Bi-cultural Architecture

Mike Austin
School of Architecture, Unitec Institute of Technology
139 Carrington Road, Mount Albert,
Auckland 1025
New Zealand
+64981543321
maustin@unitec.ac.nz

Ginny Pedlow
Mitchell Stout Architects
Level 3, 35 High Street
Auckland City 1143
New Zealand
+649 3062043
ginny@mitchellstout.co.nz

1 ABSTRACT

Aotearoa/New Zealand is a bi-cultural country. There have been attempts to design buildings with this in mind, the most well known example being the National Museum (Te Papa). This contains pre-European Maori buildings, and also a new meeting house.

However as with examples elsewhere the combination of indigenous with Western architecture is anything but straightforward. Sometimes indigenous motifs are applied to a European structure, which can be seen as tokenism, or misappropriation. Sometimes Western construction methods are used to support an indigenous building, which can be seen as patronising. In effect we have two architectures in New Zealand and it is not easy to bring them together. Some artists have produced significant hybrids, but there are few architectural examples.

Hastings is a town in New Zealand with a population of about 70,000 people, a quarter of whom are Maori. In 2012 Hastings held an architectural competition for its Civic Centre. The brief explicitly called for Maori content, and we won this competition, possibly partly because we acknowledged the Maori dimension in the complex. For instance we designed the civic square so that it could operate as a Maori marae (ceremonial courtyard) and had indicated posts (pou) traditionally used for securing canoes in this district. This notion was taken up by local Maori who carved 18 pou and placed them at the entrance to the square.

Since then the local Maori tribe (Ngati Kahungunu) have asked to be accommodated within the building and this has produced some interesting
results. The European brief for such a building specifies areas and functions while the Maori brief talks in poetic terms of land and sky and the ascent up through the spaces of the building.

Keywords

Maori, civic, bi-cultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aotearoa/New Zealand has a public policy of bi-culturalism,¹ which has developed in the last few decades of its relatively short history.² The two main islands were settled first by Maori less than 1000 years ago, and more recently by Europeans (mostly from England) starting 200 years ago. The current multi-cultural population is around 4 million.

Pre- European Maori lived in settlements, many of which were defended sites such as hills, islands, headlands and swamps. The traditional Maori house, known as the whare, was a small timber gable roofed building and provoked by the missionary church this developed during the 19th century to become the meeting house.³ The meeting house is a literally anthropomorphic building, every part of the structure relating to the body of the ancestor after whom the house is named.⁴ The mahau or porch of the meeting house is not an extension of the inside space but rather as a sheltered apse off the open platform in front of the house. This platform is called the marae, where visitors are welcomed in precise rituals.⁵ The complex of meeting house and associated buildings is also known as the marae and is a focus for the surrounding community.

Figure 1. Te Tokanganui-a-Noho facade
Figure 2. Waitangi Meeting House interior
Figure 3. Iritekura marae

¹ Walker, 1986.
² Austin, 2003.
⁴ Simmons, 1997.
⁵ Austin, 2005.
Most traditional Maori buildings are now found in museums, which enclose and entomb the indigenous architecture often with strange results. There have been discussions about bi-culturalism, and attempts to design buildings to accommodate the two cultures, the most well known example being the National Museum Te Papa (1998). This contains pre-European Maori buildings, and also a new meeting house. In our exhibition of Aotearoa/New Zealand architecture at the last Venice Biennale we reversed the usual arrangement by placing a model of the Auckland War Memorial Museum inside a carved storehouse.

A very early example of biculturalism was the Maori church Rangiatea (1850), which demonstrates a strong affiliation between church and meeting house. Perhaps the most interesting example in Aotearoa/New Zealand is Futuna Chapel (1960) that has been described as the first bi-cultural building.¹ This was designed by one of the first practicing Maori architects, John Scott and is a sophisticated abstraction of the meeting house.² Churches seem to be an important location for bi-culturalism. All Saints Church in Auckland (1958) has the gable and porch of the meeting house and the Auckland Cathedral by the same architect, Richard Toy, is based on the marae.

Figure 4. Te Rangiatea interior

Figure 5. Futuna Chapel

However as with examples elsewhere the combination of indigenous with Western architecture is anything but straightforward. We have two architectures in New Zealand and it is not easy to bring them together. Some artists have produced significant hybrids, but there are as yet few architectural examples.

2. HASTINGS

Hastings is a town in Aotearoa/New Zealand on the Heretaunga plains, which is laid out over the patchwork of fertile wetlands, on a grid determined by the railway, which in turn was alongside one of the many rivers. It now has a population of about 70,000 people, a quarter of whom are Maori. In 2012 Hastings held an architectural competition for its Civic

² Mckay, 2006, McCarthy 2009
Square, which currently consists of a wellused library and an underused art gallery, sitting in a parkland of English trees, one block from the single main street of the town. There was little evidence of Maori past or present habitation on the square.

**Figure 6. Winning design for Hastings Civic Square Competition**

![Image of design for Hastings Civic Square Competition]

We won the competition, possibly, partly because we acknowledged the Maori dimension in the complex. We designed the civic square so that it could operate as a marae. However it could not be a designated marae because protocols and custom would prevent other uses such as civic ceremonies concerts etc. For this we provided a covered stage, which also doubled as the entry to the complex fulfilling the role of mahau which we had identified as an important architectural element. With some difficulty the new foyer was squeezed between the art gallery and library as an entry to both.

In pre-European times the district was crisscrossed by rivers and swamps and the name Heretaunga means the tying up pole for canoes which were the means of transport. We illustrated these poles (called pou) in our design. This notion was taken up by local Maori where each of the eighteen marae in the district carved pou to be located at the entrance to the square where they operate as a threshold to the marae. This project attracted controversy but was promoted by a charismatic leader. Some carvings are excellent, some not, and one was even executed by a woman, which was a huge break from protocol.

We were asked to make a plan for the locations of the pou and suggested several alternatives. The first proposal we made was to site the carvings according to their home marae locations as if on a large map drawn on the site. We also suggested distributing the pou along the entries to the site. We further investigated organising them according to a genealogical chart that was used to assign the subjects of the carvings. In the end we decided to arrange the carvings around a lighting plan based on the Pleiades star.
constellation (known as Matariki to Maori) that rises in Aotearoa/New Zealand in midwinter and has become an important event. By designing the lighting this meant we weren’t assigning the particular carvings, which was politically complicated. The carvings were unveiled in a dawn ceremony around the time of Matariki, with each carving facing in the direction of its marae of origin. The Maori presence was established on the site and the result was instantly popular.

**Figure 7. Carvings unveiled**

3 NGATI KAHUNGUNU

The success of this move prompted the wider Maori tribe Ngati Kahungunu, who are spread across the South East of the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand, to ask to be incorporated in the project. This increased the size of the building by about 50% and there were several other consequences. It meant that we had to become more engaged with a bi-cultural programme, and design the building for two cultures that sometimes differed in their ways of working. For instance meetings with Ngati Kahungunu often involved a group of tribal members rather than appointed representatives, so it turned out that Maori people in the community saw the revised scheme before some of the local body politicians.

There was the requirement for a new design approach to the museum raising the question of materials, construction and decoration. Traditional Maori buildings are timber and fibre. Timber was used on The Tjibaou Culture Centre in New Caledonia by Renzo Piano, which has been criticized because timber is associated with the ‘primitive’. Timber is however being used structurally these days in Aotearoa/New Zealand, for its resilience in earthquakes. We decided on a timber structure but became interested in introducing other materials because of this desire for the building to express itself as modern and forward thinking.

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1 Austin, 2007.
Often in the construction of meeting houses Western construction methods are used, which can be seen as patronizing, or inauthentic. Alternatively it can be seen as playing a secondary role, which is supportive of the Maori carvings. In the Auckland University Meeting House steel portals support the art-work, but the builder and carver of the Meeting House at the Auckland Unitec Institute of Technology insisted that the carvings be the structure of the building.

Heretaunga suffered a major earthquake in the late 1930s and the twin towns of Napier and Hastings were rebuilt in the Art Deco fashion of the time, which did not have the difficulties of applied decoration that arrived with modernism. Consequently decorative elements in plaster were added to many of the buildings and in some cases Maori motifs were used. This would now not be possible with sensitivities to the misuse of intellectual property.

**Figure 8. Maori Battalion Building (1964) John Scott**

John Scott designed a brutalist building that challenged the predominately modernist design by placing fourteen carvings spaced across the glazed façade, which referred to the first canoes that arrived in New Zealand. In doing so he questioned the use and meaning of decoration, and the relationship between Maori and Pakeha culture. We have consequently been concerned to weave the Maori and Pakeha (non Maori) views into the structure of the project.

### 3. REVISED PROJECT

Our work on the new brief produced the usual analytic diagrams of functions but when the Ngati Kahungunu leader (Ngahiwi Tomoana) spoke of their requirements he alluded to the landscape and especially a local mountain with a provocative profile. Ngahiwi also felt the building should stand proud but not boast or display its authority or, for that matter, its ethnicity. It was emphasised that this building was not to compete with or take away from the local marae and meeting houses.
Ngahiwi spoke about the rangatiratanga (leadership) model of moving up to higher levels to attain further knowledge. He talked about the building facilitating ascending levels of complexity. This was to be realized both literally and metaphorically and led to a spiraling circulation pattern around a courtyard, up through level changes, and down the spiral stairs. This intersecting spiral movement is a Maori figure called a koru. The organisation of exhibitions would be structured to reflect this approach.

**Figure 9. Revised Ground Floor Plan**

It became apparent that the art gallery would not be the traditional museum arrangement and the new brief called for a range of spaces that would be used by a range of people in a range of ways. The increased size led to a proposal that the existing gallery be demolished and replaced with the open courtyard giving connection to the land and a series of participatory galleries built around it, such as black box gallery, a white box gallery, and a wet gallery for different uses and users.

The new proposal continues the European tradition of courtyard buildings, and at the same time emphasises a connection between earth and sky. A well-known Maori origin myth is that Papa the earth mother and Rangi the sky father were separated from an embrace by their children and that Rangi weeps for his beloved in every shower of rain. Ngahiwi talked about the rain falling and the mist rising between earth and sky and referred to the water underneath the site. Water, so fundamental in this fertile district, is now celebrated on the site as a watery threshold to the building, a reflecting pool for the existing Hall of Memories, and as a splashing fountain with a randomly programmed jet of water to the North of the site attracting attention from the town.

There is a strong Maori tradition of hospitality, that reinforced the desire for a café on site. This brings up the issue of tapu (taboo) especially concerning food, and how different cultural values need to be accommodated within the
design. It was important that food and the cafe be located away from the formal aspects of the design, yet easily accessible.

**Figure 10. Site Plan**

Organising axes can be drawn across the site, and indeed are apparent on the existing site.

The new building, with its generous entry defines the marae space in front, which in turn opens directly off a proposed civic avenue. This route follows the original stream location used for passage inland by Maori canoes. At right angles to this is an axis that connects the Hall of Memories space in the existing library, towards a relocated memorial cenotaph, both traditional European structures that commemorate the World Wars. However any attempt to label these Maori or European is too simplistic, and not the way bi-culturalism works. Maori are among those memorialized, while the marae is also the civic square.

**Figure 11. Entry Foyer**
The design identifies a new diagonal path aligning North South, which is neither ceremonial nor memorial and opens a new approach to the square, connecting the building to the town centre. A large electronic screen sits alongside this axis.

Figure 12. Marae & Civic Square

When the drawings for the combined scheme were being prepared we thought we should provide Maori translations for the various spaces. It was gently pointed out that Ngati Kahungunu would give their own names to the spaces and not the translation of the European ones.

Navigating the complexities of bi-culturalism is never easy.

4. REFERENCES

Simmons, D.R, 1997, Te Whare Rūnanga: the Māori Meeting House Auckland, Reed Publishing,