

Maori Time: Notions of Space, Time and Building Form in the South Pacific

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Abstract: *This paper investigates how Western notions of space, time and terrestrial reality may affect the perception of building form in other cultures, and have constrained our understanding of the indigenous architecture of the South Pacific. Maori concepts of space and time are explored to add a further dimension to understanding the Meeting House, which is widely considered to be the primary building of Maori architecture. This paper argues that Maori architecture may not conform to the Western model of the three dimensional object in space, and could also be understood as existing in time rather than space.*

Keywords: *Architecture; time; Maori*

Introduction

This paper investigates how Western notions of space, time and terrestrial reality may affect the perception of building form in other cultures, and have constrained our understanding of the indigenous architecture of the South Pacific. Maori concepts of space and time are explored to add a further dimension to understanding the Meeting House, which is widely considered to be the primary building of Maori architecture. This paper argues that Maori architecture may not conform to the Western model of the three dimensional object in space, and could also be understood as existing in time rather than space.

In August 1982, New Zealand Prime Minister Rob Muldoon found himself running behind the day's schedule of events. On his arrival at a function for Australian schoolchildren he commented that 'Maori time' was the reason for his late arrival, as he had just come from a conference of Maori elders (Auckland Star, 1982). 'Maori time' is a well known saying in New Zealand, referring to the Maori people's supposed lack of regard for time and timetables. It is a pejorative term in that it implies laziness and unreliability; that Maori are never 'on time'. The comment provoked two complaints to the Race Relations Conciliator who found the Prime Minister had not breached the Race Relations Act. The event prompted well known Maori academic and commentator, Ranginui Walker, to write a commentary 'A lot to learn about time' in his regular Maori issues column 'Korero' in the New Zealand *Listener* magazine. Walker commented on the Maori conception of time and space and noted Maori time had a positive meaning to Maori, which few Pakeha understood: 'All people who live in urban industrial societies have their lives regulated by measured time'... 'On the marae, the

authentic setting for Maori culture, these ideas, central to Maori time, slow down the rhythm of life. Measured time becomes meaningless as the values of relating to people, discussion and the arrival of consensus take over' (Walker, 1982, pp. 59–60).

This paper explores Maori concepts of space and time, and how an understanding of them may affect the perception of Maori architecture. We are all well aware of the issues and problems of cultural values and biases in the perception of other cultures, but very little has been written on time and architecture in relation to the cultures of the South Pacific. This paper aims to contribute to a wider reassessment of architecture's role that focuses on the haptic senses, the experiential, and the conception of time, space and building beyond the end of Modernism. It is fair to say that the Western perception of architecture is primarily visual and the building is seen as an object sitting in space. Levin (1993) has written on the dominance of the sense of vision and the ocular bias in Western culture, particularly in relation to Modernism, while Montagu (1986) and others have explored the possibilities of a haptic architecture involving the whole body and all senses in the experience of architecture, and this is often couched in terms of a return to the qualities of traditional or pre-industrial architecture.

Architecture is frequently described as three dimensional and Western architectural thought has usually focused on materiality: space, form, materials and decoration – indeed this conference's theme implies Interior Design exists on a continuum between an excess and austerity of materiality. Until the invention of film and the more recent shift to conceiving architecture in a digital medium, architecture has always been represented by the static point of view, in the static medium of paper. Architecture schools happily teach an appreciation of architectural history through the pictorial. Books, museums and Historical Societies preserve buildings frozen in a particular moment in time. But in recent years writers have begun to explore time in relation to architecture. As Harries (1982) wrote: 'Architecture is not only about domesticating space, it is also a deep defence against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality' (p. 19); and Pallasmaa (2000): 'Architecture's task to provide us with our domicile in space is recognised by most architects, but its second task in mediating our relation with the frighteningly ephemeral dimension of time is usually disregarded' (np).

We will argue that this abhorrence of time is part of a Western architectural bias, that other cultures of the South Pacific accept time and the processes of time as part of building, they accept mortality as part of architecture. Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow (1993) in their discussion of the effects of time – weathering, erosion, decay – showed that these are not

usually considered as positive elements in Western design; time and the elements are the enemies of building, the architectural artifact wishes to exist in a timeless space, an artificial condition separated from time. As Pallasmaa (2000) said: 'The architecture of the modern era aspires to evoke an air of ageless youth and of a perpetual present' (np). As will be seen, this attitude is the antithesis of some enormously important Maori cultural values such as a respect for age, the importance of a connection with the past, and the importance of connection with the land and the physical world. This paper's interest is in the cultural differences in the perception of time and space between Maori and European, and how they may affect the idea of architecture.

Space

The Maori conception of global space can seem diametrically opposed to the European. Earth is conventionally represented with north at the top, a relic of Western civilisation's European origins, as the universe has no up or down. Europeans refer to the north of New Zealand as the top, the south as the bottom. But the Maori word for north is 'raro', also meaning down or below or bottom (Williams, 1971). The word for south is 'runga', also meaning top or upwards or above (Williams, 1971). This is an inversion of the Western point of view, and derives from the arrival of Maori in New Zealand at the north of the country, then a steady settlement moving towards the south. So from the Maori point of view, as they faced this new land, where they had come from was behind them (the north), where they were going to was ahead of them (the south). This is a subjective orientation that is based on the point of reference of the people and their movement, rather than a supposedly external, objective Cartesian point of view.

Maps by Maori, such as Tuki-Tahua's map of New Zealand (drawn on the floor of a Norfolk Island house in 1793, then transcribed on paper) (Maling, 1999, p. 54), show a subjective distortion of scale favouring the authors' local area, Northland in this case, and the South Island diminishes into the distance. Interestingly Tuki-Tahua also shows a single highway running the length of the land – this turns out to be the path souls or spirits take, in Maori belief, to Cape Reinga at death. A map of the South Island drawn by 'a Maori' about 1841 for E.S. Halswell and published in 1894 (Maling, 1999, p. 55), again focuses on the qualitative, the experiential, rather than the quantitative and objective. As Johannes Anderson wrote in 1916: 'Two places would probably be shewn (sic) on a sketch as close together if the journey between them could be made quickly, or far apart if the journey were difficult or occupied a lengthy space of time. Again, a good harbour would be shewn larger than a poor one, their relative importance rather than their relative size being indicated' (Maling, 1999, p. 132).

This also illustrates the primacy of experienced time in traversal of the landscape rather than the objectification of space. *The New Zealand Historical Atlas* (1997), a recent New Zealand Government project, uses aerial perspectives, centred over particular regions, to portray Maori tribal areas (Bateman, 1997, p. 23). This is intended to indicate Maori's more intimate relationship with the land through the tribe's detailed knowledge of the immediate local area and the importance of local mountains and other landscape features in both a physical and spiritual sense. The drawings are saturated with bush, rivers, hills, streams and one can sense both distance and space, but also time, for example one can imagine how long it would take to walk through the landscape portrayed. As Anderson noted, this notion of the importance of time in the representation of landscape is important. Western maps show distance that can be scaled and measured but as a non-literate people Maori would have communicated geographical knowledge orally and from experience – how long the journey was, how hard it was, what you saw, whether it was worth it. This is a focus on subjective points of significance and topographical texture rather than an accurate objective picture of the breadth and dimension of land. The Atlas's Te Ao Maori (The Maori World) maps acknowledge the concept that it is an iwi's (tribe's) relationship with the land that is crucial, rather than the strict demarcation of spatial boundaries that we are familiar with from the Western political map. We can argue that this notion can be extended to Maori appreciation of architecture – that as with the land, architecture exists primarily in its relationship to the person moving through it, the way it is seen and experienced, the meaning of the building to the inhabitant, and that this is all based in time, more than it is in space.

A drawing from the Alexander Turnbull Library (Wellington), by an unknown Maori c.1860, portrays a landscape, but not in the form of a picture that we are familiar with from Western perspective, a framed window on the world. This drawing has no up or down; it is like a map or plan and relates its four sides to the horizon – with the observer's point of view at the centre and the edges of the drawing extending to four quarters of the world. Other drawings of the 1860's, by Aporo (in the Alexander Turnbull Library), and an unidentified Maori ('Ua Rongopai', in the Auckland Central Library), show a perception of architectural objects such as niu poles and flags, that is focused on the symbolic, that which communicates meaning, rather than the purely physical dimensions of form and space.

The South Pacific attitude to space in terms of sea can also be contrasted to that of the European. Western voyagers navigate in relation to fixed points – the sun at noon, a Cartesian grid of latitude and longitude, or the continuous coastline of a land mass. The sea is perceived as largely empty of land and people – there is nothing there. Indeed for centuries

Europeans believed that Polynesians, lacking scientific knowledge and instruments, were unable to accurately navigate and that Polynesian settlement of the Pacific region was largely accidental. However to the people of the South Pacific the sea is richly textured and readable. Pacific navigators such as those of Micronesia used charts of stick and shell to record the interference patterns of waves intersecting with islands and navigated in a haptic sense, feeling out the rhythm of these patterns through the change in ocean chop and swell. All Pacific voyagers detect the immanence of an island through changes such as the appearance of coastal birds, cloud, driftwood in water – evidence of the influence of an island on the sea. Westerners see the Pacific Ocean as blank space speckled with objects called islands. The people of the Pacific see it as a multitude of islands connected by short journeys, in a field of cross currents, wave patterns, shifting breezes, and flotsam; rich in bird and sea life, all laid out under a series of rotating constellations, whose intersection with the horizon easily marks one's place on the trail between islands (Lewis, 1978). They see and understand this world as a series of inter-relationships.

Time

Westerners conceive our planet Earth as an object in space – but space can be considered an illusion. We think we look across space and see the moon or sun, but we actually see the light that left the moon a quarter second ago, and the light that left the sun eight minutes ago. There is physical distance between these objects, but what we see is actually the past, we see the sun as it was eight minutes ago. When we look at the nearest star we look back in time four years, when we look across the universe we do not see it as it is in space, we look millions of years back in time. Astronomers now represent large-scale space as a disk rather than a sphere, acknowledging the preeminence of the dimension of time over three-dimensional space and the inescapability of our location in time affecting our perception of the universe. We are familiar with Einsteinian notions of the inter-relation of time and space, time dilation etc, but it has yet to affect our perception of the world and we maintain a Newtonian sense of a primarily three dimensional world of objects in space and the constant stream of time passing by. We will argue that we could begin to see architecture as a phenomenon primarily located and appreciated in time rather than space, and that this may indeed be the way some other cultures, particularly in the South Pacific, see it.

The conception of time needs to be differentiated from the perception of it. As individuals we may sense the rate at which time passes to change in relation to our emotional state, such as boredom or excitement, or we may feel time seems to pass faster as we grow older. But the conception of time can be different with culture. The Maori word for the past is 'mua',

also meaning in front (Williams, 1971). As Ranginui Walker (1982) wrote: 'So the Maori faces the present and the past which are in front of him. In this time-frame he has before him the living, their forebears, the dead, the founding ancestors, the cultural heroes of mythology and the gods back to the primeval pair Ranginui and Papatuanuku. This time-frame is the basis of marae protocol...' (pp. 59–60).

Apart from showing an attitude to time diametrically opposed to the Western, this implies the primacy of both relationships and links in time, as opposed to the purely physical or spatial, in Maori thought. This is also demonstrated in how these different cultures define themselves as groups. In the West people define their nationality spatially through their location within a bounded region – a country. In the Pacific the indigenous people define themselves tribally, to whom they are related, rather than to the region they happen to be born in. The Maori word for future is 'muri', also meaning behind, because it cannot be seen (Williams, 1971). Walker wrote of Parihaka: '...for Maori, what happened at Parihaka a hundred years ago is as real as if it happened just yesterday. Parihaka of course is an episode in history that the Pakeha would prefer to forget, and his conception of time helps to erase its memory. The Pakeha orientation of time is towards the future. The present is now and the future is in front of him. The past of course is behind, hence it is easy for the Pakeha to exhort the Maori who has lost so much to "forget the past" ' (Walker, 1982, p. 60).

Maori, it would seem, are constantly aware of history, living deeply in time, so that everything in the physical world provokes remembering – rather than focusing on the immediate spatial world and its possibilities. The implication is that, in contrast, Pakeha live more out of time, removed from history, easily forgetting, putting it behind them, living in a purely physical and spatial world.

Donna Awatere (1984) in her book 'Maori Sovereignty', wrote on the concepts underlying 'white culture's' conflict with Maori values and remarked on the West's conception of time as a colonial tool: 'Spatialisation of Time: In this concept the present is all important. The dimensions of time have been collapsed into space. This occurred when time began to be measured and quantified. It was no longer tied to the cyclic rhythm of nature and to the ancestor's rhythm of life and death' (p. 61).

So Maori are not just physically separated from their land under Colonialism, the Western concept of time serves as a mechanism to dislocate Maori from their culture as well. Awatere (1984) went on to state: '...the intimate, mimetic reciprocal relationship between the human being, nature and the living past of the ancestors, was replaced by a time experienced

as space and mediated by a history 'frozen' into a mechanically measured dimension by genealogically unrelated people' (p. 61).

The land 'lost its spiritual meaning', crucial for its transfer to Pakeha and the beginning of industrialization (Awatere, 1984, pp. 61–62). 'The squeezing of time into the spatial present' also leads to a devaluing of the past, knowledge of the past, and experience, then consequently a devaluing of old people, of old ways, and of old things, and finally (as we know from critiques of Capitalism) a devaluation of the human being into a temporary source of labour (Awatere, 1984, p. 63). We will now consider how these cultural concepts of space and time can be related to a consideration of architecture.

Time and Maori architecture

There has been a great deal of writing on the Maori Meeting House, which has become the primary architectural site of cultural representation of the Maori people. For those unfamiliar with the Meeting House it is a structure that has evolved from earlier chiefs' houses during European settlement of New Zealand and is a communal building set on the marae for a hapu to gather in. Known as 'whare nui' or 'whare whakairo', the Meeting House is a structure consisting of one large space entered through a gabled porch. This internal space is often highly decorated with few if any windows. Here description of the architecture for those unfamiliar with it, easily slips into a Western focus on construction, materials, decoration and craft, which has historically characterised most texts on this subject. The House is nearly always named after an ancestor, and many of the carvings or illustrations within depict ancestors. The house is also often metaphorically a body, the personification of an ancestor, with the ridge beam and rafters often seen as spine and ribs for instance. The house is often directly acknowledged by Maori, in the same way one would address a person – it is not simply a building, a container for human activity.

It is clear that the house does what Pallasmaa finds other architecture does not – it provides us with both our domicile in space and it mediates our relation with time, it remembers, it acknowledges and iterates a connection with the past.

Walker's and Awatere's comments on Maori time noted a cyclic sense of time. Certainly we are well aware of the notion that agricultural, hunting, gathering societies are more attuned to the rhythms of the tides and seasons. Some argue that a cyclic sense of time can be discerned in the swirling motifs of kowhaiwhai (painted rafter patterns) and Maori carving, as opposed to the Western focus on progress and development. The industrialised society's sense of divorce from the natural world is well known, but we still tend to read 'Maori time'

more as an affinity with the natural world, rather than, as Maori say, a deeper engagement with time than space. Westerners think of their location in time as similar to a stream, backs turned to the past, poised in the present, facing the future, being carried relentlessly into the future, but never arriving. The Maori space-time construct can be thought of more like a constellation with the past and the people of the past always felt in the present, like the constellations of the sky to the voyager – enmeshing, surrounding, always before you, always behind, forming patterns that can be interpreted in various ways.

Our intention here is not to explain some new ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’ of the Meeting House. We would like to suggest another possible dimension to this building. Given the importance of time, relationships, the subjective and the experiential in the Maori world, we suggest that Western notions of terrestrial reality distort our appreciation of the architecture of other cultures. Westerners privilege the solid and permanent, and see architecture as primarily a physical object in space that can be quite happily reduced, but still quite well represented, in the form of a single, still photograph, frozen in time, uninhabited, unable to be entered by the viewer, on the pages of a magazine or book. We are not suggesting that this is all Western architecture is, but when reduced to its essence, this is what remains – a primary concern with form and space.

The Meeting House could be understood as existing in time rather than space. No one in New Zealand accepts that one can understand the Meeting House without visiting the building and having it explained by Maori, from the inside out. And it is not possible to make a casual visit to a marae to visit a House. Even if one knows all about the Meeting House, marae protocol involves a well-known series of events – which take time. The Meeting House is not intended to be seen as an object in the round. One does not walk around it and admire the sides and the rear. The Meeting House has a facade, a face, and is often metaphorically a body, the personification of ancestors. It is experienced through a series of approaching steps. Having been invited, and having had a welcome arranged, visitors approach the marae and wait outside. They are invited, challenged and welcomed on to the marae. Through a series of steps one approaches the Meeting House, crosses the threshold (‘paepae’), passes through the porch, then goes inside. Adherence to proper protocol involves visitors eating with the hosts (in a different building, the ‘whare kai’) and staying the night in the Meeting House.

All of this is primarily experienced in time rather than space. Again, through protocol, one’s progression is linear, towards the face or facade of the house. But even after the welcome, one does not walk around the house and look at the sides and rear; it is not intended to be seen as an object in space. This was even understood by the early New Zealand museums,

which often acquired Meeting Houses for display. In the example of the Meeting House Hotunui, which was acquired whole by the Auckland Museum in the 1890s, we can see how the Meeting House has been partially demolished and buried in the body and walls of the museum, with the interior intact and only the front face projecting, like a cave or stage. This emphasis on facade and interior, rather than exterior has often been interpreted by Western culture (who privilege the three dimensional object) as a crudity of form, but it should be understood in the same way we greet a fellow human being – we address the face rather than the body or rear. This was well understood by the Victorian and Edwardian museum builders whose own architecture displays an emphasis on the public face of a building or facade. Even contemporary Meeting House designers have constructed houses whose rears disappear into the ground. This has previously been interpreted as a desire for ultimate spatial enclosure or a closer relationship with the earth or land, but we would suggest that it is because the external rear of the building does not matter – it can disappear. We argue that this is not a two dimensional approach to architecture, rather it is a temporal understanding of architecture – we experience it in the same way as we experience the land or fellow people, through a series of steps in time. Our engagement with people and buildings exists more in time than in space.

The Maori word for threshold is 'paepae' and this has sometimes been used as a concept for understanding the Maori world and the Meeting House. The word for step is 'pae', and so are the words for any transverse beam, any perch or rest, the horizontal ridges of hills and the horizon (Williams, 1971). This notion of a series of steps in one's view of the architectural and topographical world can easily be pictured as a spatial one, but only if one takes the objective point of view and places oneself outside the world. To Maori, engagement, experience and relationships are important, therefore one finds oneself within the picture and then one's engagement with these steps is no longer purely spatial, it is temporal, it takes time to negotiate them.

To understand the Meeting House as existing primarily in time, rather than space, does not seem to conform to the Western model – it would seem to collapse Western notions of architecture as the three dimensional object in space. Indeed the Meeting House, other Maori architecture such as Ratana churches for instance, and much of the architecture of other cultures are frequently characterised as 'thin' and 'flat' by Westerners and categorised as folk art. Again we argue this is because these buildings are not to be perceived in any one moment as buildings in the round, rather they are to be seen as a series of paepae – steps, portals or gateways on the way through the world. The architectural object is subsumed into

experience and architecture becomes a skin or threshold between the inside and the outside worlds, those two profound poles of human existence. This is also the way we experience much of architecture in the contemporary world, particularly the urban environment, the main street or the mall, in an increasingly post-object society – a walk through the city now becomes a series or constellation of relationships experienced in time, rather than a parade of buildings in space. Indeed it can be speculated that Post-Modern interest in time and architecture can be seen as a response to new ways of experiencing the world such as cinema and television, through new technology, through the prevalence of new architectural forms such as motorway and mall, or the frenetic pace of post-modern, post-industrial life.

Previous mention has been made of cyclical or seasonal time in agricultural societies. Many early Maori structures were occupied seasonally, to accommodate hunters or gatherers, and rebuilt annually. Natural materials decay; buildings are frequently renovated and rebuilt. What has not been fully explored is the effect of recycling materials on the architectural logic of a building. A recycled ridge beam for instance may contain old notches irrelevant to its new use – this weakens a functional reading of the structure and builds up layers of contradiction that as Pallasmaa (2000) has written ‘wipes away the layers of utility, rational logic and detail articulation’ (np). To Westerners, this is often read as a lack of skill or craft, and the structures become characterised as mere buildings rather than architecture. It has been the fate of much Maori architecture to be categorised as folk art rather than ‘authentic’ Maori architecture and this has been explored in previous papers (McKay, 2002).

One other aspect of a consideration of time in Maori architecture is the mutability of building form. Western society prefers its buildings to be permanent, durable and lasting and the epitome of this is our preservation of ‘historic’ buildings, where Western society removes the inhabitants and freezes a building at a certain moment in time. There are numerous examples world wide of this mummification of architecture. Much of the architecture of the South Pacific shows a transience of form and materials that has been commented on by writers such as Mike Austin, Jeremy Treadwell and Sarah Treadwell. The Samoan ‘fale’ for instance is designed to allow a cyclone to strip its thatch, then it is repaired. Sarah Treadwell (2002), writing on digital film architecture, found a parallel between a time-based approach to design and Pacific architecture: ‘Architecture of the Pacific is premised on mobility, lightly fabricated and impermanent. Foundational security, traditionally at the heart of architecture’s enterprises and already doubtful in New Zealand, is offset by tendencies to movement and lightness. The permeability of architecture in the Pacific, its flexibility and responsiveness to weather, can be seen as a foregrounding of the virtual nature of space as a dimension of the real’ (p. 24).

Meeting Houses are often allowed to age and decay, as human beings do, then are adapted or rebuilt by a new generation, in a different form, reflecting the needs and concerns of that generation. In previous papers (McKay, 2002), we have discussed this surprising fluidity of form through change and transformation. Meeting Houses, such as Te Tokanganui a Noho and buildings of the Ratana movement seem to constantly change and transform – they are a series of incarnations rather than one building, and it has proved difficult for Western scholarship to pin their facts down in time. On one occasion it was explained that the three fingers of a Maori carving represented the Christian Holy Trinity. This carving predated the arrival of Christianity in New Zealand so to a Westerner this explanation would seem incorrect, but to Maori that interpretation was still meaningful.

In the West we are only beginning to question our conception of time, both scientifically and metaphysically. An examination of Maori architecture and the buildings of the South Pacific should not aim to take and incorporate Maori architecture and art into the body of Western knowledge or conventional notions of architecture. Rather this architecture can influence and transform Western ideas of architecture, time, space and our methodology, open up the possibilities of new architectural form and enrich our understanding of how one can live in the world of the South Pacific.

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