the salt cellar."⁴ Alongside this migration and urbanisation, came a Maori renaissance starting in the seventies and continuing up to the present. A major factor was the constructing of the traditional institutions known as marae in the cities. This was initially resisted by the tangata whenua (the traditional occupants), but now the marae has taken over from the church as a community building everywhere.⁵

The film *Once Were Warriors* is set in a state house in an outer Auckland suburb and is based on a novel depicting the hopelessness and despair of urban Maori life.⁶ The house is represented as cold and restricting, with a memorable external shot involving a teenage suicide hanging from a tree. The interior of the house is depicted as limiting and the scene of violence.

The somewhat heavily applied message of *Once Were Warriors* is that if Maori are to survive, they need to return to their rural roots to recover their culture. However real poverty is found in the rural areas, and violence is by no means restricted to the city. The film *Whale Rider* has a rural setting but revolves around the challenging of traditional values and practices.⁷ Here the substandard housing is offset by the warmth of community and the idyllic coastal location. Both of these films end with a nostalgic message of hope but are examples of the brooding darkness that has been argued by Sam Neill to characterise New Zealand movies.⁸

No 2 and *Siones Wedding* are quite different.⁹ Contrasted with *Once were Warriors* both these films have a certain ease and light heartedness about the occupation of the city. There are numerous jokes poking fun at the other city occupants. For example "et tu Brutus" provokes a reply of "are you speaking Maori?" An all white suburb

is used to explain a Pakeha who wishes to identify as Polynesian by commenting "he is from Glenfield". This joking masks of course an underlying hostility, but there is a strong tradition of Pacific island comedy and turning things around.¹⁰ For example dawn raids by police looking for immigrant overstayers occurred in the nineteen seventies. 'Dawn Raids' is now the name of a successful Pacific Island music and clothing label.

The designation 'Pacific Islanders' does disservice to the substantial differences between the islands of Samoa, Tonga, Niue and the Cook Islands. A Pacific Island renaissance has followed the Maori one over the last decade or so and has many causes, not least the sporting achievements of rugby stars such as Jonah Lomu (Tonga) and the captaining of the All Blacks by Tana Umaga (Samoa). As well as a vibrant story telling tradition, there have been recent music and comedy successes and an interesting move into TV cartoons.¹¹

New Zealand has an ambiguous role as a Pacific island due to its size and climate but nevertheless, globally, Auckland is by far the biggest Polynesian city with a Polynesian population of almost one quarter of the total of one and a half million. In Auckland Pacific Islanders (13%) outnumber Maori (11%).¹² Pacific Island immigrants occupied the central city as a reception area, which had been vacated by the Maori shift to the fringes, and because of the continued access to casual work. Gentrification and chain migration moved the Pacific Island population so that it is now concentrated to the west and south of the city.

Sione's Wedding is set in an inner Auckland suburb with its nineteenth century timber bay villas, but importantly it is also set in the street and the park and the bars of the city. In this film young men are depicted as endlessly on the move and not settled in the house at all. Rather they are shown roaming over the contested ground of the city. These young men are assumed to be stealing when they are in shops, taken to be looking for a fight in the streets and carparks and they are thrown out of pubs for their exuberance.

This is an architecture based on movement. To move is to lack a place - to paraphrase de Certeau,¹³ But this is not so much a "walking in the city" as a driving in the city. Cars are the way that the city is exploited and occupied and are of course, as everywhere, a basis for identifying economic and class differences. The city, rather than the house, can be seen as providing a network of possibilities, which operate through kinship and connection. We see here the city used as a resource a flowing in and out of pubs, shops, streets and parks.

No 2 revolves around a suburban house that is No 2 in a street in a lower middle class street of Mt Roskill - or 'Raskil' as the number plate on the vehicle proclaims.¹⁴ In *No 2* there is one Palagi male and one upper class English female - both partners to family members. The class prejudices of the ma-

triarch are exposed by the outsiders, which reminds us that class has always had a complex crossing with ethnicity in the Pacific. There is an ongoing dispute with a Chinese neighbour, which reflects the situation in the Pacific where Chinese are seen as a confusion or a threat. There are incidentally now as many Asians (again a designation that does violence to huge ethnic and cultural differences) as there are Pacific Islanders, both in New Zealand and in Auckland.

A further complexity in this film is that the family comes from Fiji, which is at the point of cross over between Polynesia and Melanesia - the latter being the usual classification for Fiji. What is not said is that New Zealand does not allow Fijians easy access to New Zealand in the way that it does Polynesians, which has a long history of being favoured over Melanesia.¹⁵ However to confuse the issue further there is reputedly only one Fijian actor in the film. The parts are played by Polynesian and indigenous Maori actors and the matriarch role is played by Ruby Dee - a black American.

A yet further hybridity is introduced where the feast is to be 'like in Sicily'. This is because the dead father fought in Sicily during the Second World War. It could be that it is also a rejection of the English and an embracing of an exotic other. The family is rent with endless schisms, which contradicts the communal happy family image, but doesn't fall into the dark despair, or nostalgia, of the indigenous films. There is of course a fight, but here it is both desired and prevented at the same time.

For migrants reference is always to another (but often now mythical) place, which the children of the immigrants may never have experienced. This throws up the issue of the location of home. Jane Jacobs points out:

Migrancy places into question monogamous modes of dwelling but it does not do away with the matter of house or locality." ... the migrants sense of home is split between here and there.¹⁶

But what can be said from this about the architecture of the house? Extended family living and the notion of multi-purpose spaces and openness are the themes of a publication produced at the instigation of the Housing New Zealand Corporation to "inform designers, and encourage the development of new, innovative, and creative housing design for Pacific people."¹⁷ This *Pacific Island Design Guide* has some suggested designs, with startling computer generated graphics. In general the Guide is based on a functional analysis of the house even extending to the use of a matrix much loved by proponents of design methods back in the sixties.¹⁸

The *Design Guide* proposes "the 'lounge' as the heart of the house able to be separated from the living and dining rooms and the kitchen" but in these movies we do not see the lounge, except as a formal meeting place.¹⁹ Discussion over financing the house in *No 2* takes place in the kitchen, the site of the domestic. This area tends to be

avoided by the men and the kitchen itself is really limited to a single sink bench. In the design guide the kitchen "needs to be large enough for two or three people working at the same time."²⁰

No 2 has a boarded up door which has been that way for the twelve years since the death of the matriarch's husband. It is a Pacific tradition to abandon houses on a death and doors are particularly significant in Fijian life where the traditional house has up to four doors, each one limited to a particular role, and used by particular people.²¹ The boarding up of the door is argued about in the film, with disagreement over whether this occurs for three or four days after a death in Fiji. Twelve years might be seen as the effect of the underground location of Pacific Island culture in the Auckland suburbs. The door is smashed open in the movie and the young man who does so is chosen as the matriarch's successor. This might also be seen as the current burst of Pacific Island energy.

Doors also get attention in the *Design Guide* where "a wide main entry is important for formal occasions such as death in the family where the coffin is carried through the front door".²² The *Design Guide* says "it is also common for Pacific people to enter a house on informal occasions through a secondary access (a side or rear door), preserving the sanctity of the main entry."²³ But the door is also significant because most of the action in *No 2* takes place outside the house and the boarded up door restricts inside – outside movement. This continues a long tradition of Pacific people living outside and a concern with preserving openness. The matriarch insists on trees on the property being cut down because they are hiding the sun.

The back yard in the film becomes the living courtyard of the Pacific Island. However because of the sloping ground, here in Auckland on the the side of a volcanic hill, a level platform is built for the food and for dancing. The platform is fundamental and built everywhere in the Pacific and seen in the marae in its various forms in Polynesia. In the *Design Guide* it is suggested that the outside space should be designed "as in any house design".²⁴ There is mention of provision for a vegetable garden and for cooking outside. It could be suggested how-

ever, that the use of the outside is more significant than this, and in *No 2* the men cook outside- in this case a pig on a spit. The food is abundant (there is an implication that some of it might have been stolen) and an issue is involved in killing the pig. In a nice reversal of the usual image of savage Pacific Islanders, only the palagi is up to the task. This could be read as the savage palagi, or it might be another example of palagi being depended upon to take control.

One of the male family members lives in a caravan in the back yard. This is reminiscent of the segregation of males in the men's house that is common throughout the Pacific. The *Design Guide* says that "the female family members, especially young girls and teenagers, are also accommodated inside, always separate from the males."²⁵ It is pointed out that the elderly are also accommodated inside whereas young men can be in sleep-outs. *Sione's Wedding* has the young men sleeping in various locations around the city.

Interaction in the Pacific occurs across the beach. But the beach is decidedly elsewhere in these movies, where it has become a place of escape and distance. The built equivalent of the beach is the veranda where the colonial can interact with indigenous without allowing access to the interior. Verandas are discussed in the *Guide* but seen here in terms of 'other practical benefits, allowing for a seamless flow between inside and outdoor spaces.'²⁶ The marae (malae) may be seen as the equivalent of the verandah from the Polynesian point of view, but as with the porch of the meeting house is the sheltered location of daily life rather than an extension of the interior.

Or else, as with the Samoan or Tongan fale, the house itself is an inside/outside space. This housing is not a closed object, but open air living space, with pavilions for some activities, made by people with a long history of migration and movement. In these films we see the importance of outside space as living space and a different version of place compared to the investment in the house as object. This is the shift of the myriad meanings associated with the domestic from inside the house to outside, and into the city.

¹ www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/44B07124-E0B1-46A5-87EAE823514E1846/0/NatSum01.pdf

² Joan Metge, *A New Maori Migration: Rural and Urban Relations in Northern New Zealand*, London: Athlone Press, 1964.

³ Starting with W.R. Simpson, *Workers Housing*, Auckland: Unicorn Press, 1938.

⁴ *Report of The Commission of Enquiry into Housing*, Wellington: Govt Printer, 1971, p. 324.

⁵ Hugh Kawharu, 'Urban Immigrants and Tangata Whenua', Eric Schwimmer (ed) *The Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*, Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1968, pp. 174-186. In the mid seventies when it was pointed out that marae were important to Maori it was criticised

by some who said this was suggesting that Maori didn't need decent housing.

⁶ *Once Were Warriors*, Lee Tamahori (dir) 1994. Alan Duff, *Once were Warriors*, Auckland: Tandem Press, 1994.

⁷ *Whale Rider*, Niki Caro, (director), 2002

⁸ *Cinema of Unease*, Sam Neill, (director), 1996.

⁹ *No 2*, Toa Fraser, (director), 2006. *Sione's Wedding*, Chris Graham, (director), 2006.

¹⁰ Andrew Ross, 'Cultural Preservation in the Polynesia of the Latter-Day Saints'. *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, London: Verso, 1994.

¹¹ For example the comedy group The Naked Samoans and The TV Cartoon series *Bro'Town*.

¹² www.adhb.govt.nz/about/population_stats.htm

- 13 Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-110.
- 14 This has resonances with the other big Pacific island of Papua New Guinea where criminals are known as 'raskols', a colonial hangover from the time when Papua New Guinea men were all 'boys'.
- 15 See Jean Guiart, 'A Polynesian Myth and the Invention of Melanesia', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, No 91, December, 1982, p. 139.
- 16 Jane Jacobs, 'Too many houses for a home', *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*, Stephen Cairns (ed), London: Routledge, 2004, p.167
- 17 Faumuina and Associates, *Pacific Housing Design Guide: the Beginning*, Wellington: Housing New Zealand, July 2002, p. 4.
- 18 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 11.
- 19 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 9.
- 20 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 9.
- 21 M. R. Austin, "Fijian Architecture", *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, Paul Oliver (ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- 22 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 8.
- 23 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 8.
- 24 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 6.
- 25 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 10.
- 26 *Pacific Housing Design Guide*, p. 9.