Anthony Hoete

# THE HOUSE AS ANCESTOR

## A TALE OF MĀORI SOCIAL VALUE

Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito
(Hinemihi of the Old World),
Te Wairoa, Rotorua,
New Zealand,
1880s

The photograph was taken by the Burton Bros prior to the Mount Tarawera eruption of 10 June 1886 when the meeting house was buried. The first *whare whakairo* (carved meeting houses) were built in the mid-19th century at a time of social upheaval (the Treaty of Waitangi, Christianity, disease). Māori 'architects' responded by applying carvings to *whare* to represent the *mana* (life force) of the community.

In order for a house to have social value, it must be a focus of spiritual, political and cultural significance to a specific community. This is a tale of one such house, the Māori *whare*. The *whare* is formally greeted as one would a person, before addressing the humans within. Carving, ornament and pattern constitute most of its Māori-ness, and are central to its place in Māori civilisation. **Anthony Hoete**, founder of WHAT_architecture, unravels the architecture of Māori placemaking, its social standing and worldview.

When Māori arrived in Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the early 14th century, such was the magnitude of the voyage that this indigenous society remained in isolation for the next 300 years. The Māori classical period was one of remote distillation that created a society distinct from other eastern Polynesian cultures. In Māoritanga (Māori-ness), the recounting of tradition was activated through myriad social forms including *waiata* (song), *kapa haka* (dance), *whakairo* (carving) and *moko* (tattooing). With the notable absence of writing, speech flourished: Te Reo (Māori language) is first and foremost an oral literature. The *pepeha*, for example, is a means of spoken introduction through which Māori establish their identity, a story of their connection to *moana* (sea), *waka* (canoe), *maunga* (mountain), *awa* (river), *whare* (house), *marae* (public space), *iwi* (tribe) and *hapū* (community). With the arrival of European settlers in the late 18th century, Māoritanga has been perpetually reshaped by increasing urbanisation and closer contact with New Zealanders of European descent (Pākehā). To offset identity loss, much social value is afforded to the revival of traditional practices, and the *whare* remains the key socio-spatial actuator.

**Waterscape not Landscape**

The surface area of Polynesia is so vast that it is one and a half times larger than Europe and, down there, all that is solid is swamped by liquid a thousand times over. Furthermore, a thousand tiny islands are sprinkled over this oceanic triangle, which reaches to Hawaii in the north, Rapa Nui in the east and New Zealand in the south. The earliest migratory patterns were therefore sea based, and of relatively small social clusters. There were, and still are, no Polynesian cities in the European sense. Given the solitude that is the architecture of the archipelago, traditions carried by written words could be readily washed away in one capsizing wave. Books as jetsam. *Waiata* would thus carry oral traditions forward in a not too dissimilar manner to the sea shanty. Through identification to a *waka*, one could trace descent from one of the great fleet of migratory canoes, departure from (is)lands of no return and arrival in Aotearoa. Within the indeterminate liquid context that is the sea, space and time are easily lost. Fact and fiction became blended, and so the constant retracing of one's lineage (*whakapapa*) remains the narrative that underpins Māori society today.

Ancestral stories recount the house as a boat. During the day the canoe could be used for fishing, whilst upturned at night it could shelter. In Polynesian mythology the sequence of house-or-canoe is a chicken-or-egg causality dilemma: the Samoans claim the house was built first, whereas the Tongans posit the canoe.[1] In Hawaiiki, sails are floor mats and canoe/houses are lashed together. Forever tied, house building is predicated upon boat building, and vice versa.

Yet the traditionally adorned modern plan-form of the *whare* only emerged after European arrival. Referred to as a 'meeting house', a *wharenui* served as a forum for discussion at a time when Māori were experiencing

much social upheaval relating to land loss, politics and religion. With its formal emphasis on the front facade – gabled roof form, singular fenestration – it was often interpreted by Western scholars as being crude. The Māori *whare* today needs to be understood in the same way we greet another person.[2] Much like the traditional Māori greeting – the *hongi*, or nose press – the architectural arrangement is a *kanohi ki te kanohi* (or face-to-face) engagement. When formally speaking on the *marae*, one then talks to the house before addressing those in attendance. From a Western perspective, talking to a building, like Doctor Doolittle talking to the animals, might be considered madness.[3] Yet it is not appropriate to apply a Western perspective, with its seemingly well-intended heritage practices, to indigenous culture. A visitor to a *marae* would thus be expected to acknowledge and greet the host's meeting house as part of the introduction: '*E te whare e tū nei, tēnā koe'.* Many *whare* are named after ancestors and are regarded as their outstretched body. The *tekoteko* is a gabled head and is the face of the ancestor, the *maihi* (bargeboards) their arms, the *kūwaha* (door) a mouth, the *tāhuhu* (ridge pole) a spine, and the *heke* (rafters) ribs. Each house has its own social meaning accumulated over time through use. Until recently,[4] Māori architecture did not exist in academic studies, as architecture was deemed to be non-indigenous, an import arising from Eurocentric lineages. Paradoxially, however, though Māori architecture had been suppressed, Māori *whare* had been exported since the 19th century. Today, four *whare* are located outside New Zealand. Three of these are cryogenically frozen as part of internal museum collections, but one is still in use as a house: Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito (Hinemihi of the Old World).

Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito
(Hinemihi of the Old World),
Clandon Park,
Surrey, England,
2012

In 1891 the Governor of New Zealand, the 4th Earl of Onslow, wanted a souvenir of the country to take back to England. The Hinemihi *whare* was thus sold and shipped to the UK in 1893, although it is questionable as to whether there really was a 'willing buyer' or 'willing seller' given the social upheaval Māori were experiencing at the time.

*above:* The figuratively carved elements of the *whare* are personifications of particular ancestors and resemble the human body in structure. The *tekoteko* represents the head and is a carved, human-like figure crafted to instil guardianship over the tribe.

*below:* The Māori *whare* has just one window. Hinemihi was originally built with an English sash window and thus incorporated European building elements before she arrived in the UK.

*opposite:* Carving is of the pane, a triangular profiled part of the ridge beam that lies over the front porch. The supporting rafters, or *heke,* represent the ribs of the ancestor.

A WHAT architecture depiction of Hinemihi envisaged without ornament. Whilst her carvings (*whakairo*) constitute less than 5 per cent of her materiality, they constitute more than 95 per cent of her Māori identity. Without them Hinemihi is merely a grass hut.

**The National Trust's announcement in 2019 of its support for the exchange of her deteriorating carvings for newly created carvings of original dimensions, with motifs to be informed and inscribed by both British and New Zealand stakeholders, is a final affirmation of the social value that resides within the Māori *whare***

The original six-panel side-hung door to Hinemihi was also European, although many *whare* were built with leftward-sliding cavity doors (and right-sliding cavity windows).

The internal central post supports the ridge pole of a Māori meeting house. The naturalistic style of the carved figure was intended to emphasise the social side of the ancestor.

**A House in Two Places at Once**

Her story is one of transience. Carved in 1881, Hinemihi was originally built in the village of Te Wairoa near Lake Rotorua prior to the eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886. Having provided shelter to a fortunate few (including one of her carvers, Tene Waitere), she was then shopped and shipped by the New Zealand Governor General of the time, Lord Onslow, to the UK in 1891 as garden exotica for Clandon Park near Guildford in Surrey. Without any accompanying erection documentation, Hinemihi was reconstructed, albeit chopped and chipped, as a boat shed until recuperating soldiers from the Māori Pioneer Battalion discovered her in 1917 and, sensitive to her deteriorating physical state, relocated her opposite Clandon House, *kanohi ki te kanohi*. As a colonial face-off this arrangement symbolically mirrors the historic, and at times confrontational relationship between Pākehā and Māori in the colonisation of New Zealand. Yet the siting of Hinemihi in the garden of Clandon House could also be read as positively transformative: today the grass lawn also serves as *marae ātea* (a rural form of public space specific to the South Pacific). The lawn allows for the traditional ritual of *pōwhiri* (welcome) and thereby anchors Hinemihi's shifting space to her new place. She has sat there for the greater part of her life. Hinemihi now has two meaningful historic settings: one trace to New Zealand and the shore of Lake Tarawera; another to the UK in Clandon Park. Thanks to the social value Māori attribute to the meeting house, she can now be in two places at once.

In Aotearoa, tribal narratives continue to reference the absent Hinemihi in speech as the ancestress of the *hapū* and as a means by which to recall and consolidate *whakapapa*. Despite the radical changes to the socioeconomic landscape of the UK over the past 130 years, Hinemihi continues to resonate with a distinctly Māori cultural identity. As an exemplar project of future heritage, she represents a social space that connects two distant lands. A partnership between both places, and the exchange of knowledge and materials, has imbued her with her dual timeframes: her past as Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito (old world) and her future Hinemihi o te Ao Hou (new world). The National Trust's announcement in 2019 of its support for the exchange of her deteriorating carvings for newly created carvings of original dimensions, with motifs to be informed and inscribed by both British and New Zealand stakeholders, is a final affirmation of the social value that resides within the Māori *whare*. ◭

**Notes**

1. Michael Austin, 'Pacific Island Migration', in Stephen Cairns (ed), *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*, Routledge (New York), 2004, pp 224–36.
2. Bill McKay, 'Maori Architecture: Transforming Western Notions of Architecture', *Fabrications*, 14 (1 & 2), December 2004, pp 1–12.
3. Michael Linzey, 'Speaking To and Talking About: Maori Architecture', *Interstices 1: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, 1990, pp 49–60.
4. Deidre Brown, *Maori Architecture: From Fale to Wharenui and Beyond*, Raupo Penguin (Auckland), 2009.