

## Whare Māori: Reflections on the television series

Carin Wilson

*Maku ano hei hanga i toku nei whare,  
And I will build my house,  
Ko nga poupou he mahoe he patete,  
And the pillars will be made of mahoe and patete,  
Ko te tahuhu he hinau.  
The ridgebeam of hinau.  
Me whakatupu ki tehua o te rengarenga  
It shall grow and blossom like that of the rengarenga  
Me whakapakari ki tehua o te kawariki.  
And be strong and flourish like the kawariki.*

Tukaroto Matutaera Potatau  
Te Wherowhero Tawhiao

In true kingly fashion, Tawhiao makes an aspirational statement. “I will build a house, but not any old house. No, this one will have pillars of mahoe and patete and we’ll find a tall straight hinau for the ridge. From the ngahere (bush) nearby, of course. Where we’ll offer a karakia (prayer) to our atua (god), Tāne Mahuta. For our whakapapa (genealogy) to him is unbroken, and these timbers are his children. Then the life in and around this whare can flourish and we will be nurtured and protected.” Never is this whare static or inanimate or even purely material in form – it is dynamic, resonating with the life force of mauri, the spiritual energy of its transition from Te Kore (Nothingness) through Te Po (the Dark Night) to Te Ao Marama (the World of Light).

Tawhiao: a reluctant visionary elected to succeed his father in 1860 to lead the Kingitanga movement in a time of deep crisis. His tongi (prophetic saying) was not composed to show off his knowledge of native species in the ngahere. As the incumbent leader of Māori during that awful period, when the familiar routines of sporadic tribal conflict had to be set aside to bring a unified front to the common threat of colonial rule, he looks to the imagery of the forests of Tāne Mahuta and the prospect of a house as a defensive symbol of cultural survival. Rakau (timbers), children of the forest – mahoe, patete, hinau – didn’t need explanation; Māori understood this reference to their performance and their suitability for certain functions. That a house of these materials will perform well, uniting and empowering the people who gather in it in their decisions, was a given. There were few better ways to evoke a sense of what it will take to gather the energies of a people under huge pressure, to consolidate their energies to maintain unity, and to form the resolve that would build a steadfast nation.

—

The key to comprehending this decidedly Māori world is in the seamless track linking the creative source with stories about the journey, tales of arrival and a connection made. Only then do we see attention turned to the design and fabrication of shelter, as in this whakatauki (proverb) from the Cooks group:

*Taka'i koe ki te papa 'enua  
You step onto solid land  
Akamou i te pito 'enua  
affix the umbilical cord  
A'u i to'ou rangi  
and carve out your world*

Tawhiao's tongi suggests that the challenge of defending values and insulating against pillage by stealth is not likely to be achieved through an abstract process that doesn't hook into the knowledge system it references. The tongi obliquely calls upon the whakapapa that connects people with the materials of the natural world – and their protective army of kaitiaki (guardians) – drawing the expressive whole together in spiritual concepts such as mauri (life force) and wairua (spirit). None of this needs to be stated because it is implicit in the ever-present background to the statement. In this context, tohunga/architect, user, materials, form and purpose all fold in together as one.

In every language I've studied – and possibly many I haven't – there is an insistent desire to connect the dimensions of place, time, and space in a successful relationship with the built world. These efforts are at full stretch when it comes to measuring success in achieving this link with the environmental context. It seems to come down to evaluating invisible qualities, an 'essence of being'. The condition incites a need to turn to poetic language to capture this characteristic of form (relative to time and space) with word pictures; to call up images that will convey a sense of satisfaction in the experience of a successful marriage of these dimensions.

*Architecture being involved with everything is like life itself when it is real.  
Architecture – alive, fresh, exhilarating – yet solid and enduring.*

John Lautner

Almost as economical with words as Tawhiao, Lautner manages to encapsulate in this one pithy statement what cannot be bettered by any amount of learned rhetoric. Getting near the end of his career, he tries to capture in his notes the essence of what it had meant to spend his life developing work that met his benchmark: "Architecture being involved with everything is like life itself ..."

—

Television is not bound by this limitation to words alone. Māori Television recently took us on a journey through our two principal islands and to some of their most picturesque locations. The series *Whare Māori* rested on dialogues that unselfconsciously led us into the territory that defines a culture.<sup>1</sup> Thirteen episodes drew on examples of unusual inventiveness in art, skilled craftsmanship, customs, religion, boldness, revival of lost arts, values, role exchanges between client and principal, characters and personalities – while at the same time delving into many uncharted areas of history – and Rau Hoskins delivered all this as an architect's take on life.

It was a mighty bold move, and only Māori Television would have dared. Thankfully, the channel that takes us hunting in the bush, asks aunties for advice, gives us the best current affairs, and subjects us to excruciating moments of karaoke, sometimes takes extraordinary risks with what it delivers, which makes it the best

channel in this country. *Whare Māori* gave us moments that genuinely gathered in the breadth of a culture, looking through a lens that observed the full spectrum of life as it happens. The picture it drew really was about “being involved with everything”, unselfconsciously revealing an inside story without drawing us into excessive opinion or critique.

The series showed that there is no predictable form to the whare Māori. The familiar gabled roof form of tahuhu (ridgepole) and poupou (poles), pitched at anything from 5-35 degrees, is certainly part of the story, and the echo of its ubiquitous influence is evident throughout. However, it is nowhere near as definitive as common assumptions might have it. What then is the whare Māori if not that? The series preferred to pose this question, rather than answer it. Even its title has an implicit message – a contradictory mix of explication and subtlety. *Whare Māori?* Easy. That’s a Māori house isn’t it? Well, maybe yes, but only superficially and, more likely, no. For whare has meanings that can be widely applied in relation to almost anything that collects or contains, from the wharepuni for sleeping to the wharepaku (toilet) out back; the wharehinu’s simple storage functionality in a gourd, and the even more esoteric wharehou (bank of clouds) heralding the approach of wind. And Māori? Far beyond the notion of “native” or “indigenous” lies a cluster of meanings essentially proposing nothing spectacular; a thoroughly ordinary world, not confined by restraint or ceremony; to be māori in this sense is not to be tied to notions that define connection or identity by materiality – it is all about being. A normal house? Shelter beyond ceremony or definition? Māori use of language might be elliptical but it is seldom casual. The *Whare Māori* series invited us to relate not just to the form, proportions, angles and materials of the building alone, or to the hands that shaped it. It traced and retraced connections with “life itself”, with the whare’s cultural context. Reflecting its true purpose, the series challenged poorly considered assumptions, so that we might *connect with* the Māori world: with a world where processes akin to architecture are viewed, not as a means of protecting capital or ratcheting value, but accepted as normal. In this world, the structures defining space are no more nor less than a fundamental background element, the stage that allows tangata (people) to embrace in a common social and cultural intent. They are like a filament in the fabric of community purpose that lights up whenever the energy that weaves the aho (weft) of activity and people kicks in.

---

There’s a lot to be said for seizing an opportunity to redefine territories of information when the detritus of incomplete understanding has been hanging around for too long. The power of a documentary series spread across 13 episodes is that it has enough stretch around the edges to pick up bits of misinformation and straighten them out. Where *Whare Māori* scored well for me is in the way it allowed local figures to give us the back-story straight, in candid conversations that urged us to understand the nuances of our unique bicultural world. Through its conversations based around architecture, it invited us to investigate what drives the formula of tangata, wāhi (place) and wā (time/space); what it is that quickens an architecture, embracing a complex web of connections that reach far beyond the glossy magazine images of trophies of arrival; ambitions re-alised and statements of style, where ordinary life is conspicuously absent. We begin to understand what differentiates the world-view that gave us these Māori structures from the contrived urban architecture that – perversely, and in spite

<sup>1</sup> Thirteen episodes of *Whare Māori* were broadcast between 8 May and 7 August, 2011. They can be downloaded at <http://www.maoritelevision.com/Default.aspx?tabid=649>

of its professed ambitions – eschews notions of culture and association (preferring its paste-up armoury of resources, defaulting thoughtlessly to the formulaic solutions of pure functionality, delivering incomplete results devoid of any real sense of place). In this series, no site was entertained without reference to its historic associations, no space presented without people. No building merited closer inspection without its narrative context, no opportunity was lost to weave the characters and personalities who will bring colour and humanity to our understanding.

The inference of the series is that the Māori world of habitation and functional space does not rest at meeting the elementary criteria of place and space, but looks beyond these needs. Before we have matched up all of the inputs of an authentic, and viable, waihanga/architecture, the specifics of tangata + whenua + wairua + tatai/koronga (purpose) = wāhi must be achieved. This distinction is important to Māori. The proposition that two of these drivers – whenua, acknowledging connection with the land, and wairua, accepting of an extra, indefinable, dimension to that relationship – are disposable and can be superseded by an alternative evaluation process driven by analysis and pure building mechanics is not valid. You could say that the capital drive of most investment buildings – I won't call them architecture – proceeds down a monodirectional path that studiously ignores any inference of a detrimental effect on the land or an unwelcome impact on the balance of any number of invisibles. This is categorically not the architecture of place. Nor is it excused by the insidious influence of interfering regulatory structures or the pervasive interests of the supplier industries that further distort the practise. These may have created distance between architect and builder, and disturbed the intimate relationship between builder and materials, but spirit and place remain fundamental to the practice of architecture.

It may have come as a surprise to some to learn that there are long-established, formal mātauranga (knowledge) process models with which to strategically plan development around our whenua (land). They have been embraced for generations and they may point the way towards future sustainable practices. They call on an understanding of those complex multi-layered drivers that include seeing space as a dynamic function of the relationship between Rangi and Papa; drawing on the extra-sensory capacity to engage with the wairua of a place; knowing every track formed by the waewae (feet) that tramped the land; knowing who lived here 10 generations ago; excavating an elevated knoll with a perfect understanding of how to minimise the impact of the fresh contours, while conceiving the structures that will fit a broad cultural kaupapa (agenda) ... With Hoskins' sure commentary as anchor, *Whare Māori* succeeded in taking us on that hikoi (stride) of discovery and offered us the opportunity to build a better informed picture by joining in some new dots.

Yet there was a time, not so long ago, when the proposition of an even match between the body of knowledge handed down to those chosen to carry on the traditions of the Tohunga Whakairo (master carver) and the more formal training of the architect was considered an affront to the status of the profession. Thankfully, with recent progress in integrating cultures and trading the self-conscious put-down of insecurity for more generous acknowledgement of the skills of a different cultural epistemology, that quaint view is losing currency. Hoskins did not challenge this divide directly, preferring to let the camera do the persuading, as it focussed on the sheer diversity of expression from location to location, carver to carver, construction to construction.



Production shots in Te Rongomai Wahine Marae, Mohaka (Video stills. Courtesy Scottie Productions)

High points in the series? The women's whare Te Rongomai Wahine near Mohaka was inspirational for its unique circular form – later to be acknowledged in the octagonal Te Rau Aroha tribute to the Tipuna wahine of the deep south by Cliff Whiting – and for the typically ingenious roof structure developed around a spare ship mast; the evocative faded-by-time hand-painted images on the poupon of a small, earthen-floored whare on the banks of the Whanganui river; the intriguing influence of the two principal Māori religious movements and their leaders, Ringatu under Te Kooti and Ratana under Tahupotiki Ratana, on their followers and places of worship to this day; the extraordinary Tapu te Ranga marae in Island Bay, Wellington, an astonishing structure built almost entirely from found or recycled timber and ranging over something like 13 levels. All fascinating. But for me, the sublime detailing and perfect poise of the domestic and church architecture of John Scott would be deserving of a nomination for the Pritzker prize, if he was still practising. A sampling of the body of his work, spread across 200 projects, would be material for a follow-up series in its own right. John Scott captured that essence of a house that “grows and blossoms ... to be strong and flourish” with an approach to architecture like that Lautner described as “being involved with everything, like life itself”. In what appears to have been a careful and meticulous practice, he may have unintentionally written the manual on the quintessential New Zealand house: essentially modest, nestling quietly in its landscape, and effortlessly achieving a synthesis of two cultures on quite different paths but holding the common aspiration to a life involved with everything.

This series had plenty of “wow” – but not the glossy wow of blown budgets, big mortgages and grand designs. The series showed that there was clearly considerable thought and effort behind what found its way to each 25-minute episode and I’m proud of Māori Television for commissioning it. Since 2005, it has steadily raised the bar and is well beyond the reach of the time fillers and empty-headed twaddle that take up more than 80% of the programming time of other channels. I found *Whare Māori* engrossing for the way it shifted common perceptions, similar to how James Belich managed to change many misconceptions about our history and *Frontiers* helped with our understanding of the dynamics of settlement. It would be refreshing to see more of this kind of television.