

# Te Papa Tongarewa: A theological response to the building

The architectural brief for the design of New Zealand's National Museum called for a building that would 'powerfully express the total culture of New Zealand' and represent the 'bicultural nature of the country, recognising the *mana* and significance of the two mainstreams of tradition and cultural heritage and provide for each to contribute effectively to a statement of the nation's identity.'<sup>1</sup>

The expression of identity, particularly the identity of a people, is a considerable challenge, but it is one that Christianity, along with other faiths, is well practised at. Personal identity for Christians is marked out by a story told of God's creative and redemptive gathering together in Christ, a people to be a witness in worship and in mission. The story is told and enacted whenever that people meets for worship and celebrates its identity in baptism and in eucharist, and it is told, too, in the architecture of worship. Church buildings are themselves liturgies, giving glory to God, and proclaiming a story about God's place in the world.

But what of the identity of a nation? What story is to be told in a National Museum of who we are as a people, of the history that has formed us, of what binds us together in the present and provides a basis upon which we can move into the future? Much has been written already, and much of it highly critical, of the way the identity of Pakeha culture in particular has been portrayed in the museum. The Maori cultural items are displayed with great reverence in ways commanding quiet and respectful consideration, whereas European and more recent settler displays were frequently criticised, initially at least, for having the character of an amusement arcade.<sup>2</sup> Most critics had no argument with the respect encouraged for Maori cultural heritage but some lamented what 'seems to be a scrupulous avoidance of the sacred in the Pakeha cultural history'.<sup>3</sup>

I do not propose to add further to the debate occasioned by the exhibition halls but rather to consider how the bicultural identity of New Zealand



**Maori identity is perceived by the architects as oriented to the land, to nature, to what is given to humanity for our habitation and for blessing.**

**European identity on the other hand is oriented to what is made with our own hands, to an order fashioned according to our own design**



Above: Te Papa main entrance and grey 'fault-line' wall that runs from the exterior through the whole interior.



Left: Te Papa conceptual plan<sup>5</sup>.



Above: Te Papa gate sign and museum exterior.

Below: Museum architectural detail.

Right: Bush City aerial view.

Courtesy of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.



the building, albeit in a form somewhat altered from the original plan by force of changing client priorities. Maori identity is clearly conceived in terms of openness to that which lies beyond, the land, the sea, the sky, whereas European identity is determined much more clearly according to an order that Europeans have fashioned for themselves.

This is an interesting juxtaposition; Maori identity is perceived by the architects as oriented to the land, to nature, to what is given to humanity for our habitation and for blessing. European identity on the other hand is oriented to what is made with our own hands, to an order fashioned according to our own design. This is interesting theologically. Is it true that European culture is best represented by an order that we have imposed upon the world, while Maori culture and identity is best conceived in terms of its orientation to something other than itself, to something received as gift to be enjoyed and inhabited but never possessed?

There are theological resonances here - resonances that may cause us to wonder whether the building reflects accurately, though perhaps unwittingly so far as the theology goes, the largely secular identity of European cultures in New Zealand as contrasted with a Maori culture still perceived as 'spiritual'.

- 1 pp18-19, 18, Bossley, Pete. *Concepts in Culture* in *Architecture New Zealand*, Special Edition, Feb 1998, 18-19, 18.
- 2 This reaction is reported by Michael Goldsmith in 'Our Place' in *New Zealand Culture: How the Museum of New Zealand Constructs Bi-Culturalism* in *Ethnologies Compared*, no.6 (Spring 2003).
- 3 Jolly, Margaret. *On the Edge? Deserts, Oceans, Islands* in *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13.2 (Fall, 2001) 417-466. 446-7.
- 4 Bossley, *Concepts in Culture*, 18.
- 5 The graphic is taken from Pete Bossley's article *Concepts Redirect, Redevelop*, in *Architecture New Zealand*, Special Edition (Feb 1998) 22-23, 23. Bossley was one of the architects from Jasmax who led the design team.

as referred to in the architectural brief is portrayed in the building itself. Again here, there are interesting contrasts between the ways in which Maori and Pakeha identity have been conceived. For the architectural firm Jasmax, winners of the competition to design the National Museum, the nation's identity was conceived as an evolving relationship between two cultures that have settled differently in this one land. While Maori settlement favoured orientation to an open landscape and the rising sun, with enclosure behind, the predominant European approach utilised an orthogonal street grid to mark and inhabit the land.<sup>4</sup> These preferences are expressed in the planning of Te Papa. The marae and Maori galleries are oriented to the sea and sky with the hills of Wellington behind, while the European or Tangata Tiriti galleries take their form from the grid of the city much closer at hand.

The conceptual plan shown on the previous page<sup>5</sup> reveals the concepts that generated the design of

Spirituality designates, at the very least, openness to an order not of our own making.

A further feature of the building is the symbolic fault line that runs through it. A fault line represents the ever-present threat of disruption and reordering. The geological threat is undoubtedly the reference here, but that it should feature so prominently in a building designed to represent our identity as a people may serve also to remind us of the fragility of human identity, a fragility not overcome by the works of human hands but solely by the creative and redemptive love of God.



#### Dr Murray Rae

Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of Otago, (formerly an architect).