Harry Turbott in the Wide World

A REFLECTION BY TONY WATKINS

Harry Turbott (1930-2016) was much more than an architect and a landscape architect. In his self-effacing, humble, bare-foot, New Zealand way he challenged both the creeping gentrification of an increasingly passive society and the morphing of the built-environment into a threat to the future of a planet he both loved and respected. In this reflection Tony Watkins weaves relationships between Harry’s story and the story of the global environmental movement. At this time of environmental crisis looking back suggests how we might move forward.
Harry’s Arataki Visitor Centre is but a pause on Tiriwa’s journey. If you do not know the story you cannot understand the architecture. Tiriwa, with powerful incantations, lifted Rangitoto, the mountain that blocked the view to the south from Te Ahuahu to the entrance of the Manukau, onto his shoulders. He strode across the Waitakeres and walked out across the Waitemata. When the cold water hit his loins he dropped his burden, and that is where you find Rangitoto today.

Of course before Tiriwa came along the land had already been telling other stories since the dawn of time. The eruption of Rangitoto is but a recent chapter. In an earlier chapter the enormous volcano which once stood off Ahuahu had almost completely eroded away. In a dynamic, constantly changing world Geology is more story-telling than science. Volcanos appear and disappear. With a little imagination you could say they move. It is a mistake to dismiss Tiriwa’s journey as nothing more than a myth.

However there are myths that do need to be dismissed. In our own time most human activity is driven by three great myths. It would be more correct to call them marketing lies, but they are so ingrained in our society, our bureaucracies, and our neoliberal economy that they seem to be beyond question. In endless strategic reports they form the foundation for a vision of a paradise that remains always just beyond reach, and prevents us from seeing the paradise we already possess.3

The first myth is the anthropocentric view that human beings are the centre of the universe. The second myth is that we can “manage” at least the planet, if not the cosmos. The third myth is that with a static built environment we can make certain the uncertainties of a dynamic world.

All the frozen, dead architecture now being built by “developers”4 gives form to these illusions. It not only cashes up our inheritance but also attempts to still the story of an earth coming into being. Our cities are full of award-winning empty carcasses waiting only to be cast out onto the dung heap, because they have no story to pass on that might be of interest to future generations. Architecture that forgets that life is about continuity, connections, and relationships destroys rather than develops.5

Equally all the frozen, dead plans now being imposed on society by “planners” give form to these illusions.6 What we now are beginning to call “spatial” planning is little more than reductionist thinking empowering “developers”, and disempowering everyone else.7 Stories don’t need plans to keep them under control. Stories open up possibilities. Replacing one plan with another plan will do nothing to solve any environmental problems.8 Winston Churchill wisely said: “Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.”9

All architecture exploits and damages the natural world. Architects dig it up, cut it down, or use vast amounts of energy to transform nature into another lesser reality. The first question we all need to ask is whether our architecture is going to leave the world a little richer or a little poorer.

Gardeners in contrast have a different worldview. They plant, they propagate, they graft, and they enrich the soil. They walk away and leave a garden behind, bursting with blossoms and flowers.

Harry was a landscape architect. Harry’s architecture caught the energy of an earth coming into being, and delighted in the sheer joy of being alive. He carried the story of creation forward without seeking to control where it might be taking him. With joy and delight Arataki celebrates the dynamic landscape. The Waitakeres are not a backdrop to the building. They are the reason for the building. The architecture invites us to experience the Waitakeres more intensely than we would ever have thought possible. As with any good story we find ourselves saying, “Yes, yes, it is so, but I have never been able to put it so clearly”. Papatuanuku. Tiriwa.
That they were free to play with the planet. A few thousand years later the Greek philosopher Protagoras said “Man is the measure of all things”.\textsuperscript{12} Again it was very reassuring to know that humans could ignore the consequences of their actions. More recently the United Nations still persists in using the term “shelter” to describe architecture.\textsuperscript{13} Anyone who wants to be fully alive should embrace life rather than shelter from it. Comfort fuels a passive society.\textsuperscript{14} In our time it is common to misquote “He tangata, he tangata, he tangata”, with a glib translation that “it is people, it is people, it is people” that are important, not realising that this Te Àupouri phrase was actually a warning to people who were about to become food in a hangi.\textsuperscript{15} It is so easy for truth to be “Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools.”\textsuperscript{16}

A closer reading of our own time might suggest that the Renaissance introduced the idea that science would make it possible for human beings to control the universe.\textsuperscript{17} You could then move quickly on, to say that Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring”, in 1961, pointed out that human beings were not necessarily benevolent.\textsuperscript{18} Selfishness, greed and the lust for power opened up the possibility of human beings destroying the planet. From 1961 to 1991 there were 30 good years with kaitiakitanga in ascendancy.

The 1991 Resource Management Act\textsuperscript{19} came at the end of this time and introduced Kaitiakitanga into New Zealand law.\textsuperscript{20} It was the first time that an indigenous term had been used in British law. After intense debate the Select Committee acknowledged that kaitiakitanga could not be translated into English. “Guardianship” and “stewardship” were anthropocentric terms.

Harry was part of all this story. If you called in to visit Harry at his house in Karekare he would always insist that before any korero you should take a long walk along the beach or through the bush. It was a necessary preparation. Only when you had felt the west coast salt in your hair could you catch the flavour of hot soup, or feel the warmth of an open fire. Shelter for Harry was nothing more than a pause on a journey. The experience of being outside was a necessary preparation for the experience of being inside. For Harry landscape informed architecture.

The Arataki Visitors Centre was built in 1992. It was a celebration of the golden years. The woodbutcher’s art at a grand scale. Kawarau a Maki finding a place in the sun. People belonging in place. Tangata whenua. The pou lifted out of the bush with karakia, but then returning to the bush to nourish new life. Another pou. Another story. Life moving on. People rising up above the canopy of ferns so that they might see beyond the horizon.

**KAITIAKITANGA**

An anthropocentric worldview sees human beings as the focus of everything. Everything is measured in human terms. We are sitting in the cockpit of planet earth, making decisions with ourselves in command. We are free to manage the planet to satisfy our own whims and desires.\textsuperscript{10} We feel benevolent if we save an occasional kiwi or a kakapo. An anthropocentric view fails to recognise that the planet has no need of us, and will go on living long after we have destroyed ourselves. Sadly it might be more correct to say that what we have not destroyed will go on living. History will not remember our generation kindly, but it will remember Harry.

In contrast kaitiakitanga recognises that we are part of the natural world. Beyond recognising that we need air to breathe, water to drink, or the sun to keep us warm, kaitiakitanga assumes that we also need a healthy planet before we can say that we are healthy. Maori have always said that the individual cannot be healthy if the whanau is not healthy. Kaitiakitanga means that we feel the pain of every carbon-offset tree that is chain-sawed down in Auckland. When every kiwi or kakapo dies we die too. Kaitiakitanga however is positive rather than negative. It means that we delight in every flower that blooms, and relish the joy of every beautiful sunrise. Kaitiakitanga is about being fully alive.

Histories easily become more concerned with asserting values than exploring the truth. Anthropocentric histories are common enough. Genesis was anthropocentric. Fuelled by arrogance it asserted the myth that man was created in the image of god, and given dominion over the earth.\textsuperscript{11} It was, of course, very reassuring for humans to know...
With the first images of earth taken from space in 1968 a new chapter in the human story began. The era when “You could enlarge the world simply by sailing in a new direction” was over. The planet was suddenly not as large as we had always assumed. We realised that we had already passed the carrying capacity of the earth. Our language moved beyond “the wise use of resources” and “conservation” to “tipping points” and irreversible “climate change”. We had run out of more planet to exploit with our architecture. The cost of our built environment had become more than the planet could afford. Life as we had known it was beginning to break down. We had reached limits and gone beyond them into unknown territory. The sixth great era of extinctions was well on the way.

The first United Nations global environmental conference was in Stockholm in 1972. At the beginning it was assumed that technical, scientific solutions could be found to fix environmental problems. A filter could deal with smoke pollution. It was however quickly recognised that our political structures could not deal with the questions being asked. An understanding of ‘gaia’ followed, as it was recognised that everything was interconnected. The fourth phase was the realisation that the questions were spiritual. The residue of all these unresolved ideological struggles continues, but that is another story.

A further series of conferences dealt with critical issues, such as population, which had been seen as likely to derail the main agenda at Stockholm. This first series of United Nations environmental conferences then concluded with consideration of the built environment, at Habitat 1 in Vancouver in 1976. The call went out to NGOs (Non Government Organisations) to bring a chainsaw to the parallel NGO Forum. The local beaches were strewn with logs. At the end of the first day Wellington architect Ian Athfield and the New Zealand team had finished their building and headed off to the pub. Other countries were still planning what they would do, and finalising their designs. Ian understood that building was a verb.

It is tragic that critics and authors have tried to turn Ian’s own house into a noun. One reading of history would be that of the struggle between empowering and disempowering. The idea that disempowered people escaped to New Zealand to be free. When you build you empower yourself. You discover limits and possibilities. You can make ethical choices. You tell your own story. The Habitat 1 NGO Forum was a challenge to the concentration of political power. After a week the
focus of Habitat 1 had moved down to the Forum. Margaret Mead famously announced “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Harry built his own house at Karekare. There was nothing unusual in that. New Zealanders once assumed that if you needed a house you simply built it. Most architects built their own homes. Stories abound of the Surf Club helping to carry timber up the hill to Harry’s house. When you build a house yourself the stories of the doing are as important as the structure.

The story of Harry’s rebirth of Trounson Kauri Park is more important than the buildings or boardwalks. The architecture merely gave form to the building of the community. Harry lifted people up so that they might see beyond their horizons. The almost forgotten park became the largest employer in the north. The new nursery reversed assumptions by supplying seedlings to Waipoua. Pride replaced subservience.

When, with Harry’s guidance, we were rebuilding the Pa-para-o-Tane Palace in Rarotonga, we set up forms in front of the building, and the women gathered to tell stories. Not only of place and culture, but also of Polynesian navigation and the wider Pacific. In the remembering of traditional stories life was breathed into the spirit of the building. Each year for four years Harry took a group of 15 or 20 students from the University of Auckland to spend a month in Rarotonga. It was total immersion in a culture, a place, and building as a verb. Harry believed in education rather than teaching.

Like Arataki the palace was a pause on another journey. The back verandah, with the gods carved into the posts looked up to the mysterious dynamic volcano. The front Colonial verandah looked out to the cricket pitch and the great white ships that had brought salvation. The Queen planted a coconut in the middle of the pitch to stop people playing cricket.

Back in Auckland the students were being taught about architectural objects, not architecture. Building as a noun is very different from building as a verb. There was a presumption in the University that architects needed to be trained to build award-winning monuments. The history of architecture was concerned with Egyptian pyramids, Greek temples, or Palladian villas. Architectural objects left behind by barely remembered civilisations. In their time they had attempted to provide certainty in an uncertain world, just as most architects do today.

In a market-driven consumer society a building becomes nothing more than just another consumer product, to be bought, sold, and traded for a profit. You can throw the architecture away when you tire of it, because it never did mean anything to you. The need to save “heritage” buildings is symptomatic of a dysfunctional society.

The story of design as a noun focuses on the design of things. Perhaps well designed objects, but nevertheless objects. Products. Design as a verb is concerned with process. For Harry the process of healing a broken world and making it whole again. The current environmental crisis is a design issue. We need to learn from the natural world.

The result of design as a verb does not need to be a product. Lion Breweries sought advice from Harry about the design of a resort at Mimiwhangata. Harry convinced the board that any architecture would degrade a magnificent site. Today Mimiwhangata is a farm park for all the enjoy. The only truly sustainable building is the one you do not build.

When the bush at Big Muddy Creek, linking Arataki to the Manukau, was to be subdivided, Harry worked with us to reverse the decision. It was a close call. The answer to an architectural question is not necessarily a building.
John Scott’s Aniwaniwa Visitors Centre was one of New Zealand’s best buildings. Like Arataki it was concerned with the story of Tuhoe written on the land. John was concerned about the forest, not the building. A window at your feet focused your eye on the moss, the ferns and the understory, preparing you for the experience of moving outside the building. There was no need for any clutter of human interpretation, which only got in the way.

The Department of Conservation (DoC) did not understand. The building was enlarged so that more clutter could be fitted in. Finally, at the time the Ruatoki raids were closing a culture down, the building was also closed down to take away the threat of its way of seeing the world. Eventually it was demolished, just as Rua’s settlement had been. Great architecture challenges the way of seeing of those who want power over the earth. People who love power find humility unbearable.

Harry added another chapter to John Scott’s Waitangi Visitors Centre. However the two architects respect for each other, and for place, was eventually overcome by the architecture of others. Arataki is now suffering from Tiriwa’s story being obscured by interpretation. Seeing is not the same as understanding. Sometimes you only need to know how little you know.

The golden era of the global environmental movement seemed to be too good to be true, and it was. Many people felt threatened by the idea of putting the planet ahead of profit. The United Nations UNCED Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 moved the world from the golden age of the Holocene to the Anthropocene. The language of the “Brundtland Report” was anthropocentric. Rio changed the meaning of development. The architects exploiting the world rejoiced. Once again it was business as usual, with no concern for a dying planet.

The IPCC (United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports began making it very clear that the extinction of the human race was just around the corner, but for politicians it was all too hard. A passive society obsessed with hedonistic comfort was never going to vote for a government to make changes they were not willing to make for themselves. From 1991 to 2021 we have had 30 lean years, with the avaricious making money from “development”. In the next 30 years humans will determine the future of the planet. Growing out of our dilemma is not an option.

Harry never embraced any of the new greenwash fads. He realised that focusing on “zero-carbon architecture” or “resilience” was just an avoidance tactic for not dealing with the real issues. Architecture is only timeless when it is at one with the earth.

Bernard Rudofsky’s exhibition “Architecture without architects”, in 1965, was a revelation to the anthropocentric architects of New York. There was a brief pause, with time to admire the images, but the idea that design belonged in place, culture and time was too great a challenge to the idea of design as an intellectual activity.

Indigenous cultures have always quietly got on with life, with a close relationship to the earth. Aborigines did less damage to Australia in 60,000 years than Europeans have done in last 200 years. Vernacular architecture simply belongs.

Harry’s architecture also simply belonged. The Glasgow house wraps around a pohutukawa in the same way that a pohutukawa wraps around an eroding cliff. Harry loved pohutukawa, as he loved life. His life was as natural as the Karekare salt air. You feel the presence of Harry when you breathe deeply.

There will be volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods and bushfires. The city of Auckland will pass away. The stories of Harry and Tiriwa will remain.
infinite growth is possible on a finite planet. Long ago when compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, we have been told, there was a time when we could have a growth economy to the CCC vision, even if we wanted to. In contrast IPCC reports focus on current realities and inevitable consequences.

The word “development”, with a completely new meaning, was introduced into the United Nations lexicon at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, at a conference called UNCED, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The move away from the concerns of Stockholm resulted in environmental goals being replaced by development goals.

The architects of world signed the “Declaration of Inter- national Solidarity” in Chicago in 1993. This was a New Zealand and Australian initiative, taken to the International Union of Architects by Graeme Robertson and Alan Rodger.

Auckland’s “Unitary Plan” has nothing to do with planning. It is an attempt to define what “developers” will be encouraged to build to achieve the Council “planners” vision of urban form. The reductionist thinking in the idea of uniformity is contrary to the declared diversity agenda.

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