

# Māori Architecture

## A Response to Colonisation

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### Abstract

For generations, Māori have disputed colonisation and the impact it has had on Indigenous peoples. As settlers acquired more land, Māori realised they were losing power over decision making in Aotearoa and began to create their own communities, religions and even a monarchy, in an attempt to retain tino rangatiratanga, or sovereignty. Māori leaders wanted to send a clear message to the settler state that they weren't prepared to give everything up and assimilate into the Pākehā world.

Architecture became a mechanism for resistance. Buildings, whether they be temporary or permanent structures, portray a sense of belonging and human occupation, and therefore became a meaningful way to create presence during conflict. This paper attempts to give an insight into the impact Māori architecture has had politically, focusing particularly on two buildings: Hiona, built in the early twentieth century, and Tapu Te Ranga, which began construction in the 1970s. Both buildings were built by Māori leaders who saw how their people were struggling under Crown rule and wanted to create a place of solitude and acceptance for Māori. They created unique pieces of architecture that were not only refuges, but symbols of autonomy. These buildings have become well-known architecturally and politically, and have had a lasting impact on generations of Māori and non-Māori.

### Introduction

Since the arrival of Europeans, Māori have actively contended colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Māori

have struggled under colonial laws and have therefore had to fight for recognition and equal rights on their own land. While much was taken away from the Indigenous peoples of this land, they found ways to contest their right for tino rangatiratanga and, in many cases, where Māori are an explicit symbol of autonomy.

The significance of architecture in the continual push for recognition of Māori rights and equality is paramount. For generations, Māori buildings have been used to portray opposition to a dominantly Pākehā society and have been hugely influential on New Zealand architecture as a whole. In Damien Skinner's book *The Māori Meeting House*, he says, "While the meeting house was - and is - a Māori form of architecture and art, their history is entangled with the complicated and contested interactions of Māori and Pākehā over the past two centuries."<sup>1</sup> This relationship between Māori and non-Māori is portrayed ingeniously in Lyonel Grant's design of Ngākau Māhaki at Te Noho Kotahitanga Marae on the Unitec campus. His combination of traditional and contemporary whakairo, or carving, tell the story of the coming together of two cultures, highlighting significant events in our history.

This paper briefly explores the history of the use of architecture as a method of resistance against the Crown and also looks specifically at two significant buildings built by renowned Māori leaders. The first is Hiona, built at Maungapohatu in 1907 and constructed as a symbol of sovereignty for the prophet Rua Kenana and his followers. It was a building

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<sup>1</sup> Damien Skinner, *The Māori Meeting House: Introducing the Whare Whakairo* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2016), 22.

unlike anything that had been built by Māori before and is said to have been inspired by the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Despite their isolated location, Hiona and Rua Kenana were targeted by the colonial government because of Kenana's deliberate disobedience against the Crown.

The second is Tapu Te Ranga Marae and, in particular, the main building Pare-Hinetai-No-Waitotara, which was established by the late Bruce Stewart, a man who saw a need to find a place for dispossessed Māori in Wellington. In 1974 and in the midst of a worldwide social movement of Indigenous peoples, Bruce Stewart began his journey to create a place that all people could belong to. Built with the sweat and tears of mostly homeless ex-prisoners, Tapu Te Ranga is nothing less than a masterpiece of great beauty and mana.

### The Whare Whakairo and Early Māori Resistance

A Māori building, and particularly a whareniui, or meeting house, is more than a functional piece of architecture. Art and spirituality play a vital role in how a building, or a cluster of buildings, is designed, constructed and fitted out. A whareniui is designed like the human body, and is believed to protect and guide its people and ensure the safekeeping of historical stories and whakapapa. "The whare whakairo (carved meeting house) isn't a building so much as an ancestor. And in turn, this ancestor is filled with other ancestors, who are embodied in the art form of carving, weaving and painting."<sup>3</sup> The customs and activities that take place in a whareniui or whare whakairo reflect the respect that is shown to the building as a holder of knowledge and guardian of Māori lineage.

It has been said that Captain James Cook was astounded by the whare whakairo when he arrived here in Aotearoa; however, this has since been disproved. Instead, more recent research has proven that, in fact, the carved houses as we know them today were a post-colonial development as a response to the growing population of European settlers.<sup>4</sup> After the land wars, many Māori became concerned for their land as Pākehā settlers spread throughout the country. They made buildings that were big enough to hold meetings to discuss how they could bring an end to the confiscations and hold on to what they still had. In South Taranaki, the Ngāti Ruanui people built a whare called Taiporohēniui, meaning 'to end the matter' or 'the restraining of evil,' in order to host a meeting with various iwi leaders about the land sales.<sup>5</sup> Taiporohēniui is an example of how politically driven Māori architecture has been, not only as a functional space to host such discussions but also as an architectural statement opposing colonialism.



**Figure 1. Te Hau-ki-Tūranga whareniui, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Source: Wikimedia Commons, licenced under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic Licence.**

At the same time, Māori were taking note of the different tools that Pākehā were bringing from Europe and knew that they would enable Māori to construct whareniui that were much bigger than their forebears. Therein began a new version of the whareniui that was larger and more elaborately carved than those before. In the mid-1800s, Te Hau-ki-Turanga was built by the master carver Raharuhi Rukupō at Manutuke. Rukupō was against the settlement of Europeans on the East Coast and built the whareniui as a statement symbolising mana motuhake (self-determination).<sup>6</sup> The house was large, and set the precedent for the decorative elements of meeting houses that are recognisable today. Te Hau-ki-Turanga was covered in carvings both inside and out as a means to preserve the history and whakapapa of the rohe for generations to come. Sadly, in 1867, Te Hau-ki-Turanga was confiscated by the government and taken by military ship to Wellington to be exhibited as a piece of art.<sup>7</sup> Despite being officially returned to its rightful owners Rongowhakaata recently, it is yet to be returned physically to its original home and continues to be exhibited in Te Papa Museum, visited and admired by all. It has therefore become a symbol of something else, of beauty and of indigeneity, but by taking it away from its turangawaewae, or ancestral home, the connection to its whakapapa and whenua has been severed and, until it is returned, Te Hau-ki-Turanga is unable to stand as a guardian of its people and place.

### Religion and the Development of Post-colonial Communities

There is also a clear correlation between the uprising of Māori religious sectors and the design and construction of contemporary Māori buildings. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Māori began to liken their experience of colonisation to that of the Israelites and

<sup>2</sup> Judith Binney, "Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: Rua Kenana Hepetipa," *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 1996, accessed October 6, 2018, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3r32/rua-kenana-hepetipa>

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, *The Māori Meeting House*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*, 2nd ed. (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004), 188.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Bennett, *Whare Māori*, series, episode 2 (2011), <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/whare-maori-the-whareniui-episode-two-2011>

the prophet Moses, and therefore began to construct buildings that portrayed this loyalty to other oppressed peoples. The relationship between religion, war and architecture can be seen through the actions of Māori leaders such as Te Kooti. Te Kooti (born 1814), who had been an apprentice to Rukupō, built meeting houses across Aotearoa as a way to symbolise and mobilise support for justice and spiritual revival through the Ringatū movement. "The scale of Ringatū meeting houses was significantly greater than earlier Māori buildings and often equalled the proportions of Christian churches."<sup>8</sup> Te Kooti demonstrated an intentional defiance against the European church and colonisation by developing an architecture that could compete on all levels. His buildings were large and could house religious ceremonies, where in the past a separate church building would have been erected alongside a whareniui for prayer, thus combining religion, tikanga and politics under one roof.

Māori embraced colonial technologies and styles; however, they held fast to their beliefs and resistance to Pākehā domination. For example, Miti Mai Te Arero was the name of Te Whiti's house at Parihaka. It was a Victorian-style house built by a Pākehā man, which sat perched above the settlement overlooking the wider community. Whilst it may seem that this was assimilation in an architectural sense, the name translated meant "The tongue lashes out towards me," referring to the continual negative effects of colonisation.<sup>9</sup> After being imprisoned and taken to work in a woollen mill in the South Island as punishment for their resistance against the government, Te Whiti and Tohu, the two leaders of the Parihaka movement, returned in 1883 to Parihaka and rebuilt the settlement. They embraced many Western, urban design constructs in the rebuild. For example, the houses began to face the street and they incorporated services such as electricity and streetlights. Once again, this could portray a sense of conformity, but instead they saw it as a way of incorporating what they had learnt, but on their own terms.

There are many more architectural examples of resistance against the Crown over this time period and, despite the use and appropriation of Western ways of building and living, Māori continued to fight for autonomy over their land and their culture. In some ways this shows a subtlety in the way Māori defended their sovereignty. Māori saw the benefits of Pākehā technology but the mana of such buildings continues to reflect Māori leadership and opposition to colonialism.

### Hiona and Tapu Te Ranga Marae

Hiona, the transliteration for Zion, was a religio-political building in the small settlement of Maungapohatu, deep in the Urewera forest. Used for community meetings and government affairs, it was built in 1907 and led by the Tūhoe prophet, Rua Kenana. Unlike the typical A-frame style of most Māori buildings, Hiona was a perfectly circular building, perched on a hill overlooking the village. It also had two levels despite customary practices declaring it tapu to have someone sitting above your head. What also made



**Figure 2. Burton Brothers (Dunedin), 1868-1898. European-style meeting house Miti Mai Te Arero, also known as Te Whiti's House, at Parihaka. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22774791.**



**Figure 3. George Bourne, 1875-1924. Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house at Maungapohatu. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23131313.**

Hiona unique was the decorative mix of Western motifs and traditional Māori patterns. A sequence of diamonds and clubs painted along the outside of the building is said to have represented the father, the son and the holy spirit,<sup>10</sup> whilst kōwhaiwhai flanked each side of the doors, a nod to traditional design and representation of Māoridom. Sadly, and despite its obvious uniqueness, Hiona did not stand the test of time and when Kenana was taken to prison under false accusations, it was no longer used and fell into disrepair.

Sixty years later, Bruce Stewart, an activist who had been in and out of prison as a young man, became aware of the financial and social inequality that urbanisation had brought upon Māori people. He was gifted land in Island Bay, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, by the Sisters of Compassion and began to build Tapu Te Ranga marae, which opened in 1974. The whare Pare-Hinetai-No-Waitotara was an architectural feat all on its own. With eleven storeys and nine wharepuni stacked on top of each other, the building rose to

<sup>8</sup> Deidre Brown, *Māori Architecture: From Fale to Whareniui and Beyond* (Auckland: Penguin Group, 2009), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Bennett, *Whare Māori*, series, episode 1 (2011), <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/whare-maori-episode-one-2011/overview>



**Figure 4. Tapu Te Ranga Marae, Wellington, New Zealand. Source: Facebook, reproduced with permission.**

26.5 metres in height, making it the largest and tallest building in the world made from recycled timber.<sup>11</sup> This was not a goal that Stewart set out to achieve but was instead due to his having no money and, as a result, the whole building was created using salvaged materials. The blood, sweat and tears that went into constructing such a magnificent building was portrayed everywhere. Stewart mentioned in the television series *Whare Māori* that he feels sad when he drives past marae and sees that they are empty and barely used.<sup>12</sup> Tapu Te Ranga, in comparison, was home to Bruce Stewart and his whānau and, as kaitiaki, the doors were open to people from all over the world as a place of refuge and enjoyment.

Hiona and Tapu Te Ranga Marae are not only outstanding examples of New Zealand architecture but also symbols of tino rangatiratanga. Native American activist and educator Gerald Alfred says:

It has been said that being born Indian is being born into politics. I believe this to be true; because being born Mohawk of Kahnawake, I do not remember a time free from the impact of political conflict.<sup>13</sup>

This further reiterates a global feeling by Indigenous peoples who have no choice but to be implicated by politics and therefore must find ways to not only survive in a colonial system, but fight for autonomy and recognition. Centuries of degradation have caused loss of language, traditions and land, and, irrespective of when such events took place, Indigenous peoples are still experiencing the negative effects of colonisation today.

If we were to consider the political climates when Hiona and Tapu Te Ranga were erected, it is evident that they were times of heightened unrest for Māori. Rua Kenana was a political target due to his leadership style and activities. He believed himself a spiritual leader and spent

many years developing a strong following before settling at Maungapohatu. The Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907 was aimed directly at Rua Kenana as a way to control his spiritual and political attempts to create a sovereign Māori community. He was watched by police and government officials for any sign of defiance and was interrogated at every opportunity. He was well known for his disapproval of native schools and his influence over young Māori to refrain from volunteering for the First World War. He strongly believed that Māori had their own war to fight and that he would be the one to liberate them in a developing Western world. He was later arrested for treason, which resulted in the longest trial in New Zealand history up until 1977.<sup>14</sup> Hiona was intentionally unique. It was a statement piece designed to stand out and be noticed. The architecture Kenana created at Maungapohatu was the result of his vision to create an independent community for the growing number of people dispossessed by land confiscations. Rua Kenana was a symbol of hope and leadership to many and a major threat to the colonial government's plans for New Zealand. In December 2019, the Crown officially signed a Bill that sought to restore mana to Rua Kenana and acknowledge the ill doings during the police invasion at the settlement in 1916, which ended with two men killed and Kenana unfairly arrested and imprisoned for 18 months.<sup>15</sup>

Hiona can be compared in function and style to the Beehive, which is the unofficial name for the Executive Wing of New Zealand Parliament Buildings. Both buildings are symbols of leadership and community, and both are distinctively circular in shape. Completed in 1979, the Beehive was designed by Basil Spence, who convinced the Prime Minister at the time that it would be better to design something modern rather than complete the original design of a colonial building. Needless to say, the Beehive has become a national icon, featured on the New Zealand twenty-dollar bill and easily recognised as a significant building by the general public. In 2015, Heritage New Zealand assigned it the highest rating for a historic place, Category I. Heritage New Zealand describes the Beehive as "of outstanding heritage significance for its central role in the governance of New Zealand."<sup>16</sup> It also mentions that the Beehive is of great cultural significance, saying "the Beehive can be considered a marae of the people of New Zealand."<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to compare the different attitudes to and treatment of the two buildings. Both are architecturally significant to New Zealand and representative of political agency, and yet one was seen as a threat to a developing society while the other is celebrated as a representation of progress and modernity. It could be argued that this is due to the difference in time period but, in fact, Hiona and the Beehive were built only

<sup>11</sup> "Tapu te Ranga Marae," accessed September 15, 2018, <http://www.taputeranga.maori.nz/index.php>

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bennett, *Whare Māori*, series, episode 1.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 114.

<sup>14</sup> "Rua Kenana," Ngāi Tūhoe, accessed September 24, 2018, <http://www.ngaituhoe.com/Folders/TipunaProfiles.html>

<sup>15</sup> Aroha Mane, "Crown Clears Rua Kēnana and Says Sorry for Maungapōhātu Invasion," *Te Ao Māori News*, December 21, 2019, <https://www.teaomaori.news/crown-clears-rua-kenana-and-says-sorry-maungapohatu-invasion>

<sup>16</sup> "Executive Wing (the Beehive)," Heritage New Zealand, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/9629>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 5. The Beehive, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Ulrich Lange, licenced under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 23.0 Unported.**

sixty years apart and, as it is evident in the reception of Tapu Te Ranga, many attitudes about Māoridom, both within government and the wider community, had not changed. Similarly, Bruce Stewart wanted to build a thriving community for those in need and was scrutinised by an established Western government. As a political statement, Tapu Te Ranga has had its fair share of conflict since its inception in 1974. Many locals were not happy with the idea of a group of homeless, Māori ex-prisoners living together in a well-to-do neighbourhood and the whānau at Tapu Te Ranga spent over thirty years fighting colonial policy and attitudes in order to hold on to their special place. However, the building's mana and the good it has done to a marginalised group of New Zealand society is undeniable. The kaupapa of Tapu Te Ranga is to manaaki all people of all cultures and to give them a place to be who they are. Stewart was known to have driven around Wellington picking up youth who were homeless and on the brink of offending. He would take them home to Tapu Te Ranga, feed them a good meal and then teach them to use their hands to help build the marae, continuously adding to the ever-evolving marvel that was Tapu Te Ranga. The result was a masterpiece, built without any money but with an abundance of determination and will. Stewart would often recite a whakataukī that translated as "those who build the house are built by the house,"<sup>18</sup> encapsulating his philosophical approach to the building he continued to work on up until he passed away in 2017. Unfortunately, like Hiona, the main building Pare-Hinetai-No-Waitotara no longer stands, having burned to the ground in June 2019. Sadness was felt across the world and people grieved for a building that represented belonging and pride for its large

and diverse community. There is no doubt, however, that Bruce Stewart's children, mokopuna and extended whānau will in time rebuild Pare-Hinetai-No-Waitotara and continue the legacy of Tapu Te Ranga.

### Conclusion

This paper is merely a glimpse into how architecture has been used as a way to resist colonisation, and much more research is needed in this area to be able to discuss this topic at greater length. However, what we do know is that Māori buildings play a critical role in how we assert an Indigenous identity in a prevailing European context. From passive resistance at Parihaka to the occupation of Ihumaatao, Māori have never shied away from speaking their minds and have used architecture to tell a story, to make a statement and to function as a space for political, religious and cultural activities.

Hiona and Tapu Te Ranga are two of the most relevant examples of architectural activism in Aotearoa. Both buildings represent groups of people outcast from society and have been cleverly designed to be recognised both architecturally and politically. Hiona was intended to symbolise and serve Maungapohatu, a sovereign state for the people of the Urewera after severe loss under British rule. Tapu Te Ranga came to life because of Bruce Stewart's commitment to provide a place for those who needed refuge from a system that worked against them. Both buildings continue to be admired for their architectural uniqueness, and their creators are among the most courageous Māori leaders of post-colonial New Zealand. These buildings and many others are a testament to the political climate of their time and of the struggle Indigenous peoples have been through to be recognised. Architecture has helped Māori hold on to traditional values and practices, and has ensured Māori have always been present even when other parts of their culture have been lost.

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<sup>18</sup> Alexandra Johnson, "Tapu Te Ranga Marae an Ex-prisoner's Dream," *Stuff*, August 27, 2009, para. 15, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/local-papers/the-wellingtonian/2802452/Tapu-Te-Ranga-Marae-an-ex-prisoners-dream>

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### List of Figures

**Fig. 1.** Te Hau-ki-Tūranga whareniui, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Whareniui\\_in\\_Te\\_Papa\\_museum.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Whareniui_in_Te_Papa_museum.jpg). Licenced under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic Licence.

**Fig. 2.** Burton Brothers (Dunedin), 1868–1898. European-style meeting house Miti Mai Te Arero, also known as Te Whiti's House, at Parihaka. Original photographic prints and postcards from file print collection, Box 7. Ref: PAColl-6001-48. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22774791>

**Fig. 3.** George Bourne, 1875–1924. Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house at Maungapōhatu. Godber, Albert Percy, 1875–1949. Collection of albums, prints and negatives. Ref: APG-1679-1/2-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23131313>

**Fig. 4.** Tapu Te Ranga Marae, Wellington, New Zealand. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Tapu-Te-Ranga-Marae-135069916676560/>.

**Fig. 5.** The Beehive, Wellington, New Zealand. Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beehive,\\_Wellington,\\_New\\_Zealand.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beehive,_Wellington,_New_Zealand.jpg) Photograph: Ulrich Lange. Licenced under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Unported.