

student responses to waewae taku haere: stepping into belonging in storied landscapes

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This was a really unique, Indigenous way of learning, and a spark to bring my own Māori identity into my spatial design practice. Pūrākau, waiata and pātere are like Indigenous knowledge banks for intergenerational, embodied learning. Engaging with place-based knowledge in this way was very grounding, and one of the key ideas our group explored was how pepeha acts as a grounding element when you mihi or introduce yourself. The maunga and the awa that are spoken about in Waewae Taku Haere relate to the whakapapa of the people of Te Whanganui a Tara, just like my own identity is tied to my relationship to the maunga and awa where I'm from. Whakapapa is understood as a genealogical tie to the environment and environmental beings. Coming to seeing the awa as an ancestor was a pivotal learning moment for our group. From then on the development of the project looked quite different—it became much more embodied.

Embodied listening and experience was central to understanding the pātere and its narratives, and that was emphasised by our hīkoi up Matairangi at the very start of the project. The knowledge of the pātere is felt, not written. There's a certain energy that is activated in the moment of singing it. Designing immersive experiences responded well to that—the narratives weren't just shown on a wall, but were felt in an embodied, time-based way. It was also significant that the pātere was in te reo Māori. That was a way of holding safe all the cultural knowledge; retaining mana motuhake by using the language of the knowledge-holders. The reo was at the forefront of every interaction we had with the project, because we were learning from those voices. Likewise, having Kura there as mana whenua was essential to holding the sanctity of the pātere. Her presence solidified to me the meaning and teachings of the waiata, because it's her whakapapa and tīpuna that it's speaking of, and she feels everything that is said. It's really quite powerful.

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My group and I initially struggled with how to position ourselves. There was so much we didn't know about the stories of our site. I'm not from here, but during a class kōrero we discussed how the teaching of Aotearoa's colonial history in schools was not mandatory until recently, and we realised many of us had no idea about the history of this place. This far into learning, you're often so stuck and settled in your mindset, so this project was an unsettling process in a good way. The story of our verse and site was a challenging topic. Realising that we had been going to uni on this land for three years blissfully unaware of what had happened here, and that this was not common knowledge in the area, was quite confronting. One of the most difficult things was how to share this knowledge without making people feel attacked—like 'your ancestors did this.' Initially we felt angry about what we had learned; I remember getting into arguments with people who were a bit resistant to acknowledge the history of conflict. I ended up approaching it more thoughtfully rather than just going with the initial emotion, and this translated into design.

It's important to know about the past in order to make more conscious choices in the present—to understand place and your place in it, to reduce the risk of doing harmful activities on the site. Being tauwiwi and having moved here when I was eighteen, I had some understanding of trying to figure out my place, in a place that's already existing. I now realise that you first need to know what's underneath your feet in order to do anything meaningful on top of it. I feel like this has informed the thinking and practice of our entire year group. There are so many really meaningful projects, and I don't think that aspect of meaningfulness would have come if we just did building fitouts the whole time, for example. It's a different kind of learning. One is about answering a brief in this capitalistic world we're living in. The other is outside of that—asking how we might actually change mindsets and approaches. My work now is all about community and placemaking, and you can't do placemaking without first understanding the stories of people and place.

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The learning in this project was holistic and place-based. We were given space to sit in the site, to experience it and to bond as a group. Spatial expertise is about being about to smell, breathe, touch and feel the tangible and intangible elements of site. We would just hang there; do a couple of drawings but also walk about or hop in the ocean at six in the morning. We spent time doing the internal thinking and relational work, which was really important for this kaupapa. From a Pacific perspective, everything has its own maui or life force, and vā is the relational space between everything. Funnily, vā doesn't come up much with family, except maybe when there is a break or disconnect in a relationship and it's about healing that. It's used a lot in academic spaces where we often try to define Indigenous terms and methodologies, but in reality they're fluid and embodied.

As Pacific peoples in Aotearoa, or as tangata Tiriti, being responsible to tangata whenua and the environment is about the vā. Being together as a group in the site, or regarding stones as taonga and washing them in the sea, was all the vā, and caring for that space—teu le vā. It's also about understanding that everyone has mana and has something to bring to the table. The dynamic between Jen, Stu and Kura fed into the way we started to relate to each other in mana-enhancing ways. I remember Stu saying to leave your ego at the door. Learning about everyone's different backgrounds and migration stories helped us to understand both our positionality and our interconnectedness. That's the true meaning of being tangata Tiriti—relational care. Those underlying methodologies of vā and talanoa—a space where everyone has a voice and contributes—also help to hold the space when there's conflict. You've just got to go through it and hope that no-one is going to let go of the rope and that it will somehow balance. And that was grounded in site. We were able to build a relationship with one another, connected by the moana, or sea. People in other places will have their own shores, Indigenous peoples, methodologies and migration stories; their own relationships with the communities and sites around them. Again, the sea is what connects us; the moana is the teacher.