

# The Challenge of Creating a Bicultural Museum

Ken Gorbey

The vision for the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa has arisen primarily out of a debate among the people of New Zealand on the nature of their society. To understand this Museum it is necessary to know something of the cultural makeup and history of our country.

New Zealand is a pluralistic society—it has a multicultural base. Pakehas, people of European origin, account for around 80% of the population, while the Maori, descendants of the original Polynesian settlers who discovered and developed a distinctive culture in New Zealand, make up 13%. The rest are recent Pacific Island migrants and a variety of other cultural groups (Indian, Chinese, etc). In some respects this broad population spectrum is not dissimilar to that of the United States of America.

## Biculturalism

However there is one critical difference. New Zealand is aiming towards a bicultural future. Biculturalism in New Zealand is an historical imperative that arises out of the partnership entered into when many of the Maori tribes and representatives of the British crown signed the Treaty of Waitangi some 150 years ago. This accord guaranteed to the Maori the maintenance of their rights to land and *taonga* (treasures broadly defined) and in their eyes at least established a joint governance regime. However, it is only in the last two or three decades that it has become the basis for serious negotiation between the two parties to establish a working relationship encompassing the needs of both.

## Biculturalism and New Zealand's Museums

In museum terms these negotiations began in the 1960s and early 1970s when a number of museums in regions with strong Maori populations took tentative

steps to involve Maori people in institutional decision-making. While in retrospect many of these initiatives now look distinctly paternalistic, the resulting museum programs demonstrated that Maori culture was alive and flourishing, something not necessarily acknowledged by museum displays of the time. Commonly these displays included little of 20th century Maori achievements. By the early 1980s this process had advanced to the point where the Management Committee organising the *Te Maori* exhibition (to the USA) had a dominantly Maori membership, although at that time there were very few Maoris in the museum profession.

The Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa was the next step in opening the dominantly Pakeha museum world to

living Maori culture by recognising in its founding concept statement the special relationship between "the two main-streams of tradition and cultural heritage" (Maori and Pakeha). At an organizational level this bicultural commitment was expressed in a number of departments, each with its own Director, covering the natural environment, arts and history of New Zealand and its place in the Pacific and wider world.

## The Department of Maori Art and Culture

One of the four curatorial departments is to be a Department of Maori Art and Culture. The staff of this Department is expected to be dominantly, though not necessarily solely, Maori. Further, there is a general acceptance of the need for



*Enrichments to the Museum Marae are in the hands of the Marae Briefing Group: Front row: Apirana Mahuika (MoNZ Consultant); Thelma Rogers (Architect); Cliff Whiting (Leader of the Briefing Group); Ivan Mercep (Lead Architect); Pete Bossley (Architect); Hamish Keith (Briefing Group and MoNZ Board); Te Aue Davis (Briefing Group). Back row: Elizabeth Kerekere (Project Officer); Ken Gorbey (Senior Project Officer); Scott Simeral (Ralph Appelbaum Associates, Exhibitions Consultant); Tome Dixon (Architectural Advisor).*

Maori people to be involved throughout the new Museum in all areas and departments. The resulting presence of Maori people in the Museum alongside Pakeha colleagues, and the use of the Maori language alongside English, is expected to be a major element in achieving an institution that is bicultural in deed as well as in concept. It should be noted that in view of the paucity of Maori people in the museum profession, the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa has initiated a training program that places particular emphasis on offering experience to Maori trainees.

### The Marae

Another very important physical facility that arises out of Maori culture will be part of the Museum. This is the Marae, which has become something of a conceptual gift from Maori society to the Museum. The process whereby the concept of Marae has been allied to the concept of Museum in such a way that the essential elements of each has been maintained has been an excellent example of biculturalism in action.

A Marae is the central place of Maori society, a cluster of ceremonial buildings that is the focus of the cultural activity of a particular *iwi* (tribe), *hapu* (sub-tribe) or *whanau* (extended family). It is a place that visiting groups can approach in peace to be welcomed and hosted by the local people. Certain prescribed protocols govern the ceremonial progression on to the Marae, a progression that culminates in the carved meeting house or *wharenui*. However the traditional Marae model had certain difficulties when directly imposed on a museum, a course of action that was promoted by some for the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa.

As a result, the task of describing the Marae for the Museum became a most important one and was placed in the hands of a working party of Maori consultants (centered on Api Mahuika) and Project Office staff (the Pakeha side of

the equation). Eighteen months of negotiation has resulted in a Marae model that while radical, has recently been enthusiastically endorsed by a number of tribal gatherings throughout New Zealand.

The radical nature of the new Marae model is best seen in the following:

- The ceremonial approach to, and orientation of, Marae are governed by broad protocols that while attained with ease in the normal open rural setting, are more difficult to incorporate into a large structure on a confined urban site. Despite this, the Board has required that the correct orientation should be maintained. The Architects have responded by making the approach to the Marae the single most critical axis of the new building. Further the Marae is one of the most important and dominant elements of the design.
- Normally *mana whenua* decrees that the Marae is owned by the local people (owners of the land—*whenua*) and it is their protocols that govern the use of a Marae. However the Museum is a national institution that cannot be owned by any one group. Therefore the Museum Marae is to be governed by the concept of *mana taonga*. Through this concept all cultures who have treasures in the Museum (whether they be Maori, Greek, Pacific Island, etc) will have the right to stand on the Marae and use it for their ceremonies and events.
- The traditional Marae stand upon *papa* (the earth) and is open to *rangi* (the sky). It tends to be used intermittently as the need arises. However the Museum Marae will be in large part internal although it is a design requirement that the architect should maintain strong links with the land and sky. It will be developed as one of the Museum's major educational and performance venues and as a result it will be a place of constant rather than intermittent activity.

The Marae has been the subject perhaps the strongest negotiation a some of the most detailed consideration of any element of the new Museum.

### A Bicultural Museum:

#### What Success—the Building?

Over the last month the Project Team has been reviewing the architects' preliminary sketch design and this has proved an ideal time for the Board to assess whether or not they believe that the building will assist in the process of creating a bicultural Museum.

Nga Kaiwawao, the Maori Committee of the Board, expressed general satisfaction with the design commenting favorably on the placement and prominence of various cultural elements in the building and the ability of the building to allow both elements of bi-culturalism, that is the development of activities that were either specifically Maori or specifically Pakeha, and the interaction and integration of activities among cultures. Structurally the building did not preclude interaction and the Nga Kaiwawao concluded that this was a positive element of the design.

### A Bicultural Museum:

#### What Success—the Institution?

At this early stage of planning it is impossible to say with any great confidence that the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa is a bicultural institution. We are still very unsure of the criteria against which such an assessment should be made. This particular assessment can only be applied when the Museum is under all the pressures associated with being an operating institution.

Suffice it to say at this time that while there will be many difficulties to be faced in the future, certain landmark bicultural negotiations have strengthened the Museum concept and demonstrated a willingness on the part of the traditional mainstream cultures involved in the project to seek the best for their new Museum. □

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