

"... with their usual cunning": gleaned architectural tactics from 1860s warfighting pā [paa] [pah]

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ABSTRACT: Pā have been reaped by other disciplines. Archaeologists have poured over them like coroners, enquiring into what was and how it came to be, dissecting the typology, studying and debating its purposes, its uses, its spread, its numbers. Military historians have drilled into the role pā played in individual battles, campaigns, and even distant conflicts.

Architecture prefers the whare, with only a handful of architects fossicking around pā – Sarah Treadwell's enquiry into Gate Pa, Amanda Yates' examination of monumental interior, Rewi Thompson's and Royal Associates' referencing of parts of pā in their work. This article extends the architectural fossicking by looking at what can be learnt from warfighting pā of the 1860s – a decade where they reached a nadir of design and use as a result of cultural conflict.

Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say that pā have been ignored by the architectural profession – not totally, but certainly extensively so. If you sift your way through Google for pā, or rummage through the more scholarly databases, you'll undoubtedly be presented with the writings of archaeologists, historians both military and social, and even the odd old anthropologist.

Archaeologists have reaped pā most thoroughly, with people such as Kevin Jones, Janet Davidson and Aileen Fox dissecting, describing and debating the purposes, uses, spread, and the number of pā. Ethnologists such as Elsdon Best, historians like James Belich and Nigel Prickett, and anthropologists including AP Vayda and Douglas Sutton have also been part of this reaping, delivering us

everything from seminal texts for serious study through to field guides for the adventurous traveller.

Against this abundant yield of others, the discipline of architecture has provided only a handful of texts. Deidre Brown's recent charting of the genesis and form of indigenous buildings in Aotearoa New Zealand – the first book to do so – found room for only one paragraph on fortified pā out of 187 pages.¹ Accepting that pā are "nonetheless important examples of the Māori built environment," she leans on archaeology's reaping of pā to declare that the architectural

¹ Brown *Māori Architecture* p 35. Brown's book includes a chapter titled "The architecture of war and faith (1860-1918)" which focuses on Ringatū meeting houses, and the settlements at Maungapōhatu and Parihaka, but which makes no mention of warfighting pa from this period.

form has not had a significant influence on the development of Māori architecture.

Others in the architectural profession have also fossicked around. Most recently Paul James and Robin Skinner drew on visual and written reports of pā by James Cook and Joseph Banks to explore the blurred relationship between art, architecture and nature prevalent in the eighteenth century.² Robin Skinner's doctoral thesis also highlighted the inclusion of a model pā in the Great Exhibition of 1851, and how plans of Ruapekapeka pā were published in a parliamentary paper and military journals in the mid-nineteenth century following the British defeat.³

² James and Skinner "Sites of Defence Within Picturesque Scenes" 2009.

³ Skinner "Representations of Architecture and New

Amanda Yates looked to pre-contact pā and how they sit at the intersection of architecture, landscape and interior.⁴ By carving into the ground – "digging down into the earth to define space" – pā disrupt traditional Western notions of Māori built form. Instead of fitting neatly into one of the separate disciplines of interior, landscape or architecture, pā are all of these bundled together. Being in-between disciplines also means pā are in-between indigenous and Western cultures and understandings of architecture.

"kaore e tae mai te pakeha!"⁵

This in-between status is also taken up by Sarah Treadwell in her article on Gate Pā, raising the duality of the pā as being landscape and interior, as well as landscape and architecture.⁶ Her discussion of Horatio Gordon Robley's drawing of the breach at Gate Pā on 30 April 1864 is the only architectural examination of a modern warfighting pā. Robley's drawings are

constituted as landscape, "and yet with its breached boundaries, its articulated interiority and controlled subdivisions the view of the earth is also emphatically an image of architecture."⁷ This extends to his sketch plans where conventional notation is flipped – what would normally be interpreted as the enclosing walls are actually the earth, "limitless, not linear."⁸

Treadwell goes a step further and also explores the role architecture played in the outcome of the battle at Gate Pā. Robley's drawings "made it explicit that the battle of Gate Pā was won by an architecture that was sophisticated, strategic and temporary."⁹ Moving beyond the usual descriptions of the built form of pā (pekerangi, palisade, scarp, pits etc), Treadwell gleans descriptions from historian James Belich of the less obvious, but perhaps more powerful, architectural elements of Gate Pā. Upon breaching the pā, passing beyond the palisades, the British entered the maze-like excavated trenches – confusion created by architecture reigned. Disoriented by the earth, fired upon from within the earth, the British troops were

expelled from the earth (or died to forever lie in it).

This confusion and disorientation was seen by the British commanding officer, General Cameron, as one of the main reasons for the defeat.¹⁰ His view was shared by the Melbourne correspondent for *The Times*, whose report from May 26 1864 used terms such as "surprise," "thrown off their guard," "panic" and "fled in terror" to describe the confusion that arose when the British troops entered the pā.¹¹ Such an outcome was not a result of the immediate clash with the pā, but was established days earlier through the masking and hiding of intentions. Deception was heightened through architecture by denying the British any sort of intelligence of what lay within the pā during construction. James Cowan records how the "rabbit burrows" inside the pā were "masked by frail stockades hurriedly built."¹² Not only did the "frail stockades" hide the trenches, but constructing the outer palisade of unexpectedly weak materials gave the British force a false impression about the strength of the interior.

Zealand in London 1841-1860"

⁴ Yates "On Whenua, Landscape and Monumental Interiors" 2006.

⁵ Call to arms by chief Rāwiri Tuaia at Gate Pā, translated as "the white men will not reach us!" from Cowan *The New Zealand Wars* p 426.

⁶ Treadwell "Images of Gate Pa" 2006.

⁷ Treadwell "Images of Gate Pa" p 557.

⁸ Treadwell "Images of Gate Pa" p 559.

⁹ Treadwell "Images of Gate Pa" p 561.

¹⁰ Harrop *England and the Maori Wars* p 221.

¹¹ Harrop *England and the Maori Wars* p 223.

¹² Cowan *Hero Stories of New Zealand* pp 120-121.

In this respect Robley's drawings are post-battle examinations of the architecture of war. Like archaeologists decades later, he takes a post-the-moment study to overcome the confusion of not knowing what existed before. Unlike architectural drawings for something yet to be built, Robley's plans and sections are historical artefacts, recording what was. The sketches, you could say, are therapeutic; restoring the omniscience of the British armed forces, clearing the fog of war, rendering all as known and safe.

As a record of the architecture of war, however, they are incomplete as they only record the pā at one point in time. The architectural nature of the pā shifted over the time of the battle, revealing itself in the thrust and parry of combat. Pre-attack the pā looked lightweight and temporary in nature. The strength of the palisades was revealed once the British forces reached the Māori lines, and the full strength of the pā was revealed once inside (including the strength of the underground spaces that withstood the heaviest of bombardments). After the initial assault the pā lost its strength at its temporary nature returned on being abandoned under dark.

"an antidote to the British system"¹³

Deception and trickery during the conflict between Māori and British in the 1860s was not restricted to Gate Pā. Major-General Sir James Edward Alexander wrote of how strong the pā fortifications were at Rangiriri a year earlier, with ditches 12 feet wide and parapets some 18 feet high.¹⁴ An extremely strong redoubt was placed near the centre of the main defensive line and contained fortified whare, deep bunkers, and multiple firing positions allowing cross-fire. Belich calls this construction "an innovative tactical feature," but not the most significant characteristic – as with Gate Pā, real strength at Rangiriri was achieved through deception.¹⁵ Because the central redoubt was "very small in area, ...had a low silhouette and ... effectively blended into the other works,"¹⁶ the British were totally unaware of how strong the position actually was.

And again as with Gate Pā, knowledge of this strength only came about once the British attack was well underway.¹⁷ The British

successfully penetrated the right and left of the Māori defensive line in the first stage of the battle, to the point where Belich says the "Māori defence seemed completely broken and the final assault appeared to be a formality."¹⁸ Deceived by the architecture into believing this was the case, the British made eight failed assaults against the central redoubt, leaving 110 British dead. There were also layers of deception: a small gateway at the rear of the redoubt gave the impression that there was an easy way to break the confusion, but three assaults into this gate revealed that it too was a well-constructed trap, inflicting heavy losses on those who entered.¹⁹

A similar experience was had at the battle at Ōrākau in 1864, only months before Gate Pā.²⁰ The pā was anything but visually formidable – the main parapet only four feet above ground and incomplete. Its low profile and being sited amongst peach trees made it difficult for British commanders to assess its strength to the point where Belich comments that it "is even possible that it was not immediately apparent that the place was

¹³ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 298.

¹⁴ Alexander *Bush Fighting* pp 97-98.

¹⁵ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 144.

¹⁶ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 144.

¹⁷ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 144.

¹⁸ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 151.

¹⁹ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 151.

²⁰ Alexander *Bush Fighting* p 152.

fortified at all."²¹ Deceived about the strength of the pā, the British rushed three attacks to achieve a quick victory, but each was repelled with ease.

Deception and trickery also occurred through abandonment. Throughout the 1860s Māori would walk away from strong defensive positions. Bombardments would be survived, heavy assaults repelled, and then the defenders would slip from the battleground. At Te Kohia pā the British artillery opened up early in the morning, driving a breach in the palisades through which the attackers rushed only to find it evacuated.²² Following four days of relentless fighting at Ōrākau the Māori defenders boldly walked straight through the British lines when abandoning their pā.²³ Having inflicted heavy losses on the British at Gate Pā, Māori evacuated at nightfall – as James Cowan wrote, somewhat melancholically, "The British retook the pā next day – but by that time it was empty." With victory often measured by occupation (that most architectural of acts), the Māori tactic of abandonment challenged British notions of military success.

²¹ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 167.

²² Alexander *Incidents of the Maori War* p 101.

²³ Alexander *Bush Fighting* pp 169-170.

Perhaps the grandest deception was where the whole target was false. In 1860 the British marched on Puketekauere pā in Taranaki, fixated on the palisaded structure which teased them only a mile from their own camp. The opening went to script as the artillery fired, the palisade collapsed, and "with a ringing cheer the soldiers and sailors vied with each other to get in first."²⁴ But the pā was a ruse, designed to fix British attention to the point that they were blind to the firing positions on their side, from which Māori inflicted heavy casualties and forced a retreat. Such a ruse was also effective at Titokowaru's pā in Southern Taranaki. British attention was so fixated on the pā that even when surprised by heavy close-quarters fire during their advance, the first reaction was to attempt to quicken the charge at the empty pā.²⁵ The deception was total, capturing the minds of the enemy to the point that they refused to let go, refused to accept an alternative. The British "did not actually assault [the empty pā], but they thought in terms of doing so, and all their movements were made in relation to it."²⁶

²⁴ Grace *A Sketch of the New Zealand War* p 35.

²⁵ Hamilton-Browne *With the Lost Legion in New Zealand* p 232.

²⁶ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 247.

Presenting British artillery with a false target was also done subtly at Gate Pā. Knowing that the British would target the flag as it symbolised the centre of resistance, Māori placed it to the rear of the pā.²⁷ An enormous amount of ordinance was fired into the pā over eight hours, but a significant amount was wasted before the British realised that the place represented by the flag was not what they expected. Māori also realised that the flag represented occupation, toying with British observers by hoisting it one day but lowering it the next. Alexander records that the disappearance of the flag, combined with limited sightings of anyone behind the palisades, led to thoughts by the British that the pā may have been abandoned before the first assault was even made.²⁸

The Māori use of deception successfully played with the architectural preconceptions of the British. Fortified positions were nothing new to the British army; they encountered numerous examples during previous centuries, and utilised redoubts and stockades regularly as part of their own operations. It was this familiarity that

²⁷ Alexander *Bush Fighting* p 189. Fox *The War in New Zealand* pp 113-114.

²⁸ Alexander *Bush Fighting* p 203.

allowed the deception and trickery – the British viewed pā through eyes experienced from battling countless fortified positions. To them, pā should be, do, and look like what had been encountered before.

Architecturally speaking, the expectation was that a defensive position built of solid materials (for example, a castle) equated to one of strength. Like the whare, constructing pā of lightweight materials such as timber and flax did not sit with British preconceptions of strength and permanence. Imagine the difficulty comprehending Gate Pā with its palisades built from timber posts and rails taken from a nearby farm,²⁹ and the unfinished status of pā at Rangiriri and Ōrākau. Even the use of earth spoke of primitive peoples,³⁰ not of a foe whose deception and trickery with architecture was able to inflict heavy losses.

Not that the British were stagnant in their attempts to learn from defeat. Robin Skinner notes how detailed plans and sections of Kawiti's Ruapekapeka fortifications were

²⁹ Cowan *Hero Stories of New Zealand* pp 120-121. Mair *The Story of Gate Pa* pp 24-25.

³⁰ Yates "On Whenua, Landscape and Monumental Interiors" p 106.

drawn and despatched to Britain less than a month after the battle ended in early 1846, and subsequently published in military journals for study. Royal Engineers constructed a mock rampart in England for training following the defeat at Ōhaeawai in 1845.³¹ But preconceptions are immensely difficult to shift – practising penetrating the outer wall was driven by the prevailing architectural conception of a fortress which "has its end in the wall which baffles or repels. Once breached it reverts from the strongest to the weakest of buildings."³² That further defence lay beyond, and what to do once on the other side, would require further lessons.

The inertia inflicting the British in recognising the architectural value of the pā was even evident upon occupation. Sarah Treadwell notes how the British replaced the Māori fortifications at Gate Pā with their own redoubt, a kind of architectural reinforcement by the victor (if occupation meant victory).³³ The captured ground would be made more British – ditches filled in, underground

³¹ Skinner "Representations of Architecture and New Zealand in London 1841-1860" p 122.

³² Harbison *The Built, the Unbuilt, and the Unbuildable* p 71.

³³ Treadwell "Images of Gate Pa" p 561.

bunkers buried, palisades replaced by stockades. James Alexander visited the site of Puketekauere pā some time after the battle and remarked how the Māori fortification was gone, and in its place "a strong and solidly constructed timber blockhouse occupied the height, with a good ditch, flanking defences and signal staff and yard."³⁴ Alexander's description reveals the British architectural preference for permanence and solid construction, in contrast to pā, which were perceived as weak and temporary.

Such preferences and perceptions meant that the British refused to believe that they had been beaten by architecture (to paraphrase Belich). The modern pā system was a successful "form of counter European warfare"³⁵ that played on British preconceptions as well as prejudices. For an empire drilled in Victorian values of heroism, honour and chivalry, the use of deception and trickery by Māori provoked moral and aesthetic difficulties.³⁶ When William Fox wrote that the "natives, with their usual cunning" had engineered the ruse at Gate Pā,

³⁴ Alexander *Incidents of the Maori War* p 163.

³⁵ Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 298.

³⁶ Thompson "'A Dangerous People Whose Only Occupation is War'" pp 113-114.

the comment is likely to be both compliment and insult, reflecting the difficulty that one culture had in interpreting the challenge presented by another.³⁷ This difficulty is especially intense in the case of warfighting pā which reflected British notions of fortification, but which also twisted and distorted these notions to devastating effect.

Pā-fluence

Warfighting pā disappeared – quite literally – after the 1860s. Their lightweight construction and temporary nature meant that the disappearance was quick. Unlike the castles of Europe there was no lingering blocks of stone left as a reminder of what had been. Once the grass had grown most pā slipped back into the fields from which they were constructed. Even those whose terracing was too prominent to fade totally from sight still dwindled from memory.

Born of inter-tribal tensions, perfected in the clash of cultures, pā died once the battleground shifted from the military to the social, economic, and political fields. No

³⁷ Belich notes that even when framed as a compliment, such comments "did not indicate a real objectivity" and in no way implied that Maori were the equals of the British. Belich *The New Zealand Wars* p 329.

longer needed, even the term lost its combative nature, later being used for small settlements and communities. Unlike the whare there would be no resurrection through innovation – the immediate architectural relevance of warfighting pā had gone and the cultural context has not required its return.

Some architects have sifted through what pā have to offer – two of Amanda Yates' houses – Step House and Continuum House – draw on the practice of excavation, or "the making of landscape spaces or exterior interiors."³⁸ Royal Associates' Te Putahi-a-Toi (the Māori Studies Building at Massey University) and Stephenson & Turners' Northland Correctional Facility at Ngawha both reference pā in their designs – the former through its northern wall acting as a palisade to passing traffic, and the latter through the rolling landscaping of the site. But these works have removed the clash of cultures from their referencing, preferring to use the shapes, forms and elements of pā without referencing the wider context that they were created in. Deception, trickery and cunning are not adopted as architectural tactics as with

³⁸ Yates "On Whenua, Landscape and Monumental Interiors" p 107.

pā.

Rewi Thompson is probably the closest we get in New Zealand to an architect who indulges in these sorts of tactics. The form of his Kohimarama home is derived from pā, confronting preconceptions of how a residential house should relate to the street and the outside world. Fully aware that the violence of the design was not something his neighbours would probably appreciate, Thompson sees it as a site of cultural clash. Like pā in the 1860s, "they have to get used to it or burn it down."³⁹ Thompson's use of materials in his Kohimarama home and in other projects such as Puukenga (the Māori Studies building at UNITEC) also plays with Western preconceptions of what is acceptable and meaningful. His palate is unashamedly raw, utilising plywood, galvanised steel, particle board and unpainted timber – materials which were outside what was generally acceptable to "the colonial value system."⁴⁰

But it is Māori artists who have more eagerly embraced the tactics of deception, trickery and

³⁹ "Rewi Thompson Architect" p 25.

⁴⁰ "Rewi Thompson Architect" p 26.

cunning when exploring the exchange between cultures. Māori artists have been twisting and distorting the ideas of reflection and mirroring for a number of decades. Rangihiroa Panoho talks of Māori artists using a similar type of control or alteration of reflection as a way to generate protection and control.⁴¹ Theirs is not a passive reflection of the culture before them, but an active filtering and reframing of ideas and information in the form of images. Mimicry, subterfuge, "and sometimes a gentle toying with and mocking of the ideas of the "other""⁴² are used by artists such as Peter Robinson, Michael Parekōwhai and Shane Cotton as a way to make their own space in a professional world framed by the dominant culture.

Works such as *The Bosom of Abraham* (a set of 14 kōwhaiwhai patterned lightboxes, described as "a palisade" in one exhibition catalogue)⁴³ and *Ten Guitars* (with "Patriot" branded into the guitar machine heads referencing the American missile system, and accompanied by missile-shaped guitar cases)⁴⁴ by Michael Parekōwhai have been described

⁴¹ Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" pp 284-285.

⁴² Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" p 284.

⁴³ *Good Work. The Jim Barr and Mary Barr Collection* p 24.

⁴⁴ *Michael Parekōwhai. Ten Guitars* p 14.

as barbed playfulness and "locating a space halfway between the battleground and the playground."⁴⁵ Others such as *Ataarangi* and *Indefinite Article* play on a multiplicity of readings, with the audience's preconceptions often determining the meaning they take from the work. All of these draw on the conflict between cultures, laying this bare rather than striving for a "type of earnest "biculturalism"."⁴⁶

Peter Robinson and Shane Cotton use similar tactics to lay bare the conflict between cultures. Works such as Peter Robinson's *100%* can be read as a frank admission of his own Māori heritage and therefore support for the official (non-Māori) measure of "Māori," or as a mocking of the "clumsy notions of ethnicity" that drive such statistical evaluations of identity.⁴⁷ Shane Cotton's *Sold* presents the viewer with the face of the Four Square grocer that we are all familiar with and feel safe with, but uses it as a part of a message about the voracious appetite for Māori land. The deception and trickery in *Sold* is amplified through a double appropriation, with the work also referencing

⁴⁵ *Good Work. The Jim Barr and Mary Barr Collection* p 24.

⁴⁶ Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" p 290.

⁴⁷ Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" p 286.

Dick Frizzell's use of the same grocer figure.

These works point to an ongoing need to interpret and explore the cultural clashes that still take place. As Panoho notes, "[a]lthough we no longer, like our nineteenth-century *tupuna* Kawiti, fire bullets at the "other" across trenches ... we do at times engage with one another in a war of words and images."⁴⁸ There is no end of history here. While the art world was sent on its march toward a bicultural ideal of new cultural formation by the likes of the Tovey generation, pivotal exhibitions such as *Choice!* in 1990 critiqued such a view and showed that such an ideal may not exist, and that more complex, politically motivated forms of cross cultural dialogue were taking hold.⁴⁹

Architecture missed out on a Tovey generation, but this hasn't saved it from striving for a bicultural ideal. Synthesis shall lead us to a true New Zealand architecture (so the belief goes), a journey beginning with John Scott's Futuna Chapel.⁵⁰ With no equivalent

⁴⁸ Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" pp 289-290.

⁴⁹ Panoho "Smoke and Mirrors" p 290. Brunt "Since "Choice!": Exhibiting the "New Maori Art"" p 230.

⁵⁰ McCarthy "Bicultural Architecture" 2009. McCarthy discusses Russell Walden's 1988 article "Towards a Bi-

to *Choice!* for architecture, there seems to be little to shift this belief. Recent buildings such as Gordon Moller's New Lynn Library and Tennent & Brown's TKR + TKKM o Mana Tamariki in Palmerston North show that the desire for synthesis remains strong. Deidre Brown's vision of the next chapter of Māori architecture also has Tovey overtones to it when she suggests "a return to customary concepts, materials and technologies, out of which old and new aesthetics emerge."⁵¹

Perhaps we can learn enough from the architecture of warfighting pā, with its deception, trickery and cunning, to break away from the obsessive belief in synthesis. Laying bare the conflict between cultures requires more than the whare (rendered comfortable and safe over time, despite its genesis). Perfected during the most violent times of cultural engagement, warfighting pā

are uniquely placed to inform today's war of words and images.

cultural Identity" pp 92-95 – where Futuna Chapel is used as an example of an architecture of synthesis and consensus. She also notes that Mike Linzey has equated synthesis with biculturalism when talking about Ringatu architecture. Mike Austin has also looked to Futuna Chapel as one of only two examples of bicultural architecture in New Zealand, the other being the 1851 Rangiatea Church, see Austin "Biculturalism and Architecture in Aotearoa/New Zealand."

⁵¹ Brown *Māori Architecture* p 161.

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