

ĀKAU

ĀKAU interviewed with  
Dr Fleur Palmer by  
Lynda Simmons

Fast Forward Breakfast Series  
interview hosted by Objectspace  
on 25 September 2019



From left: Lynda Simmons, Fleur Palmer, Felicity Brenchley and Ana Heremaia.  
Photo: David St George.



Based in Kaikohe, Northland, ĀKAU, co-founded by Ana Heremaia (Ngāpuhi), Felicity Brenchley and Ruby Watson, is a design and architecture practice that places people and community at the heart of their projects, creating opportunities for youth to be involved in the design of real projects through a wānanga approach. The profits from ĀKAU Studio fund the ĀKAU Foundation, a not-for-profit trust focused around teaching young people design through a kaupapa Māori lens.

Dr Fleur Palmer (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri) is an architect, spatial activist and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies at Auckland University of Technology.

Conducting this interview was Lynda Simmons, an architect and professional teaching fellow at the University of Auckland. Lynda is the co-originator, past chair and now archivist and research leader for Architecture + Women NZ.

*Lynda:* Firstly, before starting, I would like to acknowledge the space we're in and this wonderful expression by ĀKAU and Dr Kathy Waghorn.

In terms of talking about your alternative practices, it seems to me that all projects have certain ingredients as well as design—we also have funding, a client and a making process. With ĀKAU, those three ingredients tend to be subverted sometimes, or made alternative to the traditional model of a client walking in the door with a fee.

*Ana:* Taitamariki are our client, community is our client, no matter who approaches us or whether it's something we instigated ourselves. They're the ones who are going to be using these community projects. If they feel part of it, if it resonates as something that's for them, with them, then really that's success, I guess.

*Lynda:* How does ĀKAU survive? How do you finance yourselves?

*Felicity:* We're very fortunate to have a five-year grant from Foundation North, which is how we've managed to fund ourselves for the last two and a half years. Before that we had funding through the Ministry of Social Development and a couple of other small grants. We are working towards becoming financially sustainable in the long term without grant funding, although in saying that I think that the foundation itself, which does focus primarily on providing youth programmes, will be long-term government and grant funded.

We have two entities: the Foundation, which does the youth programme work, which we never get paid for other than through grants, and then we have our Studio, which is essentially a social enterprise, and that does provide architectural services that are paid for. The idea long term is that hopefully the Studio is profitable enough to support some of the work that the Foundation does.

*Lynda:* Fleur, what about funding for you?

*Fleur:* I have a position in the university as an academic, and that gives me a very privileged position

in that I have a salary. This funds the projects I'm working on because communities we are working with don't have the pūtea, the money. They can't necessarily afford to pay for architects to come in and work with them.

*Lynda:* So the university benefits from your work because that's active research in the community.

*Fleur:* It works both ways. Definitely the university benefits because my research attracts research funding.

*Lynda:* I wonder if you could just both describe how the ao Māori lens operates in your practice?

*Ana:* We work on a lot of iwi and rūnanga projects. And for our taitamariki, even just engaging them in the design process is through a Māori lens. That makes it a multi-generational approach to a project, rather than having one group of people, one age group, designing.

*Lynda:* Beyond the three of you, could you describe your team?

*Ana:* We've got a team of facilitators who work with our taitamariki under the Foundation. We have our own design and architecture practice, and we do a two-day wānanga that we can do with groups of taitamariki to engage them in a real project. We have been doing that for our own projects, but we're also now doing it on other architects' projects.

*Felicity:* We had aspirations for what we could do, but actually being up North . . . there are locals there who are much more experienced in working with young people. And that's brought this whole other level to what it is that we're doing in terms of the ao Māori approach and the way we work.

We have a small team within the Studio itself. We have a couple of graduates working for us and then it's the three of us who are all trained in design, so probably five people on the design side. And then we also have a couple of interns who are like our up-and-coming, budding designers who do work on

both sides. They help us with projects and project management and events and stuff like that, and they also work as facilitators, which is awesome.

*Lynda:* So the model extends way beyond the actual design project model. You've got the layer of the social connection, which is built into your practice structure and management.

*Felicity:* We've been working with Catherine Griffiths, who is a graphic designer, another professional who's bringing in her lens. We would love the foundation to work more and wider in terms of design professionals, architecture professionals, landscape, urban design so those people can then bring in their expertise as well, and that grows the whole kaupapa.

*Lynda:* Fleur, you're at the other end of the spectrum because you're effectively an individual within an academic institution. Can you describe how a project would work for you in terms of who you work with?

*Fleur:* I was just going to respond to this idea of how you might embed te ao Māori into the design practice. I think the thing about being within an educational institution, the way we are educated, we are ill-equipped to work in this world. We need to be looking at the roots of the way we are educated in Aotearoa, to be grounded in indigenous thinking, and grounded in a deep respect for our planet, Papatūānuku, Ranginui, deeply grounded in our wairua, our whakapapa.

*Lynda:* I'd like to hear from you about how to bring this knowledge into the institution and what you're doing there.

*Fleur:* It's really important that we are working with people who don't normally participate in the design-making process. A lot of our built environments in Aotearoa are dominated by the Western perspective and dominated by male principles. Can I say that? So, I'm really interested in how we get representation of other people into that space. Because they've got very specific needs that we don't necessarily understand

if we haven't lived that experience.

*Lynda:* This usually comes under the category of 'community engagement', which is bandied about. But nowhere in the traditional model is there space or a fee for community engagement. I wonder how you manage that, because that's what you were just describing, I think.

*Fleur:* It's a really tricky realm to be working in, because you can create false hope. And you can be exploiting communities terribly through these sorts of practices. People have to see a real outcome that works for them and empowers them. There must be real outputs.

*Felicity:* We completely agree with what Fleur is saying. And I think that is a major underpinning of ĀKAU around those tangible outcomes. But it's hard. Sometimes a client wants to do it [engagement] to potentially tick boxes, and they don't necessarily understand what we mean by a tangible outcome. We need at least some outcome, some outputs in those shorter timeframes, because often these things are long-term plans and things that no one's going to see for a long time.

*Ana:* Especially our small communities up North, and probably all over New Zealand, have had so much consultation, and very little has ever been delivered. ĀKAU takes it on that we're going to make some real stuff happen. You can have some aspirational stuff, but we really need to see it deliver something.

*Lynda:* Let's segue into the making. In order to get things made you hold these workshops and there are outcomes, and they're visible. They might be small in some cases, but they build towards a bigger one. Do you want to describe some of them?

*Ana:* I'll talk about Kaikohe specifically. A little thing like this flag project is a visible thing on the main street.<sup>40</sup> The kids can walk past and go, 'Oh, that's my flag, Mum.' And that's the first step in a bigger step to changing our community. This year we're doing the Kaikohe taonga trail. So, it's just a little bit bigger each time, and with each step we're finding



more funding. It's taken us five years to show the value of design, rather than, 'Let's just go out and build something.' But now, every big project in Kaikohe, the kids are involved. It's a community designed by taitamariki. I don't know many other communities that could say that.

*Lynda:* From a project-management point of view, everything that all three of you just described doesn't get a fee attached to it in the traditional model, so you've actually expanded that and created it.

*Felicity:* In saying that, we actually have been paid recently for a project where we're doing that exact role. So, there is recognition now in the communities and there's a big community hub building project in Kaikohe that is being designed by Opus and TOA architects. The project manager contacted us about it, and now we are involved in a paid role.

*Ana:* We don't necessarily say that engaging taitamariki in the process should be an additional cost. It speeds up the concept design process—two days in working with the taitamariki and you've got the concepts.

*Felicity:* We've been working on some other bigger projects where we have a decent concept-design fee, and we do spend all that time working with young people in that concept design, but it means that the rest of the concept design goes so much quicker. We've found that it's just as profitable as if it was just me and Maia [Ratana]<sup>41</sup> going out and trying to do the concept design without their input. We believe it works.

*Lynda:* To extend that *making* question to you, Fleur, your making is moving more into areas of policy rather than physical product?

*Fleur:* Yes. I shift all the time. When I started out in my twenties, I thought you could resolve this problem purely through design. When I did my PhD, I thought that you could resolve that through really powerful community engagement. I think community engagement is absolutely critical. But we are facing such tricky

problems now with climate change, the displacement of our communities, huge land loss for whānau in the North, that we can act much more strategically trying to advocate for policy change within our district councils so that they are more active in supporting our communities.

*Lynda:* Te Aranga design principles are now embedded in Council design guides.<sup>42</sup> We've had Te Kawenata o Rata signed between the NZIA and Ngā Aho.<sup>43</sup> I wonder if you could all just comment about those steps forward and how they're having an effect on your own practices, or practices that you've seen around, whether it be positive or negative.

*Ana:* I know of the design principles. I think it's a great first step. It's always in the implementation I guess is where it's difficult.

*Felicity:* It's obviously there in the background, but we're not necessarily referring consciously to those things.

*Lynda:* And, Fleur, I know that you teach the principles in your courses. I wonder if that's helping?

*Fleur:* Having been educated in a very Western system, I had to relearn everything about the way I practised. And I've found the Te Aranga guidelines quite a useful starting point. They have been 20 years in development by Ngā Aho. It's a nationwide group of designers and practitioners looking at how they might make visible te ao Māori within our environments—how we might be recognising and respecting tikanga Māori all the way through our teaching practice and our design practice.

*Ana:* Also, when we're engaging taitamariki, no matter whether we're working for Te Rarawa or if it's a Ngāpuhi project, they're experts in their own right on these things. We're not actually saying we're the experts on this; we're facilitating a process for them to lead their way and design with their own principles about how their project should be rolled out.

*Lynda:* We need more of you, and I wish there were more of you. How can your practice model, for example, be replicated?

*Ana:* Well, we definitely think there's the opportunity to scale the impact. The way we're looking at doing so is through projects. But we're also really passionate about the education model and getting all of our taitamariki thinking like designers. We're developing a programme that we're hoping to roll out to train teachers to be able to do it within their own classrooms. That's the next step, and who knows from there.

*Felicity:* I think when you start something, it's important to consider your values-based approach rather than just what you're wanting to produce. You don't have to set up a foundation that does youth programmes to have a positive impact. It can be sustainability; it can be all sorts of things . . .

*Fleur:* It's interesting in terms of Māori and Pasifika practitioners, we've got very small numbers within our universities. The government has just funded academics within this space, but we are finding it difficult to attract the numbers. I think the opportunity to grow these areas is through stronger outreach links. With the communities I work with, if you are on \$16,000 a year trying to survive with your family, it's almost impossible to send your tamariki to a place like Auckland to become an architect and afford the accommodation. The institutions need to be doing more outreach, off-site programmes, up in these remote areas.

*Ana:* Not a lot of our taitamariki up North want to move to Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. Whānau is everything for them; they don't want to leave home.

*Fleur:* We've got other real structural issues. A lot of our tamariki have to leave home once they turn eighteen, and if they've got no work at home, they have to move out of their communities. In our communities up in the North, there are not a lot of alternatives apart from being a farmer, working in forestry or bee-keeping.

*Lynda:* So, all of you are using the education model to have an effect on that, it feels. Are there any questions from the audience?

*Audience member one:* It's more of an encouraging comment. I'm from the secondary-education sector, specifically technology and design, and one of the big issues that I am experiencing is getting the kids to you. Especially in a staffing crisis. The kids are amazing, but now we're getting to a point where they can't do the course that gets them into university because we can't staff it. So the further your tendrils can reach the better.

*Fleur:* It does take careful planning, but what is amazing with these wānanga is you can achieve outputs that would take weeks to generate. And we can get kids with a portfolio developed within a very fast timeframe.

*Ana:* I totally agree. Some of the taitamariki we work with, even some of the seven- and eight-year-olds, they're really doing design work that we did in the first year of uni. I think the earlier we can show our young people design is a real thing, it's a real profession, then we're keeping their creativity open as long as possible.

*Audience member one:* Because it's very hard to convince a lot of people that the design-focused subjects you're teaching are as valuable as maths.

*Ana:* We're not saying all the kids should go be a graphic designer or an architect. It's a way of thinking that's problem-solving and coming up with creative ideas while at the same time helping your community.

*Felicity:* And it's really the future of work for humans. All those other roles, potentially machines will do them. But we are the ones that have those creative thoughts, and so fostering that in young people is so critical.

*Lynda:* I've got time for one more question.

*Audience member two:* So how can somebody like me, a sole practitioner, support what you do?

*Felicity:* Essentially what we're trying to do is build a network of professionals who are interested in being active in their communities. You might open your studio up so young people could understand a bit more about what it means to be a practising architect. And there's a lot of community projects, clients that don't have access to a designer, an architect, or whatever the skill set is. We're doing a lot of that ourselves, but we're at capacity. We might need someone to help with delivering on that.

*Fleur:* As a profession, we don't do a lot of pro-bono work in our practices. Lawyers do it, dentists do it, doctors do it a lot. In terms of doing things like collaborating on wānanga, one of the things we really need is facilitators. If you're interested, let us know. We can really use you.



During *Making Ways*, ĀKAU converted Objectspace into a wānanga where they hosted a rōpu of rangatahi from Taiohi Whai Oranga in Manurewa. Together they developed design ideas for a mobile coffee bar which will promote te reo Māori. Photo: Kathy Waghorn.



Manawanui Ururoa, a design intern at ĀKAU, shares her vision for *Bling Bling Toi Marama*, a festival of light for Kaikohe, realised in 2020. Photo: David St George.



A visitor to *Making Ways* views work by ĀKAU. Photo: David St George.







Ana Heremaia, one of the founders of ĀKAU, introduces a discussion on their kaupapa and mahi. Photo: David St George.





# Making Ways

Alternative architectural  
practice in Aotearoa

Edited by Mike Davis  
and Kathy Waghorn

Foreword by Kim Paton	<b>10</b>
Introduction by Kathy Waghorn	<b>14</b>
<i>Making Ways: A public lecture</i> by Kester Rattenbury	<b>24</b>
Fast Forward Interview Series	<b>48</b>
Unit Y	<b>50</b>
ĀKAU	<b>68</b>
Makers of Architecture	<b>88</b>
Hatch Workshop	<b>106</b>
<i>Looking Backwards to Look Forwards: Locating alternative practice in Aotearoa New Zealand</i> by Kathy Waghorn and Mike Davis	<b>126</b>
Contributor Biographies	<b>150</b>
Endnotes	<b>155</b>

First published by Objectspace in 2020

Text copyright © Authors as attributed, 2020

Photography copyright © Photographers  
as credited, 2020

Design copyright © Amy Yalland, 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form  
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopying, recording or by any  
information storage and retrieval system, without  
prior permission in writing from the publisher.

An online version of this work licensed under a  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-  
NoDerivatives 4.0 International License is available  
from <https://auckland.figshare.com/>

Objectspace

13 Rose Road, Ponsonby,  
Auckland, New Zealand.

PO Box 68762, Victoria Street West,  
Auckland, New Zealand.

[www.objectspace.org.nz](http://www.objectspace.org.nz)

A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of New Zealand

ISBN 978-0-995-12173-7

Designed by Amy Yalland

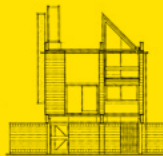
Set in 12/15 pt Futura LT Medium,  
11/13 pt CMU Typewriter Text Bold,  
and 9/11 pt Akzidenz Grotesk

Printed and bound in Auckland,  
New Zealand, by Soar. Printed on  
100% FSC Revive 110gsm stock.

Funded by a Faculty  
Research Development  
Fund Grant from the  
University of Auckland



With the support of  
the Warren Trust



THE WARREN TRUST

OBJECTSPACE

OBJECTSPACE