

# Antipodal Architecture: Traces of the ‘Other Tradition’ in Piano’s Tjibaou Cultural Centre

The return to tradition is a myth...No people has ever achieved that. The search for identity, for a model, I believe it lies before us...Our identity is before us. –Jean-Marie Tjibaou

In a sense, the process of construction is never complete. I believe that buildings, like cities, are factories of the infinite and the unfinished. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of perfection: a work of architecture is a living creature that changes over time and with use. We live with these creatures of ours, linked to them by the umbilical cord of an adventure with no end. –Renzo Piano (1997:14)

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## INTRODUCTION

Alongside any of today’s internationally-recognized architectural practices, the work produced by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop perhaps best exemplifies Colin St. John Wilson’s conception of an ‘Other Tradition’—an architecture that escapes Modernism’s false dichotomization of beauty and practicality. Surveying five decades of work by the Building Workshop, one is struck by the level of conceptual consistency on the one hand, and aesthetic diversity on the other. This can be attributed to the underlying principles of their design process, which can skillfully span multiple architectural elements and scales while gracefully accepting the inherent complexities and apparent contradictions of design. Reviewing Piano’s work for his Pritzker Prize essay, Colin Amery (1998) writes:

He has been original but not revolutionary. His design solutions are the result of analysis and research and are the best, practical answers to specific problems. There is a sense in all his works of a problem solved — sometimes in a way that is aesthetically thrilling or even strange—but always you know that he just wants to make the building work as well as it possibly can. He may try an experiment to solve the problem but he will not build anything that is not an intelligent solution.

This echoes St. John Wilson’s praise for his exemplary designers: “...the forms they have invented drew their inspiration from the true purposes which the building was required to serve” (1995: 81); or his insistence that “...new ground is broken only where new need demands it” (*ibid.*: 28). Grounded in contextual

practicality, Piano's work is enduring and adaptable, able to transcend the reductive discourses of both Modernism and Postmodernism. His personal ambivalence towards the uneven effects of late capitalism—particularly, the spread of technology and culture through globalized networks—is evident in his architecture. Refusing theoretical dogmatism, he instead chooses to poetically express such ambivalence through formal, material, and construction decisions. Above all, Piano accepts and embraces architectural practice as inevitably entwined with the nature of closure and constructability. As Coleman (2005: 296) argues, Piano's unique approach adopts both the modern and the traditional:

Control of the construction process, while lavishing attention on how the myriad elements of any contemporary building assembly are fitted together at their individual points of contact, such as Piano does, goes a long way toward making an architecture at once modern and traditional. Modern in its embrace of the technological facts of the age, traditional in its reconceptualization of mechanized building industry as also making possible a craft-like love of production.

In no Building Workshop project is this marriage of modern and traditional more evident than in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa, New Caledonia—Piano's only completed project in the 'developing world.' Though at fifteen it has yet to reach the maturity of St. John Wilson's case studies, the Centre extends the spirit of the 'Other Tradition' into the present millennium and a programmatic realm with greater political potency.

However much the Centre reflects St. John Wilson's 'uncompleted project', its qualification as an example of Third World, local modernism in the postcolonial era remains up for debate: not only was it designed by an outsider—and a Western architect at that, recalling Le Corbusier in Chandigarh or Kahn in Dhaka—it was commissioned by a *colonial* power in what remains a *colonial* context (though New Caledonia's independence movement has been slowly making progress), meaning that budgetary and resource restrictions were not equivalent to other, more orthodox examples of local modernism in the Global South. However, for at least two reasons, I will argue that the Tjibaou Cultural Centre is a valuable addition to St. John Wilson's catalog.<sup>1</sup> First, the manifestation of the Centre was made possible by a unique compatibility between the localized, postcolonial politics of 'the other' and the pragmatic, and therefore politically malleable, approach of the architect. Examining the historical and political circumstances of the project reveals that many of the major architectural decisions represent as much the politics of its namesake, the local political activist Jean-Marie Tjibaou, as it does the design process of the Building Workshop. Thus, while the architect may hail from the continent of colonizers, the project itself is an attempt to embody localized postcolonial beliefs and aspirations. Second, the design process for the Tjibaou Centre recognized several contradictions—in this case, the dialectical struggles between modernity and tradition, global and local, individual and community, tolerance and resistance—then synthesized them into architectural form. Not only does this 'contemporary vernacular' harken back to St. John Wilson's affinities for 'an alternative philosophy' to the modern movement, these dialectical pairings precisely match those that distinguish the postcolonial paradigm. Therefore, the Tjibaou Centre may indeed offer valuable lessons for those seeking to revitalize the project of local modernism. This essay is an attempt to extract those lessons by briefly recounting the project's germination, design, and construction through the lens of 'the uncompleted project.'



Figure 1: A memorial statue of Jean-Marie Tjibaou on the Centre's grounds (Flickr user RasBo).

## HOW THE PROJECT CAME TO BE

The Renzo Piano Building Workshop was awarded the Tjibaou Centre project in 1991. However, the story of how the project was brought to fruition began much earlier. The man whose name the Cultural Centre bears, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, was the son of a tribal chief of the Kanak—the Melanesian people native to the New Caledonia region—and an outspoken political leader during the politically-tumultuous period of the 1970s and 80s. While studying anthropology and Kanak cultural identity in France, Tjibaou witnessed the revolutionary challenge to traditional French social and cultural institutions in 1968. Returning to New Caledonia, he became involved in political activism as part of the emerging Kanak independence movement. Turmoil between inhabitants of the island territory peaked, with indigenous residents largely calling for independence and expatriates wishing to remain under the protection of the French Government. Tjibaou's approach to Kanak identity, shaped by his experiences abroad, was based on the perspective that,

the way back to pre-contact Kanak traditions is irretrievably ruptured by the experience of European colonization and modernity, and the changes entailed. A direct line of unmediated access to the past is understood to be impossible. However [Tjibaou's] vision of Kanak history is not conceived solely in terms of loss. He scopes all issues concerning the future of Kanak identity dynamically: emphasizing a cultural politics-of-becoming rather than a politics-of-origins (Murphy 2002: 79).

This pragmatic approach placed Tjibaou at odds with the more radical factions within the Kanak independence movement, who supported a return to historical roots of cultural identity, leading to his assassination in 1989.

In 1975, Tjibaou had arranged the Melanesia 2000 event, a celebration of Kanak arts that marked "one of the key moments in the struggle for cultural and political recognition by France" (McInstry 1998: 30), held atop a promontory in New Caledonia's capital city, Nouméa. Just prior his death, Tjibaou explicitly called for a cultural center to be constructed on the same site.<sup>2</sup> The selection of the site had more than just cultural or spiritual importance, however, as Tjibaou made clear when he demanded that,

this place must be in Nouméa because Nouméa is a city of the white people, and the white people must know that they are not in their home country, but they are in the country of the Kanak. [It] must be in Nouméa because the Kanak who live in the city must be able to find their roots, to help them enter in the modern world (Vassal 1998: 107).

Thus, the germination of the project began as a corollary to the psychological effects of imperial subjugation with the intention that the Centre's design and presence would mediate between the various racial, political, and cultural factions of a multicultural society. As will become clear, Jean-Marie Tjibaou's vision of Kanak cultural identity was one of the most influential parameters in shaping Piano's fundamental design decisions. How to embody and project Tjibaou's nuanced notion of cultural identity was itself the crux of the design problem.

This overview of the local political context helps to more accurately frame Renzo Piano's ensuing architectural process. However, such a local political moment should also be properly contextualized within a global perspective. The architectural commissioning of the project actually began in earnest at the behest of the French Territorial Government, as "part of an affirmative action plan...to ameliorate the circumstances of an aggrieved colonised people" (Murphy 2002: 80). As the last of the Mitterrand Administration's Grand Projects, the Cultural Centre and its institutional

body were promised “in return for postponing independence” (Miyake 1998: 82). In this sense, the project can be seen as a manifestation and instrument of global geopolitical—and postcolonial—bargaining. Thus, Coleman (2005: 287) asks,

Is it a guilt offering, peace offering, or something else? It can be the third only if the [French] government is genuinely pursuing a path toward decolonization leading, ultimately, to self-rule by the Kanak people of their own land, a prospect that, at least for the moment, seems exceptionally far off.

In this light, the political potential of the Centre remains unfinished.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in the meantime, it will continue to act as a lynchpin for the uncompleted project of constructing a modern Kanak cultural identity. As Findley (2005: xi) argues,

the building became a significant addition to the emergence of the Kanak as serious and important cultural participants in New Caledonia and in the Pacific region. It made them visible in a profoundly new way—a way understood in a global context and in the global language of architecture.



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### THE DESIGN PROCESS

From the outset of his involvement with the project, Piano was aware of the inherent difficulties embedded within the building committee’s aspirations and the delicate balance that the architecture itself must play: “The dread of falling into the trap of a folkloric imitation, of straying into the realm of kitsch and the picturesque, was a constant worry throughout this work” (Piano 1997: 180). The design process, then, focused heavily on the symbolic importance of the building; even the most mundane details would be interpreted under high scrutiny:

it was not a tourist village that I had to build. I had to create a symbol: a cultural Centre devoted to Kanak civilization, the place that would represent them to foreigners and pass on their memory to their grandchildren. Nothing could have been more loaded with symbolic expectations (*ibid.*: 174).

To ensure successful symbolic interpretation of Kanak identity in his architectural product, Piano undertook the design process as part of a larger anthropological research project and cross-cultural dialogue between client and design team. The eventual outcome of this collaborative process supports St. John Wilson’s claim that, “The quality of intervention that is drawn out in response to dialogue is not

Figure 2: As this aerial photograph from Google Earth shows, the Cultural Centre’s idyllic location actually sits between an airport and a golf course.

only more authentic but much richer in content than that which is inspired by monologue” (1995: 57). Integral to the process was French anthropologist Alban Bensa, who had been conducting ethnographic research in New Caledonia since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on working with Piano, Bensa (2005: 264) writes,

The architect did not ask ethnology to affix on the project a label of traditional-ity, but, on the contrary, to bring the distant past as close as possible in order for its meaning to be vividly felt in the present. With this aim in mind, the build-er’s intent was for the ethnologist to come up with the components (forms, materials, ideas) that would allow, through the architecture of the structure, the Kanak people to build a modern image of themselves, one retaining links with their past while projecting their community into the future.



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Bensa was most influential in helping translate Kanak cosmology and vernacular landscape planning strategies into major design decisions. These included arranging the vertical *cases* along a covered, axial *alée* and the Kanak Path, a winding trail that employs landscape elements to represent the Kanak creation story. As a testament to the success of this ethnographic approach, Findley (1998: 101-3) writes,

In Kanak tradition, an indirect path is the proper way to approach a dwelling. On the Centre’s opening day, non-Kanak visitors searched in confusion for the entrance, while Kanak visitors wandered calmly to it.

The form-finding process for the Cultural Centre was an exercise in cross-cultural exchange, since, according to the design team, the Kanak people have no vernacular precedent of ‘architecture’:

The Kanaks have been here in New Caledonia for much more than four thousand years, and they have never built any buildings. The huts are made from perishable materials, and never passed down to the next generation. Their tradition is not in a single building, but in the topology and the pattern of construction (Vassal 1998: 107).

Figure 3: Leeward side of the building showing the flat-roofed *alée* with vertical *cases* behind (Flickr user RasBo).

The ultimate design consists of ten basket-like *cases* developed through an intuitive and collaborative design process that manipulated traditional Kanak dwellings into a recognizable yet unique form (Figure 3):

Through a series of study models, Piano stripped transformed cases of thatch and substituted battens of *iroko* (an African wood) for the cross pieces. They removed the central pole and spread open the rafter like the petals of a flower. With tips no longer meeting, the rafters become upright structural ribs, fabricated of glue-laminated *iroko* (Findley 1998: 103-4).

Thus, the form of the *cases* is not, as might be presumed, a direct facsimile of a Kanak hut (Figure 4). Rather, the “containers of an archaic appearance” (Piano 1997: 176) are Piano’s attempt at fabricating a “remembering of a hut” (Vassal 1998: 107), the “result from a long process of trial and error” (Murphy 2002: 85) of cross-cultural dialogue with the building committee until the form, construction, and material composition evoked an appropriate, contemporary expression of traditional forms. The Centre’s Cultural Director, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, interprets the upper edges of the *cases* as such:

‘Reminiscent of (Kanak) houses but opening onto a dream of the future’, they have a feeling of incompleteness, bringing to mind that Kanak culture itself is not static but is always open to change (Murphy 2002: 85).

Here, Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s vision of a ‘cultural politics of becoming’ is married with Piano’s signature ‘material lightness’ into an appropriate architectural form.

On the leeward side of the *cases* runs a continuous, linear *allee* (see Figure 3). Critics have interpreted Piano’s modernist expression of this spinal element as another conscious attempt toward cultural agency: “Piano chose a clear international vocabulary of horizontally proportioned glass and steel flat-roofed boxes” to “provide a visual and cultural foil for the soaring curving shapes of the *cases*” (Findley 2005: 70). Thus, at the building scale, the two elements re-emphasize the common narrative: “This ‘high-tech, soft-touch’ approach manages to unite Western rationality and local tradition” (Sacchi 2007: 20). So rather than attempting to appear as neutral ground, the ‘imported’ architecture of the *allee* can be seen as acting in productive, dialectical relation with the place-based *cases*—a more complex and nuanced interplay than is evident in any of St. John Wilson’s exemplary buildings. Describing the *allee*, Findley (2005: 76) writes, “Clearly this part of the building symbolizes the international community which the Kanak are entering.” Other critics are less sympathetic; for instance, Austin (2007: 159) argues that Piano’s architectural license helps preserve the colonial legacy of misrecognition and commodification, arguing that, “The building organizes and re-frames the indigenous.” Yet, the more legitimate claim would seem to be that the Centre genuinely represents the politics of its namesake:

Jean-Marie Tjibaou laid a framework for a New Caledonia where a Kanak identity would not only be modern but where Kanak identity would inform and influence modernity itself—in that sense the Tjibaou Centre fulfils its purposes (Losche 2007: 76).

Once the project’s site strategies and major forms had been determined, the process turned to decisions of materials and construction details. When it came to articulating and cladding the iconic *cases* of the Centre, Piano decided on wood as the primary material for two main reasons. First, wood is a direct reference to vernacular techniques of residential construction. Here again, Piano is confronted with a contradiction, between evoking the ephemeral while optimizing the building’s durability. The selection of *iroko* made sense not only because its natural weather- and water-resistant qualities reduced maintenance costs, but because the species, “evokes the intertwined plant fibers of the local constructions”



Figure 4: A traditional Kanak house constructed on the grounds, with the Centre in the background (Flickr user ggallezot).

(Piano 1997: 176). Typical of Piano's oeuvre, the kit-of-parts that comprises the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, including connections between the laminated wood, glass, and steel, are highly legible. In this case, the details needed to reflect a Kanak understanding of construction, and Piano made sure that the clients could 'recognize themselves' in the details. Upon reaching what he felt was an appropriate structural detail, Piano explained his feeling of satisfaction,

When you see that steel structure, you can't say it's just a redrawing of a traditional hut. But the way the parts go together is easy to understand and logical, like the traditional hut, so it works. We didn't work in a basic way just to copy it, but we tried to understand the spirit and work on that (Vassal 1998: 108).

Piano also chose wood in order to glean and evoke certain qualities of the natural surroundings. Over time, "Piano hopes that the rot-proof *iroko* ribs will weather to the same pale silvery grey as the trunks of the indigenous palm trees" (McInstry 1998: 35). This hope has since come to pass, as Coleman (2005: 285) remarks: "Happily, the building is now less striking than it was when new. Rather than garishly sticking out of the landscape, it emerges organically from the land it inhabits as an integral part of it, while also calling attention to it" (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: The *iroko* has begun to grey, helping to ground the structure to its surroundings (Flickr user MomLes).

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Piano's decision to import mahogany from West Africa, then have it shaped and laminated in France before being assembled in the South Pacific certainly does not follow best practices of sustainable design. But Findley (2005: 64) defends Piano's decision to largely eschew using local materials and labor:

Historical Kanak construction materials and methods are patently unsuitable, and the locally available imported construction technologies, functional in the extreme, were not any better from either a conceptual or material point of view.

For these reasons and others, she argues that, "The Tjibaou Cultural Centre sits outside of easy politically correct condemnations, either cultural or environmental" (*ibid.*: 76). In line with his reputation, Piano was careful not to let ethical or theoretical dogmatism undermine his pragmatic design process.

## CONCLUSION

In fact, Renzo Piano often hides behind the mantle of anti-theory, avoiding discussions of anything he considers 'intellectual'. His projects are characterized as a "consequence of an architecture of action where there is no room for thought

apart from what is required for construction” (Rocca 1994: 45). And his reflections on the design process make it appear as though any decision is made merely out of prudent necessity. In the design of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Piano seems to follow St. John Wilson’s notion of a ‘Classical’ architectural process:

the Classical ethos requires of architectural design a strict linear sequence that proceeds from the discovery of what is desirable to the invention of an appropriate form and thence to the elaboration of the technical means that make it possible (1995: 41).

Yet in this instance, and in spite his anti-political reputation, Piano benefited from the content and theoretical consistency of Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s politics for determining ‘what was desirable’. St. John Wilson is adamant that, “Architecture is neither the plaything of aesthetes nor the servant of necessity, but the embodiment of a desired way of life; only in the pursuit of that ambition does its true origin lie” (1995: 58). Thus, it is somewhat ironic that a project founded upon such lofty, even utopian, pursuits of cultural expression has become a signature building of an architect known for his exceptionally rational approach to design. In the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, the political-symbolic and the tangible-pragmatic converged toward architecture’s ultimate goal, “to realize some desirable end that can only be fulfilled by a building” (St. John Wilson 1995: 40), and to a greater degree than any of St. John Wilson’s own examples.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Worth noting is the fact that the project has already been selected as exemplary in at least two other ‘catalogs’: Findley (2005: xii) includes the Centre in her cases of cultural agency, of designers using “their position as *architects* to support the emergence of previously marginalized people”, and Coleman (2005) includes the Centre as a contemporary example of a built project that embodies utopian principles. Their arguments align significantly with one another, as well as my own.
2. Prevalently printed photographs and site plans make the Centre appear within a remote, natural setting; while it indeed sits atop a wooded promontory, it also lies within the metropolitan boundaries of one of the fastest growing urban centers in the Pacific—nestled in one of Nouméa’s last remaining pine forests between a golf course and New Caledonia’s largest airport (see Figure 2). Thus, despite its idyllic reputation, the site selection is consistent with Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s desire to project a forward-looking cultural icon to non-Kanaks.
3. New Caledonia’s plans for independence still remain on hold, no doubt due in part to the island containing 25-30% of the world’s nickel resources.
4. Collaboration between an architect and anthropologist raises its own set of ethical questions, such as: why not hire an anthropologist for every architectural undertaking—not just in the colonized world, where ethnography has historically been tied to the imperial project? Certainly, this dilemma is not solely Renzo Piano’s to bear; but particularly because this method has garnered praise from so many architectural critics, it seems appropriate to question its application.