

# SCOPE

*Contemporary Research Topics*

## Art & Design 27: Architecture

August 2024

Encounters

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1027010>

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY:  
DEFINING BI-CULTURAL ARCHITECTURE IN  
NEW ZEALAND'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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## CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: DEFINING BI-CULTURAL ARCHITECTURE IN NEW ZEALAND'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Meaghan Christensen

*Biculturalism* is a common term in discussions of identity in New Zealand and, in a country which defines itself as bicultural, it is important to question how this *bicultural* identity is explored through the nation's built environment. This discussion will interrogate the definitions and understanding of the terms 'bicultural' and 'biculturalism' through a legislative and architectural lens and, in response, propose an appropriate understanding of these terms in today's cultural context. Within this discussion, multiple case studies drawn from academic research are consulted in order to examine the history and evolution of the term and its application and thus better understand the evolving definition of biculturalism in New Zealand architecture.

The concept of *identity* has a long discursive history in New Zealand, where *biculturalism* is often a leading term in conversations navigating land, built form, education and related topics. In British English, the term *bicultural* is defined in the Harper Collins Dictionary as "having two cultures" and, subsequently, as "the characteristics, or policy, of a two-cultured society." According to these definitions, the presence of two cultures (Māori and Pakeha) and their involvement in signing the nation's founding document, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, implies that New Zealand is bicultural both by definition and legal obligation. In response to the transgressions suffered by Māori following the signing of the Treaty, multiple legal documents have been produced to move us toward a truly bicultural nation which upholds what was agreed in the Treaty of Waitangi and restore the identity and mana of Māori people. Driving documents include Te Tiriti o Waitangi, specifically the te reo translation of the text;<sup>1</sup> the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 and the Waitangi Tribunal;<sup>2</sup> and the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the issues around defining bicultural architecture are linked with the perspective that biculturalism as a concept and term has its origins in a Eurocentric agenda, evolving in New Zealand from assimilation and integration of Māori culture into Pakeha culture, progressing to biculturalism. Throughout the history and evolution of the concept, many bicultural policies remained restrictive for Māori, particularly regarding their expression of identity.<sup>4</sup> Architecturally, this aspect has been canvassed through criticisms of John Scott's Futuna Chapel, voiced by Julia Gatley and Bill McKay, questioning the validity of Scott as a bicultural architect – "an architect that was Māori, or a Māori architect?" – and analysing Futuna as a work that it is possible to view without recognition of any cultural elements.<sup>5</sup> Other work in this area has examined historical discourses about the defining of bicultural buildings, such as Āniwaniwa Visitor Centre and Te Kupenga o te Mātauranga. In the case of Te Kupenga o te Mātauranga, while consultation with the 'correct' parties was carried out according to legal obligation, those with genuine cultural interests were not consulted, resulting in the sale of the marae (according to official policy which required consultation with local iwi for whom the marae held no significance, despite the marae having been constructed by Māori students from Massey University, for Māori students).<sup>6</sup>

Āniwaniwa Visitor Centre, on the other hand, exemplifies the progress achieved by bicultural policies, which allowed a Māori voice in defining the original building, designed by John Scott, and its status and significance as a 'bicultural' work. While the planned restoration of Āniwaniwa Visitor Centre was the subject of debate due to its

historic significance as a bicultural building, Māori parties disagreed with this identity, as for them it was a symbol of oppression – a fake symbol of 'cultural unity,' built on land which had been stolen. Following protest, the building was knocked down (rather than repaired) in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the success at Āniwaniwa Visitor Centre, the policy failings evident in Te Kupenga o te Mātauranga marae and the criticisms of Scott's Futuna Chapel show that in New Zealand the concept of biculturalism (and the policies associated with it) is a 'work in progress' that is slowly moving away from its Eurocentric origins, but still has room for improvement. Politically, it is not enough to foster a nation or a built environment that is merely bicultural by definition, but rather one that is equally made up of both cultures or, better yet, incorporates bicultural equity. We need to question whether, in New Zealand, we collectively define biculturalism as an *equal* synthesis of the two cultures, or if our definition of biculturalism is defined by the minimum – the mere presence of elements of the two cultures, which could then be considered a failure to uphold the legal obligation to comply with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Thus biculturalism, particularly in New Zealand architecture, could well be defined as "an equitable synthesis between Māori and Pakeha" – a concept which would uphold legal obligations to the treaty of Waitangi, but would also establish Māori identity in the built environment (something required by the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act).

In questioning *how* we define biculturalism in New Zealand, the fact that discussions of identity are often centred on "becoming a bicultural nation" or "mastering biculturalism" highlights the term as one which is loosely used and poorly defined and understood. By definition, New Zealand is *already* a bicultural nation, and yet much of the discussion is taken up with 'becoming.' In the realm of architecture, so long as a body of work incorporates an aspect of both cultures, it is by default bicultural. As currently used, the term 'bicultural' implies no essential balance between the two cultures, merely the *presence* of both. However, in the practice of architecture, it is unacceptable to merely 'slap' a Māori carving onto a building of otherwise European inspiration and call it bicultural. As the debates around Āniwaniwa Visitor Centre and John Scott's Futuna Chapel show, there is a good deal of controversy over defining bicultural buildings in New Zealand, and just as much confusion around what it means to create truly 'bicultural' architecture.

Christine McCarthy describes biculturalism as a term which arose in New Zealand during the 1950s, gaining momentum in the 1980s, and which has remained a subject whose contours shift when considered from the perspective of different disciplines, particularly when it comes to architecture. Despite its fluid usage, however, key similarities appear between academic interpretations of the term – especially the professional consensus that Scott's Futuna Chapel is a bicultural work (although even this is debated), and variations of the statement "biculturalism is a synthesis between Māori and Pakeha." However, this 'synthesis' is agreed to be difficult to achieve in practice and the methods by which this is done are subject to interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Taking these factors into account, it is evident that minimal criteria for defining bicultural architecture, and even the common term 'synthesis,' fail to include any further requirement for a 'balance' of cultures beyond the dictionary definitions of 'bicultural' and 'biculturalism.'

There is a need for the development of definitive criteria by which biculturalism is achieved, or at least for a stronger definition and understanding of the term, particularly with the intention of creating racial equality in New Zealand. Paul Jones discusses the sociological impacts of architecture, its ability to mediate between discoursing cultures and its ability to construct identity. For architects, particularly in relation to social architecture, there is an obligation to construct identity through the built environment as well as pressure to be cultural experts who walk a very fine political line.<sup>9</sup> As a result, biculturalism in New Zealand architecture should turn its attention to the built environment, rather than the individual building. If one building that strongly constructs Māori identity is produced in a sea of European representation, this is preferable to constructing a building that is 'half and half.' Perhaps it is in this way that *cultural* architecture should be produced to form a *bicultural* urban fabric that will in turn create bicultural equity within the built environment. In this regard, the goal should be the construction of Māori identity through built form, giving a distinctive voice to the minority culture.

How can this identity be constructed? For Māori, architecture is not merely made up of iconography and symbol through carving (visual form), but inheres in the relationship to landscape, spiritual journey, the life that the building itself has as an entity and, fundamentally, cultural storytelling as a key aspect of identity in Māori design.<sup>10</sup> The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa uses a series of metaphorical expressions to create a “mythical underworld” or a “third space” known as *chora*. The idea of the underworld is prevalent in Māori mythology – myths involving the underworld often “involve some measure of re-evaluation of self or identity construction.”<sup>11</sup> Te Papa has been heavily criticised as a missed opportunity, or a building that has failed to be bicultural and does not embrace bicultural ideals.<sup>12</sup>

However, Michael Linzey argues that Te Papa’s use of the “third space” is an effective means of constructing identity. One of the biggest criticisms the building receives, particularly from visitors, is the ‘disorientation’ that results from the presentation of the interior spaces. It is easy to get lost in Te Papa, to make for one place and arrive in another; and the lack of a clear path through the building can be an uncomfortable experience. However, Linzey argues that this sense of disorientation and the lack of a linear journey through a mix of cultural spaces creates the effect of walking through a mythical underworld, where

‘[u]nder the mountain’ of Te Papa, Māori encounters Pakeha as such as a foreigner; biculturalism encounters the foreign-ness of its own culture ... In this reversal and this keeping apart of opposites there also comes about the growing self-awareness, the growing together of awareness, which necessarily builds and contributes, to a deeper kind of construction of New Zealand identity as a nation.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Te Papa’s incorporation of Māori metaphor in its design, and its ability to construct identity and ignite mediation between cultures, this attempt at biculturalism is also where it fails. According to Paul Jones, “architects’ attempts to make their work resonate with publics outside of the architectural field go far beyond what is actually built, with the work of high-profile architects in part concerned with discursive strategies to make their architecture socially meaningful to non-experts.”<sup>14</sup> It is not that Te Papa fails to be a work that mediates between cultures, as it does so through its programme, but it is open to criticism insofar as its methods of cultural mediation fail to be understood by the non-expert; thus it fails to be socially meaningful, merely reading as a building whose programme is confusing and disorienting to the everyday person. While Te Papa has the ability to construct identity for the individual, such construction is inaccessible because the programme cannot be readily understood. This failure exemplifies the reasoning behind the concept of *co-design* as a way of moving forward within bicultural architecture.

In response to a need for architecture which can be understood by the people it is targeting, and the lack of a strong collaborative process in the design of projects such as Te Papa, *co-design*, a form of participatory design, has emerged as a strategy to mitigate such failings and is proving to be a promising method for constructing cultural identity. *Co-design* involves a collaborative process with users and stakeholders, leaning on their knowledge and experience to inform and guide projects.<sup>15</sup> It is exemplified in the rebuild of Ōtautahi Christchurch. The Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act requires the involvement of Ngāi Tahu in the design process as a part of the exercise of ‘chieftainship’ over their land. As parts of the Avon River and central Christchurch are important historical pa sites and kai-gathering grounds, large amounts of the central Christchurch rebuild, particularly in the public sector, legally require communication and involvement with Ngāi Tahu. In response, the Matapopore Charitable Trust has been mandated to be involved in the design process to ensure the integration of Ngāi Tahu values and identity in the redevelopment, in ways which are culturally relevant and appropriate, thus becoming one of the parties involved in the *co-design* process.<sup>16</sup>

Examples of recent buildings in the central city that have been designed through *co-design* are Tūranga Central Library and the Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre. Both buildings successfully acknowledge and incorporate cultural values such as connection to landscape through their use of form, façade and physical connection. Storytelling is also prominent in the designs of both buildings and has been integrated into the built forms through art, sculpture,

carvings, façade design and spatial layouts.<sup>17</sup> Both buildings are successful in establishing identity – as they were designed to do – and have involved parties who understand the values and needs of the culture whose identity is being affirmed. In both instances, the building's cultural relevance goes beyond the visual – although visual elements provide enough on their own to make a construction of identity – and are supported by the values embodied within the remaining design features, making both buildings more successful examples of bicultural architecture than their predecessors.

Driven by policies including Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1845, the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, the Waitangi Tribunal and the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998, biculturalism in New Zealand architecture is an ever-evolving concept which is mandated to produce a construction of identity within the built environment. This discussion has explored the definitions and debates around bicultural architecture in New Zealand, and how these definitions have been formed through policy, to better understand the political obligations and drivers behind 'bicultural' architecture and how it navigates the political and sociological landscape of New Zealand. The definition of bicultural architecture in New Zealand is still a topic for debate, with no agreed definition of or collective understanding as to what is or is not bicultural architecture beyond a 'synthesis' of Māori and non-Māori architectures. Some commentators continue to uphold this view of biculturalism as a limiting term to form identity within New Zealand and the architectural landscape, where colonial views remain prevalent. However, methodologies such as *co-design* have begun to enter the 'bicultural' architecture scene as a means of promoting cultural equality in New Zealand architecture. Bicultural architecture is hard to put in a box, and almost impossible to define with any precision. Perhaps it is more useful to regard 'bicultural' in relation to architecture as a term whose definition is necessarily fluid and ever-changing according to social context. Given that architecture is a vessel for the construction of identities, and, as identity is constructed at ever more sophisticated levels, what was considered bicultural in the past may not be considered bicultural now. Looking forward, as the balance between cultural identities within an urban landscape, or the cultural values embodied in the 'average' building, continue to shift, so too must the architectural profession respond with an authentic commitment to instigate change.

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