

## On Whenua, Landscape and Monumental Interiors

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**Abstract:** *There is an intersection of landscape and interior within pre-contact Maori building practice. Throughout New Zealand the land bears imprints from such interventions as the terracing of pa<sup>1</sup> to form defensible, habitable zones; the recessing of rua-ka<sup>2</sup> to form storage vessels within the ground; the indenting of umu<sup>3</sup>; and the imprinting of the interiors of whare puni<sup>4</sup>. This paper explores the manner in which this excavational practice destabilises the clear distinctions between the Western spatial disciplines of interior design, landscape architecture, and architecture. The paper speculates that this carving practice may offer opportunities for intercultural, interdisciplinary space making.*

*This exploration moves between cultures, between perceptions of landscape and whenua, between landscape, interior and architectural disciplines. These between are theorised as a practice, as a mode of making contemporary space which draws from the history and specificity of this land and indigenous culture. This theorised practice has been embodied in a series of buildings developed over the last seven years. Step House, and Continuum House are discussed in relation to notions of landscape interiors and nature-culture continuums. The built works are sited in-between; between bodies in space, and the body of the land; between architecture, landscape and the interior; between indigenous and Western cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Maori, interior design, landscape architecture*

### **in-between**

There is an intersection of landscape and interior within pre-contact<sup>5</sup> Maori building practice. Throughout New Zealand the land bears imprints from such interventions as the terracing of pa to form defensible, habitable zones; the recessing of rua-kai to form storage vessels within the ground; the indenting of umu; and the imprinting of the interiors of whare puni. Through this excavation practice the landscape becomes what theatre-archaeologists Pearson and Shanks refer to as 'a social construct, a palimpsest, marked and named by the actions of ancestors' (Pearson & Shanks, 2001, p. 139). These palimpsestic inscriptions in the land are interiors, within, inside the body of the land; many trace former architectures whose supplementary shells have eroded, leaving a monumental interior.

Referencing early colonial representations of the whare, Sarah Treadwell writes that 'the woven house is a container that leaks' (Treadwell, 1999, p. 267). Maori architecture is commonly characterised in colonial discourse as permeable and lightweight, constructed

as it was with technologies of knotting and weaving. In this there is an intersection of architecture, landscape and interior, with all three disciplines interconnected. Yet there is another technology that can be unearthed within traditional practice; one of excavation, a digging down into the earth to define space, to achieve environmental control, to preserve and to contain. Spaces such as those within the partially sunken whare become interior landscapes whose floors and partial walls are contiguous with the earth.

This exploration of difference across cultures and cultural spatial practices offers an opportunity to rethink our building practices and overturn spatial orthodoxies. Elizabeth Grosz's work has much to offer in this context. Grosz conflates thinking and texts (whether painting, book, landscape, architecture) thereby conferring agency, contingency, action on or within texts. She writes:

*Like concepts, texts are complex products, effects of history, the intermingling of old and new, a complex of internal coherences or consistencies and external referents, of intension and extension, of thresholds and becomings. Texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments. They are events – situated in social, institutional, and conceptual space (Grosz, 1995, pp. 125–126).*

Two built works are discussed within the context of rethinking practice; the built spaces are understood as active 'text' events bringing about new alignments, operating between dissimilar conditions. These betweens, following Grosz, are theorised as a mode of making contemporary space which draws from the history and specificity of this land and indigenous culture.

The territory explored within this paper is one in which the land is not only a ground or site for a woven fabrication, but also a material within which, and with which, to make space. This exploration must move, therefore, between the landscape, interior and architecture practices which are understood in the Western model as separate, distinct disciplines; between indigenous and Western cultures; between conceptions of culture and nature; between body, whenua and landscape.

### **between whenua and landscape**

The primary site of this paper is the ground itself, the land and its ecosystems. The terms 'whenua' and 'landscape' are employed to signify the same or similar conditions; yet the cultural differences between the Maori and Pakeha terms leads to a blurring, a kind of slumping, between meanings. Landscape entered the English language at the end of the sixteenth century; 'landscap, like its Germanic root, Landschaft, signified a unit of human

occupation, or a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction' (Schama, 1995, p. 10). A bifurcation of the etymological root gives the term's derivation in the 'idea of a clearing cut by people in the wild forest' (Park, 2006, p. 9). As such, it already holds within it the notion of acculturation of the environment by human engagement. Yet the Western notion of landscape, a viewed or occupied human terrain, implies an understanding of the land, and the non-human organisms within it, as separate from, and subordinate to, humanity's controlling gaze<sup>6</sup>. The Western cultural construction of landscape includes a concept of 'ownership' of land and a sense in which humanity is separate from and in control of the natural environment. This concept has significant utility but has a problematic potential to reduce awareness of our profound reliance upon and vulnerability within the environment. This cultural construction is predicated on origin narratives of separation<sup>7</sup>.

The perception of the relationship between human and land in Polynesian culture is radically different to this. The term 'whenua' describes both placenta and land. These meanings overlay and profoundly intersperse; the term signifies the inseparable interaction and contiguity of the natural environment or 'nature' and humanity. In Maori origin narratives the land is body, that of Papatuanuku, humans are the grand-children of that body and the sky father, Ranginui<sup>8</sup>. There is, in this world-view, a sense of (placental) connection rather than separation, a nature-culture continuum.

Some Western trained ecologists are now beginning to espouse this ethic of connection, challenging the dominant Western model of conservation in which humans are seen as separate from or other to nature. Geoff Park speaks to this when he asserts that in the 'elemental terms of matter and energy, people ultimately are land, no more, no less than the birds, insects, trees and seeds and the constant process of their birth, growth and decay and the movement of them and their parts through the landscape' (Park, 2006, p. 25). Cultural critic Elizabeth Grosz's work is useful in reconfiguring notions of nature, and culture-nature relationships. Grosz frames nature, the natural, as an origin, a site of action, a fluid thing. She writes that she is 'interested in rethinking the status of the natural, to affirm it and to grant it the openness to account for the very inception of culture itself...the natural, must be seen as ... the ground of a malleable malleability, whose openness account for the rich variability of cultural life ... The natural must be understood as fundamentally open to history, to transformation, or to becoming...'. (Grosz, 2001, p. 98). It is this malleability, this openness to transformation which is engaged in the excavated landscape-interiors that mark the whenua.

## into the land

There is a curious lacuna, a kind of hole, in discussions of the building practice of pre-contact Maori. What is particularly curious about this hole is that it occurs in relation to that which is most visible, most massive and monumental in Maori building practice; the hill top, headland and lowland pa, with their terraces and carved recesses<sup>9</sup>. By contrast smaller scaled cutting or carving techniques, whakairo, and ta moko, tattooing, have been discussed in considerable detail from early contact onwards<sup>10</sup>.

There are many potential reasons for this omission, architecture's disciplinary territory has been quite strongly defined and there has been little movement into the zones, seen as other and minor, of landscape architecture and interior design. It seems clear that these monumental pa landscapes, with their earthen interiors, have largely been understood as landscape interventions rather than as a building technology and material.

Colonial culture had a lot to gain from a conscious or subconscious denial of the location of Maori, 'ownership' in Western terms, within the land. There were frequent assertions that the land was empty, and that Maori were a dying 'race'; Walter Buller in his *Supplement to 'The Birds of New Zealand'* noted, in relation to the projected death of Maori, that 'Our plain duty as good, compassionate colonists is to smooth their dying pillow' (Park, 2006, p. 86). In fact many areas of the North Island, and several South Island locales, were densely inhabited; archaeologist Ian Barber writes that while '[monumental paa] structures are probably underreported for many Pacific Island landscapes (Best, 1993, pp. 438–39), there is still no question that the number of Maori paa is without precedent in Polynesia... Given the sociopolitical and ceremonial importance of paa, such landscapes represent spectacular and enduring visual re-creations of border, order, identity, and ancestry' (Barber, 1996, p. 876). While Maori held no deeds of ownership of the land, the inhabitation and investment, both spiritual and economic, remain written into the land itself.

This practice of excavation must have had multiple and overlaying cultural utilities. Building typologies and techniques varied across territories and across seasons. Type and use of pa also varied greatly, dependent on function, site and era of use. Certainly some pa were used as fortifications yet there is evidence that many did not have a defensive function. Many pa had a storage function, and there is a clear parallel between pa and areas rich in resources from horticulture and fisheries (Davidson, 1984, p. 184). Terracing was a practical response to achieving a flat living platform on steep hills and ridges, yet it may also have had other religio-spiritual functions. Recessing of fire pits, whare puni floors, and rua-kai had a clear

utility associated with achieving stable temperatures, and controlling fire spread. As these sites are explored we build up a pattern of a culture which used the body of the earth itself as structure, as a building material, as a generator of interior space.

Something in the order of 6000 pa sites have been discovered and it seems that pa proliferated in a short period of time, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Belich, 1996, p. 80). New Zealand historian James Belich has questioned the assumption that these pa were a response to a 'massive and permanent upsurge in warfare, and that it was a direct response to food shortages? He suggests rather that the pa 'were so difficult to take that there was often little point in trying...They are evidence of the presence of reserves, not their absence. They must post-date, or emerge in tandem with, the successful shift by some groups from an extractive to a sustainable economy' (Belich, 1996, p. 80).

In *Loss, Change and Monumental Landscaping* Ian Barber discusses the overuse and subsequent failure of a primary food resource in relation to pa construction finding that '[Given] a resource-crisis concern for territoriality, control, and permanence, paa of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries at least may represent a monumental reaffirmation of and appeal for the extension of a more beneficent and productive order into a now more permanently capricious island world... In its symbolism, the paa landscape ... united expressions of "cultural" landscaping with "natural" sacred ancestral [land] ... paa building extended and reintegrated the traditional landscape... a response of spiritual continuity and connectivity to stressful environmental change' (Barber, 1996, pp. 876-877). There is, in this theory, a complex layering of culture and nature in order to formulate sustainable economies and ecologies; a culture-nature continuum established by ritualised landscape-building practices<sup>11</sup>.

### **spaces of the in-between**

This indigenous practice of excavation, the making of landscape spaces or exterior interiors, has formed the ground for a design practice which is concerned with operating in-between and with critiquing current spatial paradigms. This re-thinking has been embodied in a series of buildings developed over the last seven years by the author. Two of these buildings, Step House, and Continuum House, are discussed in relation to notions of landscape interiors and artificial ground.

### **Step House**

The Step House sits on a gently sloping site, surrounded on three sides by housing, with a panoramic vista to an inlet. The house is formed by three shallow steps; at one end it retains

a hill; at the other it is recessed below the flat ground plane. The lower terrace is recessed 900mm below ground, the intermediate plane is slightly raised above ground, the upper terrace is level with the ground on the long axis, on the short axis the bounding concrete block wall retains 2.2m of soil. The stepping ground plane of the interior is continuous, moving from below ground, in the recessed winter lounge, stepping up to the dining zone, stepping again to the kitchen area, and then into the summer lounge, positioned at the upper level of the site. This continuous ground plane is polished, ground concrete in all zones other than the summer lounge. The grinding process is an excavational one, cutting back through the upper layer, the fines and slurry, down to expose sectioned spheres of aggregate and particles of shell. This ground holds other objects within its depths, iron rebars and services are held within, thus protected and encased.

In the winter lounge, set 900mm below ground, one is at eye level with the exterior ground plane when seated. This ground plane is problematised, radicalised via the relocation of the body below the exterior ground plane. The fireplace and hearth are recessed a further 30mm, the fire, recessed like the recessed fire pit, is set into the body of the ground within the cut concrete surface which folds down from the ground plane of the dining zone. Held within the body of the ground, with a recessed fire pit, the winter room is warm, contained by an 'exterior', operating as a landscape interior.



*Figure 1: Ground level concrete slab*



*Figure 2: Folded concrete slab.*

The folding, malleable ground surface marks the level change between dining and kitchen; it rises up 900mm above the surface of the kitchen floor, folding to form the kitchen bench. This bench too is formed of ground concrete, the cut surfaces of its aggregate apparent. The hobs are set within this cut 'ground' plane with the oven positioned below this ground. The summer room has timber flooring directly applied to the concrete substrate, recalling the temporary, supplementary fibres upon the earthen floors of whare puni. Beyond the concrete block wall at the back of the summer lounge is a store area which holds garden equipment and laundry. This space is set within the ground, held within an earthen vessel, as the service and storage zones of rua-kai were held.

### **Continuum House**

Set on a steep site, overlooking the sea and a bush clad headland, the Continuum House<sup>12</sup> operates as a terraced, artificial, landscape. The building becomes the means by which one negotiates the steep site, moving onto the 'roof' which is level with the upper ground plane, then down the sloping roof/wall to a roof garden, and down again to an outdoor room which is partially enclosed by two perimeter walls. The house problematises distinctions between architecture and landscape in that the architecture becomes another landscape; it challenges understandings of interior and exterior in that the exterior forms the interior via the angled wall-floor. This angled wall-floor, formed from concrete, is pockmarked and bubbled; its surface speaking to the incised, weathered rock slope within which it is lodged.



*Figure 3: Angled wall-floor.*

The kitchen bench here too is formed from the artificial ground plane, a concrete fold extends up; recessed within its surface, the hob, beneath it the oven. The aggregate for

bench and floor is sourced from the same site, flecked with white and grey aggregate and shells, reminiscent of middens. Ruakai of a sort are held within this extended ground plane, the pullout pantry holds cooking essentials, olive oil, tea, salt. Also within this 'earthen' vessel are the plates, cups, pots and pans; pullout rubbish, recycling and compost bins; and three different kinds of water store, two sinks and a dishdrawer.

These interiors, monumental in their mass, are formed from a continuous folding ground plane; in this they are acculturated landscapes, artificial 'natures'. They explore an indigenous spatial paradigm in which interior and exterior are blurred and multiple, in which space is formed with and within the ground, in which the exterior, or land, becomes itself a mode by which to make interiority.

The paper suggests that the works are dynamic texts whose readings shift between landscape, interior and architecture, all inscribed within a contiguous nature-culture field. This mutability is engaged as a strategy, a means by which to open up contemporary architectural practice to cultural and spatial difference. The spaces operate between conditions, both 'natural' and 'cultural', both 'interior' and 'exterior', confounding and contesting these Western oppositions.

### **monumental interiors**

The term 'monumental interiors' is used, in this paper, to describe the complex and multiple nature of the indigenous excavated landscape spaces, and to challenge Western disciplinary preconceptions on interior design, landscape architecture and architecture. The interior design discipline has been characterised as the lesser of the binary opposition, architecture and interior design; it is strongly gendered, again figuring as the supposed sub-ordinate pairing of the male, female binary. It is continually positioned as the temporal and temporary, against architecture's supposed permanence. There is some utility in this positioning, in the minor, the marginal, the ephemeral; such a location more readily enables a critical radical practice. Grosz sites this marginal practice in the space of the in-between, a space of trajectories of movement, of fluidity and contestations of identity. She writes that:

*The space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural and natural transformations... The first great thinker of the in-between is probably Henri Bergson, for whom the question of becoming, the arc of movement, is the most central frame. Instead of conceiving of relations between fixed identities, between entities or things that are only externally bound, the in-between is the only space of movement, of development or becoming... it is the space of the bounding and undoing of the identities which constitute*

*it... This in-between is the very site for the contestation of the many binaries and dualisms that dominate Western knowledge... (Grosz, 2001, pp. 92-93).*

The work of refiguring the interior, of stepping outside of disciplinary boundaries, has some currency at present. Bill McKay and Antonia Walmsley's work situates itself in a space of in-between, exploring Western and Pacific models of space, rethinking the architecture of the Pacific. They write, in their paper on Pacific space, that:

*In the West, architecture, landscape and interior are seen as separate disciplines, with the latter two subordinate to architecture's concern with object, form and structure.... [they] explore the extent to which buildings of the Pacific subvert this Western model... What if these indigenous structures are not architecture and have more of an affinity with the crafts such as weaving, binding, carving and painting? What if these buildings are closer to clothing or furniture or even floral arrangement than they are to building? What if the buildings of Oceania are not so much a topic for architectural history as one for the disciplines of landscape and interior design? (McKay & Walmsley, 2005, pp. 61-62).*

These explorations and speculations recognise cultural and spatial difference. Through explorations of Maori and Polynesian building practices spatial orthodoxies may be reconsidered, contemporary spatial practice opened up to difference.

### **on whenua and monumental interiors**

This paper has explored the pre-contact Maori building practice of excavation into the ground to make 'interior' space within the landscape. It has discussed the manner in which these interiors remain as monuments in the landscape, traces of former inhabitation. The paper has examined two contemporary buildings which are designed in response to these indigenous monumental interiors. The paper suggests that this excavational practice destabilises the clearly defined disciplinary territories of the Western spatial disciplines of interior design, architecture and landscape architecture. From this the paper speculates that such a carving practice may offer opportunities for intercultural, interdisciplinary space making.

In attempting to frame both the indigenous practice and the contemporary work this paper has ranged across a territory of culture, nature and cultured nature. It has sought to work into this territory, forming a discursive space which, while contemporary, is grounded in indigenous practice. The built works discussed in this paper draw from a paradigm in which the ground is engaged, enculturated to form space. They are sited in-between; between bodies in space, and the body of the land; between architecture, landscape and the interior; between indigenous and Western cultures.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The term Pa is difficult to define, given the variety in the typology; common features include a monumental carving of the landscape, sometimes fortified, often with food storage capacity, having a role as a marker of place. See Davidson (1984), *The Prehistory of New Zealand*, Belich (1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Rua kai are excavated food stores; see Best, (2005).
- <sup>3</sup> Umu are in ground ovens, utilised throughout Polynesia.
- <sup>4</sup> Whare puni are indigenous sleeping houses, they manifest in a variety of forms, some are excavated; see Davidson (1984).
- <sup>5</sup> Contact era is commonly dated from 1769, the time of James Cook's expedition to New Zealand; see Belich, (1996).
- <sup>6</sup> Giselle Byrnes writes of the effect of the controlling gaze in the colonization of New Zealand; 'Typically, British visions of empire were appropriative: the British collected and packaged information for their own consumption. Visual readings and representations of landscapes, especially foreign and exotic landscapes, were considered in this possessive manner: for on a conceptual level, to see was to possess' (Byrnes, 2001, p. 129).
- <sup>7</sup> Western attitudes to 'nature' are polysemous, shifting, seamed through with values of connection to the earth which precede Judeo-Christian narratives and Cartesian thought. See Schama (1995) for an extended discussion on this.
- <sup>8</sup> In a Maori origin narrative Papatuanuku is the mythical earth mother, Ranginui, the sky father, whose grand-children were human. Polynesian origin narratives run parallel this; see also George Grey, *Polynesian Mythology*.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Austin is one of the few architectural commentators who has discussed this practice, identifying it as the monumental architecture of Aotearoa/NZ (Austin, 2004 iii-xi.)

<sup>10</sup> There is a large body of research on the ritualised carving of timber, stone, and the body, I have found little to date about a ritualised carving of the earth. I hope to explore this in a later paper.

<sup>11</sup> I intend to explore this ritualised sustainable practice further, with a view to its utility in addressing the growing awareness that Western economies and ecologies

<sup>12</sup> This house is still under construction

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