

Whare in the Bush: Reclaiming the name

Lynda Simmons

1. Refer to the 'List of Buildings and Projects 1947–1970' from (Ed) Gatley, J. *Group Architects. Towards a New Zealand Architecture*. Auckland University Press, 2010, 226–241.

2. Francis Pound discusses the Nationalist identity and Nationalism in full in Pound, F. *The Invention of New Zealand. Art & National Identity 1930–1970*. Auckland University Press, 2009, 13. These labels have been used widely by others for at least forty years and have become part of a terminology used in discussion of arts, architecture and literature in New Zealand in the 20th Century.

3. This title was written as a caption by A.P. Godber, in one of his Piha albums. See Skinner, R. *The Whare in the Bush*. *Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition*. *Fabrications* 18:1, 2008, 63. Skinner refers to Clark and Walker, who made this observation.

4. This was the title given by James Garrett, the editor of the exhibition catalogue for *HOMEBUILDING 1814–1954*, who sourced the image from the Alexander Turnbull Library. (Skinner, R, endnote 35, 73.) 'The King Country, or Rohe Potae, was originally a large tract of the western central North Island and comprised the tribal lands of Ngati Maniapoto Ngati Tama, Ngati Tuwharetoa (the portion lying west and south of Lake Taupo), the Waikato lands which escaped confiscation, and the northern fringes of Ngati Ruanui and Ngati Hau lands.' Retrieved <http://www.kingcountry.co.nz> 25/10/11.

5. The description of 'man alone' refers to John Mulgan's 1939 novel titled *Man Alone*, which describes the itinerant life of an individual man who does not fit with typical social norms, living in an often harsh and remote environment.

There is a particular photograph that has been employed in New Zealand's architectural discourse in since 1954. This photograph in conjunction with early projects by The Group,¹ support a connection between modernism, solitude, landscape and a timber tradition. The accepted story involves ideas related to the nationalist² identity—of silence, isolation, pragmatism and stoicism, which in this photo are expressed in a simple building form: the bach and/or the pioneer hut.

The photograph is of a simple timber hut set amongst the flax within an isolated landscape, with a man reading on the verandah, alone. Titled either 'Whare in the Bush'³ or 'Bach in King Country',⁴ the unfixed location and un-named man have allowed for wide (mis)readings of the image, which have been used throughout the Twentieth Century to support the developing architectural mythology of 'man alone'⁵ in this country. The simple hut structure in the photograph was well suited to the timber-modernist ideals of the 1950's, so it was easily adopted as the image of this mythological ideal, and which is seen to still have influence on architecture in New Zealand today.⁶

In 1954 the photograph was presented in large format at the entry to the exhibition *HOMEBUILDING 1814–1954 The New Zealand Tradition*, by the Auckland Architecture School and held at the Auckland Art Gallery, reinforcing the overall curatorial intention that a type of New Zealand pragmatism emerges from absence and solitude.⁷ It was re-used in 1966 for an exhibition held at the Building Centre⁸ and then again in *The Elegant Shed* thirty years later.⁹ It is also on continuous display in the Architecture Library at The University of Auckland, and is often referred to in various books and articles, including Clark and Walker's *Looking for the Local*.¹⁰ This image contributed to the dominant cultural identity, which was an idealised version

6. The NZ Venice Biennale 2014 title: 'Last, Loneliest, Loveliest' refers to Rudyard Kipling's 1891 description of Auckland as 'last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart'. This quote illustrates and idealises the idea of isolation, of being away from something larger.

7. Vernon Brown was teaching at the University of Auckland at this time (1943–65) and had strong views on a nationalist, regionalist version of modernism.

8. The re-use was by James Garrett, curator of the *HOMEBUILDING* exhibition, and the exhibition was called 'Castles on the Ground'. The Building Centre was located at that time in Victoria Street, Auckland. (See Skinner, 62.)

9. Mitchell, D. and Chaplin, G. *The Elegant Shed. New Zealand Architecture Since 1945*. Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1984, 104. There was also a six-part Television series titled 'The Elegant Shed' prior to the publication of this book, screened in 30-minute segments on *Kaleidoscope*, TVNZ (1984).

10. Other references to this photograph appear in E.M. Farrelly's *Architectural Review* (July 1986) book review of *The Elegant Shed*, Peter Wood 'The Bach. The Cultural History of a Local Typology.' *Fabrications* 11:1, 2000 and 'Cultural Regionalism and the Development of the New Zealand 'Bach'.' *Habitus 2000*, Perth, Gill Matthewson 'Looking at the Icons' *Formulation Fabrication*. SAHANZ, Wellington, 2000, 483 and 'Sketching in the Margins' in (ed) Walker, C. *Exquisite Apart: One Hundred Years of*

of a working class truth,¹¹ and for over half a century the image remained with its unidentified monikers, as a symbol of New Zealand's mid-century Nationalist identity.

As has been so well illustrated by Robin Skinner in his article *Whare in the Bush: Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition*,¹² the anonymity of the man in the image was important to the strength and continuity of the developing (Pakeha) nationalist 'man alone' myth. His anonymity exaggerated solitude and silence, to help create a 'sublime' condition of man in isolation, engulfed in nature.

In Skinner's thorough examination, he identified the man in the photograph and therefore the context: he was Hans Peter Knutzen, the hut was located in Piha, and the photograph was taken ca. 1915–16.¹³ Skinner looked closely at the Piha images and in doing so has managed to expose the myth of the photograph, with the act of bringing real information to the image.

He indicates that the hut does not have a flat or low mono-pitch roof, but is in fact a gable. The interior is not sparse or desolate but rather homely, and the context is not isolated but within a community setting. Skinner also showed that Mr Knutz himself was not an outcast or a loner, but a man with a managerial position at the Piha Timber Mill, thus he was connected and of established social class, not the working class hero of the nationalist myth. And through discussions with Coney, Skinner found that Mr Knutzen might have employed a housekeeper for the domestic duties required at the Piha hut, meaning that:

'Rather than being *man alone* he was *man attended*.'¹⁴

Architecture in New Zealand. Balasoglou Books, Auckland, 2005, 126. Refer Skinner, R. *The Whare in the Bush*. Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition. *Fabrications* 18:1, 2008, 59.

11. Francis Pound points out that the idea of the isolated, silent landscape experienced by the individual loner is a Nationalist myth, which belonged to and was fostered by the educated classes of the mid-twentieth century in New Zealand painting and literature. 'Yet, really, the whole painful 'silence', 'isolation' and 'blankness' business was an Intellectual's construction.' Pound, F. *The Invention of New Zealand. Art & National Identity 1930–1970*. Auckland University Press, 2009, 35.

12. Skinner, R. *The Whare in the Bush*. Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition. *Fabrications* 18:1, 2008.

13. The photograph was taken by A.P.Godber. The image was named by Sandra Coney in *Piha: A History in Images* Auckland: Keyhole Press, 1997. The connection was pointed out to Clark and Walker by Peter Wood—Refer Clark, J. and Walker, P. *Looking For The Local. Architecture and the New Zealand Modern*. Victoria University Press, 2000, 32. (footnote 48.) Skinner provides a short overview of how the architectural community identified this image only recently. Refer endnotes 1 and 33 in Skinner, R. *The Whare in the Bush*. Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition. *Fabrications* 18:1, 2008, 71, 73.

Francis Pound reminds us that the man alone mythology was forged from a particular viewpoint, based around the landscape and its relationship to the pioneering Pakeha male at the turn of last century;

'Absence, blankness, solitude, silence. Such, according to the Nationalist speakers themselves, was the origin of their quest to discover, or to invent, the true New Zealand.'¹⁵

However the land was not empty, nor was it considered remote by those tied to it through long lineages. Both Francis Pound and Mike Austin¹⁶ point out that this myth of the man alone is a nationalist identity story told from a Pakeha point of view, as the land was not 'silent' but already occupied. They show that the myth was created during the shift from a colonial identity in the 19th century to a nationalist one in the 20th century, and that it did not form part of a bicultural or Maori identity.¹⁷ The relationship between the land and the individual in Maori culture was already well established as being an embedded, connected one—in contrast to the ideas of silence, absence and disconnection being promoted.¹⁸

Four women Rebecca Green, Elisapeta Heta, Raukura Turei and Ruby Watson, have reclaimed one of the titles attributed to the anonymous photograph that has dominated the New Zealand art and architectural history so powerfully. 'Whare in The Bush' as a title has been re-contextualized back into architectural discourse, and re-framed to provide another version of a New Zealand identity involving the landscape, people and architecture.

In this recent project, *The Whare in the Bush* Group have countered the idea of an isolated, solitary male through several avenues, such as their collaborative working and ownership

14. Skinner, R. The Whare in the Bush. Unpacking a Twentieth Century Tradition. *Fabrications* 18:1, 2008, 68.

15. Pound, F. *The Invention of New Zealand. Art & National Identity 1930–1970*. Auckland University Press, 2009, 31.

16. Austin, M. 'Notes on the Colonial City' (1991, 36) in *Fabrications* 2, 1992, 35–44. Austin says: 'This could be away of avoiding the fact that the landscape was already occupied, or it could be that the inhabitants were seen as inseparable from the landscape to be dominated. In either case, the "noisy silence paradox" (in which the early settler claims New Zealand is totally silent, and then proceeds to list all the noises) is, I suggest, the silenced Maori voice.'

17. See also McCarty, Christine 'The Bach.' *Interstices* 4, 2004, 1. 'Displaced within New Zealand, the Western primitive hut engages in the discourse of the colonial and architectural erasings of the Maori. Yet the pioneering hut is both the manifestation of the uncivilised and of the civilising forces which reconstruct a colonial landscape.'

18. Pound, F. *The Invention of New Zealand. Art & National Identity 1930–1970*. Auckland University Press, 2009, 36. Pound says: 'Certainly it is not the 'we' of Maori, for whom this place is not an unrepresentable, unhistoried Sublime.'

structure and their 'experimental approach' to pragmatism. (Material gathering and detail solving being two examples of their version of pragmatic thought. All inexperienced builders, the construction process itself demanded practicality and expediency.) The idea of anonymity has been completely banished with the inclusion of family and friends throughout the project's process, with some weekends filled with food sharing, child-minding and construction lessons. The group's non-Pakeha worldview and revealed identities ensure that their gender and culture are no longer erased, and their connection to the land is continued. The new image, with Lily on the swing, describes a new kind of *whare in the bush*.

Gentle Foundations

**Extrapolations of
*The Whare in the Bush***

**By Rebecca Green and
Elisapeta Heta**

Curated by Tosh Ahkit

***The Whare in the Bush*
(2012–2014) project by:
Ruby Watson, Raukura Turei,
Rebecca Green, and Elisapeta Heta**

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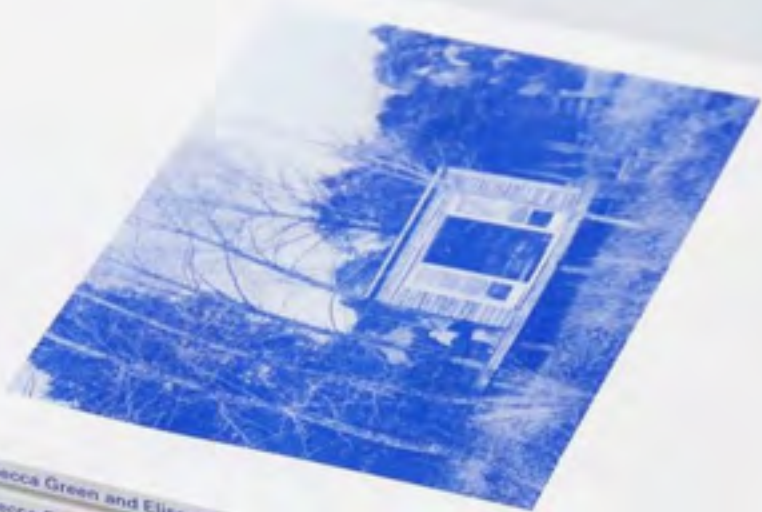
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