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Translating a Post-Industrial Landscape: The Rebirth of Pukewā

INTERSTICES 21

Introduction

Space is beheld by the people who occupy and experience it. They translate this into an environment that holds meaning, enriched by the traces of memories arising with everyday life occurring there. Environments for this reason are ever-changing, providing settings inseparable from the moments we retain as memory. Not simply a point locatable on a map, a place is created mostly by and through time. Its power resides in memory. Whether through the ephemerality of memory or through an inevitable accumulation of traces, place arises as an experience of its persistence through time.

Geographic layers of history build up over time, each existing as a transformation of the previous. Restored sites can be thought of as chronotopes, the chronotope being a literary notion originally developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (2000) who thought of it as a ‘time-space’ amalgam commonly deployed in the novel. Extended to place-restoration, the notion can be thought of as a narrative representation of the events and time that have accrued there. Restoration in this project begins by retelling the histories of a still operational industrial place—a maunga or mountain named Pukewā near the township of Waihi. Parallel Māori and European histories constitute this place, although the former have been overwritten, and in large part, forgotten by the latter. The design research presented here has sought a communication between these two histories, a dialogue in fact that aims to revitalise the once sacred nature of this place.

The maunga named Pukewā is today more commonly known as Martha Mine. In 1878, gold was discovered deep within her body—this gendered designation follows Māori understandings of the ground itself as being the domain of Papatūānuku, the earth mother. In a quest to extract the koha or gift of Papatūānuku, Pukewā was firstly mutilated, through deep shafts and cuts in her surface. Later she was decapitated, excavating her body to a flat surface. Finally, the ground on which she had stood was excavated transforming her into the deep void we see today. The ongoing excavation of Pukewā will continue until around 2030, when her diminution will reach a final ecological state, becoming a vast lake. The memory of Pukewā and the whenua or land that she was—and which she rested on—will be all but forgotten. It is such an ignominious fate that this

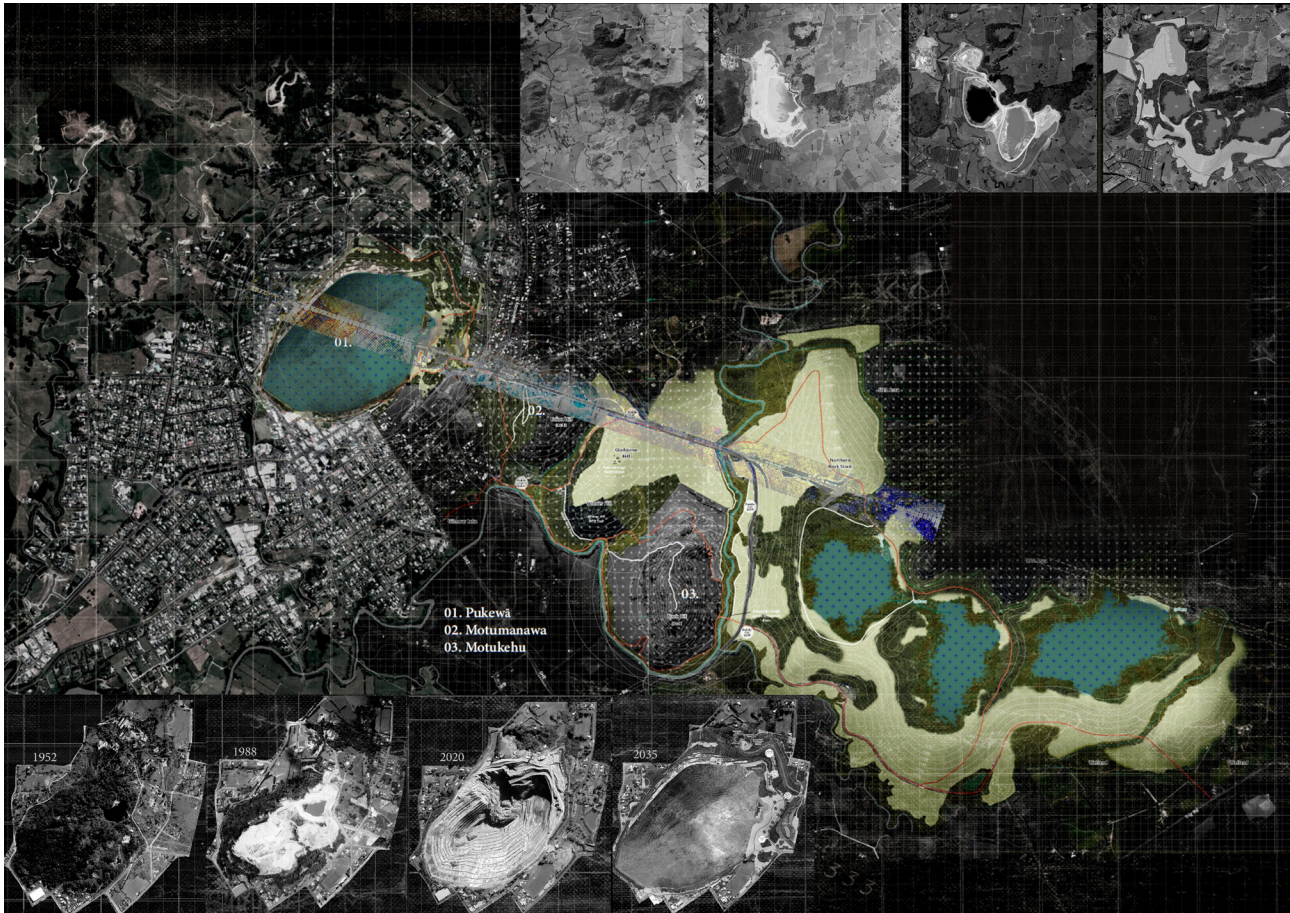


Fig. 1 Author. Site plan of the rehabilitated Waihi in 2035. Stages-of-degradation of Pukewā and the surrounding landscape (top right). [Digital drawing]

design research addresses, asking what manner of architectural intervention may redress these cultural, environmental and landscape losses?

In response I have understood this industrial wasteland a palimpsest itself resting on deeper layers of significance and on which future layers may be accreted (Potteiger, 1998: 225). Drawing on translation theory and local memories, a range of counter-narratives are offered, narratives for which architecture may play a part in remediating post-industrial landscapes (Scott, 1923: 133).

The desecration of a landmark

Histories emerge and fade over time dependent as they are on memories to sustain them. Histories are rewritten as places are reinhabited with each generation. Since European colonisation of Aotearoa commenced in the 1800's, the desire for precious metals and minerals has created an array of industrial sites whose exhaustion of extractive value has left desecrated landscapes. Many of these abandoned sites have slowly been regenerating with the return of adjacent natural ecologies. Yet as the technological ability to more radically reshape landscapes advances, many of these scarred places have become too altered to ever fully heal, leaving economic and social dereliction in addition to ecological losses. Gold mining in Aotearoa, with its associated despoilation and wastelands, has been severe and its effects on Pukewā and its associated town of Waihi are particularly marked, as this project has addressed (see Figs. 1 & 2).



Fig. 2 Author (2021). Waihi with Martha Mine (shown in the midground) as viewed from atop Motukehu (Black Hill). [Digital photograph]

The task of the translator

How then to translate places of despoilation into locales of healing and future value? In responding to this question I have turned to Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay, "The Task of the Translator". In this writing Benjamin proposes an understanding of translation as a form of perpetuation or 'afterlife' emerging from an original, one which ensures the survival of that original work (254). Benjamin is concerned in the essay not just with translations of the word, but a broader understanding of an original 'other', whether that be a person, text, or cultural phenomena. This approach is useful in the dialogue I intend between histories and the future narratives that may build on and translate them. Also useful in Benjamin's essay is his assertion that translation entails a formal layering from which understanding is built according to accretion. As Christian Kohlross argues in relation to "The Task of the Translator", both understanding and this formal layering together create a translation that works hand in hand (2009: 98–99).

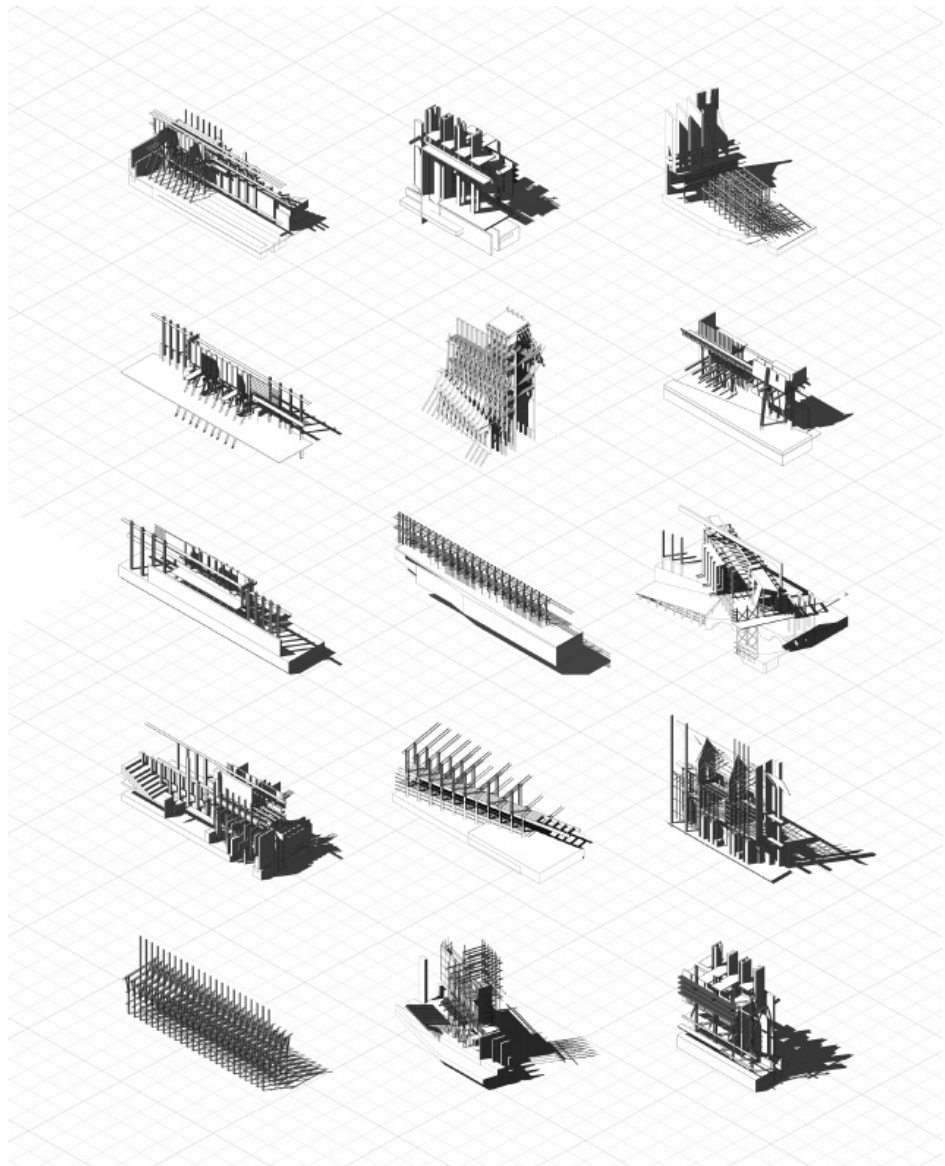
What then of the task of the architect acting as the translator in post-colonial contexts where a diversity of cultural elements are joined antagonistically? One solution is to produce constructive spaces satisfying the needs of specific cultural groups. Translation would then entail an engagement with cultural material, both Māori and European, to be conceptualised and configured as a means to create a new discursive assemblage. This dialectic methodology would fuse visualisation and thinking thereby integrating alternative narratives that shaped the site's heritage. Like translation which inherently forms discrepancies in its operations, architecture and built landscapes have the capacity to preserve multiple versions of the past. They are a multivalent past incarnate layering memories thereby enabling us to complexly remember who we are. The designer as the translator therefore, much as Juhani Pallasmaa has argued, has a significant existential and mental task: domesticating space for human occupation by turning anonymous, uniform and limitless space into distinct places of awareness (2012: 189).

Re-establishing lost memories through translation

Informed by translation theory, cultural and landscape narratives founded within the site were linked with traces of the built environment as a means to create a deeper dialogue between different understandings of place within human settlement. The proposition was that through these links visitors and residents could be equipped to better discover new understandings of, and engagements with, this uniquely complex context (Potteiger, 1998: 225).

A design process commenced with various conceptual ‘design excavations’, themselves conceived of as translations of initial site research and fieldwork. After this, a series of preliminary drawings were created that intended to rethink history and context via a new repertoire of speculative images. What I termed “dreamscape extraction drawings” were then developed by utilising key points and axes to better suggest architectural/formal responses. The resulting drawings became a library of thought that subsequently solidified into propositions for habitable buildings (see Figs. 3–6).

Fig. 3 Author (2021). Archive of process: design excavations. [Digital drawing]



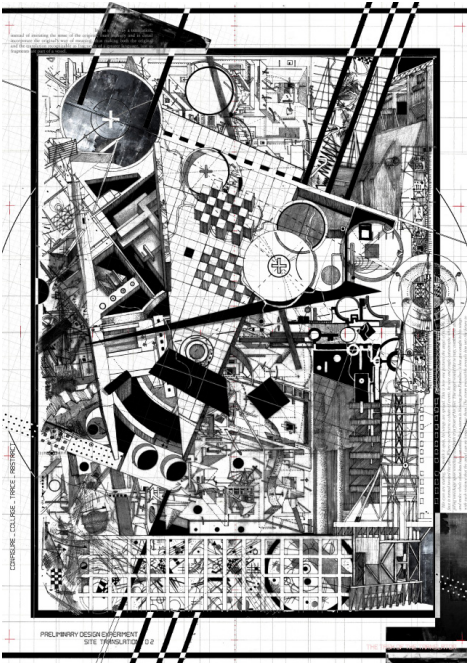


Fig. 4 Author (2021). Site translation 02. [Hybrid drawing]

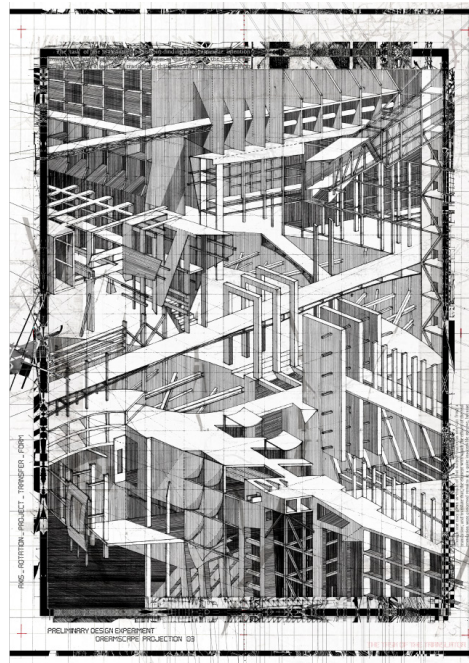
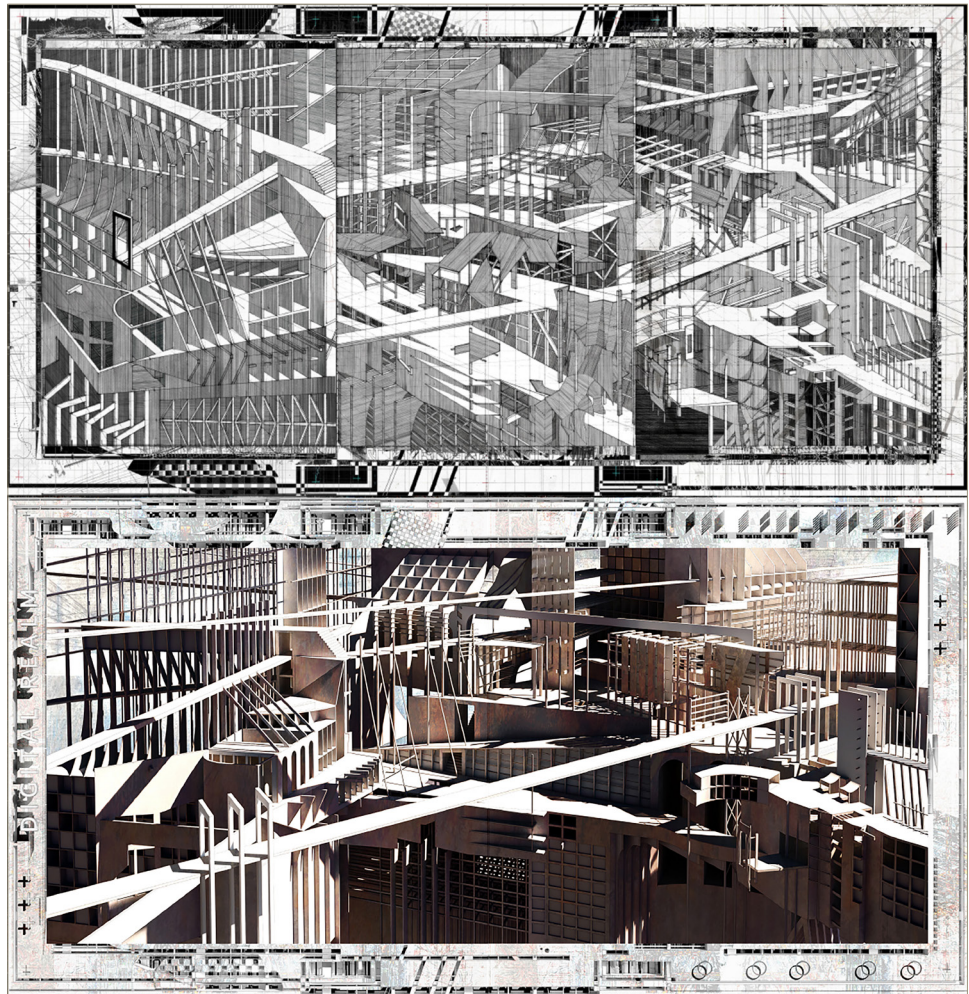


Fig. 5 Author (2021). Dreamscape projection 03'. [Hybrid drawing]

Fig. 6 Author (2021). Dreamscape realm analogue-digital. [Hybrid drawing]



The final version of the project proposes a series of axial structures that work together to analyse and re-conceptualise historic memories of Waihi. Areas of the site affected by the mining industry are connected along a facsimile of the conveyor axis that is currently used to transplant gold-bearing ore from the open-cast mine to the extraction plant and then on to the tailings facility and waste water dams. The re-formed axis intends a physical passage across the site that is also a contextualising, interpretative structure intended to be an inhabitation of time in disjunctive, truncated senses (see Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 Author (2021). View of Contemplation: the site representing the past. The bridge-like structure protrudes out from the lake edge and is directed towards Motukehu. [Digital Render]



Hence the axial structure representing the past sits alone on the northwestern side of the newly formed lake. Severed from the present, this intervention employs a series of interlinked passages, each designed to evoke a different emotion. As such, this axial structure acts as a memorial of sorts with pathways cutting through, allowing visitors to explore intersecting passages of time (see Fig. 8–9).

Fig. 8 Author (2021). Contemplation: Site plan. Two axis are created, one directed towards the ‘present’ and ‘future’ sites and the other directed toward Motukehu. [Digital drawing]



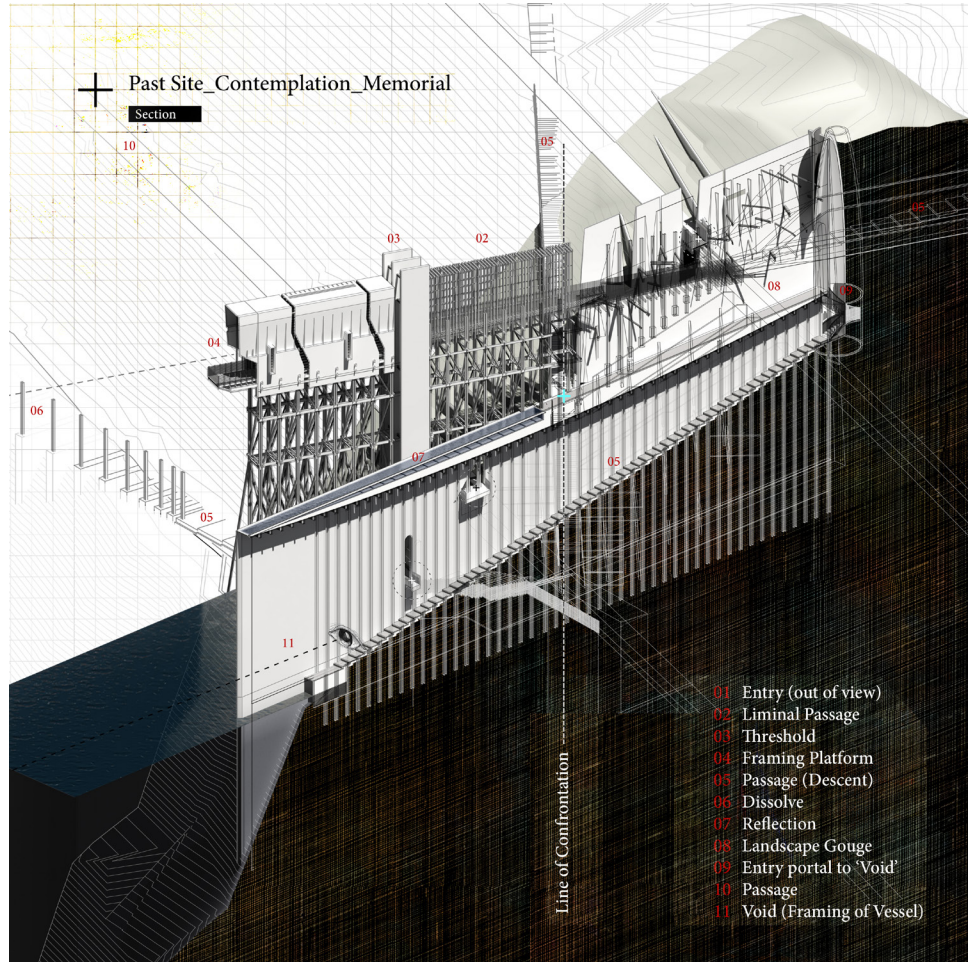


Fig. 9 Author (2021). Contemplation: Section. This section cuts through the passage that leads down to the lake edge with the view directed toward 'The Vessel', itself located on the opposite side of the lake. [Digital drawing]

Across the lake is a territory where two timelines meet thereby creating a link between the past and future. In its current use, this site is the start of Pukewā's journey along the conveyor line which transplants her body to the processing plant. Proposed instead is a new axis allowing passage of fresh water into the lake. This intervention also facilitates a central community hub for Waihi (referred to as The Vessel), one that offers a view back (in time) across the lake to its extractive past (see Fig. 10–12).

Fig. 10 Author (2021). View of The Vessel, itself a location representing the present for it serves the community of Waihi in its present state by offering places for learning and socialising. [Digital render]

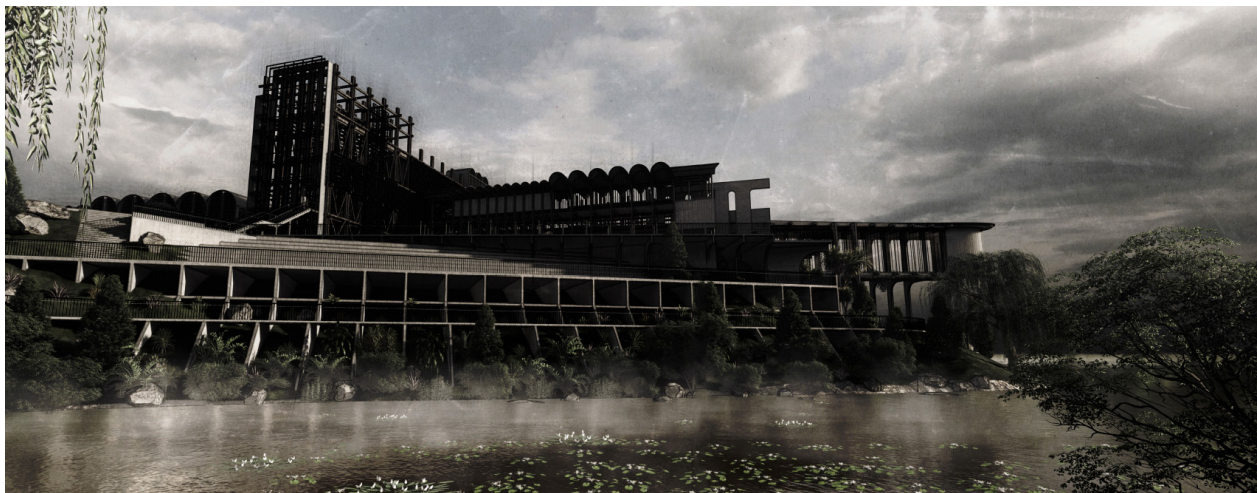
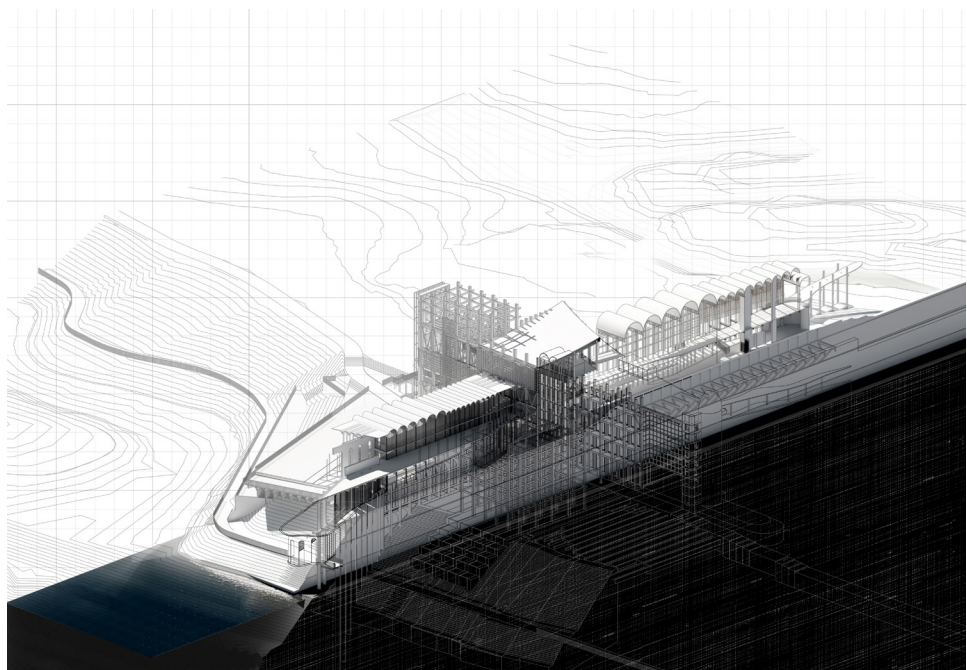




Fig. 11 Author (2021). The Vessel: Site plan. The water enters the lake through the newly formed passage which flows beneath the building. [Digital drawing]

Fig. 12 Author (2021). The Vessel: Section. Shown through the conveyor axis. The passage of water passes beneath the building before entering the lake. [Digital drawing]



A final intervention proposed by the project sits on the outskirts of Waihi at the culminating end of the mnemonic axis stretching from the past to the future. It entails a transformed landscape recognising the truncation of Pukewā’s body. Arriving at the end of the linear pathway an immense void is cut into the landscape, one that is abruptly contrasted by vertical monolithic pillars reaching skyward. A single concrete block invites the visitor to sit and reflect across a shallow body of water. Large boulders—directly extracted from Pukewā’s body—are reflected in the flowing water thereby suggesting in its journey downstream both a cleansing and recharging of the water’s mauri or life force.

A bridge-like structure of timber and steel slices the monolithic pillars, turning

against the axis as if to break away from the destructive nature of the site’s past. This structure is designed to gradually break down over generations, and with its obsolescence, enact a return to Papatūānuku. Assisting this return is a newly planted forest whose maturation will engulf and eventually tear the structure apart. Left behind is a culmination of the narrative pathway—Motukehu, or what I have imagined as Waihi’s landscape chronotope, a maunga untouched by the mining industry due to its non-gold bearing, andesite core. It’s persistence stands as a place of safe habitation and defence for the original peoples of the land (see Fig. 13–14).

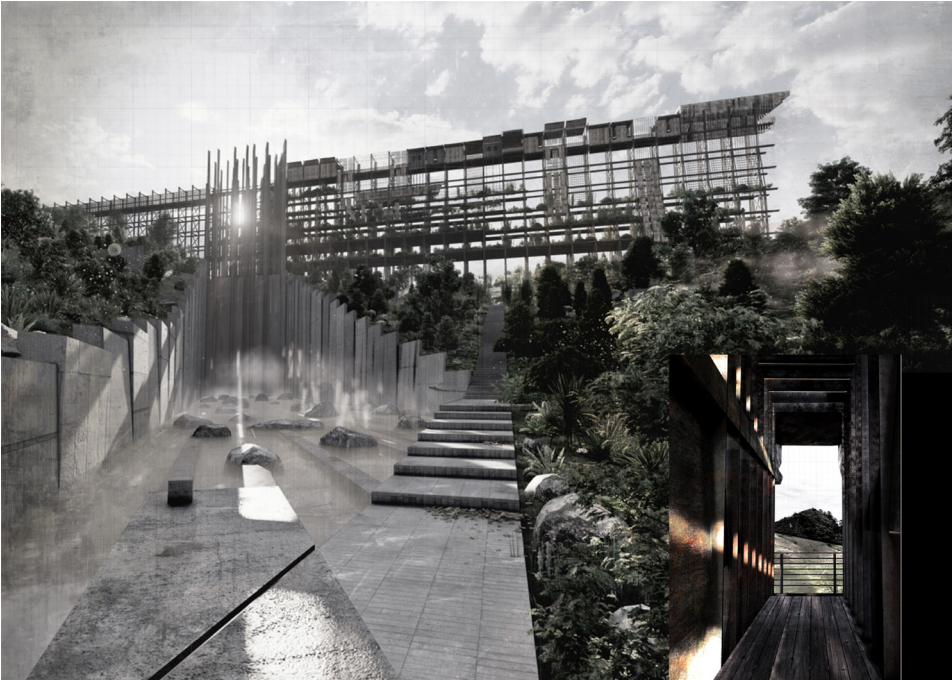
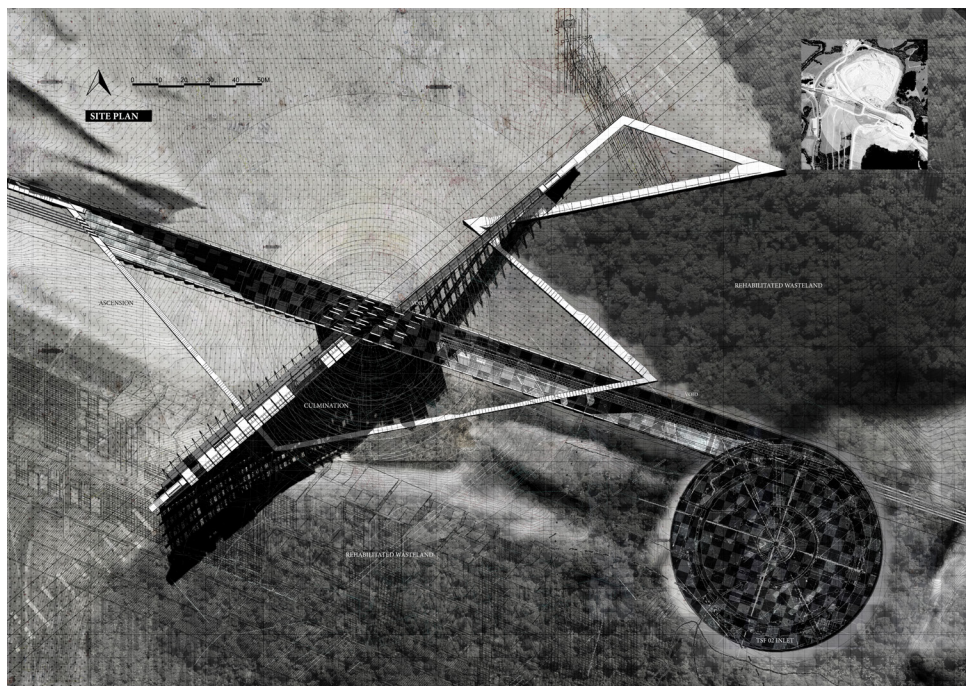


Fig. 13 Author (2021). View of the Culmination, a site representing the future. Image is taken from a rehabilitated landscape and shows maturing trees beginning to engulf the structure. [Digital render]

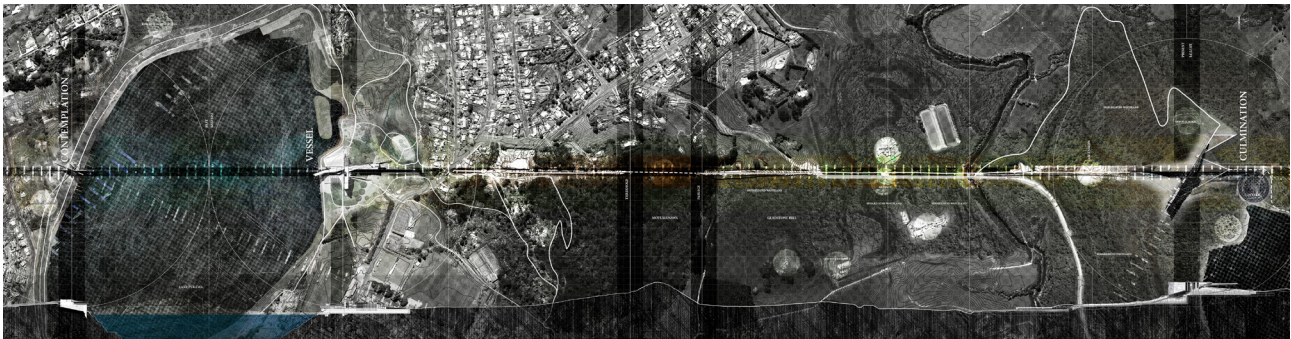
Fig. 14 Author (2021). Culmination: Site Plan. With the axis broken over time, a remaining pathway veers off course crossing over the axis. [Digital drawing]



A path to the future

Motivating this project was a quest to make imaginable the rehabilitation of a once sacred landscape now permanently scarred. Not just a memorial to loss, I have intended a witness and translator of history, one whose ongoing presence serves to enrich the community of Waihi and Ngāti Ranginui, the iwi or tribal people who are descendants of the various tribes affiliated with the area—a presence in fact that may extend the timeline of these communities. The design process draws attention to the changing histories and contexts of sites such as Waihi, and also to architecture's potentials to respond to the issues of these sites. As such, it has sought to demonstrate a working method capable of synthesising narrative histories and their translation in the service of speculative futures.

Fig. 15 Author (2021). Rebirth of Pukewā: complete site plan. [Digital drawing]



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