

Chains of Negotiations: Navigating between Modernity and Tradition' Jeremy Treadwell

all photos by Jeremy Treadwell

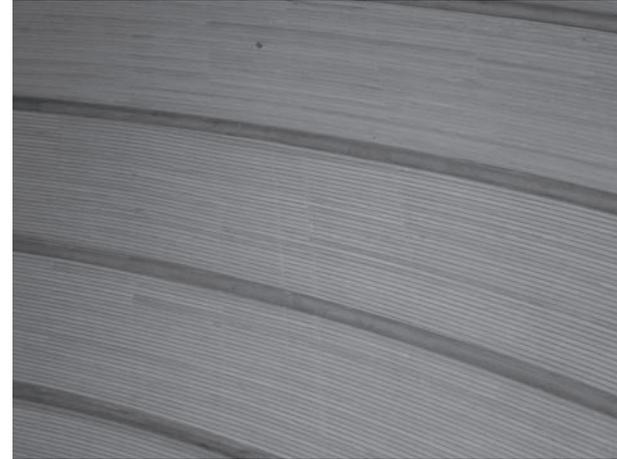


Figure 1: Construction and Representation in conflict

1. This discussion is based on my prior experience of the complexity and dilemmas involved in the design and construction of a small traditional faletele at the School of Architecture at Unitec Institute of Technology.

2. Buck's anatomising description of *fale* construction may be seen as an attempt to describe and fix a contemporary tradition as a condition, against which all future *fale* may be judged.

There is no denying the impressive interior space of the University of Auckland *Fale Pasifika*, with its soaring shadowy volume rising above the low band of light at its base. The size of the building has necessitated timbers of impressive dimensions to carry the roof structure. This is indeed a substantial building, a tangible commitment by the University to Pacific culture. This paper discusses some of the intricate dilemmas of its historical and contextual background.

Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) wrote in the introduction to *Samoa Material Culture* that "persistence of custom has led to the retention of much native material culture in Samoa ... The need for guest houses kept up the guild of carpenters who ... perpetuated the native form of architecture and technique" (1930: 6). Linking custom and material cultural production, Buck emphasised their widespread continuity, concluding that "the [recording of] technique may be useful to the Samoans in days to come when the broadening of the horizon will inevitably lead to the decay of their native arts and crafts"(7).²

Woven into Buck's description of the construction of a Samoan guest house—a *fale tele*—are accounts of ceremonies that structured the process. The making of a *fale* is inextricably bound into the social world of politics and economies it was destined to shape. The *fale* simply *was*: it existed in its own time and space, congruent with its social milieu, rather than symbolising something separate from itself. In that sense, the *fale* may be equivalent to Romanesque or Gothic cathedrals in which Peter Eisenman (1984: 155) perceives a lack of signification: "Things were; truth and meaning were self evident ... it [the building] was de facto." By contrast, he argues, all buildings from the Renaissance onward "pretended to be 'architecture'"—and "received their value by representing an already valued architecture".

Eisenman's proposition provokes consideration of a parallel condition in the Pacific as a consequence of European colonisation. Pacific and indigenous architecture generally was frequently appropriated by its colonisers (Morton, 2000). An example is the exhibition of Maori houses at interna-



Figure 2: Aligned with the street

tional and British expositions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Samoan *fale* were also variously exhibited in Britain and New Zealand during the 1920s and 1930s. Colonial interest in re-representation led to their excision from their spatial and temporal contexts; they became colonial representations of *fale*. In the wake of these disjunctive interventions, *fale* building is no longer inextricably bound by traditional context. It has become a self-conscious act of the present, in which values of the past are relativised and represented.

Tradition is never a static order which excludes innovation: innovation was highly valued in Samoan tradition. We know of two-storey *fale*, and one *Tufuga-fai-fale* (architect/master builder), Mulitalo, was described as having specialised in a “*fale afolau* (long house) with two smaller rounded ends added in the middle of the long section” (Unesco Office for the Pacific States, 1992: 73). Innovations in the twentieth century have included the use of corrugated steel for the roof, concrete floors, the widespread use of nails, milled timber, and a reduction in the use of lashing. In 1985, when Roger Neich surveyed houses in thirteen villages in Upolu and Savaii, only twenty-two of 887 houses were fully lashed, thatched and framed: “The percentage of traditional thatched, sennit lashed houses in all villages is now minimal” (1985: 21).

These considerations form part of the background of the University of Auckland project to construct a large *fale afolau* as focal point of the new *Centre for Pacific Studies*. If Buck’s 1930 textual *fale* is taken as an exemplar of Samoan tradition, what might the huge dislocation in space and time mean for the designers and users of such a building?

Displaced from traditional context, the design of a *fale* becomes, in part, the design of representations. A chain of negotiations arises between elements signifying tradition and requirements arising from the new context. Without binding traditions, things can get complicated, for everything is now at stake: form, structure, function, ornament, and of course spatial context. On what basis are architectural decisions about such things now

made? In an account of the design process, Ivan Mercep of Jasmax was reported as saying

This system of construction would not meet New Zealand structural standards, particularly since at 26 metres long and 15 metres wide it is much bigger than a traditional Pacific Fale. So the timber poles are connected with unobtrusive bolted steel gussets that are set into the framework. These will be covered with traditional lashings. (*University Fale begins to take shape*, 2004)

This was a decision of considerable significance because it separated architecture from construction. Traditionally, the *fale's* powerful aesthetics were indistinguishable from its structure. Samoan traditional *fale* architecture was enviably 'modern': the experience of the interior's visual complexity and beauty is that of its explicit structure and construction. For Samoan *Tufuga-fai-fale* there was no need to devise the negative detail as shadowy representation—what could be a more explicit statement of function than the lashed joint? The union of elements can be traced with every turn of the *afa* (sennit cord). While Western architecture relinquished the fiction of the modern in the 1980s, unease about covering structure with ornament is still widespread. Within a modern tradition, lashing without structural role becomes ornamental; in a post-modern paradigm, the *fale* acquires an explicitly representational condition.



Figure 3: The lashed joint as an occasional feature

Much appears to have been given away with the decision not to take Samoan structural systems seriously. New Zealand's environmental conditions are frequently mentioned to explain architectural decisions. Many environmental risks, however, are related to the country's general seismic conditions, which Auckland does not equally share. However, Auckland occasionally experiences significant storms that endanger buildings. *Fale* were developed within this environment of annual storms, and archaeological records suggest that *fale* have been built in the tropical Pacific region for many hundreds of years. Contemporary observations of the *fale's* general resistance to cyclones suggest that its structural system is worth considering. The large scale of the *Fale Pasifika* was another explanation why traditional principles of construction were abandoned. However, there are photographs of nineteenth century *fale* measuring around twelve metres in height and breadth—dimensions roughly equivalent to the scale of the *Fale Pasifika*. Were the structural operations of the traditional *fale* investigated from an engineering point of view? Such research would be of great value, not only to Pacific studies, but also to the discipline of engineering.

Entering the *Fale Pasifika* is a memorable experience. When crossing the threshold at the top step of the *paepae* (platform) and passing under the low soffit of the roof, the building opens up its soaring interior volume. This experience confirms the understanding of the *fale* as an interior building. It is on the inside surfaces that they reveal themselves. But maybe as a consequence of this building's size, its interior space—in contrast to traditional buildings with their proliferation of timbered complexity—seems strangely empty and mutely incoherent. It is as if Pacific tradition has baffled the West. Standing in the main space and looking up, one notices that the fine traditional thatching astles have been replaced with grooved plywood. On the straight sides of the building, the grooves run vertically (traditionally), and at right angles to the *laau matua* (under purlins), echoing the warp and weft of the Pacific structure. But, astonishingly, the grooved plywood in the round end of the *tala* is run not at right angles with the great curved beams—*fau*, but in parallel, denying all sense of their constructional role.³

The building seems to embody the dilemmas faced by the architects in their quest to represent the traditional with the modern. What elements are needed to be present to signify tradition, once traditional construction and structure has been jettisoned? In the selection of familiar elements of a *fale* interior, questions arise as to which ones to use, and how much is enough? While in the tradition of the West 'less is more', in Samoan architecture less is not enough. Consequently, the building lacks the visual complexity of major and minor elements, interwoven in the wonderful texture of Pacific architecture. While some elements were reinstated to operate symbolically, the omission of others such as the *auau* (ridge pole), an element fundamental to wider Pacific architecture, leaves the building incoherent in its representational claims.

Auckland can feel like a subtropical city in summer but, for most of the year, the cold south-westerly winds banish such fantasies. *Fale* were not built for such climates. Their openness is architecturally foreign, even alarming, in a New Zealand context. For a *fale* to be habitable throughout the year, it has to be capable of being enclosed. The designers' response was to deploy a perimeter of glazed aluminium joinery, a mixture of bi-folding doors and louvres, to admit flows of people and breeze. Visually, however,

3. The equivalent in Western architecture would be to run nogs parallel with studs, or the ceiling battens parallel with the rafters.



Figure 4: The interior poutu (posts) structure the space

the glass in dark painted frames hermetically seals the house. Taken seriously, the radical openness of the *fale* tradition offers Western architecture a chance to rethink its strategies of achieving openness in buildings, beyond the ubiquities of aluminium joinery.⁴ The ‘glazing line’ of the *fale* also excludes from the building’s interior the important perimeter posts, crucial for setting out social and political hierarchies in the important *kava* ceremony. Here, the architects’ judgement was in line with Buck’s assessment of the disadvantages of *fale afolau* or long houses (the *Fale Pasifika* is a long house), where the main interior posts obstruct sightlines and where “guests therefore have to sit to the inner side of the supporting posts while the attendants sit between the main posts and the wall posts” (Te Rangi Hiroa, w930: 21). Adroitly, the architects left the perimeter posts visually to structure the exterior of the *fale* without compromising its social utility.

To design a *fale* based on the Samoan *fale afolau*, not just for Samoans but for all Pacific people, seems like an impossibly complex task. Over-generalisation had to be avoided and materials and elements employed that could take the *fale* towards a new, hybrid complexity. Filipe Tohi’s lashings might do just that, and provide a beginning for the house to become both an instance of Pacific architecture and a repository of wider Pacific cultural production. Perplexingly, however, they appear to have been abandoned before completion. At the level of the first tie beams, black and russet coloured *afa* are wound into complex geometries, unmistakable statements of Pacific craft. Above this level though, the lashings are small and occasional, and the rest of the structure is revealed as a composition in *pinus radiata* and galvanised steel—meagre by comparison. The restriction of lashing to just a few locations seems as incongruous as the re-direction of the plywood grooves, and their location suggests that their purpose was indeed to conceal the steel fittings whilst simultaneously evoking tradition, at least at the major structural junctions. This creates a double emptiness. Not only is Pacific construction set aside, but its aesthetic and signifying properties seem also undermined.

The *Fale Pasifika* reveals how difficult it is to build across cultures, but it also seems to offer clues about what may become a new Pacific architec-

4. Failure to rethink rote strategies has, during the period of New Zealand’s control of Samoa, similarly led to a misrecognition of openness: in model villages, *fale* were built in straight lines to one side of the *malae* or open ceremonial ground, which had taken on the ‘openness’ of a parade ground. The “almost ethereal loveliness” of Samoan villages was lost in the view of a contemporary trader (in Austin, 1996: 3). The issue is the extent to which Western planning uncritically defaults to a Cartesian spatial organisation. A *fale* that had swivelled to the openness of Mechanics Bay and unfurled an asymmetrical *malae* space, instead of aligning itself to the street, might have suggested a design concept critically open to Pacific ways of thinking.



Figure 5: Frigate birds in the South Pacific sky

ture: hybrid, contemporary, vigorous and enriching. It will be an architecture based on the recognition of traditional strengths and their adaptation, rather than on unquestioning acceptance of orthodoxies, or their representation as tradition. Tohi's sculptural work offers insights into possible transformations: working from projections of traditional Tongan lashing, Tohi has created a public sculpture already recognised for its architectural qualities.⁵

The *Fale Pasifika* is of great significance to Auckland, which already has a number of *fale* buildings. Its designers took a risk that others avoided: they navigated along a line running between modernity and tradition. In doing so, they stretched across great voids to connect two worlds. That the architecture was sometimes out of reach can only indicate the great difficulty of the project.

5. Tohi's *Halomoana* sculpture, gifted to New Plymouth by Terry Boon, was praised for its architectural implications. The piece outside the Onehunga Public Library is equally complex and three-dimensional.

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