The Wanderings of the Meeting House Hinemihi: The mythologies and realities of an appropriated indigenous building and an argument for a positive reading of its place in a post-colonial context.

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Abstract: While New Zealand's inimitable history has generated many distinctive spatial phenomena, one of the most anthropologically intriguing examples are the carved meeting houses historically purchased by visiting foreigners from the indigenous Maori population and reconstructed in a European context. One such space, disconnected from its original context and still in the process of negotiating a relationship with its new place is Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito or Hinemihi of the Old World, a meeting house from the ruined village of Te Wairoa in New Zealand now located in the grounds of Clandon Park, a stately home in Surrey in the United Kingdom. The architectural tradition of the Maori people places great significance on constructed spaces and the specific rituals associated with them. Meeting houses are not only embodiments of their community's achievements but also anthropomorphic representations of ancestors and symbolic displays of tribal genealogies. The foreign acquisition of these metaphorically dense spaces and their misused placement as colonial artefacts or garden follies in distant landscapes provokes interesting questions about the negotiation between space and setting. This paper will use the wanderings of the meeting house Hinemihi as an example in considering the implications of expatriated spaces that once directly communicated with their occupiers but now exist in supposedly inanimate relationships with their new place. Nonetheless, by virtue of its tenacious meanings, Hinemihi's story suggests that such architecture can also be viewed as pan-geographic and omni-relevant spaces; a reading that elucidates a potentially optimistic contemporary reality.

Keywords: indigenous architecture, appropriation of space, post-colonial contexts, negotiated occupation

The Mythologies and Realities of One Travelling House: An Introduction.

“From the first act of its creation, through its long life to the present day, an historic building has artistic and human 'messages' [embedded in it] which will be revealed by a study of it history…a complexity of ideas and of cultures may be said to encircle an historic building and be reflected in it.”

The appreciation of a certain space must sometimes start as a process of understanding the negotiations encountered at its inception. Being conscious of this tendency is to be aware that the creation of architecture can be a struggle between the manifestation of a space and the place it is manifested on. The definition of this relationship is most obvious in spaces that no longer occupy the places for which they were intended – spaces, borrowed, taken or even stolen from their place of origin and moved elsewhere. The historic creation and contemporary implications of such a space is defined by the confrontations in the process of being transferred. The effects may even mean that the space is transformed in the compromise with the place to which it is relocated. While such considerations are relevant across almost all of architectural space’s global contexts, it is particularly pertinent to places with a colonial heritage – nations where the conceptions of space, place and architecture for one tradition encountered those of another. New Zealand is one such setting where the negotiation between pre-colonial practices of the indigenous Maori and post-colonial conventions of the
predominantly British arrivals created many distinct structural phenomena, on some occasions resulting in new definitions in the relationship between space and place. One unique example of new meanings generated by New Zealand’s special social, historical and geographic conception is the story of the Maori whare-nui, or meeting house, Hinemihi-o-te-Ao-Tawhito or Hinemihi of the Old World. More famously known as the travelling whare or house of Te Wairoa village in New Zealand, this single roomed building was purchased from its local tribal-group in the late 19th century and after being disassembled into 23 carved sections, journeyed to its new place on the grounds of the stately home Clandon Park in Surrey, England, where it stands to this day (Image 1). While it is not the only ‘émigré whare’ – being one of a few traditional buildings outside of New Zealand – it is the only one outside a museum context. The ‘travelling’ whare were a “period fashion [that lasted] between the late 1880’s and the 1930’s” and their acquisition was a unique colonial response to the ‘native’ Maori culture. It was an event that, the ethnologist Dr Roger Neich describes;

“Involved the physical appropriation of complete or partial carved Maori houses, their insertion and assimilation as follies...into existing long-standing English traditions of landscape gardening around stately homes, and their consequent use for alien English purposes.”

As indigenously sourced, expatriated buildings, they were transformed from architecture into “colonial artefact[s]” irregularly occupied and treated as exotic, inanimate objects set in a foreign landscape. Because they were often inappropriately reconstructed and distant from their intended patterns of use, they appeared disconnected from a purpose as well as any future potential. This consideration, however, does not address the fact that these buildings arrived with their own well defined mythologies and even clearer histories, taking part in what might be considered in today's post-colonial context as an inevitably reciprocal spatial exchange. To critique the possibility of this and other concepts, as well as suggest a redefinition of the relationship between space and place that this unique building proposes, it is necessary to explore Hinemihi’s prodigious role as a travelling house and the meaning of its continuing antipodal existence.

An Inanimate Artefact or an Activated Architecture: A History.

“We need connectors with both place and time to locate our present lives geographically and historically; heritage helps in both the temporal and spatial sense.”

In the late 19th century, the indigenous Maori population experienced the reconceptualization
of New Zealand as a place. Declared the British subjects of a formalized colony with the signing of a still contested treaty in 1840, Maori encountered eclectically motivated colonists, arriving to create a new life, develop trade and profit from New Zealand's natural resources. Tourists came for adventure, too, and the exposure on a colonial, if not yet truly global, scale was quickly perceived for both its advantages as well as the potential risks to the established Maori society. The creation of Hinemihi by its local population is one example of a spatial response to the perceived benefits the new social setting provided as well as a confident, but weary, emphasis of ‘self’ in the changing notions of land occupation and ownership. Begun in 1870 by the eminent Maori woodcarvers Wero Taroi and Tene Waitere, Hinemihi was constructed for Aporo Wharekaniwha, a chieftain of the Ngati-Hinemihi hapu or sub-tribe, the traditional occupier of the Te Wairoa village area, in the aptly named ‘hot-lakes district’ of New Zealand. This geothermal region was popular with the booming tourist trade that came to visit what was then regarded as the eighth wonder of the world – the pink and white terraces of Lake Tarawera, near by. Lucratively located, the people of Ngati-Hinemihi promptly provided guides for visitors to the lakes, selling food and drink, and providing accommodation to some of the first intrepid pleasure seekers. The resulting financial gains benefited the population and helped finance the construction of their new meeting house, Hinemihi. When it was finished in 1881, the building quickly became one of New Zealand’s earliest cultural attractions with dancing, singing and, according to some sources, burlesque entertainments provided inside the space for visitors tired after a day of sight-seeing. Its success was such that for a while Hinemihi was known as ‘The House with the Golden Eyes’ after the shiny sovereign coins that were wedged into the carved patterns of the exterior by both satisfied public and showy performers. Such decadence was not approved of by everyone and the wider tribe disliked the building’s ‘after-hours’ use in what Maori tradition would have considered acts of desecration.

The Maori notion of a meeting-house, a building that traditionally belongs, literally and symbolically, to the entire tribal group, is primarily informed by a feeling of communal reverence (Image 2). While the space is not worshipped it is venerated as the anthropometric embodiment of a tribal forebear and more patently, through the imagery, patterns and textures rendered on the outside and inside the space, as a literal representation of the tribe’s particular stories and histories. While there are several differing but interchangeable terms for ‘meeting-house’ in the Maori language of Te Reo, such as whare whakairo or carved house and whare nui or great house the essential link is to tribal history. This is because the building
is "conceptualized metaphorically as the [whole] ancestry and is accordingly referred to as the *whare tipuna*, the ancestral house." While a meeting-house certainly responds to the place on which it stands, with a sense of occupation extending into the landscape surrounding the structure, the most *tapu* or sacred aspect is contained within the single, interior space that represents these genealogies. Being inside a meeting house is the symbolic equivalent of entering the body of the founding member of the tribe which in Hinemihi’s case is a renowned and eponymous ancestress. As such, the structural elements within the space have emblematic values too; the roof ridge pole, for example, is considered the spine of the ancestor, the rafters are their anthropometric ribs, which, painted with a curvaceous, red pattern symbolize blood vessels that connect down to the wall panels representing descendents (Image 3). A visit to this interiorized world depends on such knowledge because the space relies on a literal engagement. The building's occupier, whether attending a tribal gathering or mourning at a communal wake, is traditionally expected to commune with the space. By complying with various customs of use, recognizing the meaning of a pattern, or responding to an ancestor shown in a carved panel, the visitor is reconnected to their tribal history and becomes a user that activates the architectural enclosure. To those who know, spaces like Hinemihi are never passive interiors because all “Maori treasures are kept alive and their histories reactivated by being touched, wept over and talked over and by taking part in gatherings and ceremonies.” Meeting houses like Hinemihi were – and still are – symbols of tribal pride, and, more than just a tourist feature, reflected a community's success while fulfilling a “deeply felt need for the maintenance of culture, assertion of identity and resistance to assimilation” in the changing times of the late 19th century.

More change was to come. The prosperity of the Ngati-Hinemihi sub-tribe as well as the popularity of the Te Wairoa area was cut short by the catastrophic eruption of a local volcano, Mt Tarawera, in 1886. Considered one of the greatest natural disasters in New Zealand’s recorded history, the event devastated the area, killing members of the population and completely destroying some of the local landscape, including the famous pink and white terraces. Miraculously, Hinemihi’s stout structure withstood the weight of falling ash and debris, sheltering fleeing survivors and enduring the eruption. The Ngati-Hinemihi sub-tribe was left with a dwindling population in an area that would never again return to the roaring days of trade and tourism of the preceding decades. As a result, the now derelict Hinemihi
was sold to the departing Governor-General of New Zealand, William Hillier, the Earl of Onslow, in 1892. In his short term, Lord Onslow had become one of the most successful of the previously rarely popular representatives of the British crown, and had won the affections of both Maori people and European settlers. Lord Onslow's interest in New Zealand was demonstrated by a small collection of Maori objects, mostly received as gifts from his travels through the country, but which encouraged his desire to obtain an even more significant reminder of his time in the antipodes. Finally, he “decided (that) a Maori meeting house was what he wanted for Clandon’s (his stately home) grounds” and after several failed attempts to purchase other carved houses, his agents made a deal with the Maori owners at Te Wairoa, buying Hinemihi for a sum of £50. Lord Onslow’s interest in Hinemihi “was mostly as a souvenir and memory of his time in New Zealand, on which he always looked back with pleasant nostalgia.” Nonetheless, it was more than just an affectionate cultural memento, and his experiences in maintaining the grounds of the estate, famously laid out by the 18th century landscape architect Lancelot “Capability” Brown in a previous generation, had made him appreciate the appeal of just such an object in his landscape. Although he may have been aware of the important function Hinemihi fulfilled for its people, the building’s first purpose upon arrival at Clandon Park was as a garden folly within the European conception of landscape design. In this setting, Hinemihi seemed nothing more than an inanimate artefact. Although later years would see it utilized as a boathouse and a summerhouse, its essential treatment as an object within the dominant architectural scheme of its new place was quite opposite to the role it fulfilled for its original owners, and was the beginning of Hinemihi’s unique duality (Image 4).

Isolated in a Place or a Universally Occupied Space: One Definition.

“Maori people have a saying that you walk into a meeting house and you feel the warmth of it because you know that meeting house is named after an ancestor. And you are amidst people who have passed on. All the things they have said over the years are echoing through the meeting house and you immediately feel warmth.”

In a simultaneous existence as both an artefact in a foreign setting as well as an architectural space with its own past, Hinemihi typified what the anthropologist Eileen Hooper-Greenhill describes as “ethnography of occasions [and] a hybrid construction of the self.” A situation
typical for many colonially acquired ‘items’, it is a state that can often seem an existence based on negotiating a position between the possibility of autonomous isolation and the potential of a broader relevance. This is nothing new, because a history of lessons learned from cultural encounters have made it possible for “Maori people [and, by association, Maori architectural canon] in New Zealand…to hold two worlds within their mental schemes – a European way of explaining the world that holds good in European situations, while in Maori situations the Maori cosmology, with its different concepts of time and space.”

The acceptance of this duality is one method of “establishing personal identities within a complex post-colonial world”

The notion of ‘occasion’ is central, however, and although Hinemihi’s role in Clandon park began as a solitary folly, “integrated as a triangulation [point], guiding visitors on their ritual journey through the created landscape” the previously described symbolic conceptions of Maori space meant that it could never be completely isolated. Despite autonomy in its new place, Hinemihi’s space symbolically maintained an “openness to spiritual and emotional experience and a readiness to respond to [engagement with] its genealogical stories.”

For Maori today, an encounter with their tribal meeting house is not necessarily a regular event, often prevented by the demands of a modern life away from tribal lands. This is absolved, however, by an appreciation that the space is ‘waiting’ for an occasion to be initiated by people, existing not in stasis but in a self-perpetuating reference to its own past, present and future. Just as it is a built statement of tribal excellence, it is also a construct of tribal accord; the reason why a meeting-house is sometimes described as ‘the eye of the needle – through which white, red and black cotton might pass to achieve unity’. This elegant analogy is not just a reference to the communal construction tradition of the Maori, but also a crux that explains the position of the house as a universal source; simultaneously first origin, medium of communication and a paradoxically infinite conclusion of “the past, the present and the future.”

Time within Maori cosmology is complex and it suffices to say that the chronology embodied by Hinemihi is cyclical rather than linear and based on a concept of looking back to look forward. The idea of universality enclosed within a meeting-house stems from “a concept of history for which past and future are assimilated into the present history movement. Here, the past, rather than being a cause of [the present], lives in the present” with spaces like Hinemihi tied to an unending narrative of which every item, structural or symbolic, is imbued with a self-generating contribution to a universal identity. This in turn informs the rites and rituals of sacred endowment and profane release that make allowances for the contribution of all skilled members of a tribe to the collective creation process and why traditional meeting-houses share not just literal but also metaphorical similarities with other built typologies in Maori culture. According to the anthropologist Terence Barrow, this is mostly due to the fact that “each part [of Maori built form] was, technically speaking, made separately as an object in and of itself [and] in this sense each part of a canoe or house was an artistic object in its own right but joined to form the larger structures.”

A comparison between a meeting house and a canoe is neither arbitrary nor poetic. In fact, the academic Mike Austin states that “the source of architecture in the pacific is not the glorified hut but the canoe…and there continues to be [a shared] identity between the shape of canoes and the shape of houses on many Pacific Islands” extending a sense of universality across what have been called “the two fundamental artefacts [of Pacific culture.]” Furthermore, there are historically founded reasons for the interchangeability between a meeting house and canoe. When regular intertribal conflict between Maori declined in the late 19th century, the
construction of canoes for the major function of carrying war-parties became almost obsolete. As a result, the skills in making these vessels were concentrated on creation of architecture for the new social condition. Hinemihi’s own chief carver, Wero Taroi was one of those made redundant by these developments as he himself was originally a tohunga tarai waka or master canoe builder. The Maori academic Dr Pakariki Harrison also explains that, because they are carved within an identical philosophy, both the meeting-house and canoe are imbued with the same “immanent power focused into the [carving] adze by the priests and carvers through ritual invocations, incantations and chants [and] physically and symbolically the house can be linked to an upturned canoe and parts of it to parts of the human body.” 21 This already mentioned anthropomorphic symbolism carries through from the meeting house to the canoe; this time, however, it is the vessel’s keel, similar in form to the ridgepole of the house, that is the again the ancestral spine, while thwart’s of the upturned vessel are the equivalent of roof rafters, and thus, human ribs. Anthropologists have also found similarities in the representations of “the [carved canoe] prow [which] compares to the lintel above the doorway [of a meeting-house].” 22 Austin adds that “Sails become floor mats, and old boats are used as storage structures or tombs, or coffins and both buildings and boats are held together by tying and binding and weaving.” 23 These links inevitably inform the proposition that a capacity for mobility is inherent in the built heritage of Maori culture. The academic Carol Susan Ivory confirms this saying that initially, “Maori were a highly mobile people…with temporary huts spread over hapu (sub-tribal) lands, they moved from place to place as seasonal duties demanded.” 24 This heritage means that while Hinemihi comes from a tradition that never denies the importance of place it does give space the ability to travel beyond its setting without a symbolically diminished significance.

The Negotiated Place of a Space in Continuity: A Conclusion.

“Te Toi Whakairo, He Mana Tangata – The excellence in making, is the pride and identity of the people.” 25

All the same, maintenance of meaning cannot be easy, particularly in the spatial transcendence of deeply rooted global boundaries. As the initial historic setting showed, Hinemihi was subject to a process that “can be regarded as a progressive extraction and abstraction of symbolic elements of the Maori carved house form, in order to use them as symbols of liberal sentiments, of sophistication and a cosmopolitan awareness of other cultures.” (Neich, 2003:359) Even though it possessed a density of self-perpetuating values, Hinemihi compromised in other ways in compliance with the expectations that the new context imposed. The structural dismantling it experienced was indeed detrimental, and some pieces of the original house that arrived in England were given away, others may have been discarded and sections of what remained were initially wrongly reconstructed. Yet, within the scope of the metaphoric negotiation of an old building in a new place, not that much was lost. If anything, the traditional continuity of the space was reaffirmed by its foreign setting, the contrast of which made Hinemihi even more relevant to those that knew. Although admittedly infrequent, a Maori presence at Hinemihi did in fact continue, with visitors to England making a cultural-pilgrimage to the meeting-house. As early as 1897, Maori attending the Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria visited Hinemihi with the same occurring in 1902 during the coronation of King Edward VII. Furthermore, World War I Maori soldiers convalescing in the army hospital set up on the grounds of Clandon Park actually “suggested that they dismantle the house and re-erect it away from the lake” 26 which they did, relocating to it’s present location near Clandon House and reconstructing it more accurately (Image 5).
Today, Hinemihi’s relevance continues, confirmed and activated by its association with Ngati-Ranana, a group of London based Maori that gather as a modern, expatriate ‘tribe’ within a cultural association and who have adopted Hinemihi as their own meeting-house for annual events and gatherings. The descendents of the Ngati-Hinemihi sub-tribe themselves maintain a connection with their ancestral space; most recently they were instrumental in organizing the recreation and reinstallation of some of the missing carvings when they ensure that the “replacements for lost sections [were] carved by descendants of the original carvers.” 27

In a positive paradox, it seems that Hinemihi’s fragmentation is still open to reinterpretation and compromise, continuing to exemplify the highly porous principles which typify most nations with a colonial past. Thus, the motivating factor in Hinemihi’s ongoing voyage is just this ability to adapt both metaphorically and figuratively. This malleability of form and a flexibility of significance no longer need to be misunderstood as a survival tactic; instead it is a logical continuation of a deep capacity to accommodate a myriad of social and cultural needs (Image 6). For a long time the ‘depth’ in Maori architecture was overlooked or even denied. A tradition of colonial dominance, or perhaps less sinisterly ignorance, meant that “Maori architectural influence [was] confined to the ornamental in much the same way that the role of Maori in New Zealand public life used to be restricted to the entertainer.” 28

Hinemihi’s example, though, suggests that a pursuit of causes below the decorated surface coupled with an appreciation that their effects adjust but do not necessarily change in such infinite spaces, reveals layered strata of dense mythologies and histories. While they are
directly relevant only to some, they can be lessons for all. A space unlimited by contemporary constraints of style, geography or even time and poised in a unique, foreign setting, Hinemihi is an architectural hybrid of powerful figurative and metaphorical implications. In part an example of traditional construction methods but more potently an embodiment of the values that informed these, it continues to exist within a negotiated resistance to a more obvious tendency. It is an essential structure not just because it is a reflection of New Zealand’s history, but because it personifies what is greatest about both the historical and contemporary architecture of this nation – an opportunity for endless interpretation, an anticipation of continuity and the positive promise of infinite potential (Image 7).


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Endnotes
8 Walker, (1997) :472
10 Neich, (2003): 344
12 Hooper-Greenhill (1998): 142
15 Neich, (2003): 336
21 Harrison Pakariki, (1990) ‘The Carving of Tane-Nui-a-Rangi, Auckland University Marae’;: 23
22 Harris, (1990): 24
23 Austin (1991): 39
26 Neich, (2003): 343
27 Neich, (2003): 344
28 Austin, (2000): 121

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