

# Passing Time: A Phenomenological Approach to Heritage Design

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## KEY WORDS

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It's a debate that's been bubbling among Akaroa's townsfolk for 130 years. Should the 4.9ha Garden of Tane (or the Domain, as it was known until 1986) be allowed to return to natives, or should it be restored, in part at least, to what many regard as its glory days in the last few decades of Queen Victoria's reign? (Lovell-Smith, 2004, p D22).

IN RESPONSE TO THE APPARENT CONFLICT between movements to preserve natural or cultural heritage, this paper explores time as a design strategy, its use in international heritage sites and the application of these design principles within two design experiments. The first is a subtle intervention within the Garden of Tane, and the second is at Te Waihora (Lake Ellesmere) – both rich heritage sites in Canterbury, New Zealand. The design experiments were based on the ideals expressed in Georges Descombes's observation that interventions within landscapes can make the 'passing of time visible [and] also make this passage effecting of further potential' (Descombes, 1999, p 80), which is particularly appropriate within the area of heritage and the temporal. Georges Descombes suggests that to recover something – 'a site, a place, a history or an idea – entails a shift in expectation and point of view' (ibid). By acknowledging the landscape as part of a 'living process', this study adopts a phenomenological approach to design, engaging perception and imagination in the experiential facets of space and place. The discovery and weaving together of the physical and the sensual, the real and the imaginary enables designers to integrate the 'numerous possible pasts' from which heritage is selected. Principles that enable the changing aspects of a single place to be revealed enhance the meaning of these places and the activities of people who use them without locking them into one romanticised past.

## INTERPRETATION

Time plays an integral role in the human experience of landscape, and our perception of its passing can enrich our sense of connection with past, present and future. Used as a design tool in the interpretation of heritage landscapes, time can evoke the 'connection of inside and outside worlds where we seem to be part of the landscape itself [enabling] change and time [to be] immediately apprehensible' (Lynch, 1972, p 177). This paper explores the ways in which design interventions that alter our perception of time enable us to celebrate heritage values, discover their meanings in ways that are conducive to the continuity of place and enhance the experience of the visitor. Georges Descombes's section of The Swiss Path

## RESEARCH

in Switzerland and Andy Goldsworthy's sculptural Wall at Storm King in New York are two sites that illustrate how the most minimal of design interventions can evoke a multitude of memories and associations in the interpretation of the landscape's history. Drawing on an experiential approach to interpretation, I will discuss elements within these landscapes that use time to integrate both natural and cultural aspects of the site's history. The insights gained from these features offer guidance for the interpretation of heritage-related sites, and I subsequently explore these by means of two hypothetical projects at the Garden of Tane and Te Waihora, both in Canterbury, New Zealand.

The representative nature of interpretation poses significant challenges for the authentic expression of heritage values. Consequently, the deep attachments and specific dimensions that various groups form with place over time have often been oversimplified or negated. The use of time as a design strategy therefore places a particular, and largely unaddressed, challenge to design interpretation, because the landscape is not at all static, but 'accrues layers with every new representation ... which inevitably thicken and enrich the range of interpretations and possibilities' (Corner, 1999, p 5) for engaging with heritage.

## THE SWISS PATH

*Geneva, Switzerland, 1991, Georges Descombes*

My main interest ... moves from the trace at one moment – as memorial – to the recognition of changes in time and future potential. Consequently, I believe that both buildings and designed landscapes must not only make the passing of time visible but also make this passage effecting of further potential (Descombes, 1999, p 80).

The following case study examines a design element within The Swiss Path, a 35-kilometre hiking trail created to mark the seventh centenary of the Swiss Confederation in 1991, and looks at the way in which time has been used to interpret the heritage values of this landscape. In 1987, Georges Descombes was invited by the canton of Geneva to design a 2-kilometre section of the path, between Morschach and Brunnen. Built around the southernmost end of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, each of the 26 cantons was allocated a section of the path, 'corresponding to their order of entry into the Confederation and proportional to their share of the Swiss population' (Ibid).

### *Recovery of something no longer visible*

Descombes's intention was to interpret the history of the site by 'clarifying' both human modifications and natural activities that had taken place in the past, while leaving a mark to show today's activity. Simply taking the time to look at things that have been most often overlooked has formed the basis from which both Goldsworthy and Descombes have made visible the activities that have influenced the formation of landscape over time.

The approach of making only minimal interventions to intensify experiential



Figure 1: Georges Descombes's Chanzeli (The Swiss Path) and Andy Goldsworthy's Wall at Storm King. (Collage – W Hoddinott.)

engagement is highlighted in the construction of a belvedere, Descombes's Chanzeli. This structure is central to his project, providing a vantage point that focuses the visitor's attention on the 'ever changing views of the landscape' (Rotzler, 1993, p 95). A circular, metallic structure, it extends 16 metres in diameter and 9 metres high, and is situated 150 metres above the lake on a cliff face. The structure is described as 'light and transparent, soft in its embrace and playful in its interpretation' (Descombes, 1999, p 85) drawing attention towards its natural surroundings and human involvement in the landscape. The circularity of the surrounding landscape converges within the form of the structure, which has an incurved oversized postcard-shaped opening in the cylinder wall from which to view the seasonal changes of the landscape.

Such a strategically placed element along the hiking trail has allowed people to 'restructure an imaginative sense of place' within their physical experience of the landscape, as opposed to having a didactic interpretation of history or heritage imposed on them. The structure accentuates the ordinary details of the site so that the landscape becomes a channel for evoking new feelings and associations. As a result, this design intervention expresses and changes the visitor's perception of time and becomes a vital part of evoking meaning in the landscape.

## WALL AT STORM KING SCULPTURE PARK

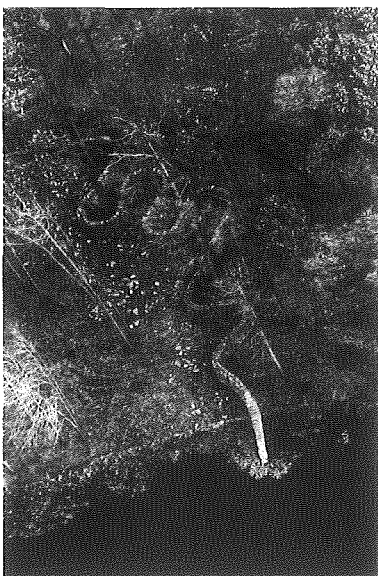
*New York 1997–1998, Andy Goldsworthy*

Like Descombes, environmental sculptor Andy Goldsworthy adopts a minimalist approach to interpretation, provoking a shift in expectation and point of view in order to recover something that has, over time, become invisible in the landscape (ibid, p 79). His sculptural wall at Storm King Sculpture Park in New York evokes a collection of memories and associations in the interpretation of a site's heritage.

Using stones gathered from the Art Centre grounds, Goldsworthy has constructed a 700-metre-long stone wall following and extending the path of an old stone wall that had once existed on the site. The wall meanders downhill to a nearby pond, from which the second section emerges on the other side and continues up the opposite hill. Goldsworthy explains, 'The idea of stone flowing links the magmatic origins of the land's geology, the glaciers; fragmentation and transport of boulders and people's long history of shepherding loose stones into functional structures' (Baker, 2000, p 13).

Beginning at the remnants of one of the many derelict walls at Storm King, the interaction of old tree trunks and stone, over time, has provided the orientation and source of inspiration for Goldsworthy's work. As a cultural expression in the context of American history, the dry stone walls refer to 'the relics of European conquest' (Ibid, p 12). Stone walls were built during this period of deforestation, as land was cleared for farming. Now the meandering flow of Goldsworthy's stones spill into the pond, having developed their irregular shapes through the polishing action of the river. Goldsworthy's wall subtly interprets and makes legible the sequence of events that took place in this landscape – the interaction of nature and culture over time. Goldsworthy explains his approach in expressing this relationship:

Figure 2: Wall at Storm King Sculpture Park (Goldsworthy, 2000).



The lie [of the original wall] could be picked out by the straight line of trees growing along its length ... In building the new wall, I have reworked and continued this dialogue. The wall has been remade, but with a new role, it now follows a line in sympathy with the trees, working around each one in a protective, enclosing gesture (Goldsworthy, 2000, p 8).

The wall now gives way to trees that had been cut down to make way for agricultural crops. The wall, and its 'movement', as it weaves between the trees, indicates that the trees were here first. By placing the new wall in deference to the trees, Goldsworthy subtly interprets the site's meaning today as an 'index of changing land use' and an indicator that 'agriculture ceased there generations ago' (Baker, 2000, p 15).

### *Growth and change as common ground*

The historical references found in Goldsworthy's sculptural wall draw attention to the issue of 'agency' common to both human and non-human activity. As Jones and Cloke have noted, 'The timescape of trees reflects both the processes of ongoing growth and decay and the seasonal cycles of trees, and the shifting cultural and economic relational networks that trees inhabit' (Jones and Cloke, 2002,



Figure 3: *Contrasting time scales*  
(Goldsworthy, 2000)

p 222). They suggest that understanding the fundamentally different timescales that trees and humans occupy is critical to developing an accurate interpretation of the 'nature-society' relationship. The timescales of trees and humans become evident as the contrasting temporal activities of nature and culture are manifest in the relationship that is exposed between the trees and the human presence as indicated through Goldsworthy's wall. Jacky Bowring has noted the 'defamiliarisation' effect that inspires Goldsworthy's work as it 'decontextualis[es] elements in nature so that we are no longer blind to them' (Bowring, 2004, unpaginated). This defamiliarisation of the landscape refreshes our perception, attracting our attention to the way in which the objects are 'composed, assembled and presented mak[ing] them strange' (ibid). In this context, the arrangement of stones highlights the interactions of nature and the people that have affected the landscape, drawing attention to the effects of temporal activity and its relevance for heritage interpretation.

## APPLICATION OF DESIGN PRINCIPLES

### *Design experiment 1: Garden of Tane, Akaroa*

Where there is revelation, explanation becomes superfluous (Franck, 1992, p 85).

The testing of theory in the context of landscape architecture comes at the point of designing, therefore my focus was to explore how the 'traces' of history discovered in the Garden of Tane could be made visible by incorporating the perception of the visitor as an integral part of the interpretive process. Using a similar approach to the 'imaginary thread' woven through Descombes's Swiss Way, I proposed that a strategically placed element at the site where an old summerhouse once stood might engage the visitor with the passing of time in the landscape.

#### *Background and site description*

The Garden of Tane, or The Akaroa Domain as it was known until 1986, is situated on the eastern shores of Akaroa Harbour, on Banks Peninsula in New Zealand.



Figure 4: The summerhouse located near the lookout during the 1800s. (Photograph No. 817 from Akaroa Museum, New Zealand.)

Classified as a scenic reserve, the site is not a forest remnant but evidence of a long-standing relationship between people and nature.

There is a wide variety of exotic trees located within the reserve, many of which were planted over 100 years ago to mark significant occasions and represent different parts of the world. A considerable number of these trees are notable species of national significance. The caretaker, Nigel Harrison, explained the effort that went into retaining the park-like setting in the early days, 'A great deal of [the caretaker's] time was spent clearing the native undergrowth away ... so that the exotics could be enjoyed, and also to allow people to wander off the track and continue to picnic' (Harrison, 2003, p 8). An extract from a letter written to the Akaroa Mail on 25 September 1877, describes the value of the park to locals and visitors in the development of the Domain during this period:

The winding walks with comfortable seats here and there, at well chosen intervals, the varied hues of different shrubs, some native and some planted, the ever-changing views of the town and harbour together combine to render these grounds a constant source of pleasure to the inhabitants of Akaroa and an additional attraction to visitors (Mears, 1984, p 9).

The post-war period saw the Domain fall into a state of decline until the involvement of local resident, Arthur Erikson, who in the 1960s instigated clearing the rampant weed growth and establishing significant numbers of native plants. In 1986, the name was changed to the Garden of Tane, and likely would have remained a wilderness if not for Erikson's efforts. However, the English-style garden that once formed the site is now hard to imagine, and there is concern that such an important part of Akaroa's history has all but disappeared.

#### *The Garden of Tane – 2006*

Little evidence now remains of the early constructions in the Akaroa Domain. One of these structures, a summerhouse, was built soon after 1876 and located in a prominent position to enjoy the view from a grassed lookout over the harbour. Originally used as a venue for concerts, the building was burned down by vandals during the 1920s and the site is now covered by regenerating native bush.

On a summer's Sunday, people would walk along lovers walk, as the Beach Road below the Domain was then known, and they would then enter the gardens opposite the original rowing club boat sheds and proceed up a short path to the lookout area. There they would picnic and listen to the band (Harrison, 2003, p 8-9).

A recent stroll through the Garden of Tane with Landcare Research associate Warwick Harris offered the opportunity to hear the stories of some of the notable exotic trees and sites of buildings and monuments that once graced the area. Stopping at one point along the forested pathway, Warwick drew our attention to a scattering of sea shells, some distance from the seashore. The sudden break in the uniformity of the soil beneath the trees caused us to stop and reflect on the

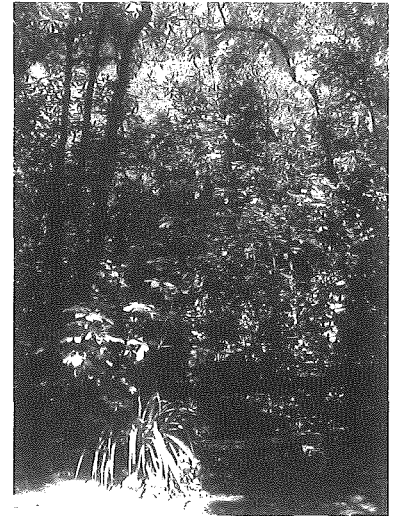
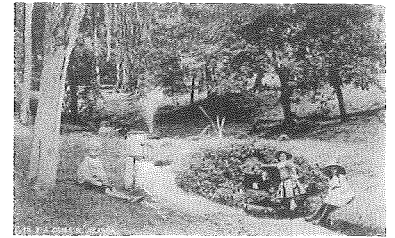


Figure 5 (above): Akaroa Domain, 1800s.  
(Akaroa Museum, New Zealand.)

Figure 6: Garden of Tane, today.  
(W Hoddinott.)



Figure 7: View from lookout near the summerhouse over Akaroa Harbour today. (W Hoddinott.)

subtle, but unusual grouping of elements, and Warwick explained that the alien remnants were part of a shell pathway that once led to the old summerhouse. The shells, originally sourced from local beaches, had been transported to this site over a century ago, and now lay in contrast with the soil. (The shells were ‘collected from Sandy Bay, towed to Takamatua wharf by punt and then to Akaroa by dray’ (Mears, 1984, p 12)). At that moment, my awareness was unexpectedly focused on the forest’s ‘own sense of time’ as I saw the exposed roots of the regenerating native bush thread their way through the soil and shell.

#### *Design response*

My small epiphany resonated with ecologist and historian Geoff Park’s similar experience of timelessness as I read his evocative account of coming across a 100-year-old surveyor’s peg in the midst of an ancient New Zealand beech forest. He recalls, ‘The same ancient trees under which [the surveyor] stood and drove this spike into the clay made the century or more between him and me seem but a moment’ (Park, 1995, p 248). Powerful experiences such as these demonstrate the vital role that both perception and the structure of the spatial environment play in ‘linking the living moment to a wide span of time’ (Lynch, 1972, p 89). The designer’s challenge is to envisage a similarly subtle trigger in the landscape that might encourage a meditation on the revelation of the passage of time.

Drawing on the strategies of Descombes and Goldsworthy, in terms of subtle interventions as a means of temporal revelation, and interfacing them with my experience of the site, I developed the idea of intervening by placing a mosaic shell

trail interwoven amongst the existing shell, soil and tree roots.

As a discrete intervention in one section of the garden, the mosaic catches the visitor's attention, signalling the existence of alternative layers in the landscape in order to express and make comprehensible the interaction of natural and cultural history. Although the site could display a highly polished interpretive sign that describes historic details, such as where the shell was brought from, how it arrived and what it was used for, this sort of approach locks the deeper meaning of the site into a static rendition of the past. As Marot warns, 'the use of literal transparency often exhausts depth in the very act of releasing it' (Marot, 2003, p 85).

Instead, the sea-shell mosaic prompts a response from the visitor. Through the contrasting of elements, interpretation 'relies on the mental activity of the subject' (ibid) and therefore cannot be passed without causing the visitor to question the mosaic's presence and placement. Visitors can restore a certain depth and breadth to the garden because they are prompted to create and link different readings of the site. This type of intervention provides the opportunity for visitors to expand their concept of time because they bring something of their own interpretation to the reading of the site.

#### *Tension and engagement*

The visitor, drawn by the tension created in the dialogue between forest and human input, becomes an 'active participant in bringing [the] work into being' (Bowring and Swaffield, 2004, p 1) because the mosaic facilitates a continuing story in the landscape. Subtly disrupting the visitor's connection with the surrounding bush, the relationship between nature and culture becomes comprehensible through a dialogue generated by the mosaic itself. The historical references found in the shell mosaic draw attention to the 'agency' common to both human and non-human activity. The decorative expression of organised shells makes visible the emphasis on 'appearance' that typified the atmosphere of the orderly Victorian era – as a place to 'see and be seen' – while emphasising the fundamentally different timescales that trees and humans occupy. It is the displaced nature of the mosaic, however, that provokes an emotional response that can be experienced as an adventure in time. 'When we stand before a prospect, our mind is free to roam, as we move mentally out to space, we also move either backwards or forwards in time' Yi-Fu-Tuan, in Baljon, 1992, p 111). Engagement of the emotions therefore enables the viewer to add something of themselves to the site, weaving a meaningful dimension to the heritage fabric of the area. By attempting to make the invisible visible, this interpretive element opens a door to both a deeper connection to, and a broader understanding of, the garden and its heritage significance.

#### *Design experiment 2: Te Waihora, Lake Ellesmere*

##### *A lake by the sea*

Separated from the sea by Kaitorete Spit, Te Waihora is one of New Zealand's most important wetland systems and has, over time, been through many dramatic

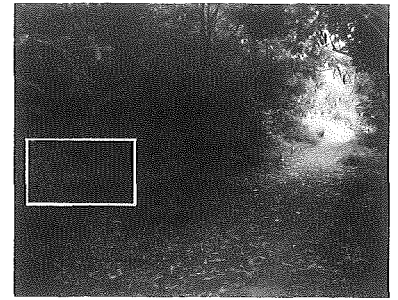


Figure 8 (above): Path on the Garden of Tane and site (outlined) where the summerhouse was located. (W Hoddinott.)

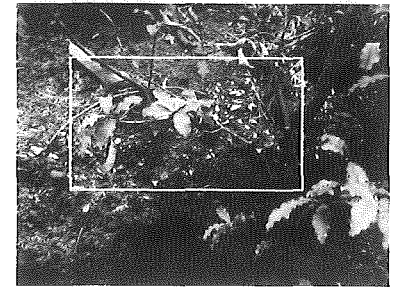


Figure 9: Close up – remnants of shell remain from the original pathway. (W Hoddinott.)

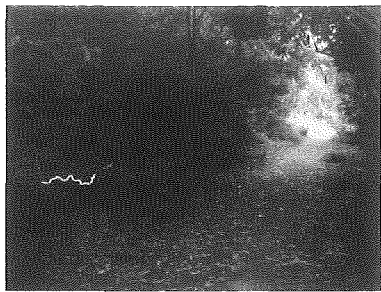


Figure 10 (above): Diagrammatic illustration of the location of the proposed mosaic shell trail. (W Hoddinott.)

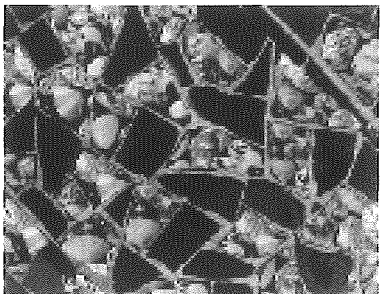


Figure 11: Close up – impression of the design intervention, a mosaic shell trail. (W Hoddinott.)

changes due to both cultural and natural influences. Historic Māori occupation and subsequent Māori and European settlement and resource usage makes Te Waihora an important part of Canterbury's heritage. The lake's wetlands extend to the high ground of adjacent Banks Peninsula, and, in early days, were a barrier to land transport. During this time a significant number of trees on the Peninsula were felled for timber, while the lake was artificially opened at Kaitorete Spit to drain the rich wetland for farming. The Little River railway embankment now dissects these wetlands, and is a reminder of the changes that land reclamation and railway construction brought to the area (Te Rununga o Ngai Tahu and Department of Conservation, 2004).

The Little River railway embankment was recently selected by the Department of Conservation for development as a walkway, one of a collection of sites encouraging recreation and appreciation of heritage in the region.

#### *Passing time at Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere*

As Kevin Lynch suggests, design can allow us to fully appreciate the passing of time, as our experience of landscape becomes more than just a static rendition of the past.

The landscape can strengthen our sense of the passage and organization of time. The cycles of the sun and of human activity can be celebrated, and our orientation to the past can be maintained (Kevin Lynch, 1972, p 221).

Wide-open spaces and skies characterise the Waihora region. The lake-edge is simple and ordered with a strong horizontal emphasis, and panoramic views emphasise distant mountains, cloud forms and changing weather patterns.

Theoretically, the design strategy is based on the horizontal movement of travel and the vertical threads of whakapapa (genealogy), developing an experiential journey along the margins of the lake and connections to the wider landscape, engaging visitors with the passing of time that continues to shape this landscape.

#### *Re-interpreting wetlands*

By viewing wetlands as a culture replete with history as well as biology, we see an expanded definition of ecological design. Rather than assume an ecological aesthetic that disdains signs of human intervention or attempts to get back to nature, the design promotes exploration of the reciprocating relationships of natural processes and constructed acts. The project encourages our symbiosis and our friction with nature to resonate in one place (Poole, 2005).

Removal of a 250-metre section of the railway embankment, and excavation of intermittently waterlogged farmland, would create a dendritic 'finger' of water of sufficient depth to restore a portion of wetland habitat to the lake and one of its important embayments. Ecosystem restoration is contrasted with the construction of a contemporary steel bridge 'reinventing' the industrial era of the railway line.

A connection to the lake's fluctuating water levels is re-established, demonstrating how water naturally gathers a landscape around it. It is no longer seen as a line

against the embankment, but a 'condition', allowing for engagement with water as a body that commands space that changes over time. (Poole, 2005)

#### *Design responses*

Layers of geology, ecology, culture and scenery are illustrated through a collage of the activities or processes that have occurred here. These include:

1. the volcanic spurs
2. early Māori access to the lake
3. the Little River railway line (early European)
4. the Kaituna railway station
5. poplar trees (early European)
6. the changing lake and sea levels.

As Geoff Park (1995) has suggested, 'reading the landscape is like a collage interweaving the patterns of ecology and the fragments of history with footprints of the personal journey. The journey in time, as well as space, plays no small part.'

The following elements are proposed to respond to, and amplify, these aspects of time's passing, as shown on Figure 13.

A boardwalk takes the visitor alongside the reconstructed wetland, under the new elevated bridge to the Kaituna quarry site and lake edge.

Kahikatea (*Dacrycarpus dacrydioides*) were once a significant part of this wetland ecosystem – planted in a lineal fashion, they bisect a visual line where the colonial influence of the old Kaituna railway station and the poplars along the highway align. Geoff Park has described how kahikatea evoke a sense of time, both enduring as ancient survivors of the cretaceous period, and preferring an ephemeral habitat with periodic covering of water. Seasonal fruits of scarlet and black were valued by Māori, providing a food source for kererū (wood pigeons), themselves a traditional food in the region.

Steel poles, symbolic of kō (digging stick), follow the line of kahikatea, extend through the trees, intersect at the bridge, and are oriented towards Taumutu where kō were used by early Māori to open the lake to the sea. These vertical elements strengthen the concept of whakapapa, the understanding that everything is connected – birds, fish, animals, trees, soil, rocks, mountains and people.

A wave field with wave-like landforms evokes the energy of the sea that once shaped the volcanic spurs.

A canopy sculpture highlights changing lake levels and shifting angles of the sun, as shadows from the woven steel canopy of eel-type forms are thrown on visitors and the boardwalk below. A fish-hook boardwalk forms at high lake levels. When the lake is artificially opened at Taumutu, and the lake level drops, a waka of gabion baskets (basalt from the railway embankment) is revealed.

## CONCLUSION

The expression of time in the landscape, in terms of the passage of time in both natural and cultural contexts, has frequently been treated in a very prosaic and

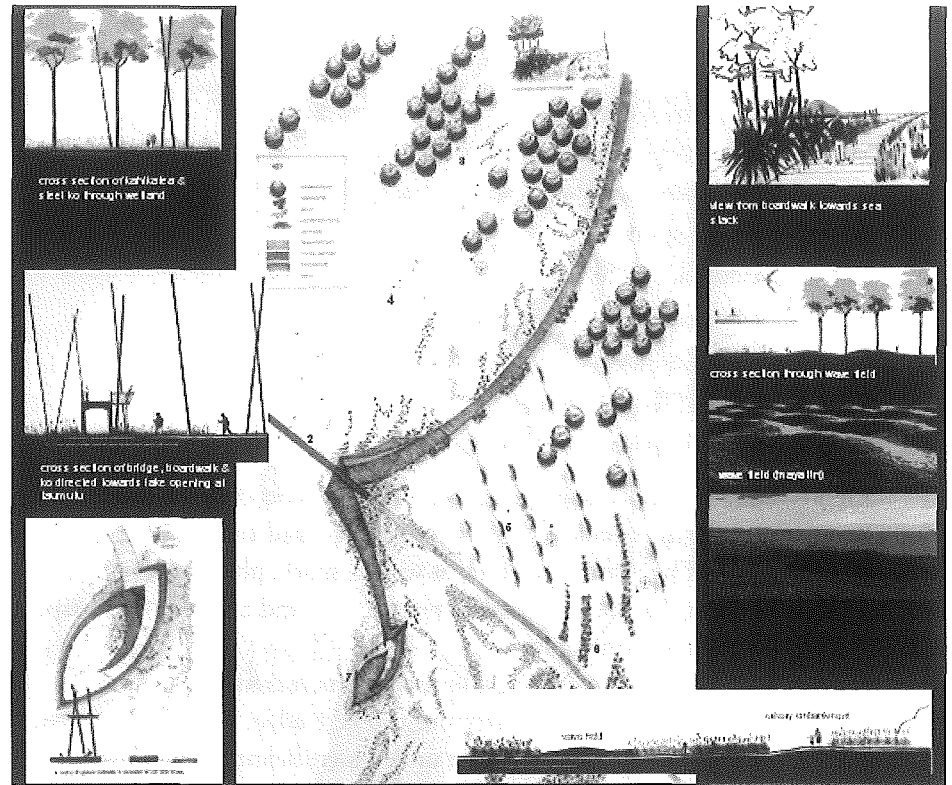


Figure 13: Design proposals for Te Waihora.

interpretative fashion, seeking to educate the visitor. However, such approaches can switch off people's association with the landscape, because their attention is focused only on captions, signs and displays. I wanted, instead, to explore some of the more poetic ways in which designers have integrated time as a design element in the landscape, looking at how these interventions might engage the attention of the visitor to awaken memory. By 'stimulat[ing] our attention rather than monopoliz[ing] it' (Marot, 2003, p 78), new associations with place may be brought to life through imagination, inviting the visitor to become an integral part of interpreting the meaning of heritage. Fundamental to this approach has been the role of perception in altering experience as the objects within one's environment take on meaning in terms of how one sees them. As Ingold has explained, 'with space, meanings are attached to the world, with the landscape they are gathered from it' (Ingold, 1998, p 192). This distinction illustrates that interpretation can evoke more than a static mental image as a reciprocal process takes place between the visitor and the landscape enabling them to engage 'perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past'. Heritage interpretation in this study has taken on the challenge of a new dimension, one in which time can evoke a 'living process' in which pre-existing meanings and contents affect our present state.

The use of the temporal as a conceptual framework for design illustrates how we can move beyond the polarised interpretation of heritage as either nature or culture. Descombes's and Goldsworthy's design interventions show that, through disturbing the expected order of a site with the 'minimum of means' the visitor is

able to experience the less tangible aspects of place by focusing their attention and locating the body in time and space. Interpretation that considers the perspective of the visitor can address the concerns expressed over the conflicting values that arise in the interpretation of heritage sites. The restraint of intervention turns the interpretation of place into an 'open metaphor', one that remains fluid enough to engage memory from 'numerous possible pasts'.

*Postscript* The author's project, *Passing Time at Te Waihora*, won First Place in the International Federation of Landscape Architects Eastern Region Student Design Competition, announced in Sydney, Australia, May 2006 – The Editors.

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