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PAPERS

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The New NZ: methods for  
reimagining the identity of  
Aotearoa NZ

If a country's landscape is a reflection of its culture (Lewis, 1979), one would expect to see evidence of a 'sharing or blending of two cultures on more or less equal terms' (McKay, as cited in Memmott and Davidson, 2008: p. 98) in our bi-cultural nation's designed landscapes. What we typically see, however, is a design default to a narrow number of archetypes and symbols typically expressed as standard forms and surface patterning (see fig. 1). These designs, while often well regarded, are 'by their very nature... superficial in terms of their cultural expression, narrative content, and cultural accommodation' (Simpson, 2008: p.2). Mackay's sharing on equal terms requires an unprecedented intensity of cultural exchange; so either bi-cultural exchange in this country is far from equal, or designers are not yet sufficiently conversant with the appropriate design modes and practices necessary to effect meaningful cultural exchange.

#### Background

This paper describes four years of research with iwi and hapu partners on the Horowhenua coast (see fig. 2), where accelerated and inappropriate land use have led to environmental degradation and economic decline. The research explores the potential of design to re-establish cultural connections to ancestral lands for the benefit of all communities and, through the establishment of productive bi-cultural partnerships, to re-imagine a new bi-cultural future for NZ. The team includes masters students in Landscape Architecture at the School of Architecture at VUW, and Manaaki Taha Moana, a government funded iwi led research project established in 2009 to investigate the health of the region's extensive freshwater ecosystems. Design allows us to consider the inter-relationship between new economies, cultural practices and freshwater ecosystems, and in particular, to rigorously test how an emphasis on one can act as a catalyst for development of the other two. The work is consciously directed towards the realization of spatial solutions at the local, human scale while imagining the regional and global implications.

#### The Protocol

The Resource Management Act (RMA) 1991 recognises and provides for the values of both Māori and Pākehā in the development and protection of natural and physical resources but there are at least two major impediments to this objective: i) Māori values and knowledge systems and relationships with land and waterways and their kaitiaki (custodian) responsibilities for place, remain poorly understood and ii) amongst Pākehā there appears to be a fear of cultural transgression, which can be crippling for design.

To address these issues, we designed a protocol, effectively a third space to operate 'between cultures' that would encourage experimentation and innovation while leaving



Fig. 1. Te Aro Park, Wellington (2013) Google Earth 2009. 41°17'40.60", 174°46'51" elevation 3.0m. At: <<http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>> [Accessed on 38.08.13].



Fig. 2. Cairns, L. (2009) Aerial view of tribal region showing Tararua Ranges in the background.



Fig. 3. Author, (2010) Cultural Immersion.

the worldviews, knowledge bases and mental spaces of each culture intact. The protocol, basically a set of operating principles, is based on a model developed by Charles Royal which advocates for the creation of discrete spaces in which the cultures... 'can interact with one another while naturally evolving in their own way' (Royal 1998: p.10). The protocol's recommendations include: that bi-cultural partnerships should be preceded by an immersion in culture; be characterised by a fundamental shift in method; lead to innovation; have active Māori participation; use mainstream and Māori tools for analysis; include Māori values to evaluate the research; and not distort the context and content of cultural knowledge.

The protocol establishes the conditions for transgression to occur in an appropriate way. It is useful as both a diagnostic as well as a prescriptive design tool: its recommendations have guided the establishment of the partnership but they have also been referred to regularly to sharpen values and techniques. We have found that an intense front-loading of protocol techniques is an effective way of building the kind of trust in a relationship conducive to experimentation and innovative design outcomes. The extended period of cultural immersion (see fig. 3) has encouraged designers to recast their own insights and experiences through a series of radically different lenses and the process has become a defining characteristic of the partnership.

### Māori Methods

We have also begun to experiment with Māori methods, e.g. hīkoi , (walking/talking with others on whenua), whakapapa (the expression of interrelated and interdependent familial relationships between cosmology, peoples, environmental properties and land) and oral narrative (characterised by a continuous dialectic between past and present and future). Designers are asked to work with these methods and to position them within their own cultural and disciplinary contexts, in order to locate a lineage of analytical and generative design technique that might resonate. For example, hīkoi is aligned in non-Māori design with work by artist Richard Long and the Situationists, who incorporated 'rules' in their technique to radically shift perspective. To stimulate the enquiry we asked: What might an overlay of these techniques reveal? How can an understanding of the similarities as well as differences help to refine technique? What kind of outcome does this kind of radical subjectivity encourage? Does this process of alignment help to integrate cultural exchange at the level of value as well as aesthetic?

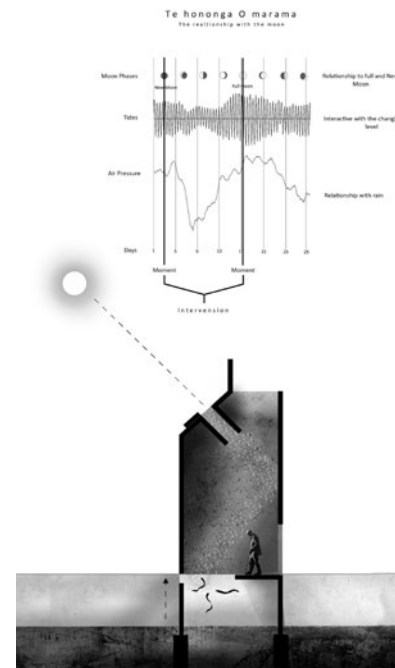


Fig. 4. Dewhirst, W. (2013) Te Hononga O Marama.





Fig. 5. Roberts, D. (2013) Oral Narrative “Life Support”.

### The Work

Examples of design responses include Dewhirst’s landscape ‘devices’ (see fig. 4), which spatialise and amplify, for the purposes of knowledge transmission, the whakapapa connections between seasons and the harvesting of resources (‘when it’s raining and the tide is low, the eels are running’). Roberts (see fig. 5) applied a set of ‘rules’ to extract the spatial dimensions of locally generated oral narratives and used this to generate the design of a space for the transmission of new narratives inspired by the cultural activities associated with the rehabilitation of ancestral lands.

### Conclusion

While physical outcomes are important, the significance of this project lies in the potential for design to interrogate and propose new methods and modes of bi-cultural engagement. The hope is that this might encourage a shift from the appropriation of Māori surface patterns and symbols towards a less token approach; one that integrates the rich knowledge base of two very different cultures on ‘more or less equal terms’ to solve some of this country’s most serious environmental challenges.

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