
The ovava tree plays a significant social, cultural and environmental role within the Ohonua community, contributing to the shaping of a blue biophilic place in ‘Eua (image by Zhang, February 2026).

LANDSCAPE
REVIEW

# Blue biophilic place and island placemaking in the Pacific: the case of the island of ‘Eua, Tonga

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This paper presents a critical auto-ethnographic reflection on blue biophilic placemaking and islandness, framed through a post-disaster context in ‘Eua, an island in the Kingdom of Tonga. The Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha‘apai volcano erupted in 2022, triggering a deadly tsunami and causing widespread disaster. Coastal communities in small Pacific Island countries were seriously affected, including Ohonua on ‘Eua. Ohonua faced the additional burden of intensifying weather and sea-level rise due to climate change, which exacerbated its vulnerability during disaster recovery. Through a Placemaking Sandbox delivered in July 2024, students explored reconnection and healing, sense of place and belonging, blue nature and biophilic urbanism with the community. Examining the social-ecological-cultural islandscape of ‘Eua, we highlight a nature-based placemaking project where islandness is expressed through fostering collective community leadership and stewardship in building connection through creating spaces for play and caring for nature. This helps to amplify often muted voices of nature and children, recognise residents as place experts, and listen to intergenerational resilience stories that share knowledge and practices. This encounter offered fresh insights and place-based learnings on the role of island placemaking and blue urbanism in shaping being and belonging as the community gradually recovered after the disaster.

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## Introduction

With one in four countries being an island nation, about 730 million people around the world live on an island (World Population Review, 2026; WorldAtlas, 2026). Yet island nations are disproportionately affected by natural disasters such as cyclones, typhoons and floods, which have a catastrophic impact on already at-risk coastal communities and exacerbate their vulnerability. Therefore, it is imperative to both examine social vulnerabilities of island communities and find pathways to enhancing their disaster preparedness. Identifying place-based opportunities for communities to heal during recovery will help futureproof these communities, whose culture and livelihoods are closely tied to their land and water.

In 2022, the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha‘apai volcano erupted in the Pacific Ocean. This triggered a deadly tsunami, which affected several Pacific communities, including Ohonua on the island of ‘Eua, Kingdom of Tonga (Pulu and Pamatatau, 2023). Responding to the call for a design-to-heal post-disaster project, our team delivered a Placemaking Sandbox to the community in July 2024. The Placemaking Sandbox is an experiential education platform where participants collaborate and co-design with a community to enable social transformation. The Tonga Placemaking Sandbox travelling studio was a collaboration between the Ohonua community, the Tupou Tertiary Institute and the University of Melbourne. Guided by their studio leaders, four student teams worked with the Ohonua community to explore how placemaking can support healing through expressions of islandness that build community reconnection and place attachment, in turn strengthening resilience in an uncertain climate future. This paper presents the critical auto-ethnographic reflection of one studio leader and the Niu student team.

First, we propose a conceptual framework, which suggests that islandness is an expression of community resilience and places particular emphasis on blue nature.

Second, we introduce the case study, justifying its choice in narrating resilient imaginaries, particularly in a post-disaster setting. Third, through an auto-ethnographic lens, we use the framework to critically reflect on our experience of islandness and blue biophilic nature-based placemaking. Finally, we share relevant insights on how placemaking helps in reconnecting land to water, highlighting the role of blue biophilic urbanism in adaptation to the Anthropocene, with implications for education, professional leadership and practice, and academic research.

## Conceptual framework

### *Islandness defined*

Islandness remains a contested concept with multiple meanings (Foley et al, 2023). While islands are often defined as small land masses bounded by water bodies (Baldacchino, 2006), Hau'ofa (1994) challenges this perspective by declaring that islandness is in fact the cultural connectedness of land masses via a 'sea of islands'. This perspective shifts our understanding of the role of islands in fostering marine innovation and collective climate action (Kelman, Burns and des Johansson, 2015).

Despite assumptions that island communities are insignificant when it comes to planning and designing (Ronström, 2021), they cover a vast portion of the world, varying in size, territorial area, and cultural-social-ecological characteristics and systems (Adams, 2001; Nel et al, 2021), with unique ocean governance structures (Hau'ofa, 2000) and ocean-based economies (Govan and Katafono, 2017). Also framed as blue urbanism (Beatley, 2014), islandness reflects relationships between people, a place and its four dimensions – *self, space, community* and *nature* (Hes, Mateo-Babiano and Lee, 2019). When positive relationships are achieved in (coastal) communities, islandness becomes an expression of resilience, demonstrated in the relational outcomes of sense of place, sense of belonging, blue biophilic urbanism and blue ecological health. These concepts are visualised in figure 1 and explained in the following discussion.

### *Blue biophilic nature-based placemaking*

Placemaking shapes spaces to foster meaningful lived experiences and enhance community connection and quality of life through participatory community interactions (Hes et al, 2020). It recognises residents of place as experts with knowledge and skills that can positively transform spaces for deeper connections (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1993). In so doing, it will support place care and custodianship, enhance nature stewardship and improve ecological health (Bush, Hernandez-Santin and Hes, 2019). Strengthening the relationship between community members builds social relationships that will cultivate their sense of belonging to blue places.

A critique of placemaking is that it traditionally forges emotional connections between people and space. Yet by embedding ecological thinking, we contend that people and place are part of (and not apart from) nature. In island settings, placemaking based in blue nature expands the approach beyond a human-centred focus and flips the perspective towards integrating marine (or blue) nature in island geographies. This shift impacts development by creating healthier, more sustainable blue environments for positive societal futures (Bush et al, 2019).

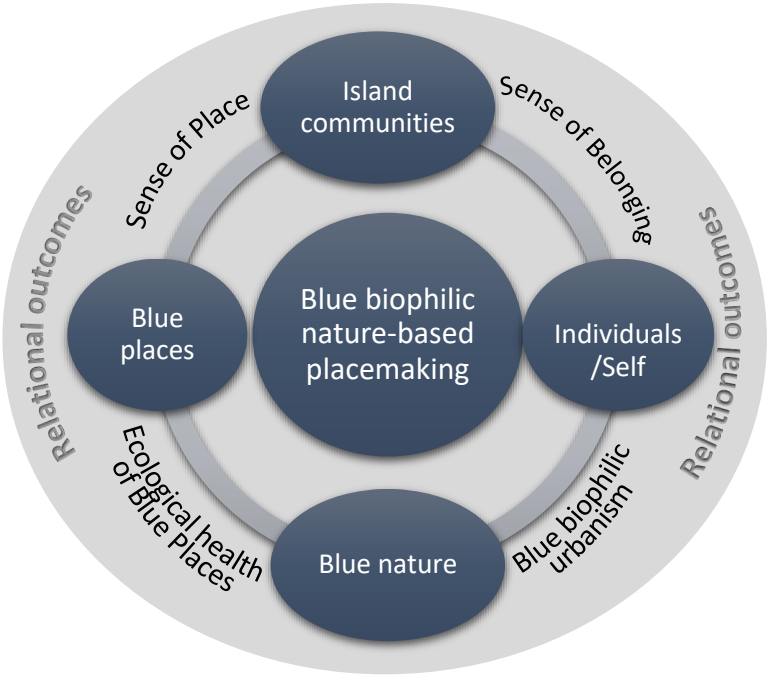


**Figure 1.** Blue biophilic nature-based placemaking framework (image by Mateo-Babiano, March 2026).

*Blue biophilic urbanism*

In *Blue Urbanism*, Beatley (2014) argues that planning often overlooks the connection between cities and the sea, despite its social and ecological importance. He frames blue urbanism as a form of *biophilic* urbanism, emphasising how the human affinity with marine nature brings out our biophilia – or our desire to reconnect with nature. This perspective repositions oceans and islands to be not boundaries but connectors across cultures and communities (Adams, 2001; Hau'ofa, 1994, 2000; Wardle et al, 1997). It calls for cultivating blue biophilic environments that support wellbeing, strengthen stewardship and respond to climate challenges such as sea-level rise (Beatley, 2014, 2017).

*Blue nature as blue biophilic infrastructure*

Nature-based strategies include green and blue spaces (parks, forests, coasts, lakes, ponds and pond systems, water courses). Building on this, our discussion extends beyond land to focus on marine nature, advocating a shift towards understanding blue and green spaces as integrated infrastructure. From this perspective, nature becomes a natural asset (Pinto et al, 2022), providing essential ecosystem services ranging from mangrove forests that minimise the impacts of storm surge to healthy forest systems that mitigate drought, flooding and landslides. When the environment is considered as a natural asset, people, in return, care for it and become stewards on its behalf (Bush et al, 2019).

For this reason, island communities, through nature-based placemaking, emerge as active agents of change in prioritising blue biophilic infrastructure (Sutton-Grier et al, 2018). It follows that placemaking, while acknowledging the physical and geographical makeup of ocean communities, recognises that islandness goes beyond the physical place boundaries, acknowledging island living or blue urbanism as embedded local knowledges of blue nature in lived experiences of and cultural relationships with the sea .

## The case study

*An overview of the Ohonua community*

The Ohonua community comprises eight blocks, including six directly bordering the ocean and block 7 at a higher elevation east of these six blocks, as shown in figure 2. Blocks define the spatial distribution of the township according to streets and natural topography, running mostly in parallel, from the southeast (highest point) to the northwest (lowest point), which has access to the beach. These streets also serve as boundaries for the blocks, ending at the foreshore area.

As the lowest point on the island, the foreshore area's elevation ranges between 13 and 26 metres above sea level. The increasing elevation on moving inland means that the eastern portion of these roads offers breathtaking scenic views of the beach and other ocean attractions. However, during heavy rainfall the west (foreshore area) becomes a rainwater catchment, subjecting the foreshore to erosion and flooding.


**Figure 2.** Ohonua community, 'Eua, showing **(a)** the sole ovava tree left standing; **(b)** a view towards the ocean from the higher point of a road; and **(c)** a panoramic view of the community (collage by authors, June 2024).

*Traumatic spaces, opportunities for healing*

During our visit, we observed the heavy impacts of the tsunami on the foreshore area (Faisal, Ayuningtyas and Maulida, 2023). Along the shoreline, around 139 buildings were damaged and abandoned. All public structures were required to relocate to higher ground. Residential development was also banned in the same area and affected residents, although hesitant, agreed to move to block 8, which is south of block 7.

At the same time, use of the now-abandoned area became a challenge. This once vibrant, blue biophilic coastline serving as the heartbeat of the community now became a stretch of unused and desolate territory. Figure 3 shows the extent of the devastation. Yet this abandoned space also presented untapped potential for the community and became the empirical context for the Placemaking Sandbox.


**Figure 3.** Images of the tsunami devastation along the coast (clockwise from top): (**a**) collapsed bank with an abandoned government building in the background; **(b)** main road with a view of the church; (**c**) perspective towards the ocean of abandoned buildings; (**d**) view of block 3; and (**e**) ignored foreshore spaces (photos by authors, June 2024).

## Approach

*Researcher positionality, auto-ethnography and data needs*

The authors were all participants in this project: Iderlina was one of the studio leaders, while Adelaide, Anh and Shiyi formed the Niu student team. Together, they used an auto-ethnographic lens with an outsider position to explore islandness and nature-based resilience. Working with the Ohonua community, they made conscious efforts to clarify roles in ways that would amplify voices often not heard such as the voices of children and of nature.

During the learning about concepts and approaches in reducing social vulnerability through nature-based resilient placemaking, we intentionally did not to impose ideas on the community. Similarly, we did not make assumptions about how members of the community would re-imagine a healthier, more resilient ‘Eua. Instead, we sourced critical reflections from our own observations and daily field notes, which captured our first-hand experience of living in ‘Eua, and focused on co-designing with the Ohonua community. Further interpretations of these ideas were made against the broader goals of strengthening relationships with place through sense of place and place belonging,

ecosystem services, ecological health and biophilic urbanism – all of which are strategies to enhance disaster resilience to future shocks.

This approach helped reinforce the role of researchers as research instruments and the role of the Ohonua community as research partners. Yet one of the authors observed that differentiating private and professional identities is challenging. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) note, when adopting an auto-ethnographic process, we need to follow a systematic self-critique of how we experience a phenomenon, always aware of our own biases, particularly if we are also participant observers. This process is two-fold, involving critical self-reflection (*auto-* + *-graphy*) to increase one's understanding of a cultural phenomenon (*ethnos-*).

*Placemaking Sandbox: an islandness living lab*

The Tonga travelling studio is a subject offered in the Melbourne School of Design. It is part of the Master of Urban Planning programme at the University of Melbourne, which is accredited by the Planning Institute of Australia. It is a collaboration between the Ohonua community, the Tupou Tertiary Institute and the University of Melbourne to respond to the call for a design-to-heal, post-disaster project, which was delivered in July 2024.

The Placemaking Sandbox, which is part of the studio work, takes on a participatory action research-led pedagogical approach to support transformative learning. Transformative education encourages both students and studio leaders to go beyond acquiring knowledge and skills to understand place and community values.

In the context of a changing climate, islands are crucial sites for observing the impacts of planetary challenges, but also for testing opportunities for resilience. As a placemaking living lab, they offer opportunities for testing resilient strategies and solutions that can respond to global challenges and contribute to global sustainability goals (Horgan, Kerst and Koens, 2024). This process first and foremost prioritises respect for the natural environment, local contexts and situated knowledges, which enables collective action and community leadership in co-creating a more just and sustainable future (Rabie, 2013).

*Data collection: exploring islandness via blue biophilic nature-based placemaking*

Twelve students from the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, formed four transdisciplinary placemaking teams. Students came from diverse built environment disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning and one Tupou Tertiary Institute student joined each team.

Each team, including the Niu team, was assigned to work with two neighbourhood blocks. Adopting convenience sampling, student teams engaged in Talanga conversations with the community to explore how placemaking can support community healing through expressions of islandness across 10 days. Talanga is a community-centred research process: 'Ta' refers to initiating a talk or conversation while 'langa' is about responding to a talk or conversation, so the term as a whole means 'interactive talking with a purpose' (Ofanoa et al, 2015, p 335).

Talanga as a process recognises that island residents are place experts that share specific local actions and grassroots initiatives relevant to their island way of life or blue urbanism (Baldacchino, 2006). Through Talanga, social and biocultural relations are cultivated and trust with the community is built. This develops insights into how people shape their places and expands understanding of local resilience-building.

Both studio leaders and team members were tasked with writing their observations and taking field notes on their daily experiences and learnings in their journal. In our field notes, we used the relational outcomes of placemaking to guide the content while drawing on the 4Fs (facts, feelings, findings and future actions) to structure the auto-ethnographic critical reflection. Specifically, we:

- picked one event, documented an objective account of that event and wrote what we learned from it (facts)
- wrote about our subjective account of or reaction to the activity or learning (feelings)

- reflected on our key takeaways from the activity, connecting this learning to islandness and the broader environmental, cultural, political, and social island contexts (findings)
- ended by describing how this learning can inform our future actions, research and/or professional practice (Greenaway, 2002).

*Data analysis: island transformation, learning and nature-based resilience*

Through our journal entries, we analysed our own experience of the Placemaking Sandbox travelling studio as we embarked on a co-design journey with the Ohonua community. With the intention of understanding the impacts of the disaster, the community healing process and expressions of islandness, we analysed the entries against broader situated experiences, knowledges and practices of islandness in the cultural and institutional setting of ‘Eua.

We were interested to investigate how islands can serve as evolving spaces for cultural production, exchange and human-nature transformation, fundamentally leading to an understanding of the centrality of islandness in the process of making meaning of place. We also wanted to understand how the placemaking process presents opportunities for transformative learning for the students, the studio leader and the Ohonua community.

## Results and findings

In this section, we describe expressions of islandness through the lens of blue biophilic nature-based placemaking.

*Team naming*

Inspired by the nature endemic to island settings, each of the four teams navigating the complex biocultural settings of the Ohonua community adopted a name drawn from local flora and fauna. Group 1 picked Mohokoi, the local name for the ylang-ylang flower; group 2 chose Kava, which is a popular ceremonial drink in the South Pacific; group 3 picked Niu, which is the local name for the endemic coconut; and group 4 chose Koki, which refers to the native parrot found only on ‘Eua.

The naming signalled the start of our learning journey of deepening our ecological knowledge of the island’s social-ecological system. This learning journey is the central tenet of our Placemaking Sandbox.

*Walking on ‘Eua – our approach*

On the day that we arrived on ‘Eua, we were introduced to the community and received a very warm welcome. We were brought to our accommodation at the sole local agricultural college on the island. Each team was assigned two of the community’s blocks. The Mohokoi team focused on blocks 1 and 2, the Niu team on blocks 5 and 6, the Kava team on blocks 3 and 4 and the Koki team on blocks 7 and 8.

Our first activity was to visit households in our assigned blocks. The Niu team was accompanied by two local youths, who served as our translators as we went door-knocking. At each household, we introduced our team, discussed the purpose of our visit and engaged in Talanga conversations . The intent was to deepen our understanding of place, including its blue natural environment. Our encounter with each household helped us gather initial insights and, more importantly, engage in an honest and transparent conversation and express our intentions with the community. This helped build trust.

Subsequently focus group meetings and discussions with various community groups (ie, women’s council, children, commercial owners) were held. While some of these were pre-arranged, most of the deeper conversations happened organically. We also went on a walking observation with community members, particularly with youth and children. These activities helped capture both the natural and sensorial experiences of the place – a process that helped the student teams to work with community members, learn about the various ways of working with people and their connection to marine nature, and identify

biophilic, nature-based strategies. The daily community interactions also helped students to build their creative, critical and intercultural thinking competencies.

*Social vulnerability and community resilience*

We witnessed the physical damage brought by the tsunami as we went around the community. Yet we were also pleasantly surprised to see that, despite the significant environmental devastation, many native plants (eg, *Cyathea* and the ovava tree (Indian almond)) were thriving and vibrant in the area. The landscape demonstrated the area's ecological diversity: the many types of vegetation included coconut trees, which are a staple in tropical regions, as well as seaweed and moss flourishing near the coastline. The vista was also breathtaking. Roads led directly to the sea, offering impressive views that enhanced the area's natural environment.

We realised how the geographical and ecological richness of the island is crucial in shaping community lifestyles and traditions, which also served as a reminder to us that care and stewardship are fundamental to the preservation of such an invaluable biocultural heritage. We thought that as long as sustainable practices were embedded in the community, their biocultural heritage will remain intact and will be sustained for future generations to enjoy.

An important goal for placemaking is to build the resilience and agency of the community. Agency refers to the feeling of being emotionally connected to place and the ability to act for, with and in place. In the case of 'Eua, Tongans' traditional attachment to place is underpinned by their cultural obligations to their fāmili (family), kolo (village), siasi (church) and fonua (place) (Ongolea and Houkamau, 2024), which together comprise anga faka-Tonga or the Tongan way of life. Resilience stories of nature and the children's planting group (discussed below) are examples of how it is possible to build the agency of Tongans related to their social and ecological systems, which leads to caring for their place. Once they care for their place, they look after it. Yet when we began our project, such agency was under threat because of the adverse impacts of human activities compounded by the changing climate, which increased the social vulnerability of the community.

*From foreshore trauma to fostering belonging to place and nature stewardship*

Even after the trauma they had experienced, we noticed that Ohonua residents continued to express a profound physical and emotional connection to their natural blue and green surroundings. By living alongside the Ohonua community and surrounded by bodies of water, we felt a renewed sense of place unique to an aquapelago where the community was insulated from outside influence.

As days went by, we started to feel a strong sense of connection with the people in the community, which grew through our daily communal interactions. Sharing meals, joining gatherings and listening to stories allowed us to co-create a design that was inspired by the everyday lived experience of the community, and one that resonated with local culture and place.

What made this experience unique was that it brought out collective leadership especially among the children. They welcomed us, joined us in our walks, willingly answered our questions and had a few themselves. Their inquisitive minds reminded us of who and how we were when we were younger. Some of the children had knowledge of plants endemic to the area. Later, we learnt that most of them were part of a planting group, an informal gathering of children that was organised a few months after the tsunami. One of their projects was to plant telie, tropical almond trees that are endemic to coastal areas, along the shoreline. The idea was that each tree would be taken care of by one child, who would grow with the trees. Senior members of the community shared that now the children knew more about the trees than them.

This experience highlights the major role that children can play in building back better and with greater resilience through community leadership and nature stewardship – roles that are often invisible as generally their perspectives are not sought. This experience also

highlighted the importance of seeking children's input, amplifying both their voice and nature's voice in the process.

*Islandness – converting waste into a resource in aquapelagic settings*

Infrastructure-related challenges persist in island settings. The first 'Eua visit led to the discovery of a burgeoning waste dumpsite. A published report by MORDI Tonga (2014) described wild dumping happening in areas outside of the official dumpsite, on farmland or along the coast. Also observed were waste materials such as plastic bottles, cans and food packaging indiscriminately scattered on roads, in common areas and public spaces, including the beach. Waste derived from construction, including plastic pipes, wooden panels and timber logs, was abandoned in various areas and mixed with other types of waste materials.

Without proper management, these areas attracted scavenging dogs, pigs and rats, which potentially could become vectors for diseases (MORDI Tonga, 2014). In addition to the immediate health hazard that these scavengers present, a significant concern is that they could damage the ecosystem, affecting local wildlife on land and marine life beyond that.

The need to explore innovative waste management interventions for 'Eua inspired us to brainstorm possible ideas with the community. Through the Placemaking Sandbox, we were able to build collective leadership within the community, particularly among youth and children – leadership that we observed helped to strengthen collective stewardship of nature along with community resilience.

*Islandness and Tongans' traditional attachment to place*

Tongans' place attachment is influenced by their cultural obligations to their kolo (village) and siasi (church) (Ongolea and Houkamau, 2024). As Liava'a (2024) extensively documented and as confirmed by our first-hand experience of Sunday worship with a host family, religious practice of Lotu (Christianity) permeates all aspects of the Tongan household and daily life (Havea, 2011; Havea et al, 2017). These sources also highlighted the centrality of Felupe (sense of community) in Tongan society (Liava'a, 2024).

The preparation for Sunday worship commenced each Saturday when families headed to grocery stores for food. They then spent all of Sunday with a host family, which included church attendance. All participated in after-church social activities, with the nature of the activities depending on the local family's religious denomination. For some, it was joining kava hili e malanga (or kava after the church service). Kava-drinking was practised mainly by the men in the community, while the women gathered with the children in the church hall.

These gatherings provided a platform for the community to come together, bolster connections and show solidarity. Indeed, siasi was not only an important place of worship but also served as a venue for community gathering and social support, and as a platform for 'holding things together' or Felupe, strengthening place attachment and sense of belonging in island communities (Liava'a, 2024). Lotu became embedded in familial life following its introduction by two missionaries, J Thomas and J Hutchinson, in 1826. At that time, King Tupou I supported the integration of Lotu into communities.

Since then, Lotu has become an important social and cultural foundation, shaping the Tongan national identity and its cultural, political and community spirit (Faisal et al, 2023; Tafea, 1999). As a result, it is impossible to disentangle the Tongan way of life from the practice of Lotu. While Liava'a (2024) contends that addressing the climate crisis will be more effective when conceived through the lens of Lotu, many coastal communities still live in incessant fragility as the global polycrisis persists, intensifying local challenges such as water scarcity and climate impacts.

*Interpreting islandness through biocultural heritage and connection, intergenerational resilient stories*

The story of the sole surviving ovava tree left a lasting impression. After the 2022 tsunami brought great damage to the community, this single ovava tree was the only mature plant

standing in the middle of an almost barren foreshore area. It became a symbol of the ‘Eua community’s cultural identity and resilience to challenges.

The community shared that the ovava was more than a tree, in that it compelled them to face challenges head-on. Talanga conversations particularly with a community elder revealed deep memories of the ovava tree as the community’s original gathering place in the 1950s while they waited for the ferry from Nuku‘alofa to arrive in ‘Eua. Community members, particularly the women, stayed under its breezy shade while telling stories to children.

Today, it remains a space for play, learning and intergenerational exchange. It is a resilience story of how native plants function as ecological, cultural and social anchors for the community – resulting in a deeper sense of place and belonging in island settings. As we continued to listen to many more stories the Ohonua community members shared during our daily encounters with them, these stories became ‘moments of inspiration’, serving as our jump-off point to extend the spirit of the ovava tree into the broader community through placemaking.

The ovava tree became the basis for the development of the placemaking project, supporting socio-ecological resilience and placemaking in island settings. The group was guided by this provocation: how can placemaking foster islandness through the cultivation of a space that, like the tree itself, will bring people together, reawaken abandoned land and remind everyone of the strength that grows from green–blue nature, culture and care?

*Islandness through nature-based placemaking: Ovava Playground collaboration*

In building the vision for the Ovava Playground for Resilience, what began as a learning journey became the heart of a project that would support the Ohonua community in rebuilding their bond with the land and water, as well as strengthening their resilience to future challenges, particularly climate change.

The Ovava Playground for Resilience was crafted as a place-based tactical placemaking intervention. Tactical placemaking is a temporary, co-created approach to place development. In this instance, the process was earmarked to co-create a playground with the community, with the aim of transforming a tsunami-affected shoreline from a place of trauma into a space of joy, community connection and local cultures. The project was not about delivering a community playground as the studio’s final *product*; rather the emphasis was on the *process* of building resilience. By shifting the purpose of the playground co-design towards building connection and prioritising relationships, the placemaking process became a platform for cultural renewal, environmental education and intergenerational collaboration. The intent was that through a small-scale, place-based intervention we could show how resilience can grow from modest initiatives to shape meaningful and more impactful actions.

*From individual to collective stewardship: children’s role in island community healing*

Early in our implementation of the Ovava Playground, we went around the neighbourhood to gather ‘waste’ that we could reuse in the playground, such as some old car tyres, wooden materials and plastic bottles. With the help of our host and some local residents, we brought all those materials to the site late one morning to start working on the tactical placemaking.

When we started setting out our materials, we could see several children from a distance looking at us. They were curious. We started waving at them, inviting them to join us. A few minutes later, we saw one child cautiously walking towards us. Their slow steps signalled to us their uncertainty. After the first two or three children joined, more came to help make the playground while playing.

Given the freedom to come up with and implement their own ideas, the children co-designed and built the play elements, the elders shared their cultural knowledge and ecological wisdom, while craftspeople taught us to work with endemic materials (ie, coconut and palm leaves) and recycled materials. This cycle of sharing went on for more than three hours as we collaborated on building the playground.

Through this experience of co-creation, we learnt that by enabling the community, they can lead the transformation of trauma into joy and restore pride and stewardship.

They felt confident to share their knowledge and learnings. This helped both the community and the team deepen our understanding about community resilience, which emerges from trust, relationships and shared actions (figure 4).

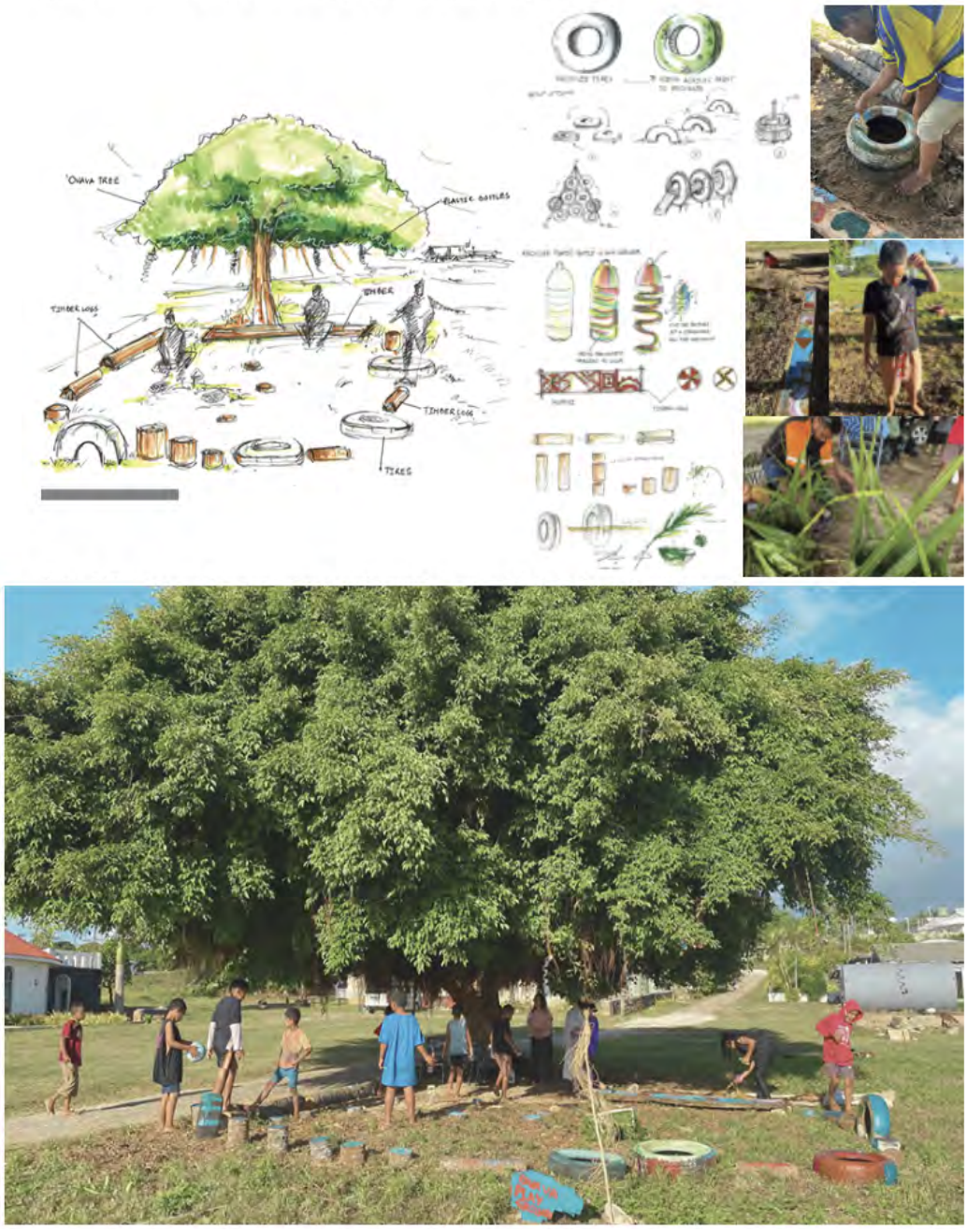


**Figure 4.** Waste-to-resource play elements and the Ovava Playground (collage by authors, June 2024).

This experience further highlights that in placemaking, the process is more important than the product. It also taught us that the community are the true experts of their island. This is invaluable learning to present and future built environment professionals like us. At the same time, the placemaking process reminded the community of their rich blue islandscape heritage around the ovava tree in the foreshore area. It encouraged the community to reconnect with their land and water, to bring back their stories to share with one another. This small, seemingly insignificant process helped bring life back to the abandoned zone, which contributed to the community's ongoing process of healing and resilience.

*In summary: The Ovava Playground and islandness resilience*

The purpose of the Ohonua visit was to listen, learn and walk alongside the community. The many stories of resilience reinforced the ovava tree's quiet strength against cyclones, making it an enduring symbol of resilience, while enhancing intergenerational connections. The ovava tree was not only an important shelter and community gathering place; it was also important biocultural heritage and an ecological anchor for the Ohonua community.

The design for the playground embraced biophilic and social connection principles. It became a platform for blue biophilic urbanism, which reconnected people to nature. It became a tool for socialisation and communication to achieve a shared purpose and an important environmental resilience outcome. Serving as a central feature of the proposed playground, it became its living heart where children play and hear Talanoa 'a e mātu'a (or stories of the elders), and families reclaim the shoreline.

## Placemaking in a sea of islands – implications for education, practice and research

We conclude by sharing our critical reflections on islandness as expressed through the following principles: transformative learning; collaborative community leadership and blue nature stewardship; and environmental sustainability and its biocultural connection. These reflections also lead us to consider their implications for education, professional practice, leadership and future research.

*Islandness supported the transformative learning process*

Place-based education centres on contemporary environments as the basic unit of teaching and learning. Initially, we viewed the Placemaking Sandbox as a traditional classroom where concepts and ideas that can be applied elsewhere are learnt. However, we now understand that it goes beyond that to become real-world experiential learning, which Mezirow (2008) calls a socially transformative pedagogical education.

For us, the different blocks and the no-build foreshore area are the pedagogical landscape, challenging fundamental assumptions contained in classroom definitions. We realised that in place-based learning, it is important to go beyond the four figurative walls of any teaching space to support knowledge creation, skills development and applications in real settings. We found the experience transformative as well as key to anga faka-Tonga (the Tongan way of life) (Ongolea and Houkamau, 2024). Self-reflection, socio-cultural awareness and self-transformation are valuable and important to our future professional practice. We now understand that in placemaking, designing and planning with the Ohonua community, we are not experts but rather are collaborators who build trust, actively listen and acknowledge the expertise of the community in leading and supporting co-creation that respects socio-ecological islandscape.

*Leadership, collaboration and blue nature stewardship*

This project was a learning journey shared with the Ohonua community. An invaluable lesson we learnt was that islandness is central to the community's resilience stories. Expressions of islandness are woven into each experience of laughter, each story and the shared experience of creation.

Our understanding of the expressions of islandness in placemaking also evolved. The concept of islandness highlighted that placemaking is not about individual leadership, but about the potential role of individuals working intergenerationally and leading together. Elders, youth and neighbours each have their own blue nature stewardship but collectively led and contributed to the co-creation of the Ovava Playground. The tactical placemaking exercise became the vessel for cultural connection, community leadership and nature stewardship. It became evident that small, culturally grounded actions can turn trauma into a process of renewal, restoration of land, identity and hope.

Moreover, the intentional involvement of children – whose voices are often excluded in disaster recovery conversations – demonstrated how, as leaders, co-designers, co-

creators and teachers, they have place expertise, which they shared in waste-to-resource activities and play. Ultimately, their involvement strengthened participation and representation in an island landscape project that prioritised relationship building and empowerment of local voices. The voices of children and nature are key to strengthening participation and representation in island settings. Indeed, our adoption of blue biophilic, nature-based placemaking provided a crucial lens through which to comprehend islandness and resilience. The participatory nature of the process was useful in engaging with community and building community trust. Both of these are important aspects when researchers are outsiders building a bridge into the community, which proved to be an invaluable lesson we learnt in the process of delivering the Placemaking Sandbox.

*Biocultural connections and environmental sustainability*

In the Anthropocene, islands face heightened risks from disasters, biodiversity loss and climate change. After the 2022 tsunami, the lack of disaster preparedness and an early warning system on ʻEua intensified community vulnerabilities. In response, our Placemaking Sandbox provided deeper understanding of islandness and blue biophilic place.

Reconnecting the community to their land and waters strengthened the foundation of community resilience. Blue biophilic nature-based placemaking interventions that student teams co-created became an important anchor in bringing the community together. With the intent of preparing the community for future climate challenges, this strategy complemented what Liavaʻa (2024) refers to as Felupe, a sociotheological approach to facing an uncertain climate future. While it acknowledges the crucial role of Lotu (Christianity) in this process, this approach also helped us to learn important lessons on sustainability. In adopting the waste-to-treasure approach, the Niu team recognised the value of repurposing car tyres, bottles and coconut leaves to become playground equipment and seating, which shifted the narrative from scarcity to creativity and innovation. The sharing of place-based knowledge and skills as well as resilience stories empowered the community in co-designing spaces for healing.

*Research themes on islandness, cultural connection, health and wellbeing*

While its focus was on education, the travelling studio also presented opportunities for future research. Methodologically, the benefit of using auto-ethnographic practice as a research method appeared weak: exploring islandness challenged its robustness. Yet as the team listened to the community, the voices of children and nature became clearer. Reflective insights emerged and confirmed key concepts on islandness while debunking others. For example, we were able to expound our analysis of islandness beyond the perception of isolation, vulnerability and remoteness. This also deepened our understanding of islandness as being connected through rivers, seas and oceans, which encompasses what Hauʻofa (1994) referred to as the sea of islands.

This re-imagination of islandness must go beyond the physical attributes of land to highlight the interconnection of people and nature, the socio-ecological landscape and culture. Resilience in place occurs through connections that have been built through cultural, ecological and technological interactions, which can blur the boundaries between land and sea (Foley et al, 2023; Vannini and Taggart, 2013). Yet it also offers fresh insights and place-based learnings on the role of island placemaking and blue biophilic urbanism in shaping being and belonging, which was evident as the Ohonua community picked up the pieces after a truly life-changing disaster.

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## Declaration on the use of generative AI

In preparing this work, the authors used Grammarly to check spelling errors and noun and verb agreement. After the use of this tool, the authors conducted a comprehensive review of the content. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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