

# asylum

*rethinking our future neighbourhoods*

# Decolonising and Re-Indigenising Neighbourhood Design

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## Introduction

How do we create a fairer, more equitable future? How do we create neighbourhoods that serve and nurture us; spaces that reflect us, that bring beauty, that inform our identities? Urbanists are generally reluctant to address the past in order to summon that more equitable future. However, I believe that it cannot be achieved without decolonisation.

Before we get into it, we'll need to set some parameters. I cannot dictate exactly how Māori should be represented or what *mātauranga Māori* should mean. That's not what this piece is. Its purpose is instead to provide an overview of this topic and what Aotearoa can do to decolonise architecture and urban design on a larger scale. Hopefully, it will also introduce you to some incredible people and research that I highly recommend you dig into after this.

Next, decolonisation, even just for design, is a large topic. It's a complex and nuanced one, too. Furthermore, fully unpacking colonialism and its devastating, widespread and pervasive effects deserves a lot more time than we have today. So, let's focus up. We're here to talk about neighbourhoods, so, as much as it hurts, we are going to have to leave every other institution aside, just for today.

Decolonised neighbourhoods will better reflect Aotearoa's people. Through art and language, structures and environments, we can confront this country's very real and ongoing colonial history and consciously make space for future Māori representation. This decolonisation will mean deconstructing what is in our neighbourhoods, who they're for, and the institutions behind their creation. From there, it will mean purposeful and meaningful Māori and iwi involvement to consider what these spaces could become.

For our purposes, decolonisation means the examination and disruption of coloniser culture, institutions and hierarchy in a colonised country. It will include an acknowledgement and sincere confrontation of the effects of colonisation, both historical and ongoing.

The thing is, colonisation has a way of affecting every little crevice of society and culture. Its presence permeates across our institutions, communities, government, assumptions, norms, housing, and all sorts of places you may not think about. When a nation is colonised, the coloniser culture tends to build spaces based on its own aesthetics, values, identities, institutions and narratives.

This often comes with the removal, replacement or suppression of land, spaces, symbols and practices that reflect the Indigenous culture(s). That which reflects the coloniser's culture is assumed to be more correct, developed and acceptable than that which reflects the other culture(s).

## The Colonial Neighbourhood

Let's look at this in the context of neighbourhoods. What do you think of when you consider a quintessential New Zealand neighbourhood? Maybe rows of houses? Suburbs? Cul-de-sacs? What groups of people live there? Are there local shops, a bank, a cinema, a marae, a school? What about aesthetics? There's precedence for colonisers to import and favour their own architecture, flora and fauna; for instance, creating parks and gardens full of non-native plants<sup>1</sup> which may be ill-suited to the new environment and disrupt native species.

Most of our neighbourhoods are made with single families and individual ownership in mind. Here, even what we assume a family looks like – probably a couple and their kids – is informed by European standards. The sheer ubiquity of these structures implies a norm.

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Cocks and Charlie Shackleton, "Colonial Legacies Shape Urban Nature: Why This Should Change," *The Conversation*, March 25, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/colonial-legacies-shape-urban-nature-why-this-should-change-156334>

Moreover, it makes any deviation from said norm difficult. What happens if you work in a city but have a larger, intergenerational family? Historically, policies like the Town and Country Planning Act zoned papakāinga as rural. This limited the number of dwellings that could be built, forcing Māori into what was available: colonial-style homes.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, medium-density residential standards have made it easier for three three-storey houses to be built on a residential site. However, the houses that tend to be built to these standards continue to favour smaller, single families over other dynamics. In a recent article by Adam Jacobson for *Stuff* (2022), Rau Hoskins, director of the architecture firm DesignTRIBE, commented on these high-density developments. He suggested that the one-size-fits-all approach encouraged by this kind of development forgets Māori and Pacific families. For instance, bedrooms are often located upstairs on the second or third storey, making them poorly suited for many elderly residents. Here, it is important that new, even well-intentioned, designs do not further perpetuate colonial assumptions and restrictions.

### Decolonisation by Design

So, what does decolonisation look like? Jade Kake<sup>3</sup> argues that at a minimum, practical decolonisation requires the returning of Māori land, resources and power. Further, she suggests that this should be underpinned by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Additionally, there needs to be an active push to integrate Māori voices, local iwi and mātauranga Māori into urban design.

A study by Kimiora Raerino, Alex Macmillan, Adrian Field and Rau Hoskins<sup>4</sup> discusses kaupapa Māori,

and mana whenua autonomy and engagement in streetscape design. The research utilises interviews and a case study of Te Ara Mura, Māngere, before and after redevelopment. Participants stated that for these kinds of projects, Māori involvement needs to feel integrated, welcome and respected throughout. Real effort must be made to ensure this involvement doesn't feel like an insincere box-tick. This kind of superficial inclusion can feel disrespectful and tokenistic. One participant recounted a project wherein she was offered three pre-made design options for approval. There was no Māori agency over the designs or chance to make meaningful changes. She said the experience felt like the project wanted a rubber stamp of Māori endorsement without Māori input.

This is far from an isolated incident. Dr Rebecca Kiddle<sup>5</sup> explores how Māori designs and input are often left uncredited. Once again, we see Māori involvement being treated as superficial. Kiddle provides examples such as Christchurch's Tūranga library and Auckland's Tirohanga Whānui walking and cycling bridge. Both structures have been highly praised for their designs and both relied on Māori designers and motifs. Yet, Christchurch City Libraries severely underplayed the work and input from Matapopore Trust, the group that speaks for local hapū and iwi Ngāi Tūāhuriri, Ngāi Tahu, on rebuilding projects. Meanwhile, the artist behind Tirohanga Whānui's iconic design, Graham Tipene, wasn't even invited to a ceremony where it won a prestigious architecture award.

Let's bring this all together. We need to provide active support for Māori communities, designers, artists and architects. Moreover, that needs to be standardised throughout planning, design and development. We

can't be settling for one-off features and projects. This involvement cannot feel like tokenistic box-ticking. That means listening to, being respectful of and implementing ideas, criticisms, narratives and designs that are brought forward by mana whenua. With that, all work, symbols and input must be appropriately celebrated and credited. Otherwise, you start to lean towards appropriation, which can range from humorously ignorant to genuinely offensive.<sup>6</sup> The resulting designs ought to serve their communities, whatever that looks like for the specific place and its history.

### The Bigger Picture

Now that we're talking about standardising these practices, you may be sensing our scale getting a little bigger. At a certain point, this conversation stops being about individual projects. For long-term change, we have to decolonise the institutions behind our structures.

New Zealand has a history of racist policies that aimed to keep Māori out of Western systems and institutions. These policies made it more difficult for Māori to obtain financial resources for development. Moreover, they discouraged communal ownership and, in the case of the Raupo Houses Ordinance, Māori construction practices.<sup>7</sup>

Even in modern architectural education, there is little time given to non-Western theories or practices. Indigenous knowledge is often left untouched, or is discussed in a shallow manner. Here, we are taught to think about architecture through a highly selective lens. It's harder to integrate new knowledge and conceive of something brand new when you're only taught one set of philosophies. This approach also leaves many graduates ill-equipped to facilitate conversations and collaborations

2 Rebecca Kiddle, "Indigenous Ecological Design," in *Ecologies Design: Transforming Architecture, Landscape and Urbanism*, ed. Maibritt Pedersen Zari, Peter Connolly, and Mark Southcombe, 204–211 (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

3 Jade Kake, "Spatial Justice: Decolonising Our Cities and Settlements," *Counterfutures: Left Thought and Practice Aotearoa* 9 (2021): 122–135, <https://doi.org/10.26686/cf.v9.6777>

4 Kimiora Raerino, Alex Macmillan, Adrian Field, and Rau Hoskins, "Local-Indigenous Autonomy and Community Streetscape Enhancement: Learnings from Māori and Te Ara Mua – Future Streets Project," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 3 (2021): 865, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18030865>

5 Rebecca Kiddle, "The Buildings Are 'Uniquely Aotearoa'. Their Māori Designers Are Ignored," *The Spinoff*, June 24, 2019, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/24-06-2019/the-buildings-are-uniquely-aotearoa-their-maori-designers-are-ignored>

6 AJ Park, "It's Not Trendy if it's Appropriating," September 16, 2020, <https://www.ajpark.com/insights/its-not-trendy-if-its-appropriating/>

7 Kake, "Spatial Justice: Decolonising Our Cities and Settlements."

with iwi and mana whenua even if they have good intentions.<sup>8</sup> We also know that the pervasive dominance of whiteness and Western ideals in higher education lowers the education outcomes of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) students. Furthermore, BIPOC staff at universities are less likely to get promoted<sup>9</sup> or obtain tenure, making it even harder for their knowledge and experiences to be made accessible or respected.

When you're not represented or when the stories about you are all the same, it becomes difficult to imagine yourself in new ways. You learn that's the only story worth telling, the only one people want to hear. When you're nowhere to be seen, it becomes difficult to feel important or for those experiences to feel worthy.<sup>10</sup>

Decolonising educational institutions will require the active inclusion of Indigenous and international knowledge, history, contributions and practices. Importantly, it will require dismantling the assumed superiority of Western practices over Indigenous ones. This should also include dedicated education on a place's history of colonisation, institutional harm and suppression of Indigenous knowledge. In a panel hosted by the University and College Union, Juliana Ojinnaka reinforced that it is up to all of us to decolonise these institutions. The burden cannot fall purely on BIPOC students and staff; Pākehā and tauiwi have to be a part of this mission.

In the same panel, Jason Arday discussed how this movement cannot stop at the university level. Universities inherently gatekeep knowledge. If these are the only

places where this information is available, a large group of people will inevitably be alienated from these discussions. Furthermore, if decolonisation is limited only to assessments and lectures, students will forget or lose that praxis when they leave university. Decolonising has to go beyond the classroom, beyond graduation.<sup>11</sup> Maybe that means, once again, standardising and formalising practices like consulting iwi and hapū groups, or regularly integrating karakia and actions that make Māori culture feel welcome and understood.<sup>12</sup> Maybe it means continuing education for alumni. Or universities, their alumni, staff and students could invest in community projects<sup>13</sup> and education for the wider public.

### Re-Indigenising Our Spaces

Now that we're well into it, let's flip this conversation on its head a bit. There's a problem with the way we've been thinking about decolonisation: it focuses on the coloniser and their assumptions, knowledge and hierarchy. Re-indigenisation – sometimes called indigenisation or (re) Māorification – however, centres Indigenous peoples' agency and desires rather than those of the coloniser. It's a strength-based approach that, in Aotearoa, would consciously prioritise kaupapa Māori.<sup>14</sup>

Here are some basic methods of re-indigenising our spaces. We can encourage more te reo Māori and Māori art in our public spaces and communities. Art is a key way for people to represent themselves, make statements about our world, and confront our pasts. The same goes for actively caring and making space for native plants and animals in our neighbourhoods. These are all

opportunities for education, storytelling, and informing cultural and national identity. As a bonus, more art and nature in our daily lives does wonders for wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

Re-indigenisation would also mean fostering structures in our neighbourhoods and towns that reflect Māori desires and kaupapa. For example, we can ensure our neighbourhoods allow for and foster communal and intergenerational living.

When it comes to institutions, education should celebrate mātauranga Māori. Dr Rebecca Kiddle<sup>16</sup> provides principles to decolonise and indigenise architecture and the institutions behind it. These include an emphasis on maintaining a temporal approach – carefully considering all temporal directions, histories, and how structures will serve us over time – and care for Papatūānuku. She also highlights the urgency for Māori leadership and collective action. Practically, this encourages collaboration between a project and a range of stakeholders, including mana whenua.

### Conclusion

Neighbourhoods informed by these principles would be more equitable both in their creation and results. They would authentically elevate and directly reflect kaupapa Māori. Again, these approaches coupled with the re-indigenisation of our institutions would create systems for meaningful mana whenua and iwi involvement that doesn't feel tokenistic or shallow. They would create a sense that this involvement is an essential part of development. They would create a future where neighbourhoods

8 Kiddle, "Indigenous Ecological Design."

9 University and College Union, "Decolonising Our Institutions," July 23, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpiO\\_on9fgQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpiO_on9fgQ)

10 Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor, "To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation," *The Journals of the Archives and Records Association* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>

11 University and College Union, "Decolonising Our Institutions."

12 Raerino, Macmillan, Field, and Hoskins, "Local-Indigenous Autonomy and Community Streetscape Enhancement," 865.

13 Melbourne School of Design, "Decolonising Architectural Education," April 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIy63-dwCsQ>

14 Puawai Cairns, "Decolonise or Indigenise: Moving Towards Sovereign Spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand Museology," Te Papa Blog, February 10, 2020, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/02/10/decolonise-or-indigenise-moving-towards-sovereign-spaces-and-the-maorification-of-new-zealand-museology/?cn-reloaded=1&cn-reloaded=1>; Melbourne School of Design, "Decolonising Architectural Education."

15 Raerino, Macmillan, Field, and Hoskins, "Local-Indigenous Autonomy and Community Streetscape Enhancement," 865; University of Toronto Daniels, "Design through an Indigenous Lens: Decolonizing our Approach to Architecture." Matthew Hickey, February 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMCaArTrPoo>

16 Kiddle, "Indigenous Ecological Design."

become key spaces for Māori self-determination and self-expression. Furthermore, these neighbourhoods would serve not only their people, but their environments and creatures. They would encourage an ethos of protection and care for natural spaces. This would be reflected by more accessible, biodiverse green spaces integrated throughout these neighbourhoods. Finally, the ideas we've discussed in this piece will encourage the development of housing and communities that benefit us for years to come. Too much urban planning revolves around short-term rewards and goals. Re-indigenisation invites us to consider a space in its unique historical and future contexts. With that, we are invited to ask how its use, perception or efficiency will change over time. This kind of thinking is crucial for creating neighbourhoods that matter and last in the face of our rapidly changing climate.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There's much more we can do at both the community and institutional levels. This work will require active and meaningful change throughout our systems. This work is critical for building those neighbourhoods we desire. But it's work that is easily overlooked or put aside for short-term issues. Decolonisation begins with education, but it must lead to action.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ingrid Huygens, "Developing a Decolonisation Practice for Settler Colonisers: A Case Study from Aotearoa New Zealand," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011): 53–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648812>