



Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington and the geological forces of two taniwha, Ngake and Whātaītai (image by Matt Wakelin, 2020).



Te karanga ki ngakengake: the call of the shifting forces

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This design proposal extends and intensifies the powerfully present geological conditions of Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand. Originally conceived for an international design competition, it contextualises the magnitude of geological time and imagines an embodied experience of suspension, a quality of being between worlds yet in the felt immediacy of nothing but a field of transmissible intensity. The design emerges from and is given meaning by pūrākau (narratives) of Te Ātiawa (a tribal grouping) about two taniwha (powerful supernatural entities) called Ngake and Whātaimai. Together these taniwha give the why and how of Te Whanganui-a-Tara land and seascape; they contextualise geomorphology in deep time and express the entangled alliance between mana whenua and the specificity of place, a quality defining Te Whanganui-a-Tara. With the design, we touch on multiple relational intersections made possible by the forever mercurial space where the sea and the land meet, yet do so in such a way as to unsettle settler colonial schemas of landscape–seascape experience.

Introduction

This design proposition is in service of Ngake and Whātaimai – taniwha (powerful supernatural entities) of Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (harbour, city and wider region). Their ancient pūrākau (narrative) from Te Ātiawa, who are mana whenua (people with traditional territorial authority) of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, carries a wary reminder that the land of Te Whanganui-a-Tara is restless, unruly and very much alive. The landscape of this region knows action: tectonic plates subduct and fracture; rock corrugates and sculpts landform. In response, the wind tightens and speeds up when squeezing between up-thrusted ridgelines. In geological time, Te Whanganui-a-Tara is positively fluid, spilling its turbulence as a condition of material chaos.

While the impacts of everyday geological dynamism go undetected, massive geological events create significant dents in the deep-time psyche of place. For mana whenua and ahi kā (burning fires of occupation) of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Whātaimai and Ngake – taniwha of Te Whanganui-a-Tara – carry as memory the impression of the origin event that formed the harbour of Te Whanganui-a-Tara. Together they represent an agreement with a place that writhes. The agreement is one of interdependency, a tethered and unbreakable relation that transmits the specificity of place knowledge. The name Whātaimai refers to the lifting of the land through tectonic force, and Ngake (a short form of Tō-Ngake-Ngake) refers to acts of tearing and thrashing. Together these taniwha continue to shape Te Whanganui-a-Tara landscape and seascape at a scale and power well beyond the reach of any land design, yet the significance of their influence is seldom fully conceived.

It is a prerequisite of systematic colonisation and the settler colonial mind to relegate land to being static, lifeless. Under this paradigm, which gave rise to the nation of New Zealand by way of invasion and ‘literal trespass’ (Simon, 2023), land was and continues to be abstracted as resource to own and occupy. In turn, land is leveraged as a foothold in the circulations of capital gain concurrently ushering a cascade of rights-based and aesthetic sensibilities that cement ‘kiwi’ *settleness* as the cultural norm.

Such western-centric objectifications and their associated effacements of the relational realities embedded in lands fail to conceive of taniwha in their rightful context. *Settleness* thus fails to understand what relation and responsibility to land might mean on this motu (island). Settler sensibilities consign the taniwha to myth, or a fragment of

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superstition, casting it outside ‘real’ knowledge. This at once minimises taniwha and erases their rightful place as bearers of deep scientific knowledge acquired through generations of observation. It is an outcome that demonstrates not only suppression as a condition of settler nationhood, but also the incommensurability of colliding knowledge systems. The settler colonial mind therefore neither hears the call, nor heeds the warning, that the ground here moves. Such are the blind spots conditioned by whiteness.

Design

With this design we critically question the role of taniwha in occasions of landscape architecture. The design refuses to locate taniwha in the ‘habitat’ of superstition installed by colonisation. Instead it works with the prevailing wind and sea patterns to materially intensify a manifestation of Ngake as the tearing of the earth in fault-lines, and Whātaītai as the tectonic uplift that constitutes the highly turbulent geology of Te Whanganui-a-Tara. It works to ‘place’ the human within this movement, and afford an experience that registers the knowledge of taniwha power in the realm of sense.

A precarious ‘reef-like’ walkway from Oruaiti, a point at the mouth of the harbour, is envisioned (figure 1). Like a microcosm of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, the ‘reef’ captures the rushing winds, or the energy of Ngāke’s unseen presence, ‘turning up the velocity’ of its movements.



Figure 1. Oruaiti Point and plan of the ‘reef-like’ walkway (image by Matt Wakelin, 2020).

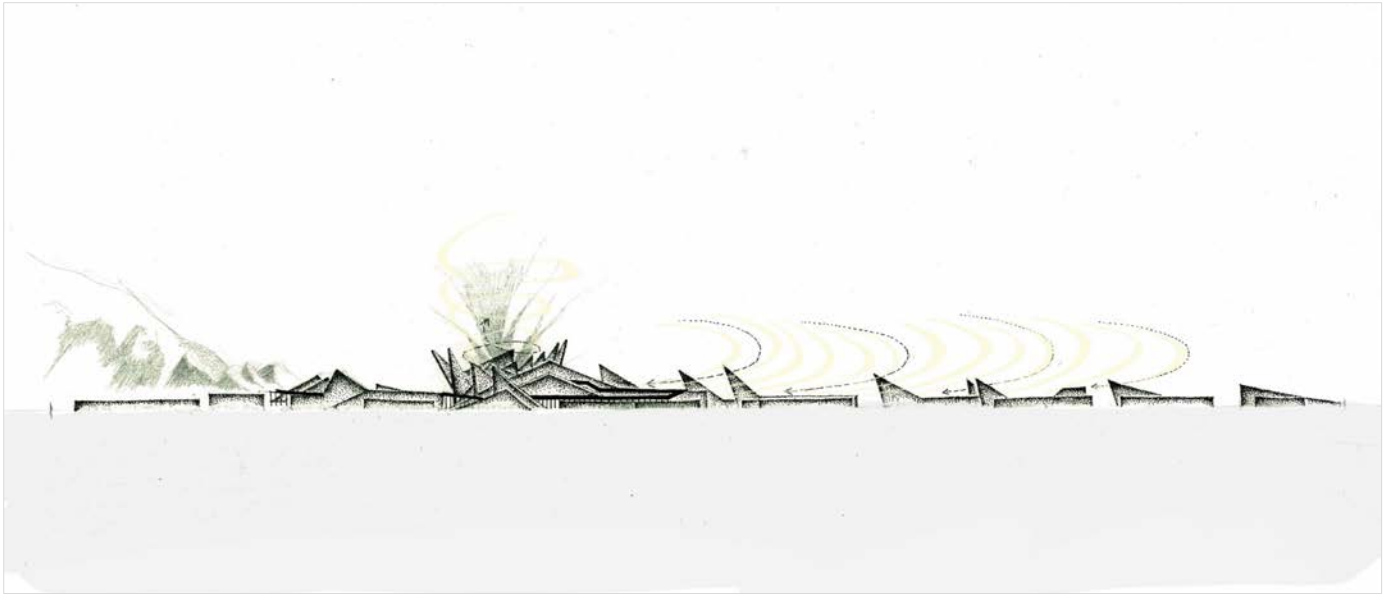


Figure 2. Elevation of the ‘reef-like’ walkway (image by Matt Wakelin, 2020).

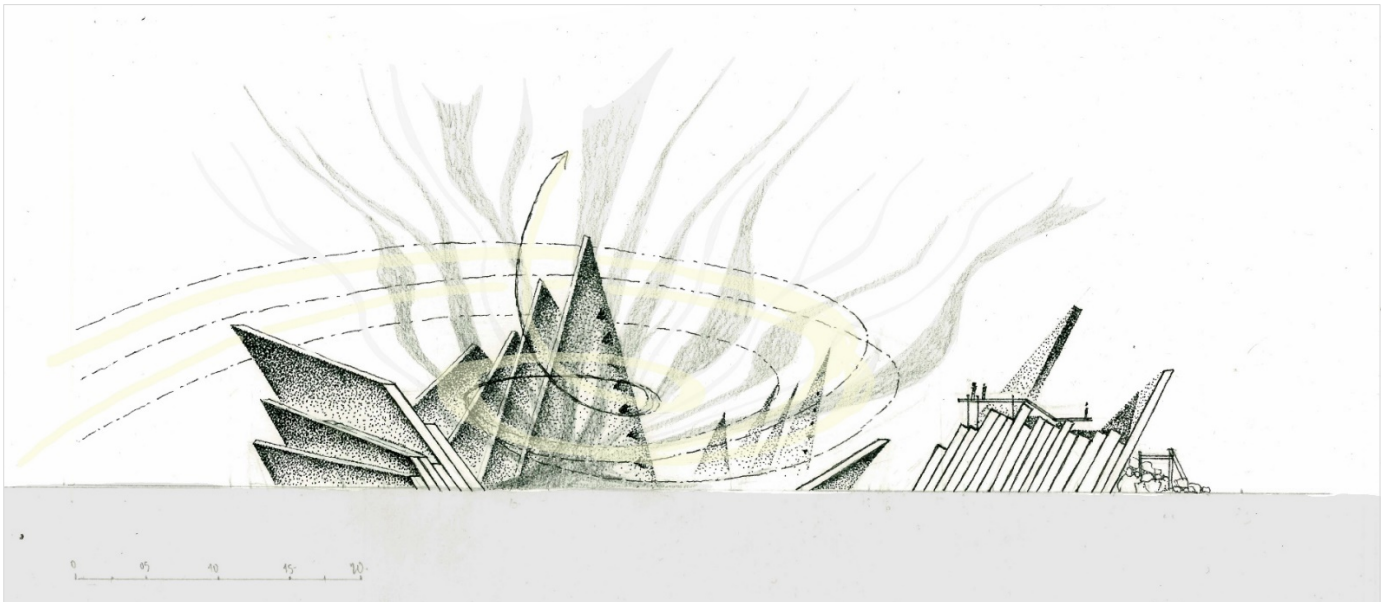


Figure 3. The ‘fins’ intersecting with the wind to tear up the sea’s surface as the sounds of Ngake and Whātaimai resonate (image by Matt Wakelin, 2020).

With a series of concrete ‘fins’ protruding up to 20 metres from the sea’s surface, wind-flow is concentrated to ‘tear up’ the surface of the sea (figures 2 and 3). Below the water line, the concrete substrate is variegated to accommodate the diverse and specific niches for local marine inhabitants. Between the Whātaimai structures, eddies and vortexes intermittently form and rise up, surprising walkers with seemingly spontaneous ‘water spouts’. Channels and chutes are bored through the ‘fins’ to funnel the fast-moving winds, transforming the rushing air into fluctuating resonances of the power of Ngake and Whātaimai.

A path of shifting elevation permits embodied extension into this dramatic, yet everyday situation. Physical access is created and invited to impart experience; however, we want to be clear that the intended experience is not geared to co-opting the experiences and relationships mana whenua hold. Nor is it to assert an incidence of benign allure affirming the settler sublime and its fetishisation of natural systems. Taniwha are not fables of the past, but real, nonetheless virtual, dimensions of the everyday landscape-seascape of Te Whanganui-a-Tara.

Conclusion

This design response emerges from the ancient understandings of pūrākau to employ taniwha not as mythological creatures, but as deep knowledge about the phenomena of earth and time. It is our hope that through this design, the settler colonial usage of taniwha as a primitive mythical monster is cast aside, so as to awaken an empathetic re-cognition of taniwha in and of itself outside the ongoing hegemony of eurosphere epistemic appropriation.

While this design changes nothing for Ngake and Whātaimai, nor for mana whenua, perhaps the speculative materialisation of pūrākau might prompt another dent in the history of this harbour; this time one that dislodges blindnesses perpetuated by colonialism. For too long, landscape architecture has participated in settler 'common sense', aligning itself with a form of nostalgia for an idealised nature that ignores not only historical injustices, but knowledge held by mana whenua. To this end, this paper uses design as an occasion to dislodge settler logics through productive disorientation, and interrupt the constant yet often unnoticed reproductions of the settler sublime in landscape architectural projects.

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About the authors



Matt Wakelin, BArch, MLArch (Victoria University of Wellington), is a landscape architect at SBLA Studio with skills in planting, ecological design, community engagement, and hand-drawing. Matt has played key roles in designing schools, neighbourhood centres, inner-city public spaces, streetscapes, expansive inter-suburban parks, playgrounds, ecologically informed infrastructural systems, and master planned communities. All of Matt's projects emphasise understanding of a site's history and its unique natural systems in placemaking

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