

architecturenz



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Empty architecture



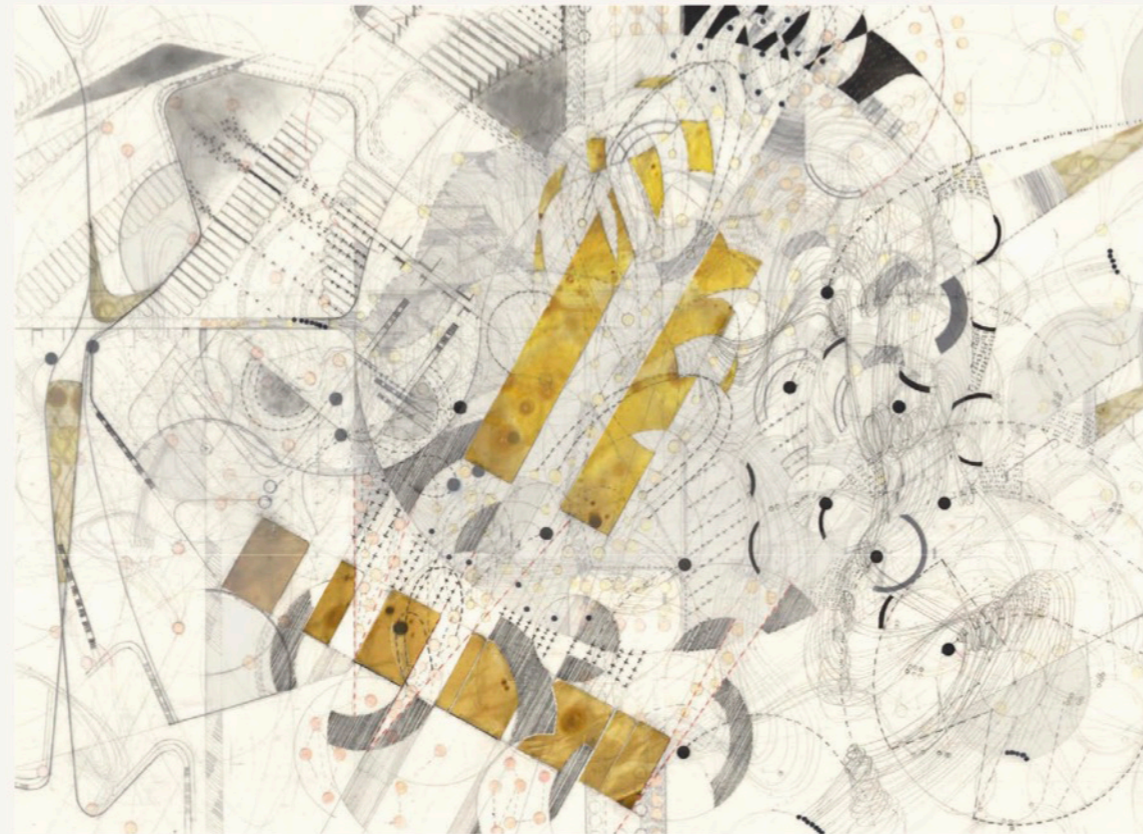
Lynda Simmons considers the separation of land ownership from building ownership and the centuries-old guardianship model of tangata whenua.

AS HE LEANED FORWARD ONTO

his elbows and the corner of the lectern, Reinier de Graaf told the audience of approximately 1300 that 21st-century architecture has effectively lost its soul. The keynote speaker for the NZIA in:situ 2019 conference suggested that, despite architecture's long histories of idealism and working for a social good, we are in a time of 'ideological bankruptcy'.¹

He even provided the mid-1990s as a date for this shift – illustrated with a graph charting the production of that distinctly 20th-century document type: the architectural manifesto.² His graph showed an abrupt ceasing of production at the end of that century, implying that we are in a new era.

The supporting argument provided for such a powerful message was through examples of an architectural contradiction: housing designed to remain empty. Apartment buildings all over the world are currently largely empty, with extreme profit generated at each change of title. In comparison, rental income is negligible (and brings



Lynda Simmons illustration by Julia Gessler.

all the associated problems of human inhabitation) and is often avoided. The production of buildings as objects of pure capital has, he argued, distorted where value lies in the architectural profession.

In many cases, housing is being produced "... not because people are looking for a home, but because money is looking for a home". (20:51min)

Some may call this good business; however, when the return on capital so grossly exceeds the return on labour (yes, including the labour of architects), there becomes no amount of hard or excellent work possible to avoid the distorted, classed society currently developing globally.

Architects are complicit in this unethical system, through their conscious production of buildings

purely for land-banking.³ Empty architecture. Empty not only of people but of ethics.

Reinier de Graaf ended his (disturbing) presentation with a possible solution – one drawn from another era of global social unrest caused by economic inequity: the 1960s. The German politician Hans-Jochen Vogel⁴ saw land as a fundamental human right, like water and air, and proposed a law to separate the ownership of the building from the ownership of land. De Graaf reasoned that such a separation would curb the runaway capital gain on both land and building, his hope being that perhaps architecture, and architects, can regain their souls.

Has someone told Reinier de Graaf that we have such a system in New Zealand? Is he aware that 1960s'

European leftist politics could have used as an exemplar the centuries-old guardianship model of tangata whenua?⁵

The separation of building development from land ownership has emerged from iwi ownership in a collective title,⁶ where the removal of land from the transaction of property for capital gain ensures environmental and social investment, as well as affordable developments.

This system of guardianship has survived, despite the overlain matrix of boundaries and individualised titles, despite the financial structural barriers to development on collective title, and despite the severe loss experienced by iwi throughout the country, now slowly being redressed by the Waitangi Tribunal process.⁷

Not only has it survived but its ethics and strength are also undeniable. Interestingly, the broader financial, legal and architectural communities continue to overlook the leadership shown by many iwi, where the value of development lies in strengthening social groups and long-term care for the environment. When such a system also addresses the gross distortion of housing affordability, it is surprising that more are not looking to the successful examples we already have, such as Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei's Kāinga Tuatahi housing development, by Stevens Lawson Architects. This project shows excellence in every area, including financial ingenuity, restorative social vision, environmental care and, of course, architecture.

New Zealand financial lending criteria rely on individual title so that lenders can retrieve capital should things go wrong – a structure that has hindered collective land ownership development. In February 2019, the government announced

the allocation of funds to address access to loans for development on Māori land,⁸ and Kiwibank now provides finance for collective title, with restrictions on foundation design (i.e. the structures need to be relocatable).

To circumvent such banking restrictions, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei created its own financial institution for hapū members. Other New Zealand developments that have grappled with collective title lending criteria barriers are Earthsong (Robin Allison, Bill Algie),⁹ Collett's Corner (Ohu)¹⁰ and Cohaus (Studio Nord).¹¹ Interestingly, all the above projects measure success through social health and governance, rather than capital gain.

Someone should be in touch with Reinier de Graaf – I am sure he will see the potential in the valuable model of Māori land ownership. The separation of land title from development title, which is the result of collective ownership structures, is one that can have an impact on the distorted capitalisation, occurring globally, that he described. There is hope for architects yet.

POSTSCRIPT

To leave the sadness and horror of 15 March 2019 unacknowledged here would seem like Aotearoa is back to business as usual, which is so very untrue – and our raw condition will not (and should not) fade quickly. This country is rightfully feeling the shame, as well as the pain, of the terrorist murders.

To address our shame, it is time to listen. The daily reality for so many New Zealanders is a lack of inclusion and it is time to start putting their stories before those who have had the platform for too long.

Please be kind to each other. 🙏

IMAGE OPPOSITE

Raukura Turei (Ngāi Tai Ki Tāmaki, Ngā Rauru) 'Conceptual Plan Event Phases 1 and 2 (cropped)' – from *Looking Up Skirts: Te Hiki a Hine-Ruhi*, (2011) MArch(Prof) thesis.

As part of Turei's project for the design of a contemporary whare tapere, she calls attention to the nature of land ownership and land guardianship. Her transportable arts and performance centre was sited initially at Te Waiarohia (Musick Point), on the peninsula Te Naupata. These are the traditional lands of Ngāi Tai Ki Tāmaki, inhabited from approximately 900AD until Ngāpuhi took possession in 1821. The Howick Golf Club now occupies the majority of the peninsula, with some public land maintained by Auckland Council. To illustrate her rangatiratanga connection, Turei designed her thesis project to leave traces upon departure – not only a carved groundscape but also a nursery of native plants used for the performance arts.

The thesis programme at the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning is a full-year design-by-research project. Students select their fields of study and set their own briefs.

REFERENCES

¹ Reinier de Graaf (OMA, AMO), Public Lecture, Thursday 14 February 2019, 6.30pm, Spark Arena, Auckland, NZIA in:situ 2019. A video of the lecture is available on the NZIA website.

² At least 50 manifestos were written in Europe between 1909 and 1915. 'What Happened to the Architectural Manifesto?' Session 3 Columbia GSAPP, Mark Wigley, 2011. youtube.com/watch?v=SOfffXd2Yc

³ Reinier de Graaf showed that, ironically, empty cities are financial successes. The list of the most liveable cities in the world is almost identical to the list of cities with the most vacant real estate. ('In other words, cities are most liveable when you don't live there.' 28:10min).

⁴ Hans-Jochen Vogel (b.1926), member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) from 1950–1994, leader 1987–1991. His policy was in reaction to the 1968 protests in Paris and Frankfurt.

⁵ Tangata whenua: Māori with traditional or customary authority over a particular geographical area. From Catherine Iorns Magallanes, 'The Use of Tangata Whenua and Mana Whenua in New Zealand Legislation: Attempts at Cultural Recognition', 42 *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review* (2011).

⁶ Māori freehold land is held by individuals who have shares together as tenants in common (Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993).

⁷ For lands no longer in possession of an iwi or hapū, rangatiratanga is maintained over their district, with legal status given to the iwi or hapū as kaitiaki (guardians) supported by the Resource Management Act 1991 and territorial authority District Plans.

⁸ Radio New Zealand 4 February 2019, Leigh-Marama McLachlan, 'Māori welcome \$100m fund to support better use of land'. There is also a call for Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993 to be updated.

⁹ earthsong.org.nz

¹⁰ ohu.nz/portfolio-item/colletts-corner

¹¹ cohaus.nz