

## The last decade: the New Zealand architectural designs of Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928-2000) in the 1990s

Linda Tyler

**ABSTRACT:** Constructivist in his approach to both painting and architecture, the Austrian designer Friedensreich Hundertwasser's technical innovations in building anticipated many of the principles of sustainability which characterize eco-structures. These include rooftop planting for insulation and temperature control, rainwater harvesting and use of recycled materials including glassware. His regeneration of Kaurinui in Northland has been located by some within the tradition of Land Art in the way in which it interconnects ecology and humanity. He became a New Zealand citizen in 1986 and produced an architectural model called "Spiral Monument" as his entry for the architectural competition for the Museum of New Zealand in 1990. In it, some have seen a hybridizing of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* with Māori spiral designs. In 2021, his 1993 plan for improving a council building in the Town Basin in Whangārei and making it into an art gallery will come to fruition. His 1998 Kawakawa toilets have become iconic in the North. This paper will consider how these designs from the 1990s reflect Hundertwasser ongoing concern with rejecting rationalism in architecture.

Hundertwasser is best known as a painter, but from the 1950s onward, he began to focus increasingly on architectural design in the pursuit of his goal to create an architecture which connected humans with nature. Taking up residence in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1976 and being granted citizenship in October 1986, he was able to produce a few architectural designs for his adopted country in the 1990s, a decade which immediately preceded his early death at the age of 71 in February 2000. While it is on these projects that this paper will focus, I will first provide some background about Hundertwasser's attitude to building, since it differs considerably from the other Austrian émigrés who made this country their home in the post-war period.

Throughout his life, Hundertwasser wrote

copiously about architecture, and took the opportunity to disseminate his views through events and performances as well as publications. In 1958 he read out his "Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture" (*Verschimmelungsmanifest gegen den Raionalismus in der Architektur*) at an art and architecture event held at Seckau Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Styria, Austria:

Functional architecture has proved to be the wrong road to take, similar to painting with a straight-edged ruler ... Any modern architecture in which the straight line or the geometric circle have been employed for only a second – and were it only in spirit – must be rejected ... In order to rescue functional architecture from its moral ruin, a decomposing solution should be poured over all those glass walls and smooth concrete surfaces, so the moulding process can set in.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hundertwasser "Mould Manifesto Against Rationalism in Architecture" np.

He took steps to be as provocative as possible, and to ensure that his views were widely reported. In his "Speech in the Nude for the Right to a Third Skin" (*Nackstreden für das Anrecht auf eine dritte Haut*) which was delivered in the nude at Galerie Hartmann in Munich, on 12 December 1967, he announced that "[w]e live in buildings which are criminal and which were built by architects who are really criminals."<sup>2</sup>

It was as an Austrian, Hundertwasser said,

---

<sup>2</sup> Munich gallerist Richard P. Hartmann had invited Hundertwasser, Ernst Fuchs and Arnulf Rainer to perform an action, and had invited an audience to attend. Fuchs and Rainer prepared to start painting on naked models but Hundertwasser took the opportunity to strip off his own clothes and read out a speech condemning what he saw as the sterile grid system of architecture. Hundertwasser "Speech in the Nude for the Right to a Third Skin" np.

that he felt a moral obligation to combat functionalism in architecture, since fellow Austrians had unleashed on the modern world what he perceived to be a sterile approach to architectural design. In his 1968 speech "Loose from Loos: A Law Permitting Individual Building Alterations or Architecture-Boycott Manifesto," he laid the blame at the straight-edged door of Adolf Loos:

It was from Austria that this architectural crime as launched into the world. It is thus from Austria that reparations must come. The Austrian Adolf Loos brought this atrocity into the world. In 1908, with his manifesto aptly entitled "Ornament and Crime." No doubt he meant well. Adolf Hitler meant well too.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years later, he felt that the problem had been exacerbated by the global spread of the International Style. In 1989 he observed,

Rational architecture is costing us a lot for the huge losses it incurs far outstrip the savings this method of construction claims to bring. You are confusing true, lasting values with a short-term, materialistic, bottom-line mentality. True values are increased: quality of life, health, contentment, longing for romanticism, individuality, creativity, a life in harmony with nature, with your own dreams and with other people. Everybody knows that quality is the cheapest

---

<sup>3</sup> Schmied *For a more human architecture in harmony with nature* p 58.

commodity. The balance sheet is cooked when you leave [out] all the negative factors – vandalism, discontent, illness etc. – out of the equation.<sup>4</sup>

By the time he moved to the Kaurinui Valley in the Bay of Islands in the 1970s, Hundertwasser was beginning to translate his ideas on forested roofs, tree tenants and the window right into visual form using architectural models. Implementing these models, he was able to convey his conception of prototypes for a new form of building: the spiral house, the eye-slit house, the terrace house and the high-rise meadow house. Drawing on his experiences with earth building in Aotearoa, and the skills of model maker Peter Manhardt in Vienna, from 1974 he had added the pit house, the grass roof house and the green service station to his repertoire. These typologies were joined by the concept of the Green Motorway, a half-buried autobahn heavily planted with trees, which would be both invisible and inaudible.

In the early 1980s, he styled himself as an architectural doctor, redesigning the façade of the Rosenthal Porcelain Factory and the Mierka Grain Silo in Krems, Lower Austria as

---

<sup>4</sup> Schmied *For a more human architecture in harmony with nature* p 192.

well as the "tongue beards" he added to the windows of the Museum of Modern Art, the Rupertinum, in Salzburg. By the latter part of the decade, he was realizing entire architectural projects where there were uneven floors, roof gardens, and tree tenants. His aim was always to break away from a grid system where the straight line ruled to an organic approach that incorporated irregularities and allowed occupants of a building to add their own flourishes to the exterior as well as the interior.

Although Hundertwasser never saw himself as an architect, he tried to intervene in the dominant architectural culture of his time, giving lectures to the American Institute of Architects, the Development Committee of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in San Francisco, and to the Architectural Association in London in 1983.<sup>5</sup> In dismissing his ideas as unrealistic, and not meeting the demands of developers, Hundertwasser felt that the architects he spoke to were making excuses and abdicating their responsibilities to society by building sterile, cold and soulless architecture. His Residential Building for the City of Vienna (1983-85) was his proof that

---

<sup>5</sup> Harel "Hundertwasser: The Painter as Architect" p 172.

these professionals were wrong, and that more natural buildings that fitted human needs could be built just as economically and quickly as modernist blocks. As the designer for this building, he made a point of awarding the contract to the lowest tender. The building was completed using randomly chosen construction workers within two years, to comply with the requirements for communal buildings which were publicly funded. This building, with its organic shapes, dancing windows and a forested roof became his three-dimensional manifesto, frequently photographed and widely published, as his public toilet for Kawakawa would be in the 1990s.

Hundertwasser's belief in the endurance of organic architecture had its basis in his own practical experience in shipbuilding. In 1967 he had acquired the Sicilian-Tunisian cargo transport ship "San Giuseppe I" in Palermo. He spent seven years refurbishing it, and it was relaunched as "Regentag" in 1972. It became both his home and his painting studio. After several trial voyages, "Regentag" sailed from Venice via Malta, Gibraltar, the West Indies, Panama, the Galapagos and Tahiti to New Zealand, captained by Horst

Wächter, over 18 months in 1975-76.<sup>6</sup>

### **Becoming established in Aotearoa**

New Zealanders were well-acquainted with Hundertwasser's work by the time he arrived to live here, as a major exhibition of his graphic art had toured art galleries in Auckland, New Plymouth, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin in 1973. In 1974, he designed the poster for New Zealand's first Conservation Week.<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, disembarking from the "Regentag," he began to buy land in the Kaurinui Valley out towards Opuia from Kawakawa. He began to rebuild old existing structures on the land including a collapsed hut and a pigsty over the next 20 years. His approach to revitalizing these buildings anticipate many of the principles of sustainability which characterise eco-structures with rooftop planting for insulation and temperature control, rainwater harvesting, solar panels for generation of electricity and use of recycled materials including glass bottles as seen in the Bottle House (1979). Where his land had been

cleared for pasture by previous owners, he reforested the bare hills with the aim of returning the land to nature, an approach he had followed in other properties he owned such as La Picaudière in France, the "Giardino Eden" in Venice, Italy and in Zwettl, Austria. The goal was always to live in harmony with nature.

Also, in 1979, he published a book which was his reflection on life in his new home: *Aotearoa: Island of Lost Desire*. Hundertwasser both wrote the text for this book (in three languages German, English, French), and designed the publication's layout as well as taking some of the photographs.<sup>8</sup> Images in the book testify to Hundertwasser's integration of art and architecture with his everyday life and the principle of living in harmony with nature at Kaurinui. Hundertwasser became a New Zealand citizen in 1986, two years after Aussie Malcolm as Minister of Health in the Muldoon government had granted his exceptional request to be buried on his own property

---

<sup>6</sup> "The Ship Regentag" np.

<sup>7</sup> Hundertwasser "Conservation Week 1974 [Poster]"

---

<sup>8</sup> Others were contributed by German photographer Gerd Ludwig. Those taken by Hundertwasser were marked with D standing for Hundertwasser's name Dunkelbunt, which means: glowing in pure strong and deep colours, a little sad like seen on a rainy day.

rather than in a cemetery.<sup>9</sup>

Hundertwasser was also interested in indigenous building methods and in particular the whare mahana or wharepuni, which was designed to be partially buried for extra warmth with an excavated floor. His design for the Mountain Hut at Kaurinui is dug into the slope of the hill so that three quarters of the height of the back of the hut is underground. Sides of the hut taper down on an angle to join the front wall which has recycled windows and a chimney along its façade. The construction is a mixture of lengths of mānuka cut into 30 cm pieces and laid flat with ends showing towards the inside and outside of the hut, and square blocks of *Pinus radiata* cut from an old felled tree, with all the walls mortared together with lime. One side wall has an infill of recycled glass bottles, and there is a dirt floor.

### **Public toilets, Kawakawa (1999)**

After he had come to even greater prominence in the community for his involvement with saving a heritage building in Kawakawa in the 1980s, Sue Hodge of the Far North District Council, Kaikohe asked Hundertwasser to

redesign a 1960s toilet block on the main street of Kawakawa. He was delighted to oblige, donating his time to what was initially intended to be a redecoration project. However, more thoroughgoing renovations were required, and Hundertwasser became personally involved in the reconstruction, collaborating with local Māori artists and the potter Peter Yates. Hundertwasser created the columns on the exterior by assembling mass-produced and colourfully glazed Asian ceramic vases, for example. Walls of bottles were integrated into the design as a reference to the Bottlehouse on his own property. The grass roof was to be fertilized by visitors' deposits, and he himself planted trees in the turf atop the structure. He also selected a plane tree for the front of the building and a tulip tree for the back.

His speech at the opening of the building expressed his attitude towards the gift:

I am very happy that I could do something for Kawakawa. It is only a toilet but it should show that even small things can bring beauty into our life. A little bit more feeling brings a lot more fun. We live only once and money making is not all. It is harmony with beauty and harmony with nature which makes us really feel good. Beauty has an important function. Beauty is always underestimated. I am sorry I am not here today but I hate being in the centre of interest. This is why I

live in New Zealand. What I did must speak for itself and not my person. I want to thank all of you who contributed to this little building: especially Doug and Noma Shepherd, Mike Browers, Richard Smart, Woody, The Kawakawa Community Board, The Kawakawa Business Association, The Bay of Islands Students, The woodworkers, tile setters, pavement workers and especially the friendly atmosphere in which I could work.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did he reconceptualize the building, he also designed ceramic signs for "Male" and "Female" to direct users to either side of the building. Subsequently, he used these same signs for all the public toilets in his architecture projects. The Kawakawa toilets are the only Hundertwasser project to be built in the southern hemisphere, and the community benefits from tourism associated with them – they are the number 2 attraction listed on Trip Advisor for the town, and the Kawakawa toilets now attract around 10,000 visitors per month.

### **The New Zealand National Monument**

Two years after Northlander James Belich (1927-2015) became mayor of Wellington in 1986, he approached Hundertwasser asking him to design a building for the Wellington waterfront that acknowledged both the

<sup>9</sup> "Authority for a Burial at a Special Place" p 236.

<sup>10</sup> "Kawakawa Public Toilets" np.

heritage of both Pākehā and Māori in Aotearoa. Government organisations in the late 1980s were preparing to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and a 1990 Commission had been formed with Dr Michael Bassett, then Minister of Internal Affairs, as its chair. Bassett's name appears on Hundertwasser's drawing below the underlined phrase "bi cultured society," based his concept for this building on his design for a koru flag which he had proposed as a secondary ensign for Aotearoa to accompany the official flag. The drawing shows that he conceived of the building as comprising two mounds, one which is based on the fortifications of a pā site and the other which references European architecture. There is an annotation on the drawing which reads, "Irregular glass front with Victorian stile [sic] elements." Hundertwasser's own annotation from 1988 has connected this design to the competition for the creation of a Museum of New Zealand:

The structure should be five stories high and consist of a Māori pillow consisting of a Māori Pā in spiral form and a sloping European pillow with a lawn-garden reaching down to the floor level. Both pillows combined with a grass and garden bridge planted with native wind-resistant trees. The structure will house documentation of N.Z. history, conference halls, maybe cinema, library, offices, restaurants. Māori museum, Settler museum, etc.

The green garden ramp, union bridge and garden spiral will be open to the public at all times day and night like any public ground though it consists of a roof. [...] This monument will give pride and unity to the nation and lift New Zealand up to a nation with a high culture and a high standard of humanity giving the world an example of how to act as a bicultural society and to act in harmony with the laws of nature and human creativity.<sup>11</sup>

### **The new Hundertwasser Museum**

In 2014 debate raged in Whangārei about whether or not to proceed with a proposal to build an arts centre to honour Friedensreich Hundertwasser's association with Northland. A binding referendum decided the issue in March 2015 and in 2021, Hundertwasser's 1993 plan for altering a council building in the Town Basin in Whangārei to house a gallery will be implemented. The Hundertwasser Art Centre will span two levels and include two galleries, a learning centre, a theatre, café and a shop. It will feature state-of-the-art exhibition spaces, a main gallery of Hundertwasser's work on the top floor and a contemporary Māori Art Gallery on the ground level. Adjacent to the existing two-storey Harbour Board building and an area currently used as a car park, the building is

estimated to draw 150,000 tourists a year, and to help promote Whangārei as a prime tourist destination. Heinz Springmann, the architect on many of Hundertwasser's projects, has produced plans for the Centre, and the Hundertwasser Non-Profit Foundation, established in 1998, plans to tour art works from its museum in Vienna for display there. A Wairau Māori Advisory Panel set up to advise on the design in 2012 takes its name (Wairau) from the transliteration of the word Hundertwasser which means One Hundred Waters in English. The Wairau Māori Art Gallery will exhibit only Toi Iho artists – those whose work has been authenticated as Māori made. Twenty-one years after his death, Hundertwasser's vision for a "bicultural" monument will be realized.

---

<sup>11</sup> Hundertwasser letter, *Hundertwasser 1928-2000* p 1240.

## REFERENCES

- "Authority for a Burial at a Special Place" *The Yet Unknown Hundertwasser* ed. Fürst, Andrea and Doris Truppe. Munich: Prestel, 2008:232-239. entag\_611
- Harel, Joram "Hundertwasser: The Painter as Architect" *The Yet Unknown Hundertwasser* ed. Andrea Fürst and Doris Truppe Munich: Prestel, 2008:172-179.
- Hundertwasser 1928-2000 Catalogue Raisonné* Cologne: Taschen 2002.
- Hundertwasser, Friedensreich "Conservation Week 1974 [Poster]" (1974) Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa GH009662 <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/559540>
- Hundertwasser, Friedensreich "Mould Manifesto Against Rationalism in Architecture" (1958/1959/1964) The Hundertwasser Non Profit Foundation [https://hundertwasser.com/en/texts/verschimmelungsmanifest\\_gegen\\_den\\_rationalismus\\_in\\_der\\_architektur](https://hundertwasser.com/en/texts/verschimmelungsmanifest_gegen_den_rationalismus_in_der_architektur)
- Hundertwasser, Friedensreich "Speech in the Nude for the Right to a Third Skin" (1967) The Hundertwasser Non Profit Foundation [https://hundertwasser.com/en/texts/nacktrede\\_fuer\\_das\\_anrecht\\_auf\\_die\\_dritte\\_haut](https://hundertwasser.com/en/texts/nacktrede_fuer_das_anrecht_auf_die_dritte_haut)
- Hundertwasser, Friedensreich *Aotearoa: Insel der verlorenen Wünsche: island of lost desire: île des désirs perdus; Hundertwasser in New Zealand* Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus, 1979.
- "Kawakawa Public Toilets" The Hundertwasser Non Profit Foundation (2020) [https://hundertwasser.com/en/architecture/arch119\\_oeffentliche\\_toilette\\_kawakawa\\_1554](https://hundertwasser.com/en/architecture/arch119_oeffentliche_toilette_kawakawa_1554)
- Schmied, Wieland *For a more human architecture in harmony with nature: Hundertwasser Architecture* Cologne: Taschen 1997.
- "The Ship Regentag" The Hundertwasser Non Profit Foundation (2020) [https://hundertwasser.com/en/architecture/703\\_arch12\\_das\\_schiff\\_reg](https://hundertwasser.com/en/architecture/703_arch12_das_schiff_reg)