CONSERVATION OF MARAE STRUCTURES

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Introduction

This paper describes the conservation of marae structures and their unique relationship to New Zealand Maori. The prime focus of many marae is the wharenui, or meeting house, that stands as a functioning structure, a ceremonial place, a repository of history. The conservation of these structures requires a different approach to maintain the living contact that these buildings have to Maori. To illustrate some of the general approaches described a case example of recently completed work on a wharenui at Otukou Marae is used.

Marae

Marae structures, wharenui (meeting houses), wharekai (dining halls), pataka (store houses) and wharemata (building for the dead during funerals) are unique buildings to New Zealand. Maori oral tradition and archaeology record a history of construction and usage of these structures from 1000 AD to the present day. Marae structures are different from other building types because they are perceived, not only as functioning structures, but as representations and associations of people, atua (gods), events, and as places that maintain a living history.

A wharenui is the focus on a marae because it provides the support for the marae atea (the ground immediately in front of the whare) a place where cultural activity on the Marae is carried out (Salmond, 1976). Wharenui interact with atua to form an important association with Maori cosmology. Wharenui are considered the medium where Ranginui (Sky father) and Papatuanuku (Earth mother) touch one another, a feature sometimes illustrated by the absence of roof guttering to allow the tears (rain) of Ranginui to fall onto Papatuanuku. This personification of structure and relationship with atua permeates throughout all the elements of the building.

When you go into a wharenui you are also entering the embrace of a tipuna ancestor. The koru figure in the front of a meeting house, at the apex of the roof, is the face of the tipuna looking forward to those that enter onto the marae. The walls are often adorned with descendant tipuna figures, carved, woven and painted that link to the progenitor ancestor through the heke (rafters) and tahuhu (ridge beam). The tahuhu is the backbone of the ancestor and is the most sacred part of the wharenui. This contains the maori, or the life spirit, of the people that ties the building together. This structure is a powerful genealogical map that ties the descendant people together as tribal (iwi), sub tribal (hapu), or family groups (whanau).

Other structures on the marae provide supportive roles. The wharekai are dining halls used to feed the visitors when staying at the marae; pataka (food store), a rarer structure, traditionally used to hold important resources of the marae; wharemata, temporary or permanent structures used for the funeral ceremony (tangihanga) to separate the tapu (sacredness) associated with death. The total collection of these structures form the marae complex.

Conservation Approach

The conservation of marae has to consider the integral relationship that Maori have to their structures. Early work on marae often highlighted a different working environment for conservators used to working in museums. (Peters, 1981) The remoteness of marae, the logistics involved in the amount of work, and the lack of conservation training slowed conservation in Maori communities. It was not until the involvement of Maori themselves in conservation, and the co-ordination and support of New Zealand Historic Places Trust, that conservation found empathy with Maori. However before this acceptance was reached the conservation process had to adapt to a Maori value system to determine what it was conserving. Instead of emphasising the retention of material information held in the structure, paint layers and tooling marks, the conservation process had to recognise and preserve the relationship Maori people had to their marae. A holistic approach was needed.

The first stage of the process is the recognition of the historic and cultural values within the marae that are considered important by Maori. An example is in some wharenui maintaining visual uniformity in the building is important and can be described in cultural terms as allowing the marae of the building to move through the structure unhindered. Damaged areas can hinder this movement, therefore processes of restoration and reconstruction are used to reinstate the pathways. Evidence of material history (e.g. patina) and age is lost sometimes to allow this cultural value to be maintained. For example old cracked kowhaiwhai patterns may be overpainted to carry a visual line around an interior that relates certain
customs within *hua* that require the talk (*korero*) to pass from one person to the next without interruption.

The second stage was to involve Maori in the conservation work. The programs run by New Zealand Historic Places Trust focus on training the Marae in specific conservation treatments needed through a series of conservation workshops. This process allows the continued interaction of people with their structures. The final stage is the maintenance of these buildings. Participants from workshops gain a new awareness of the physical needs of the structure and become maintenance conscious, active in the care of the structure, and able to access specialist help when needed.

**Case History: Okahukura Wharenui, Otukou Marae, Lake Rotoaira**

On the shores of Lake Rotoaira, Ngati Tuwharetoa tribal area, is the marae Otukou. This marae began its existence late in the nineteenth century as part of a thriving sheep farming settlement. The much celebrated *whare*, Okahukura, was built in 1893 to support the local Maori community (Gardiner, 1993). This *wharenui* displayed many elements of European and Maori art traditions and construction methods; the use of *raupo* wall insulation; traditional *tukutuku* weaving work (lattice weaving of *kiekie* Freycinetia Banksii and stems of kakaho Cortaderia spp); *kakaho* linings in the ceiling areas; and landscape paintings on the *poupo* (wall slabs).

Initially this project started through a request for conservation assistance from the marae trustees. The Marae were preparing for Okahukura's centennial and were concerned about the outward appearance of the *wharenui*. It had a number of conditional problems relating to the finishes on the interior and exterior. The porch *kakaho* had been attacked by birds nesting in the walls, causing material to fall out; linings near the front of the porch were beginning to split and weather; the interior *tukutuku* panels had been attacked by rats nesting in the walls; and the landscapes on the *poupo* had marks and abrasion damage from people rubbing against them.

As we discussed the work the Marae were describing the values they felt were important in retaining the historic integrity of the *wharenui*. The Marae had a number of skilled weavers who had revived the art of *whariki* weaving (floor mats) for the tribe. It was important that an opportunity to learn the technique of *kakaho* preparation and construction could be done on the building to revive and continue the traditional craft. They also emphasised the value in the interior of the building that had remained unchanged since 1893. The patina covered carving, smoked stained *taahu*, and discoloured *poupo* were features that reminded them of their 'old people' and were therefore important to keep.

The New Zealand Historic Places Trust conducted two conservation workshops, one on the interior work, the second on the porch *kakaho*. The interior *poupo* landscapes were cleaned with non-ionic detergent and sealed with Paraloid B72. It was decided to use this material so the thin wash paint surfaces had protection from the continual rubbing of people as they leaned on the walls. *Tukutuku* holes were repaired in situ using a technique of insert weaving developed specifically for the project. Insertion weaving avoids removing the whole wall and uses a combination of hooks and tweezers to make the repair. Other painted surfaces were only brush vacuumed and cleaned with water to remove dust deposits.

The second workshop on the *kakaho* started with the collection and preparation of material. Early in April *kakaho* was collected near the marae and sorted and dried for the reconstruction. In May, a one week workshop was conducted to demonstrate the traditional method of binding *kakaho* into the porch area. Some areas had a blend of new and old that would gradually weather to a uniform appearance over time.

The project demonstrated that the two different approaches to the interior work and the *kakaho* were, as a whole, conserving a relationship between the people of Otukou marae and their *wharenui*. Their participation in the conservation process, from the recognition of values to hands-on conservation, reinforced their cultural perception of the structure. This in turn strengthened their commitment to its care.

Work was completed by the Marae ready for their centennial celebrations in July of 1993.

**Conclusion**

The conservation of marae structures illustrates the importance of broadening the concept of conservation to accommodate cultural values that exist between indigenous people and their sites and structures. The true historic and cultural fabric of site and structure includes a dynamic relationship of history, people, and the site and structure itself. A narrow conservation approach could affect the value contained in other elements, therefore a consultative and holistic approach is required. This process must start with an understanding of indigenous values, followed by support, training and assistance offered to indigenous communities. It is hoped, from this approach, conservation can help in the maintenance of sites and structures as living places.
Dean Whiting holds the position of Maori Buildings Conservator with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. He is responsible for the Maori Building Program which includes condition reporting, treatment development, advise to marae and running conservation workshops.

Bibliography


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