

Urban ecology, tangata whenua and the colonial city

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Introduction

Any discussion about urban ecology, tangata whenua and urban environments needs to be situated critically within the wider context of colonialism and the ongoing colonial project. New Zealand cities still display, cherish, nurture and even reproduce unmistakable signs of their colonial past, not only in architecture and monuments, but urban design modeled on British examples, public parks modeled on English landscape design, gardens, imported trees and vegetation and imperial urban landscapes. The stories about our cities and even their identities are constructed in such a way as to reinforce their colonial past while at the same time negating their pre-colonial Maori origins. The perception is that our cities began with colonisation. Never mind that, indigenous Maori stories, histories, important landscapes, names of places, sites of importance, settlements have, in the process been silenced, removed, destroyed, re-routed or paved over during the colonial encounter. Or that tangata whenua have been pushed out to the margins of the city, relocated elsewhere, emigrated or been assimilated and engulfed by the city. In other words, colonialism in the city has not only been about military and economic conquest and exploitation, but superimposition of colonial (i.e. English, European) aesthetics, design, vegetation, monuments, parks and gardens on the tangata whenua of the city and their space. Consequently a re-imagining, re-presenting and retrofitting of the city needs to be processed so as to relocate our cities in Aotearoa, away from the imperial centre.

This re-presenting and reconstruction of both a new image of, and new ecology in the city, is a challenge for urban designers, landscape architects, planners, engineers, ecologists, developers and tangata whenua alike. If urban biodiversity and ecology is to be used as a basis for holistic, ethical and culturally responsive planning and design, this challenge has to be confronted directly. In other words ecological restoration in the city can only be sustained if it is linked to restoration of indigenous communities and the social, cultural and environmental values of these communities.

Urban ecology and Maori

Maori communities tend to be justifiably sceptical of 'new' terms, concepts, disciplines, 'areas of activity' that lay claims to universality but which when stripped of their theoretical or conceptual adornment simply buttress in new ways, the dominant pakeha hegemony. Urban ecology as a 'new' area of activity falls into this category. The questions that Maori might raise include: What is it? – urban ecology that is. How does it affect Maori? Do Maori have a position(s) on it? Is this position accommodated or not? If not what are we going to do about it? All are quite reasonable questions underscored by the rather basic premise that the kind of

urban ecology that gets done will depend heavily on who is doing it and the particular biases, prejudices, specialised knowledge's they may bring to the endeavour. In other words Maori urban ecology, even tangata whenua urban ecology may look quite different to the urban ecology done by others.

Furthermore, describing urban ecology as the study of relationships between living organisms, humans and their urban environments, requires such relationships to be situated in the social, political and cultural context of colonialism. Maori have a history of being excluded from the city to an extent that no other community in New Zealand can lay any reasonable claim to. This exclusion is now reflected in urban landscapes, urban ecologies and the foreign 'feel' of our cities. So while urban ecology may attempt to reconcile competing urban interests, and attempt to compose a gendered, class, and ethnically nuanced reading of the city, care needs to be taken that Maori people, their special places, names, vegetation, important natural features are not subsumed yet again by the profoundly disempowering, majoritarian common good.

Imagine a Ngai Tahu woman in Christchurch, walking up Colombo Street, avoiding the traffic, oblivious to the people around her, striding determinedly past the Christchurch Cathedral. She walks up Hereford Street and then rests by the Otakaroro (Avon River) where her ancestors caught tuna, and where tourists now pay to go punting. Rested, she follows the banks of the river through Victoria Square, past the Town Hall to Otautahi (originally a kainga near the Kilmore Street Fire Station). She then walks up to Papanui, where her ancestors for centuries extracted syrup from the ti or cabbage tree (Tau 2000). She traverses the same path that her ancestors traveled over one hundred and fifty years earlier, temporally separated, but spatially linked. Multiply this story a thousand times across all the cities in Aotearoa and one gets a fuller sense of the two histories, and two realities that permeate our cities. One dominating, the other dominated.

The colonial city

The history of colonisation in New Zealand cities as in other colonies around the world, is a tragic story of displacement, dislocation and disenfranchisement of tangata whenua. It is also a story about racism, discrimination and the systematic displacement of a people, their stories, place names, sites of importance, landscape features and even vegetation with a new colonial order creating new spaces for new immigrants to inhabit.

All cities in New Zealand, from the proverbial Cape Reinga to Bluff, are built on tangata whenua spaces, that resonate with the stories histories and experiences of iwi (tribes) hapu (subtribes) and whanau (extended families), who through occupation and use, claimed these spaces as their own. What might now be a pleasant suburban street lined with oak trees in Remuera, may have been the site of a battle, the location of the newest MacDonalds Restaurant in Otara - an important resting place of rangatira (chiefs), Christchurch's central business district, an occupation site or kainga.

Many of the place names, denoting important landscape features, tribal events, and ancestors locating these places in Aotearoa and particular tribal traditions have been replaced by English names, associating them with England, the empire and

Europe. Except for rare urban remnants, and pockets of native bush the biota of the city is also radically different. Native plants, trees, and other vegetation valued by tangata whenua have been cleared and replaced by exotics, the 'new' colonial vegetation, colonial botanic gardens and imperial landscapes. The concept of tangata whenua living 'in' nature has been replaced by the concept of nature being enclosed in public and private colonial gardens. These gardens celebrate the greatness and orderliness of England, the empire and its natural (albeit relocated) history, but exclude the vegetation, icons, names and features that could otherwise celebrate tangatawhenuatanga.

The social history of our cities has been equally exclusionary. In the evolution from rural to highly urbanised the colonial city has generally excluded tangata whenua. While descendants may still occupy the more generalised urban space that has now become the colonial city, the majority have either been relocated to the margins or forced to assimilate, thereby becoming invisible within the general citizenry. A critical issue for tangata whenua during New Zealand's urban development over the last 150 years has been finding a space to belong, and a place to be at home, in a place that was originally your home, but which is now foreign territory. Few if any New Zealand cities have responded to this need. Most have remained insistently exclusionary, forcing Maori to be quite innovative about defining and re-creating their own urban space. Many of these spaces have themselves been urban remnants, or left overs on the periphery and margins of the city. Places that no one else wanted – by rubbish dumps and sewage ponds.

The concept of being Ngati Whatua in Auckland, Ngati Kahungunu in Napier, or Ngai Tahu in Christchurch, or a city that celebrates its tangata whenuatanga therefore, is an issue that has eluded most local authorities, urban planners and urban designers until relatively recently. Cities are often perceived by Maori as threatening, dangerous, hostile, foreign 'temporary places' for Maori to inhabit. Consequently they are not places that one can fully belong to, but which through economic necessity most Maori must live in.

The urban malaise

Until recently, the Maori heartland was perceived to be a place situated in the country rather than the city. While returning home to the rural marae, either in life or in death remains a fundamental aspect of the Maori imagination, for most, the city despite its alienating influence, is the place that has 'had' to become home.

In the meantime, the city has grown up around and engulfed the tangata whenua. At the same time Maori from other rohe and even from other tribes have also moved to cities for work, opportunities and a 'better life', creating its own set of internalised Maori tension. Of course the need to shift to the cities was predicted as long ago as 1936 (New Zealand Official Yearbook 2000). Serious concerns were already being expressed at the insufficient amount of rural land in Maori ownership to provide an adequate standard of living for the rapidly growing population. In 1901 almost all Maori lived in rural village communities. By 1960 a third had moved to urban areas, and by 1976 this number had increased to three quarters. Statistics now show that, 83% of the Maori population now lives in cities (New Zealand Official Yearbook 2000).

The transition from rurally based kinship living to urban dwelling has been among the most rapid in the world. The effect both on the rural communities that were left behind and the new communities that had to establish in the city has been equally devastating. The majority of urban Maori have had to deal not only with the absence of social and cultural institutions that were present in the rural homeland (such as the marae), but with the racism that greeted them on their arrival in the city. Many attendant social problems that still exist today such as unemployment, inadequate housing, low educational attainment, poor health, even cultural dislocation, can be linked to the various forms of overt and covert racism that Maori experienced and have continued to experience in the city. However, racism against Maori in the city has not just been about people but an even more insidious privileging of colonial institutions, culture, places, sites, names, icons, even biota.

Colonial Christchurch - A case in point

Any tourist flying into Christchurch on an international flight will find that the public relations images all proudly proclaim the Englishness of Christchurch, complete with punting down the Avon River, shots of Christchurch Cathedral and Christ College boys in their blazers, followed by sweeping views of Hagley Park, gardens, monuments and icons redolent of England and Englishness. The empire and the greatness of Europe are solidly preserved and fixed in the urban landscape, gardens and ecology of the city. In many respects Christchurch sees and certainly projects itself as an imperial city, located a hemisphere away in England rather than the South Pacific. Maori images are so conspicuously absent that if you did not know you were landing in Christchurch, you could be touching down in any imperial British city around the globe.

This then begs the question of whether there is in fact anything overtly Maori about Christchurch, except perhaps for the whenua (land) it is built on, the people who live in the working class suburbs of Aranui, Linwood and parts of Hoon Hay. Or, Rehua Marae in Springfield Road and Nga Hau e Wha Marae, situated adjacent to the Bromley sewage ponds. Christchurch is a classic when it comes to extolling the virtues of the empire and unashamedly excluding its original indigenous citizens, Ngai Tahu.

The protracted, and highly contested establishment of the Nga Hau e Wha Marae in Pages Road in the early 1990's is certainly indicative of the exclusion of Ngai Tahu from Christchurch (Tau 2000). The idea of a whare in Christchurch is reputed to have first originated in the 1850s when Ngai Tahu sought a resting-place for tribes people travelling from Banks Peninsula to Kaiapoi, and for Ngai Tahu working the markets in the city. The idea was renewed again in 1940 with a petition to parliament for a wharenui located in Wellington that had been part of centennial celebrations. Little Hagley Park was considered the best place and the most appropriate given its original designation as a native reserve. Christchurch City Council originally supported the location, but withdrew its support over councilors concerns that "we are putting down an ancient Maori house in one of our best suburbs". In the 1980s the Council supported a marae, not in Hagley Park as originally intended but out in the suburbs, on pages Road, adjacent to the former Bromley sewage Ponds. From conception of the original idea to its realisation, the marae had been shifted along with its people 'out to the margin' and away from the 'best suburbs' (Tau 2000).

The rather unsubtle irony now however is that Ngai Tahu have moved from a position of being excluded in Christchurch, to being included as a major economic stakeholder in the life of the city. The challenge for Ngai Tahu and the Christchurch City Council now though is whether entry into the economy of the city will be accompanied by a reimage and retrofit to include Ngai Tahu in ways that go beyond the economy and into the urban landscape and ecology of Christchurch.

The post colonial city - Where to from here?

Cities have always been a battleground and the site of sometimes violent hegemonic struggle. The contest has largely been over space and territory. However it has also been about the right to impose ones own aesthetics through the display of monuments, architecture, icons, and garden forms that `create' identity and a sense of place. Equally it has been over the right to present and project ones history and to fortify this history, whether recent, distant, local or international - through the use of place names, street names, names of suburbs and parks. It has also been about the right to plant vegetation, trees, and to construct gardens and civic spaces, that give reminders of home and community. Ultimately though it has been about consolidating ones position in the city and in the end excluding others.

Maori have largely lost this contest. Any City in New Zealand will attest to this. Urban environments are generally not perceived as `Maori environments'. Maori may live and work within them, move through them, even die in them. They may have marae, community facilities, even their own schools. Despite this they are largely refugees and foreigners in what can be conceived as a temporary zone between the rural Maori heartland and the alien city. But, does it have to be like that?

Ecological restoration must be accompanied by social and cultural restoration of the Maori communities that have been most disenfranchised by urbanisation. Urban living is now the reality for the majority of Maori people. The rural marae is, as much a state of mind in the imagination as it is a physical entity. While most would wish to return home to the rural urupa (burial ground) to be buried when they die, most if not all will spend their whole lives in the city. Special problems also arise if `home' and the urupa is no longer rural but has itself been engulfed by the city.

It would be wrong to conclude this discussion without first suggesting ways New Zealand cities could begin the transformative process from colonial to post colonial, and also the role that urban ecology could play in this. Colonialism can best be described as the practice of extending control over `less powerful' peoples and areas, as has indeed happened in New Zealand (Collin English Dictionary – Millenium Edition 1998). Post colonialism is the practice of moving `beyond' colonialism to adopt more equitable relations between colonisers and their descendants and indigenous peoples (Collin English Dictionary – Millenium Edition 1998). Therein lies perhaps the most salient message. Transformation will only occur if it is founded on `equitable relations' between the tangata whenua and representatives of the wider citizenry of the city, particularly local and regional

councils. This relationship needs to be immersed in an inclusionary rather than exclusionary discourse about the city

A comprehensive planned approach that covers the whole city rather than a piecemeal, ad hoc, reactive response is absolutely essential. The planning needs to be creative and imaginative. It also requires courage, and a radical approach to reimagining, re-presenting then reconstructing the urban environment to include tangata whenua, physically and symbolically. . Decision processes about retrofitting the urban landscape and the ecology of the city need to be collaborative rather than competitive ventures.

Precolonial and colonial Maori histories in the city need to be celebrated, commemorated and interpreted. Traditional Maori icons need to be reinstated and placed alongside 'new' contemporary ones. Maori place names, identifying natural features, landscapes, special sites, special events and prominent ancestors need to be recovered so that the multilayered stories of our urban spaces can be told. It requires ecological surveys of the city and programmes to indigenise and reintroduce native trees, plants, bush, even forests back into the city. It may even involve the identification and interpretation of waahi tapu and other sites of special significance to tangata whenua. On a larger scale the creation of new urban parks and landscapes, or the redesign of existing public parks and gardens, based on Maori design principles and Maori stories, should also be initiated. It may also require the entrance or gateway to the city and the heart of the city to be reconfigured or indeed reconstructed, to acknowledge and reinclude tangata whenua. The possibilities are endless.

Views in this discussion have been based on the premise that tangata whenua have been excluded from the city in a multiplicity of ways. Urban ecology however, provides a basis for planning about how to reinclude tangata whenua. In other words, ecological restoration in the city should not be separated from the social and cultural restoration of the human communities that inhabit the city, particularly those who have been most disenfranchised by it. If it is, questions then need to be raised about the limits being placed on the definition of ecology.

The development of an inclusive image and ecology in the city requires a heady mix of creativity, bravery and practical application. It also requires a simple question to be put and that question is – why not? So, in conclusion, why not erect a new marae in the heart of every city, perhaps in a botanic garden, public park, domain or square to at least signify the reinclusion of tangata whenua and creation of a new urban sanctuary and new heart of the city. Christchurch has the Cathedral in Cathedral Square. Why not a marae in Hagley Park, a marae on Maungakiekie (One Tree Hill) in Auckland, a marae in Clive Square in Napier. Why not establish a native plant nursery adjacent to every marae? Why not use this marae as a base from which to launch an ecological restoration programme, and to train Maori in urban ecology? Why not include an interpretation centre at the marae, depicting the precolonial and colonial history of the city.

As has already been stated, the possibilities are endless.

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