

ROSS JENNER & PATRICK CLIFFORD

In Memoriam

Rewi Michael Robert Thompson

(19 January 1954–2016)



Of Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Raukawa descent, born and raised in Wellington, architect and also academic at the University of Auckland, School of Architecture & Planning from 2002, Rewi Thompson passed away in mid-October 2016.

Rewi completed a New Zealand Certificate of Engineering through the Wellington Polytechnic, having previously worked as a structural and then architectural draftsman for Structon Group before attending the University of Auckland. After graduation, he joined Structon's Auckland office where he became a registered architect and then, in 1983, established his own practice. Throughout his career, he received over 25 design awards. By 1986, his work had achieved sufficient renown to gain him an invitation—along with a group of well-known New Zealand architects, Ian Athfield, John Blair, Roger Walker—to participate in a lecture programme in the United States, facilitated by architect Stanley Tigerman, who had recently visited New Zealand at the invitation of the NZIA.

From marae to public housing, from town centres to healthcare facilities, from exhibitions to event architecture—Rewi produced, for instance, the temporary outdoor pulpit in the Auckland Domain for the visit of Pope John Paul II (1986)—his work favouring the inclusive and the diverse was always slightly beyond what was imaginable and achievable in the built public realm.

Apart from his own practice, he was an important collaborator engaging with a broad range of colleagues across a variety of projects—for instance, the plan of the Wellington Civic Square (Te Aho a Maui, 1988) with Athfield; the City-to-Sea Bridge (1990) with John Grey, master planner for Wellington waterfront, and Paratene Matchitt; and the Te Papa project (1990) with Frank Gehry and Athfield, which was blindly and stupidly thrown out in the first round of selection. A decade later came the Olympic Park War Memorial in Newmarket, Auckland, completed with Isthmus Group (2001) and the City Mission proposal undertaken with Stevens Lawson for Hobson Street, Auckland (2006). He created works that, beyond exploring biculturalism, built relationships that enabled others to do so also. As such, he was a bridge connecting and bringing into close proximity multiple worlds. His Te Wero Bridge proposal for Quay Street, Auckland, for instance, with Warren & Mahoney and Holmes Consulting, was conceived of as an overarching hinaki (eel trap) and offered a figure for connecting and spanning a diversely configured and populated city.

Among Rewi's unique traits was a very personal understanding of materials, often in models, where, for example, he employed paua (abalone) and oyster shell, pounamu (jade) and other stone, and various states of wood, as in his models for the Wellington waterfront. In this work, piers break out, and ramps, tilted planes and other fractures narrate the emergence of land from sea. Timber-work resembling drift wood suggests the arrival of canoes and sailing ships. Rewi delighted in the sheer exhilaration of improvisation. He caught things in the act of making; they often appear inchoate and temporary, but they retain the immediacy of that act. His projects do not begin in form or geometry but in an impromptu play of provisional elements, where materials have important lifecycles.

His understanding of place, moreover, involved negotiation—rites of foundation and of construction. Place is not not something simply found but *made*. Places, like buildings, are events. Place is a matter of placing and marking, where the beginning often lies in nominating something, in naming

it, in putting down a thing (like a stone or a stick) that marks or allows us to think about putting something on that site. But the thing you put there for the purpose of just starting, might also have abstract architectural qualities that you keep because it is the thing that in the process, has taken on some meaning for those involved. (Thompson, 1995: 26)

While his projects make visible traditional sanctities of places and their relationships to an over-arching cultural matrix, his understanding of place was not one of nostalgia, archaeological recovery, or the disclosure of what already exists as some sort of permanent background. Even though Māori understanding of landscape may have been pre-urban, it is, as Rewi demonstrated, still perfectly capable of animating the most banal and sterile Anglo-Saxon urban planning and building forms. To live and make architecture between cultures is to recognize that any fixed 'original' tradition cannot be realised by any process that translates it. On the question of negotiation, he wrote of his own house:

The house or the project, then, is the object of negotiation. The object is a part of this reconciliation that is central to the process of culture: they have to get used to it or burn it down. (1995: 25)

Rewi's work always had an element of the iconic, a term which implies something sacred, ritualistic, or worshipped, a suggestion of mystery, 'presence' or

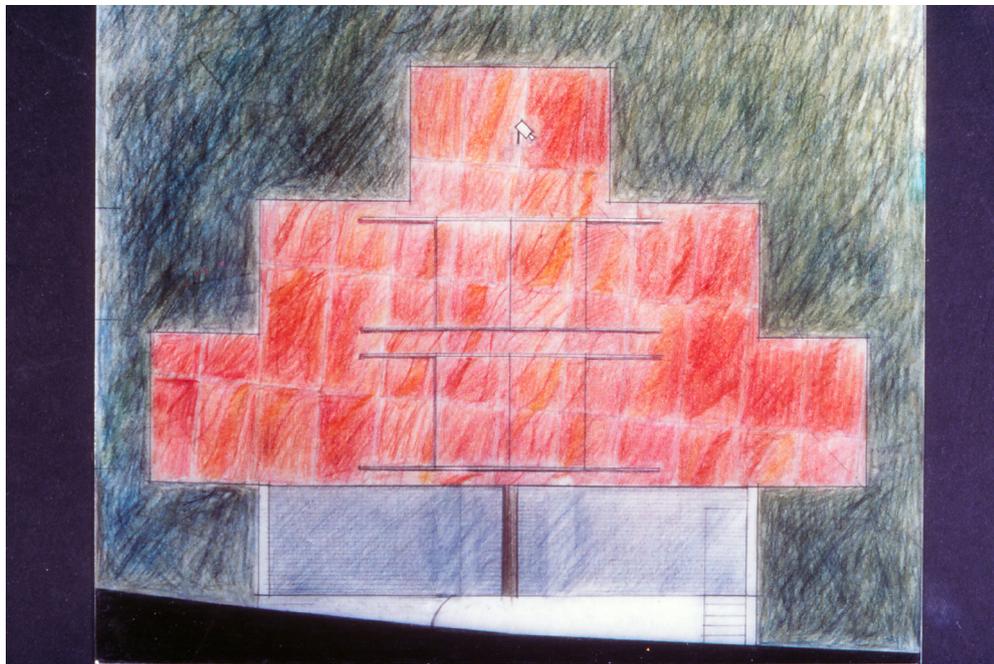


Fig. 1 Rewi Thompson. Elevation of Thompson House.

‘aura’. Indeed, at its best, his works embody these qualities. Traditionally, the iconic also implies an image on a flat surface or background. In order to achieve a hieratic force, a certain flattening and diagrammatic condensation is needed. Among very many examples, this is demonstrated by the image of the waka in the Ngāti Poneke marae project (a wonderful reversal of Stanley Tigerman’s Titanic, where the iconic postmodernist image of Mies’ Crown Hall (1978) sinking into lake Michigan became instead the arrival of Māori into Wellington Harbour), the severed fish at Otara town centre (1987), the mountain in Wellington’s Civic Square, the kotouku (white heron) as papal pulpit, the suspended letter of the Wishart House (1987–99), the baskets of knowledge at Pukenga, Māori Education Department (1991), or the hinaki project (2007).

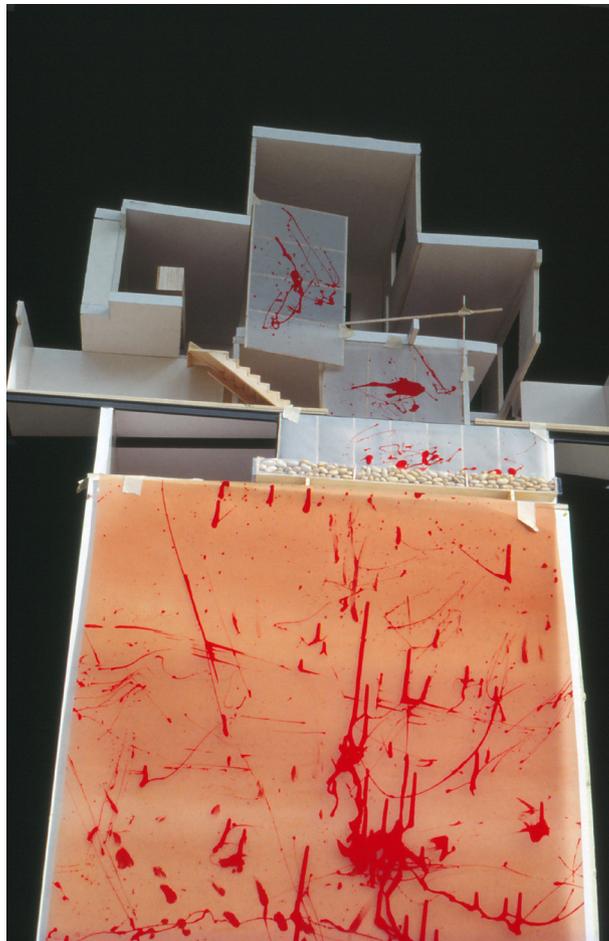
In Māori culture, voice, language and land are connected. A matrix forms over the features of the landscape (mountain, river, swamp, etc.) and their sites are defined by their relationship to them. Similarly, within the tradition of oratory and oral literature, kōrero are required, specific stories whereby things are animated, made into cultural objects by a process of clothing with words. Over time, a thing becomes invested with talk, transformed “by building words (korero) into it and by contact with people, into a thing Maoris class as a taonga” (Mead 1984: 20–21). Buildings, too, are animated, and this means that they have agency. Since the demise of modernism, we have come to understand that agency in architecture means more than the simple functional workings of a building. The paradigm of the building as machine is well passed; Rewi lived through that era and overcame it. An idea of animation arose that was typified in various tendencies: ‘animate form’, parametrics and ‘vital beauty’. Yet, for Rewi, this return to the animate took a different slant. For example, as well as toying with it as a person without eyes, he presented his own house (1985) as site of warfare: the stepping terraces of the volcanic pā (hill forts), whose remnants are scattered throughout Auckland, are effective in the stepped terraces of the house. A sectional model, with the facade removed to show the design of the interior screens, reveals violence, the

violence of the region, its geology, its volcanoes and their myths, and the blood spilt over successive occupations of Auckland: “Maori vs Maori and later Maori vs the colonists. But now it is violent, where people fight over land, they fight a war for a view of the water. I didn’t want any windows” (1995: 26). The vivid red paint in the drawing, on the model and on the screens, animates the house by the evocation of blood. Perhaps this is a form of security, a living-on from the primeval cosmogony when Papatūānuku (Earth) and Ranginui (Sky) were cut apart. Rewi put it thus: “Blood brings the violence into the soul of the house.” (pers. comm.)

Rewi’s works may appear stark and diagrammatic, but at an intersection of cultures—as questions posed—they remain a rich call to attend to the limits of one’s own thinking—and above all, to the encounter with what lies outside it.

Ross Jenner

Fig. 2 Rewi Thompson. Model of Thompson House screens.



Eulogy delivered by Patrick Clifford at Tātai Hono Marae/Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Friday 21 October

Tena Koutou.

To Lucy, Des and the whanau,

On behalf of the architectural community, particularly of course, those who could not be here personally, and on behalf of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, the collective guardian of our craft, I offer you our thoughts, our support, our love.

Too young and too soon Rewi leaves this physical world. His presence, however, will remain palpable—in constructed works, projects and writings, in the many students he inspired and mentored, in the colleagues he influenced and guided, and in the memories we all hold.

Rewi is a hugely significant figure in the culture and architecture of Aotearoa—New Zealand. His exploration and defining of a way to express bi-culturalism lies at the core of this legacy. Of it, he said,

Our practice is interested in what this might mean architecturally. How you would discuss the sort of relationships this might produce in a spatial way. Does it mean that instead of having only one door you have two? Where would people go when you have two different doors? They would have to make a decision as to which door they belong to (1995: 25).

Rewi had an ability to reduce and represent issues and ideas in incredibly simple and powerful ways. In some ways I think, of these as being like parables appropriate to today. His work is raw and elemental—literally expressed as earth, water, wind and fire, conceptual and abstract, heroic and challenging. Formally inventive and technically daring.

Neither his work nor his words were ever delivered in a strident or assertive way but were offered with respect and dignity. Lots of gently posed questions challenged any assumptions or too quickly reached conclusions. Rewi was not about answers but about the process.

He was great collaborator, there are many here like me and my colleagues who worked with him. He created not only works that explored biculturalism but relationships that enabled others to do so—he was a bridge to connect our worlds. Rewi was a great colleague, too. Des, I can't imagine how many of those models you two made together ...

He was also a great friend. He first entered my life wearing pink jandels, having arrived late for the start of architecture school in March 1978 (38 years ago), fresh from the national surf lifesaving championships representing Worsley Bay as I recall. He came directly into second year and produced a stream of striking projects—the first a bach at Piha illustrated with a highlighter that matched his jandels.

We got to know each other that year and shared a studio in 3rd year. The studio structure at that time involved the students' picking a project from those offered at the beginning of each term. Rewi would do them all and still fit in a reasonable number of visits to the Kiwi! He redefined studio.

Rewi was not only a member of the architectural profession (the NZIA) but also of the “380 Group”. We fell under the spell of John Williams at the end of 1979— if friendship is about shared experience, then we had enough to last a lifetime after that summer! Malcom Bowes, Michael Thomson, Tim Nees, Ti Lian Seng, Rewi and I were chatting in the studio about holiday job prospects when John popped up and off we went to our first demolition job which paid \$3.80 per hour. When the summer ended, we had demolished quite a few things, sold and partly put together a modular house in Patumahoe and bought a substantial but rather run-down boarding house in Parnell. Rewi had the only car, a Mini, we needed to get to Patumahoe each day—with five of us in it, it wasn’t speedy—Rewi was always known as ‘Fangio’ from then on. I also stayed with Rewi and Leona that summer—they were so generous and welcoming—and so committed to each other and their families.

Over the last 30 years and more, we enjoyed happy times—from the Tolaga Bay motor camp to a lot of Mondays in the Corner Bar of the Globe Tavern or a catch up in the office—and there have been sad times...

Aside from having a few laughs about the 380 days, every conversation we shared from then until the last time I saw him—a few weeks ago—no meeting went past without his saying “how’s the family?—that’s what is important”.

He was right about that.

Vale Rewi

REFERENCES

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