

NEW SPACES AND BOUNDARIES WITHIN POUTASI VILLAGE, UPOLU, SAMOA: THE FATU FEU'U ART CENTRE¹

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In May 2012, I found myself navigating through a torrential downpour, finding speed humps that appeared out of nowhere along the Cross Island road on Upolu, on my way to meet with the artist Fatu Feu'u and visit his village of Poutasi. All the bumping and munching on breadfruit chips eventually led me to his studio in Saleilua (a neighbouring village of Poutasi). I was greeted by Feu'u, a humble tama (father) also fondly known as one of the 'godfathers' of Pacific contemporary art in New Zealand.

HIS VISION

Feu'u began by telling me how he paints his hopes, his future aspirations for the village of Poutasi, and the shared vision led by Tuigalatele Joe Annandale (paramount chief of Poutasi) to rebuild their village, their *va*² with the land, their *va* with the oceans, and *va* as a community. Feu'u seemed somewhat annoyed at the rain gods for spoiling the day of my visit to his village and to the newly built Fatu Feu'u Art Centre (FFAC) – part of the Poutasi rebuild project following the 2009 tsunami which also includes a community centre, funded locally and by the New Zealand Government's Aid Programme. Personally, I was just excited to see him.

CONNECTING THE PEOPLE AND SEA

Tuigalatele Joe spoke of the ongoing efforts to reconnect the people of the village with the sea, involving the restoration of a community centred on the making and maintaining of carving, telling stories in the visual arts and cultural heritage based on the arts. This will hopefully be a model replicated across other districts and coastlines devastated in 2009. He spoke of his fear of losing knowledge around the 'everydayness' of village life and the relocation inland of communities away from the coastal strip. We were both in Samoa a few days after the tsunami that left our villages on the south coast of Upolu devastated. My mother's village of Amaile sits in the upper corner of the coastal strip heading down towards Lalomanu and we were both there to assist in whatever way we could. The relocation of these families is visible along the south coast of Upolu. Funded by aid, basic homes (roofed, concrete-poled homes) were built in



Figure 1. Fatu Feu'u, the author and Tuigalatele Joe Annandale, May 2012.

Poutasi for families who had lost their land and possessions and are now situated one kilometre inland along a dirt road (accessible only by 4WDs). By viewing these new settlement areas, it's clear that the relational spaces and dynamics within this village context have changed dramatically. Eighty percent of the locals in this village don't own cars or have access to vehicles, so lack of mobility has increased with the extra distances to be travelled. There is an increased sense of fear and respect for the sea. In Poutasi alone, brand-new paopao (small fishing boats) have remained untouched by the locals.

During our conversation in his studio, Feu'u spoke with animation when expressing the importance of the acquisition of this project and the geographical layout of the FFAC; He used the term *va fealoaloa'i*³ when discussing the concept of spatial awareness and the location of his family land in relation to the centre.

He reminded me that a family's business or *tautua* (service to the community) can only be built or located on one's own family land, and verbally connected the several pieces of land involved, located in various places in Poutasi. The FFAC is on the site of the old Poutasi School and Poutasi District Hospital. Like a Samoan orator, and as if to minimise the isolation of the FFAC, he eloquently defined these spaces as an advantage to visitors to the place – requiring them to visualise and move on foot around the village, drawing on all aspects of village life. At this point, I was thankful for having some knowledge of Samoan land and titles, especially the importance of the term *va fealoaloa'i*.

The 2009 tsunami has physically altered the boundaries and therefore the *tuaoi*⁴ and structure of the villages. However, the new *tuaoi* suggest a new *va fealoaloa'i* for this village, relational space is key to structure and order in the village (both personally and in terms of spatial awareness). With the relocation of most Poutasi families inland, Feu'u's shared vision highlights a necessity for any village that it be a centre for community. The necessity of locating a central place where villagers can collaborate, create and engage in *talanoa* or 'critical dialogue.' His vision for the centre involved activating this space, nurturing heritage arts and providing a service to his village but also to his external arts community, who have longed for this opportunity.

MAKING OUR WAY TO THE CENTRE

After our *fono* (meeting, hui) in Saleilua, we made our way to Poutasi. Twelve people from Poutasi died in the tsunami, it was one of the worst-affected villages. Memories and images of the damaged bridge and the swamped hospital came flooding back, however, these images quickly evaporated in the heat of the sun, along with a beautiful idyllic moana landscape that presented a very settled and new Poutasi, still in rebuilding mode.

Feu'u's studio is located a short two-minute drive from the FFAC with its adjoining community centre and gallery (still under construction). The project manager mentioned that there were eight weeks to go until the opening of the complex, in August 2012. This date will coincide with Feu'u's first solo show in his birth land of Samoa. Much of the recent work that I saw in his studio will contribute to this historic show, which will feature as the official gallery opening at the centre.

The interior of the FFAC, still fresh with stained and painted surfaces and windows waiting to be installed, had been occupied by carvers the week prior to my visit. Excited by the urgency of this project and the accolades it will surely garner, we moved on to the artist-in-residence house. This complex has excellent accommodation facilities and can house up to four artists at a time; Feu'u proudly declared that this accommodation will be the best Samoa has to offer, providing superior housing for all artists on the residency programme or for those just passing through. Surrounded by *esi* (pawpaw) trees and the smell of *vaisalo* (young coconut and sago pudding), this is going to be an idyllic residence for several artists. Supplementary accommodation for groups of 8-10 students or other visitors is located approximately 100 metres from the centre.

As a Samoan host, you offer your best accommodation to your visitors. I recall how Unitec's visiting US ceramic artist and lecturer Scott Chamberlain and his family were caught in the tsunami, losing all their holiday possessions, and were graciously taken in by a local family who had lost 13 family members in Lalomanu. In a conversation we shared on his return, he praised the hospitality and kindness of the villagers, saying how they had been well looked after and treated like royalty by the family, although they were in the midst of grieving and shock as a result losing their loved ones.

Spending time in Poutasi and getting to know the friendly locals, it is easy to visualise newly painted workshops and an art centre cum village becoming a new mecca for both heritage and contemporary arts in a fast-developing Samoa. And, like any trip across any border, what makes it memorable are the people. He tangata, he tangata ... he tangata.

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- 1 This article was edited with help from Gina Ferguson and Edith Amituanai.
- 2 *Va* is the Samoan concept of space, relational space, or space that connects.
- 3 *Va fealoaloi*'i refers to the conceptual space between relationships and the social structure within the aiga (family or extended family).
- 4 *Tuao*'i are land boundaries which help define the social boundaries of *va fealoaloi*; attending to one's land and 'invisible fences' in the village setting nurtures good relationships between neighbours.