

Polynesian Housing in Auckland*

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Auckland is sometimes called the world's biggest Polynesian city but Polynesians occupy only some of the suburbs. The original Ngati Whatua inhabitants have been swamped, not only by the European (Pakeha) settlers, but also over the last half century by Maori groups from other parts of New Zealand. To add a further complexity there are large numbers of immigrants from other Pacific islands.

It has been argued that Polynesian's housing requirements are different to the majority inhabitants in the suburbs and recent feature films exploit these differences and can be seen as a reading of the occupation of the house and city through Polynesian eyes. 'Once Were Warriors' plays out the suburban house as a location of Maori dissolution and violence, which is contrasted with the rural homeland. This nostalgia ignores the reality that many rural areas lack both work and acceptable housing.

The lower middle class suburb of Mt Roskill is the setting of the film 'No 2'. This title is the street number of the state built house that is the location for the action, most of which takes place outside the house. This in accordance with Pacific island traditions and the back yard of the house is used in culturally specific ways. The inside outside relations of the house revolve around a door that has been boarded up for twelve years and many living practices are revealed that are other to the norms of suburban behaviour.

'Sione's Wedding' repeats some of these themes, but it is set in older housing in an inner suburb. There is in these films a certain acceptance, and right of occupation of the fabric of the city, which expose some of the European assumptions that have shaped it. The paper discusses these issues.

* This paper has been blind refereed by academic peers appointed by the conference committee according to DEST standards.

Polynesians make up one fifth of the Aotearoa/New Zealand population. The majority of these are indigenous Maori (14% of the total) and the rest are immigrants from Pacific Islands. Globally Aotearoa/New Zealand has been well housed - except that is, for Polynesians. Single unit suburban houses have been the norm, until relatively recently, when there has been a spate of apartment building. It is very unusual for Polynesians to live in apartments, or even two storey houses because it is believed that no one should be above any person of status. This is sometimes explained by Maori beliefs in tapu.

Maori were rural dwellers up until the Second World War. In the fifties and sixties there was a migration to the cities in search of work.¹ At that time this was found in the centres of the cities, the locations of the wharves and labour hire centres, and in Auckland this led to the occupation of the inner city suburbs of Parnell, Freemans Bay and Ponsonby. The inner city areas were regarded as 'slums', suitable for re-development and some public housing was built. Since then these areas have become popular and are now gentrified and privatised. During the sixties and seventies Maori shifted to the urban fringes where State provided rental housing was located.

This housing derives from the mid nineteen thirties when the newly elected labour government built state rental housing for workers. Much has been written about the decision to make the original housing individual cottages, every one to be different in appearance and all built to the highest standards. This state housing has been the site of political difference where labour governments built houses for rent and conservatives sold them for private ownership. Maori had special provision to purchase houses, which were distributed ('pepper potted') in state housing areas. However the numbers built were limited, and because many Maori were on low incomes they were eligible for state housing anyway, which produced 'a result more characteristic of the salt cellar.'² As a result these suburbs became predominantly Maori suburbs.

Recently the deaths from abuse of twin Maori babies in one such suburb in Auckland (Mangere) provoked comment from everybody from the Prime Minister to Maori activists. This endless stream of opinion was accompanied by a photograph of the house, as if this was somehow responsible for the deviance. However it is hard to see what evidence there is for this. The house appears completely normal and one that the majority of global citizens would be thrilled to occupy, and indeed state houses located in the more desirable suburbs are much sought after.

The situation in the house where the abuse occurred was compared to that portrayed in the film *Once Were Warriors*, set in a state house in an outer Auckland suburb, and based on the book with the same title depicting the hopelessness and violence of urban Maori life.³ In the film a memorable exterior shot shows a teenage suicide hanging from a tree with the house as backdrop. The interior of the house is depicted as constricting and the scene of violence. A local newspaper headline is a quote from Pita Sharples a Maori politician: 'Maori are not brown Pakeha' "It wasn't as bad as they make out," says Sharples, describing the home the twins lived in. "Like many houses in New Zealand, they're three-bedroom, sometimes the materials they're made out of are not that flash...."⁴ Sharples is obviously struggling to explain what is wrong with the house and in fact the materials are possibly better than many architect designed houses of the time.

Back in the seventies it was suggested that there were a number of misfits between Maori and their houses.⁵ This was based on functional assumptions and as Cairns has pointed out, functionalism is only one way of analysing architecture. He contrasts this with the neo-rationalist view of architecture as autonomous, but it could be argued that this supposed autonomy is anthropocentric in its assumption of European culture, and doesn't account for other architectural traditions. Cairns suggests a third position focussing on place, and says that each of these positions 'implicating function, type and place, draws on a particular version of the conventional migrancy script.'⁶

Cairns suggests that migrancy demands other architectural articulations based on movement. 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 it could be argued that the real poverty and bad housing have always been found in the rural areas, while 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. Here the substandard housing is offset by the idyllic coastal location and nostalgia, which work to disguise poverty.

The urban migration had several effects but one important one was that the rural areas lost their young and energetic members. Further from this migration and urbanisation (which was often commented on in negative terms) came a renaissance in Maori culture and language, starting in the seventies and continuing up to the present. This involved constructing the traditional institutions known as marae in the cities. This was also resisted by the conservative tangata whenua but now the marae has taken over from the church as a community building everywhere.⁷ In the mid seventies it was pointed out that marae were as important (if not more important) to Maori as individual houses but this was criticised by some who said that it was suggesting that Maori didn't need decent housing.⁸

Auckland has a Polynesian population of almost one quarter of the total of one and a half million. In Auckland Pacific Islanders (the common designation that does disservice to the substantial differences between the islands of Samoa, Tonga, Niue and the Cook Islands) make up 13% of the total and actually outnumber Maori at 11%. Pacific Island immigrants arrived from the sixties onwards and occupied the reception area of the central city that had been vacated by the Maori shift to the fringes. Gentrification and chain migration has meant that the Pacific Island population has moved out to the west and south of the city. Jane Jacobs points out that: '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.'⁹

Back in the sixties an investigation of the housing and welfare needs of Pacific Islanders was surprised to find that generally they were doing well, given that the centre city housing wasn't of high standard.¹⁰ However what they did find was some 'overcrowding' and the number of people per dwelling has always been used as measurable statistic for housing assessment. Overcrowding has been taken as a sign of pathology and the commentators on the Auckland baby deaths focussed in the end on the number of people in the house, which has come to be called 'clustering'. It has been pointed out that this is often necessary for mutual economic and other survival. Once again the issue becomes middle class assumptions based on the norm of the three bedroom house for the Pakeha nuclear family.

In case too rosy a picture is being painted here a recent survey is reported as saying: 'Pacific families reported the worst hardship among ethnic groups and the most significant decrease in living standards, followed by Maori.'¹¹ There is a *Pacific Islands Design Guide*, 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.'¹² The emphasis is on extended family living and the notion of multi-purpose spaces. However once again the functional basis for this guide is indicated by the use of a matrix so popular with the design methods practitioners of the sixties, and indeed the authors were trained in local architecture schools.¹³

We might get some clues about how the housing is actually occupied from two recent films about Pacific Islanders in Auckland. The film *No 2* revolves around a state house that is No 2 in a lower middle class suburban street. *Sione's Wedding* is set in an inner Auckland suburb with classic nineteenth century timber villas, but significantly it is also set in the street and the park and the bars of the city. Both films indicate an ease of occupation of the city showing young men endlessly

on the move and not settled in the house interior.

Houses are the locations of change. *No 2* is owned by a Fijian matriarch and some of the film is discussion over the financing of the house. This takes place in the kitchen, women's territory and the site of the domestic, while the kitchen in the film is limited to a single sink bench typical of the nineteen forties state house. Men do not use the kitchen. In the *Design Guide* it is said that the kitchen 'needs to be large enough for two or three people working at the same time.'¹⁴ 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'.¹⁵ However in the movies we do not see the lounge being used except formally.

Instead the action takes place outside and *No 2* has a boarded up door that 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 4 doors each one limited to a particular role and used by particular people. 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.'¹⁶ It continues: '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.'¹⁷ But the door is also significant because most of the action in the film takes place outside the house and the boarded up door restricts this so called inside-outside movement.

The back yard in *No 2* becomes the living courtyard of the Pacific, and because of the sloping ground a level platform is built for entertaining and dancing. The platform is fundamental in the Pacific and seen in the marae in its various forms throughout Polynesia. In the *Design Guide* it is suggested that the outside space should be designed 'as in any house design' except for some provision for a vegetable garden and for cooking outside.¹⁸ In the film the men cook a pig on a spit and the meal and dancing all take place outside. This suggests that outside space is more important and specific for daily life than suggested by the *Guide*.

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* points out that the elderly are accommodated inside, whereas young men can be in sleep-outs and it states that 'the female family members, especially young girls and teenagers, are also accommodated inside, always separate from the males.'¹⁹ garages are used in a variety of ways and the *Guide* acknowledges that garages are a 'multipurpose overflow utility space for welcoming ceremonies, entertaining and temporary visitors.'²⁰

Interaction in the Pacific occurs across the beach but the beach is distant and possibly an escape for most Polynesians in Auckland. The built equivalent of the beach is the veranda where the colonial interacted with the indigenous in the in-between space between inside and outside. Verandas are discussed in the *Guide* but seen in terms of 'practical benefits, allowing for a seamless flow between inside and outdoor spaces.'²¹ However where living occurs outdoors the veranda becomes a sheltered niche off the outside space rather than an extension of inside colonial space. The Polynesian fale with its extraordinary openness can be seen as a sheltered pavilion in the outdoor space of the malae.

What then can these films tell us? We see that the notion of the house as type is challenged. What is more important is the importance and use of the site and its space. There is traditional precedent for this with pre-European Maori paa and kainga as fenced enclosures. Pre-European Tonga was described as courtyards screened by fences. A house in Bali consists of a number of separate pavilions in courtyards, not unlike Ise temple in Japan, which is an example well known to architects. Polynesian gang houses in Auckland have fences around them, which are seen to be

security measures but may be an indication of a more fundamental desire built by those assertive enough to build what they want. The affluent have always walled in their property.

This is the importance of open space as living space. This very openness is the dream of modernism that contemporary architecture provides for its elite clients. This is housing not as closed objects but as living space with pavilions for some activities - many occurring outside. Australasians reserve this experience for the barbeque. It will of course be objected that the climate of New Zealand mitigates against outdoor living but they used to say the same about outside areas for cafes, and it seems that now people eat outside all year round even in impossible places like Wellington.

In the films the city is used as a resource with the inhabitants flowing in and out of pubs shops streets and parks. The city becomes a network of possibilities, which operate through kinship and connection. This is a 'driving in the city' to misquote de Certeau.²² Archigram hoped to move from the fixity of architecture and we can certainly see the influence of this in the heterotopic space of the city hotels and offices, terminals and museums. In this way the city can be seen as providing rather than just the house. 'What results is an architecture that comes to be imbricated with the effects of a particular kind of movement that carries ongoing, multiple, intermittent and intensified investments in place.'²³

This could be especially important for people who have a long history of migration and movement across oceans; where the idea of impermanence and transience is fundamental to island dwellers. Polynesians raised in Auckland have a complex relation to their place of origin, which they have never known, and to the city in which they have grown up, but to which they do not belong. We are involved here in a de-territorialisation of architecture, with the shift of the meanings associated with the domestic from inside the house to outside and ultimately to the city.

(Endnotes)

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

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

3 Alan Duff, *Once were Warriors*, Auckland:Tandem Press,1994.

4 Sunday Star Times , July 2, 2006. p. C3

5 This was based on the work of Christopher Alexander where fit between function and form was defined as the elimination of misfit. M. R. Austin, 'Housing since the Hunn Report', *Te Maori*, Vol 1, No 3, 1970. pp. 11 - 13.

6 Stephen Cairns, *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 38.

7 Hugh Kawharu, 'Urban Immigrants and Tangata Whenua', Erik Schwimmer (ed) *The Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*, Auckland, Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1968, pp. 174-186.

8 M.R. Austin, 'Maori Housing in Context', *Auckland at Full Stretch*, Graham Bush and Claudia Scott (eds), Auckland: Auckland City Council, 1976, pp. 109-114.

9Jane Jacobs, 'Too many houses for a home', Stephen Cairns (ed) *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*, London: Routledge, 2004, p.167.

10J. R. McCreary, *Housing and Welfare Needs of Islanders in Auckland*, Wellington:Victoria University of Wellington, 1965.

11'Report chronicles NZ's rising tide of poverty', *The New Zealand Herald*, July 12, 2006, p. A3.

12Pacific Housing Design Guide: the Beginning, Faumuina and Associates, Housing New Zealand, July 2002, p. 4.

13Design Guide, p. 11.

14Design Guide, p. 9.

15Design Guide, p. 9.

16Design Guide, p. 8.

17Design Guide, p. 8

18Design Guide, p. 6

19Design Guide, p. 10

20Design Guide, p. 9

21Design Guide, p. 9

22Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-110.

23Stephen Cairns, p. 42.

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