

# Polynesian Influences in New Zealand Architecture

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The islands of Aotearoa/New Zealand have two main populations - Maori and Pakeha (non Maori). Maori arrived from Polynesia over one thousand years ago and the Pakeha settlers (mostly from Europe) over the last two hundred years. Maori now constitute nearly 15% of the population of less than four million people. Maori buildings were called whare, and consisted of a single enclosed space with a small doorway, and were of gable or arched form constructed of timber and thatch. The roof extended over the entrance to form a sheltered porch. This was the prototype for all Maori building. The influence of this architecture on that of Aotearoa/New Zealand is, we are regularly told very small. Hurst Seager writing around 1900 is usually taken to be the first commentator on New Zealand architecture: "Here in New Zealand the only historical examples of art we have are the works of the Maoris; and these, though excellent examples of savage art are scarcely suitable as standards on which to found our national taste."<sup>1</sup>

This relies on a clear and comfortable differentiation of the savage that was the focus of Loos' assertion that the tattoo was acceptable on the primitive but not on the civilized.<sup>2</sup> Civilization is further defined as "British" fifty years later by Knight.

*"The Maori race, dominant in some other fields, had little architectural influence. They have it is true a native architecture interesting and valuable from a historical point of view, but it served a way of living entirely opposed to the British civilization. Apart from some influence in detailed ornament it could have little effect upon contemporary design."<sup>3</sup>*

Knight confines Maori influence to the traditional and decorative in much the way that the role of Maori in New Zealand public life has been restricted to the entertainer. This consignment to the history and ornament categories has meant to the margins, but there is now an increasing interest in both history and ornament - and the marginal. According to Knight, Maori architecture as well as being ornamental, is concerned with detail, and a few years later the architects Pascoe and Hall in a journal article say that: "Except for the typical carving on early Maori buildings, there is little in New Zealand architecture that can be said to be distinctive or indigenous."<sup>4</sup>

Pevsner on his 1958 visit to New Zealand declined to comment on Maori art and architecture because he said he was "not an expert." This lack did not however prevent him from pointing out that "the crafts of the Maoris are gone."<sup>5</sup> Shaw perpetuates this nostalgia when he says in a note at the beginning of *New Zealand Architecture*: "Very little of the old Maori architecture survives today."<sup>6</sup> Stacpoole and Beaven in their book *New Zealand Architecture 1820 - 1970* do not discuss pre-European architecture at all.<sup>7</sup> Stacpoole in *Colonial Architecture in New Zealand*, summed up the conventional wisdom that for the European there was "...no significant architecture to be digested."<sup>8</sup> This is a peculiar expression (as is Hurst Seager's 'national taste') given the association of Maori with

anthropophagy and the tendency by pakeha to cannibalise Maori architecture and place it in museums. Recent work on cannibalism focuses precisely on New Zealand and the question of just who the cannibals were at the moment of intercultural exchange.<sup>9</sup> Cannibalism as the sign of the other, has become a sign of undecidability. The consumption and (mis)appropriation of Maori aesthetic production is at stake, and while this issue has been engaged with by artists in New Zealand architectural discourse and practice have not been prepared to grapple with the issue.<sup>10</sup>

Mitchell and Chaplin's book on New Zealand Architecture since 1840, *The Elegant Shed*, mentions in passing that the architect Rewi Thompson has Maori ancestors.<sup>11</sup> The general dismissal of Maori influence in architecture continues up to the present where just last year Stewart writes: "There must also be a question over claims of Maori influence in an art form which has a very limited resource in Maori tradition."<sup>12</sup> This comment is in the context of a discussion about John Scott the architect of Futuna Chapel. The author of a book on the chapel, implies that Scott's Maori ancestry is no more important in the design of the chapel than his Scottish and Irish origins, and is possibly less significant than his Catholic upbringing.<sup>13</sup> The building, which commemorates a martyrdom on the Polynesian Island of Futuna, is however claimed by Walden to be an "architectural watershed in our indigenous struggle to be ourselves as Pacific people."<sup>14</sup>

The word indigenous raises the issue of identity - just who is indigenous?<sup>15</sup> In the nineteenth century a New Zealander was a Maori. The twentieth century saw the term refer to Pakeha as well. Indigenous however has now returned to referring to Maori only. On most international arenas and occasions New Zealand appeals to Maori identity which is ignored or neglected at other times. Beaven and Stacpoole appeal to the international but evoke local and colonial descriptions of Maori when they say about Futuna: "Integrity, decoration, and mysterious moods come together in this building to create one of the finest architectural experiences in New Zealand, and place the chapel in world class."<sup>16</sup>

However it is not clear why the building is considered to be decorated. Presumably it refers to the artwork and the coloured perspex glazing, which happens to be the work of a Pakeha artist. Walden says that Futuna is a "faithful celebration of Maori and Pakeha" and that "...the marriage of Maori and Pakeha is legitimate."<sup>17</sup> This anxiety about the issue of paternity and the question of ownership is raised but there is no clue of how this marriage was consummated other than "a new synthesis" of Maori and Pakeha values. Nor were there any offspring. Walden makes references to European precedents, such as Ronchamp - with illustrations. There are no illustrations of Maori precedents.

And there was a Maori precedent. Almost exactly a century earlier there was a building with an uncanny resonance with Futuna. This is the so called 'Maori Church' Rangiatea which like Futuna was named after

a Polynesian island and was remarkably similar to the later building with its timber posts, exposed rafters, and branches of freestanding diagonal struts. This building was also described as 'decorated' although it was explicitly not carved, carving being the sign of the savage. The decoration here is confined to rafter patterns and tukutuku wall panelling. Walden does not mention Rangiatea as an influence on John Scott but it is very unlikely that Scott did not know the building – or rather representations of it. There were diverse drawings of Rangiatea, sometimes implying that the building is no longer in existence and perpetuating the nostalgia in relation to Maori- prophetically as it happened, as the building was burnt down in 1995.<sup>18</sup> Shaw begins Chapter 1 with an interior photograph of Rangiatea (and Chapter 9 with Futuna) claiming that this building was; "the first to blend Maori and European building traditions."<sup>19</sup> He does not say how this occurred and Treadwell has articulated in detail the ingredients and complexity of this 'blending'. Stacpoole and Beaven insist that the initiation and the supervision of the structure was by Europeans, which is again to simplify a matter of some complexity.<sup>20</sup>

Maori architecture has not been taken seriously in these publications on New Zealand architecture. On the other hand scholarly endeavour in general in New Zealand has tended to focus on Maori issues, and this is also true in architecture, where there are theses and a number of papers dealing with Maori architecture.<sup>21</sup> There is a scholarly and thorough history of nineteenth century meeting houses by Roger Neich, and Alfred Gell uses the meeting house as his exemplar for a comprehensive theory of art.<sup>22</sup> There is a possibility that the influence of Maori architecture has been more significant than is acknowledged in the same way as the Pacific has been influential in Western thinking as an unspoken factor.<sup>23</sup> Maori motifs were incorporated in building ornament up until the nineteen fifties. Often Maori motifs were used as part of the orders, which are the very authorisation of the building as architecture.<sup>24</sup> There are well known examples incorporating Maori motifs in the Art Deco decoration on the buildings of a town rebuilt after it was destroyed by a devastating earthquake in the nineteen thirties. Here the local is legitimised by the international.<sup>25</sup> The ornamental is the repressed side of modern architecture so that by being restricted to the decorative, Maori architecture became doubly dismissed.

McKay argues that fifties modernist architects, with nationalist concerns, attempted to incorporate Maori forms in the architecture of timber and pitched roofs that was the local version of modernism.<sup>26</sup> Shaw proposes that "the appropriation of Maori forms were symptomatic of the desire of many architects and artists to find a means of expression which could possibly be called a New Zealand vernacular style."<sup>27</sup> He suggests that it was a motivating factor behind the work of the influential group of postwar architects known as the 'Group' - especially a house that was called the 'pakeha house'.<sup>28</sup> Two Auckland churches refer to the meeting-house - but in these cases it was the form and not the decoration (or for that matter the structure) of the whare that was taken seriously. This of course was consistent with modernist views, but it meant that Maori architecture continued to be seen as different to mainstream New Zealand architecture. One way of ignoring Maori architecture is to consign it to the traditional, so that as the other, it is seen as vernacular or anthropological.

On the other hand at the time of first European settlement there was no question that what Maori built was architecture. In 1840 Angus said:

*"With a view to perpetuate the singular and beautiful architectural remains of these people, I made carefully finished drawings on the spot of all those most worthy of record, and thus rescued from certain and speedy oblivion the works of art of a race of men who are undergoing a most rapid and extraordinary change."<sup>29</sup>*

This comment initiates the nostalgia that characterized the subsequent discourse. It also assumes that the influence flows one way from European to Maori. On the other hand it has often been suggested

that in early contacts between Maori and Pakeha "... the qualities of the indigenes are the most profound influence on the kind of settler society which is imposed upon them."<sup>30</sup> From the beginning of European settlement the immigrant was dependent upon Maori goodwill, trade and production - a history that has been forgotten.<sup>31</sup> This was also the time of the flowering of a unique building - the store-house - when carving appeared on the surface of the building instead of being confined to the interior. These buildings, along with war canoes, died and were buried in museums.

In the eighteen sixties Maori won the battles but lost the wars over land and this led to a drastic decline in Maori population for the next thirty years.<sup>32</sup> This period however produced a most extraordinary architectural response, which was to develop the architecture of the meeting house. Deriving from the whare this building owes much to the church to which it is spatially similar but theoretically and conceptually quite opposed. European elements such as doors, windows, fretwork, roofing iron and weatherboards were appropriated and experimented with in the development of the house. This was an assemblage rather than a 'synthesis' by Maori, where European elements were collaged onto the whare form. The so called rebel Te Kooti was the definer of the classic form of the meeting house which has been the model ever since. He built these significant houses while a fugitive from the British, was reviled until relatively recently in Pakeha history, and the Ringatu religion that he founded was suppressed for over half a century.<sup>33</sup>

McKay argues that there has been a suppression of other architectural forms than the meeting-house and points out that there were many other both pre-European and post-European architectural forms. He argues that this stereotyping serves to limit understanding of Maori architecture and its substantial regional variations. On the other hand the meeting house is an extraordinary achievement, and to repeat its most remarkable aspect was that it achieved its classic form in the 1870s and 1880s - at the very moment that the Maori population was in crisis from wars and disease and the European role was seen to "soothe the pillow of the dying race." The house looked to the past where the building is literally and in every detail the ancestor's body. The house also looked forward, providing accommodation and hope for a possible future that no Pakeha believed existed.<sup>34</sup>

The Maori meeting house confounds the easy opposition between structure and decoration. In the house it is the structure that is decorated with carving, while the infill (tukutuku) panelling has its patterns created by the process of constructing a structurally stable flat panel out of reeds and fibre. These patterns are named, but derived from the fabrication process. With carving (as with the tattoo) the decoration is not applied, but rather cut into, the surface of the material which might be seen to open up and structurally weaken the members. It was a destruction of the surface, which Loos would argue was a disfiguring. But the intention was quite the opposite. The carvings were all human figures and they are seen to strengthen rather than weaken the structure. Owen Jones (half a century before Loos talked about the Papuan paddle) spoke about the Maori paddle, which he claimed "would rival the works of the highest civilisation" and he noted: "He (the New Zealander) desired not only that the paddle should be strong, but should appear so, and his ornament is so disposed as to give an appearance of additional strength to what it would have had if the surface had remained undecorated"<sup>35</sup>

Today most meeting-houses are decorated and the architecture of these buildings is constituted by their decoration. John Scott said: "The Maori will not worry about buildings but he will worry about those particular kinds of things he has around - the carvings and tukutuku work."<sup>36</sup> Those nostalgically committed to loss mourn the present day absence of a structural rôle for the carvings, but the Maori view (that the ornament is the architecture) has given to structure the rôle of supporting and holding up the ornament. For example in the Auckland University meeting house the structure is a steel frame with timber

infill to which the carvings are attached. The steel frame can be seen as subservient to the carvings producing the typical Semperian reversals that seem to occur around this topic.<sup>37</sup> Carving is allowed (necessary even) on meeting houses but not on European buildings thereby reinforcing the difference. The meeting house is always associated with an open space onto which it opens, called the marae and it is now difficult to believe that it was assumed thirty years ago that this institution (along with Maori language) would be limited to occasional and ritual use.<sup>38</sup> Some claimed that only traditional sites and structures were allowable for the building.<sup>39</sup> However marae and meeting houses have now replaced churches as community buildings in New Zealand, being built at almost every educational and community institution in the country.

The marae was central to the design of the New Zealand National Museum (known as Te Papa) where instead of just being enclosed as in other museums the marae and meeting house gets lifted off the ground and interiorised. The Te Papa meeting house seems to respond to this isolation where the decoration is wonderfully innovative and excessive, crawling out over the bargeboard as if it has been held inside for far too long. However the decoration, and indeed, the marae never made it to the exterior of the building. Kawiti has pointed out that Te Papa is located on the beach - the site of arrival, departure and pleasure for the European.<sup>40</sup> This museum owes more to Europe than to Polynesia and it lost the opportunity to use the marae as approach and to ornament the exterior.

There is another building by the architect John Scott, not mentioned by Walden, where carving was used on the exterior as 'decorative' panels on the facade. This is the Maori Battalion building in Palmerston North:

*"It initially seems strange that this building is so unrecognised by the architectural profession. In the many retrospective articles in Architecture New Zealand dedicated to Scott's work there is no mention of this building. In comparison Te Ao Hou: The Maori Magazine dedicated a front cover and article to this work, showering the building with praise"*<sup>41</sup>

In this project Scott (mis)appropriated English New Brutalism and decorated it with Maori carving. The carvings weave their way across the glass façade so that the "equivalent sized windows and carvings become, in many ways, a reversal or negative of each other."<sup>42</sup> Steiner gives several readings of the impropriety of this façade arguing that this is no easy harmonious mixing. On the other hand, Maori commentary said: "Here at last is a building incorporating both Maori and European elements of architecture which are not only happily and harmoniously wedded, but which show conclusively that it is possible for New Zealand to develop unique architectural forms."<sup>43</sup> Again the marriage metaphor and again, it seems, a union without issue - no one else has dared to do this - not even (or maybe especially) Maori architects. Interestingly Scott and some other Maori (such as the Maori prophets Te Whiti, Rua and Ratana) have never felt entirely comfortable with the meeting-house in its conventional form. Some have worked hard to change the wooden aspects of Maori architecture. Other architects have resisted an ethnic identification but these days it leads to commissions. The issue is one of identity and many architects claim a geographic, rather than a racial or cultural belonging, which sees architects claiming a Pacific identity. Perhaps it is because Pacific buildings do not have the decorative dilemmas of the carved house. Perhaps it is because the Pacific Islands voice lacks local power. The mention of the Pacific returns us to the problematic title. Polynesian does not distinguish between the various and different Pacific Island groups and between them and Maori. Talk of influence is to perpetuate the New Zealand obsession with origins

and sources and anxieties about ownership. Influence is in the end about power and it is not sufficient explanation of the complex interrelated formations and decisions that constitute a piece of architecture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>S. Hurst Seager, 'Architectural Art in New Zealand', *RIBA Journal*, Vol. VII, No 19, (29 Sept 1900): 490.

<sup>24</sup>The Papuan covers with tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddle, in short anything within his reach. He is not a delinquent but the modern man who tattoos himself is a delinquent or a degenerate." Adolph Loos, "Ornament and Crime", 1908 Trans. Michael Bullock, in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th Century Architecture*, Ulrich Conrads (ed) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975): 20.

<sup>3</sup>Cyril Knight, *1840 and After*, (Auckland: Auckland University College, 1940): 180-181.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Pascoe and Humphrey Hall, 'The Modern House', *Landfall*, Vol 1, No 2, (June 1947)124.

<sup>5</sup>Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Ingratiating Chaos', *The Listener*, (November 20, 1958): 825.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture: From Polynesian Beginnings to 1990*, (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991): 10.

<sup>7</sup>For which they were criticised at the time. Peter Sargisson, 'Architectural Truths', *Islands*, Vol 2, No 3, (Spring 1973): 303-304. The two buildings illustrated are Rangiatea Church at Otaki and Major Fox's house, which has a small Gothic storehouse alongside - and to which the text gives more significance. John Stacpoole and Peter Beaven, *New Zealand Art: Architecture 1820-1970*, (Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1972): 34.

<sup>8</sup>John Stacpoole, *Colonial Architecture in New Zealand*, (Wellington: AH and AW Reed, 1976): 8.

<sup>9</sup>Specifically over a crucial event that took place in Queen Charlotte Sound. Gananath Obeyesekere, 'British Cannibals: Contemplation of an event in the death and resurrection of James Cook explorer'. *Beyond Textuality, Asceticism and Violence in Anthropological Interpretation*, Gilles Bibeau and Ellen Corin, (eds), (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995): 145.

<sup>10</sup>Vanya Steiner, '(Mis)appropriation in New Zealand Architecture; an incriminating cite,' *Interstices 4*, Auckland University (CD ROM, 1996). Lloyd Jenkins argues that Maori images were being used by designers before the turn of last century. Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, 'Avis Higgs and the Maori Motif Textile,' *The Pumpkin Soup Papers*, Research Papers in the School of Design UNITEC, (Auckland, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin, *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture since 1945*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984): 93-94. Gerald Melling, *Joyful Architecture: The Genius of New Zealand's Ian Athfield*, (Dunedin: Caveman Press, 1980). Also *Positively Architecture: New Zealand's Roger Walker*, (Dunedin: Square One Press, 1985). The most recent publication on New Zealand architecture, *Looking at the Local* refers briefly to the whare. Justine Clark and Paul Walker, *Looking for the Local: Architecture and the New Zealand Modern*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2000): 31.

<sup>12</sup>Keith Stewart, 'living through art,' *Architecture New Zealand*, (July/August, 1999): 50.

<sup>13</sup>Although it is admitted that: "His lifestyle owes much to Polynesian values" Russell Walden, *Voices of Silence*: 58.

<sup>14</sup>Walden, *Voices of Silence*: 134

<sup>15</sup>Walden describes John Scott as "a relaxed New Zealander." Walden, *Voices of Silence*: 58.

<sup>16</sup>Stacpoole and Beaven, *New Zealand Art: Architecture 1820-1970*: 92.

<sup>17</sup>Walden, *Voices of Silence*: 147.

<sup>18</sup>Sarah Treadwell, 'European Representations of the architecture of Rangiatea', PhD Thesis, Auckland University School of Architecture Library, 1995.

<sup>19</sup>Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture*: 22.

- <sup>20</sup>Bishop Hadfield provided the inspiration for Rangiatea but it was built under the supervision of Samuel Williams.<sup>7</sup> Stacpoole and Beaven, *New Zealand Art: Architecture 1820-1970*: 16.
- <sup>21</sup>Recently McCarthy has drawn attention to the complex architectural exchange in Dunedin's 'Maori House.' Christine McCarthy 'The Maori House', 'Te Pa' and Captain Hankey's House": bicultural architecture in New Zealand at the turn of the century.' *Fabrications*, Vol 11, Number 1, (July 2000): 62-78.
- <sup>22</sup>Roger Neich, *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting*, (Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1993). "The totality of Maori meeting houses, therefore constitutes a particular genre of art production, over a particular historical phase in the course of Maori history (in many ways a glorious period, which contemporary Maoris recall with pride), which can be considered 'coherent' in the sense we require." Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1998): 251.
- <sup>23</sup>As documented by Bernard Smith Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). The Polynesian words taboo and tattoo were discussed by Freud and Loos respectively in significant modernist texts. Mike Austin, 'Taboo and Tattoo: Freud Loos and South Pacific Practices,' *Double Frames: Proceedings of the first International Symposium of the Centre for Asian Environments*, Maryam Gusheh, (ed) (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2000): 33-42.
- <sup>24</sup>Examples are the Auckland war Memorial Museum and the Wanganui Post Office. Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture*: 122.
- <sup>25</sup>Peter Shaw and Peter Hallett, *Art Deco Napier: styles of the thirties*, (Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 1987): 46-48.
- <sup>26</sup>Bill McKay, 'The Whare face of Modernism', *FIRM(ness) commodity DE-LIGHT: questioning the canons*, Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (Melbourne, 1998) 262.
- <sup>27</sup>Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture*: 154.
- <sup>28</sup>Paradoxically the Group's reverse reference to Maori was commented on in two British Architectural Journals *Architects Journal*, March 1951. Quoted by Bill McKay, 'The Whare face of Modernism: 260, and 'New Zealand Vernacular,' *The Architect and Building News* (9 Jun 1950):585. quoted by Robin Skinner, 'Larrikins Abroad: International accounts of New Zealand architects in the 1970s and 1980s', *Proceedings of Thresholds: the fourteenth annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand*, Launceston, (September 1999): 302.
- <sup>29</sup>George French Angas, *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, 1847 Vol II, (London: Smith Elder and Co, 1847): 88-89
- <sup>30</sup>David Pearson, *A Dream Deferred: The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in New Zealand*, (Wellington: Allen and Unwin, 1990): 39.
- <sup>31</sup>"It must be confessed that the huts built by them [Maori] were much superior to those of our handywork." Henry William Petre, *An Account of the Settlement of the New Zealand Company*, (London: Smith Elder and Co, 1842): 11.
- <sup>32</sup>James Belich, *Making peoples: A history of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the end of the nineteenth century*, (Auckland: Allen Lane, 1996).
- <sup>33</sup>Mike Linzey, 'Te Kooti Architect,' *Architecture New Zealand*, (Sept-Oct 1989): 90- 95.
- <sup>34</sup>The 'Anytime' conference which focussed on the temporal in architecture, failed to look at this double architectural process where buildings respond to the crisis of the present by constituting protensions and pretensions. Cynthia Davidson (ed), *Anytime*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
- <sup>35</sup>Owen Jones *The Grammar of Ornament*, London: B Quaritch, 1868, 13 n.
- <sup>36</sup>John Scott and Ming Ching-Fan, 'Of Woolsheds, Houses and People', *Islands*, Vol 2 No 3. (Spring 1973): 291.
- <sup>37</sup>This building uses the colonial style which is identified with Maori Meeting houses much as Maori ritual life seems to operate with a nineteenth century missionary version of Christianity.
- <sup>38</sup>Bruce Biggs, 'The Maori lanuage Past and Present', *The Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*, Eric Schwimmer (ed), (Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1968): 447- 454
- <sup>39</sup>Hugh Kawharu, 'Urban Immigrants and Tangata Whenua,' *The Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*: 174 -186.
- <sup>40</sup>Derek Kawiti, Unpublished Paper, (July 2000).
- <sup>41</sup>Vanya Steiner, '(Mis)appropriation in New Zealand Architecture'.
- <sup>42</sup>Vanya Steiner, '(Mis)appropriation in New Zealand Architecture'.
- <sup>43</sup>*Te Ao Ho: The New World* (June 1964).32-34.