

# Genius loci: *identity and the New Zealand garden*

Philip Smith<sup>1</sup>

*"To build, to plant, whatever you intend,  
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,  
To swell the Terras, or to sink the Grot;  
In all let Nature never be forgot .....  
Consult the genius of the place in all ...."*

Alexander Pope,  
Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington

New Zealand is currently undergoing an important stage in its evolution as a nation. The dominant cultural influences on New Zealand's population have shifted during the past 200 years from the indigenous Maori culture, to the English colonial empire, to the present modern state. Our contemporary cultural identity is difficult to define; a statement that could easily be applied to New Zealand gardens [1]. Rod Barnett, in *A History of the Garden in New Zealand*, goes as far as to say that "the New Zealand garden does not exist" as a distinct style. Despite the aforementioned author's assertion that this is "not a conclusion to be disturbed by", I must admit to being disturbed by this. New Zealand's distinctive culture and landscape should be strongly reflected in our gardens as an assertion of our national and regional identities. This article sets out to discuss the manner in which we may explore New Zealand identity in our treatment of gardens and the landscape.

The opening extract of this article is from the epistle (written in 1730-1731) by the English poet, Alexander Pope, to the Earl of Burlington, in which he describes his beliefs on appropriate forms for architecture

and gardening. This was essentially a reactionary polemic against what Pope perceived as the insubstantial (and in his opinion, tasteless) works of many of his contemporaries in art, architecture or gardening [2]. These were juxtaposed with his expression of the virtue of basing cultural works on the "foundation" of the *genius* (or the essential spirit) of the place. This became an important tenet of the 18th Century English Landscape Garden movement. Despite the polemical tone of Pope's poem, its message is relevant to the landscape profession today, particularly in light of an increasing focus on "regionalism". In New Zealand, the leading advocate of this is the Landscape Architecture Group at Lincoln University, whose overall approach is described as "critical regionalism" [3].

The concept of the *genius* of a place (or *genius loci*) is derived from the Roman concept of the presiding spirit of a place [4]. The use of the term, *genius loci*, in this article is intended to describe an integrated concept of local character, incorporating principles of 'natural' (or native) ecology and the cultural landscape vernacular (taken here as the distinct forms within our landscape that arise from everyday life). As part of

research into "critical regionalism", Egoz and Bowring of the Landscape Architecture Group, Lincoln University, published an interesting article earlier this year on an integrated approach to exploring regional identity [5]. Their "complex ecological aesthetic" focussed mainly on the integration of native ecology and New Zealand's pastoral landscapes, to develop "landscape approaches that are both culturally and ecologically sustainable" [5, p. 65]. The greater design integrity derived from such an approach is an important outcome of a more complex investigation of regional identity.

The importance of maintaining the distinctiveness of New Zealand's 'natural' landscapes and native flora is now well-established, as evidenced by the 2003 RNZIH conference on urban biodiversity, and current media interest in this hot topic. Consequently, the case for the assertion of our national identity through reference to native ecology and the use of native plants is a logical argument (if still somewhat contentious to some). However, the place of the New Zealand cultural vernacular in defining identity in our constructed landscape is less clear. This is, in my opinion, due to a common assumption that New Zealand does not have a notably distinct or, perhaps better said, identifiable culture. The importance of the landscape vernacular is that it reflects aspects of the New Zealand character, as it is formed by the way in which we live our lives, and the effect of this on the landscape. The vernacular is the physical legacy of the history and development of the country as a whole, as well as its individual regions.

<sup>1</sup> O2 Landscapes, 15 Gorrie Avenue, Epsom, Auckland; p.smith@o2landscapes.com

## Plant ecologies and identity

Native plants have moved beyond fringe interest to become an important resource for garden makers and landscape professionals in this country [6]. The most spectacular recent example of this was in the highly successful New Zealand garden exhibit at the 2004 Chelsea Flower Show, in which a refreshingly wide range of native plants was effectively displayed alongside stylised features of the New Zealand landscape and Maori mysticism. A greater focus on biodiversity should also stimulate an increased interest in the distinctive ecologies of our native flora, not just on the plants themselves. This is not a unique or new view, but it is one that has been scarcely translated into practice by the landscape profession. A focus on regional ecologies should not be confused with eco-sourcing (and the contentious issues surrounding that). The latter is a prescriptive approach aimed at preserving biodiversity, whilst the former should be viewed as a creative tool for the enhancement of our art through the fundamental scientific practice of observation.

I recently came across an inspirational plant community in an area of coastal forest at Karekare, west of Auckland, in which *Astelja banksii*, the creeping fern (*Microsorium pustulatum*), a ground fern (*Polystichum* sp.), and the charming native forget-me-not (*Myosotis petiolata* var. *pansa*), formed a harmonic scene with assorted shrub species, including a tree daisy (*Olearia furfuracea*), beneath a low pohutukawa canopy. The self-ordering mechanisms of nature mould communities like this into visually-unified scenes. One can read of the principles of planting design from any of the myriad of books on the matter, but one can best come to an understanding of the natural order of plant communities by observing the harmony that is derived from

extended co-habitation. In ecology, necessity is the mother of beauty.

For those interested in the use of native plants within the garden, the appropriate place to derive inspiration is in the field. To this end, amenity horticulturists can benefit from the considerable knowledge base of botanists in discovering local identity. Yet, this resource is almost completely ignored by landscapers and gardeners, possibly due to a belief that the specialist scientific interest of botanists is non-transferable or irrelevant to the use of plants in the garden. I would contend that the opposite is true. A heightened knowledge of plant physiology and ecology can be a source for artistic inspiration. We do not need to adhere slavishly to literal naturalistic translations of our regional floras and ecologies; they may inspire us to abstracted representations of indigenous forms.

An illustration of this is a feature that I recently included in a garden design in Parnell, Auckland. In order to enhance the space fully, it was decided to fabricate a sculpture which would act as a clothesline (this function being necessary within the small area being developed). The sculpture consists of individual curved wrought iron rods emerging from the courtyard, culminating in heads whose form is based on the shape of the cladodes (modified stems which function as, and resemble, leaves) of toatoa (*Phyllocladus toatoa*), a beautiful tree which is endemic to the north of New Zealand (notably in the Auckland province). The connection to an endemic species creates an added resonance for the client, linking the work

to the toatoa tree that is to be planted on the property, and in turn to the distinctive plant communities of which toatoa is a member.

A well-known example of the use of a distinctive indigenous plant form in art is the integration of a colonnade of metal nikau palms into the architecture of the Wellington Public Library, designed by Ian Athfield. These nikau succeed not only as an expression of regional identity, but as an outstanding piece of design. This is the key to advancing the use of the native flora by New Zealanders. We should never forget the fact that gardens are made for people, and, therefore, must be appealing. Native gardens rely too often on the ethic of restoration as their selling point. The virtue of preserving biodiversity is insufficient as a driving factor for increasing the profile of our distinct landscape forms in gardens (particularly as we move farther into the future and the novelty of conservation wears off).

The landscape profession in New Zealand should learn from the *genius loci*, and enhance it in the manifestation of local identity in gardens. However, rather than producing generic visions of nature (often false representations from a regional perspective), we need to foster challenging, innovative design to escape the risk of native plants being viewed as confined to 'native gardens'. Certain native species have



A sculpture in a Parnell garden, consisting of individual curved wrought iron rods culminating in heads, the form of which is based on the shape of the cladodes of toatoa (*Phyllocladus toatoa*)

already been utilised extensively in landscape/garden genres outside the 'native garden' style. Examples include the use of toothed lancewood (*Pseudopanax ferox*) and nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*) in modernist gardens; or the widespread use of puka-nui (*Meryta sinclairii*) and akapuka (*Griselinia lucida*) in 'sub-tropical' gardens. We need to increase the range of species in popular use and increase the relevance of our native plants by utilising them in a variety of manners.

## Non-vegetal landscape elements and identity

This article has so far explored the potential of increased attention to indigenous plants and plant communities, as inspiration for distinctive New Zealand garden forms. However, plants are not the only elements of our natural places which can be referred to as inspiration for regionalist gardens. The post-modernist architectural theorist, Charles Jencks, states that gardens can represent a microcosm of greater natural ordering systems (on varying levels in his works, from the flow of rivers to the grand mechanisms of the universe) [7]. Gardens can remind us of the underlying character of the land which we have adjusted through our activities, and also of the character of significant natural areas which are distant from our everyday lives.

Unique landscape features may include the water flow of braided river systems of the South Island, the distinct cliff formations of the Hinuera valley, local bird populations, or the composition of rocks and rock pools on the Takapuna waterfront. These features may be geological, hydrological, climatic, fauna-related, or relating to other natural processes or forms. The Australian architect, Glenn Murcutt, explores aspects of climate (such as wind, water and light) ingeniously in his work. One of

the most remarkable international examples of the creation of a public space inspired by natural forms and processes is Lawrence Halprin's Lovejoy Plaza in Portland, Oregon. It was inspired by the High Sierra of California, and is an abstract representation of topographical form and hydrological processes [8].

By exploring the physiography of our land in our gardens, we can preserve our own stories. By referring to Auckland's volcanic heritage, we remind ourselves of the violent forces that shaped the land here. This could be incorporated into landscape design by abstracted representations of lava flows, or by highlighting soil stratification (a chronological measure of volcanic activity). A salient feature of the New Zealand landscape is the way in which water moves through the landscape. Considering the popularity of water features in New Zealand gardens and public spaces, a detailed consideration of local hydrological processes could provide some innovative pieces of design (such as Halprin's plaza). In addition, the presence of imagery of our fauna in gardens has increased markedly in recent years (notably through sculpture), and is another area in which we can explore regional identity. The challenge is to move beyond kitsch or half-gestures, towards design that truly relates to the distinctive forms of our landscape.

## The cultural vernacular and identity

"All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them" [9]. The same can be said of the landscape vernacular, and for this reason we should be celebrating this more in our garden-making and landscape architecture. However, in order to be able to achieve this, we must first be able to identify just what constitutes

our national and regional landscape vernaculars. It is also helpful to understand the ways in which these have formed. It is important to actively consider these matters because, as Colin Meurk pointed out in the 2003 Banks Memorial Lecture [10], "our culture now evolves consciously rather than spontaneously as in past history". As the needs that shaped our cultural landscape are made irrelevant by modern technology, the vernacular landscape forms that developed in response to these needs are at risk of disappearing (and, therefore, erasing the physical mark of our distinct stories from our landscape).

## Traditional Maori cultural vernacular

The first period of development of distinctive New Zealand cultural forms followed the settlement of the Maori peoples in New Zealand. They brought Polynesian ideologies and customs with them, which were altered in relation to the context of a substantially different land from those of their ancestors. The mythology and cultural practices of Maori are rich resources for artists or designers in this country, and represent a different sensibility from European-based culture. These can provide us with an extensive vocabulary of indigenous landscape forms. There is far more to Maori visual culture than the koru (a very heavily used symbol in New Zealand art, and one that has parallels in other cultures). They should also not be viewed as anthropological fossils, but updated to reflect the dynamic state of contemporary Maori culture.

Vernacular Maori cultural forms include the devices and customs used by Maori for survival. The beautiful forms of Maori fishhooks are well known, but other fishing and hunting devices, such as hinaki (eel-catching pots) and snares, are not so well known. Similarly, the design of pa or of traditional buildings was related to survival and the constant cultural dialogue with the land. Maori



Water feature in Quay Park with the three-fingered hand motif based on Ngati Whatua imagery, designed by Ted Smyth

mythology may also provide us with a powerful reference base for design, as it was derived from an intimate connection with nature (a spiritual interpretation of the *genius loci*). The Auckland landscape architect, Ted Smyth, integrated aspects of local Ngati Whatua lore in his design for Quay Park on Auckland's waterfront, representing local traditions rather than generic abstractions of Maori forms. An interesting component of Maori culture/lore is the natural history whakapapa, which describe the relationships between apparently disparate natural entities and their relevance to people. One example is the relationship of *Puawhananga* (*Clematis paniculata*), offspring of *Rehua* (the star of Antares), both of which are signs of the onset of summer, and the *tuna* (eel) because the timing of eel life cycle (and subsequently, eeling) was connected with the appearance of these celestial and floral entities.

## The 'modern' cultural vernacular

When discussing indigenous culture, I believe that we have reached a point in our history at which this term can relate to more than just pre-European Maori culture (and its development in modern New Zealand). The term 'indigenous' means "originating or occurring naturally in a particular place" [4].

that a cultural cringe exists around our 'modern' cultural heritage, as this too forms an integral part of the New Zealand vernacular.

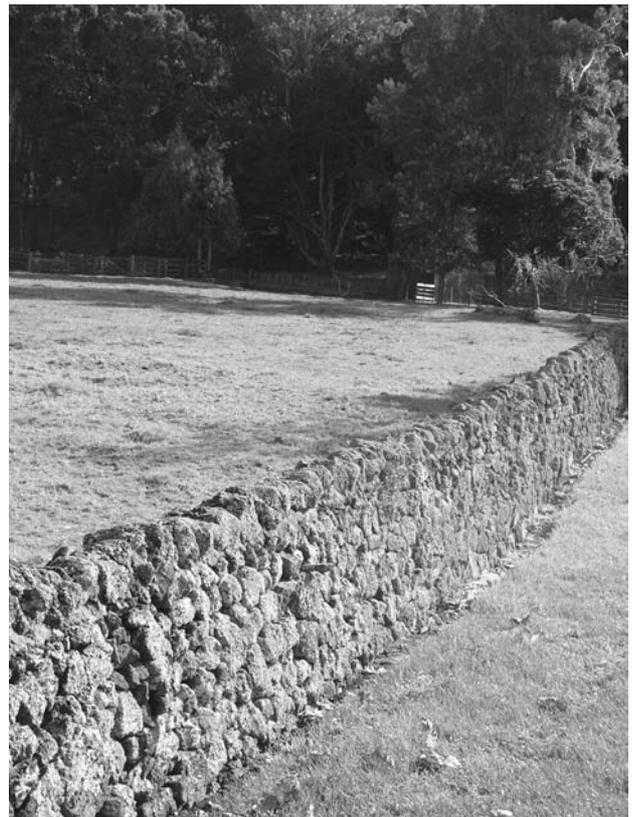
New Zealand's 'modern' vernacular forms are derived from the integration of introduced culture and the context of the place. The necessity of adapting to local conditions is well illustrated by the adjustment of our architecture to New Zealand's position on a fault line, and the subsequent regular occurrence of earthquakes. This, combined with the wealth of timber at hand, resulted in the less frequent use of bricks in building in New Zealand than in England [11], a characteristic that is reflected in garden/landscape forms as well. A notable feature of many regions throughout New Zealand is the art of drystone walling (such as the volcanic drystone walls of Northland), which was brought here by British immigrants who then adapted to local stone supplies. The adaptation to local building materials is nowhere

This is true of much more of New Zealand society now than the traditional interpretation of indigenous (as the first human inhabitants of the land). I refer here to the New Zealand cultural vernacular following colonisation and leading up to the present day. It is regrettable

better illustrated than in Oamaru, where an excellent source of local stone stimulated the development of a majestic town centre (although this does not, strictly speaking, qualify as vernacular architecture).

Local identity was further enhanced by the different regional backgrounds of the settlers who came with colonisation [9]. Christchurch's English heritage is apparent in the vernacular architecture and townscape, as is the legacy of the predominantly Scottish settlers in Dunedin. In New Plymouth, settlers from Devon and Cornwall built cob cottages, even though there was an extensive supply of timber available [9]. An interesting example of a vernacular landscape form is the use of a South African plant, *Tecomaria capensis*, for hedging in northern New Zealand. For many of us, there are memories attached to this species, which many Aucklanders refer to commonly as "hedge".

Modernist New Zealand architects in the middle of the twentieth century were inspired by New Zealand vernacular architecture as an example of "straightforward



A drystone wall in Cornwall Park, Auckland, using an imported technique and local material

responses to site and available materials" (qualities that translate well to modern attitudes) [12]. This is evident in the New Zealand landscape in the veneration of corrugated iron and No. 8 wire fencing as elements which impart a sense of the New Zealand character.

The qualities that a focus on the landscape vernacular can provide are a unity and integrity missing in many areas of our urban landscapes. The romance of rural landscapes is that they are authentic, representing a continuing dialogue and connection with the land [13]. We risk disconnectedness with our landscapes, as Colin Meurk pointed out in the 2003 Banks Memorial

Lecture [10], if we continue to ignore our distinctive identities.

## The future

I recently attended a play about the early New Zealand artist, Charles Goldie, in which George Henare gave a powerful performance as Patara Te Tuhi, one of Goldie's subjects and a Maori warrior. In this role, he explains the Maori view that the representation of an object and the object itself are the same thing (with reference to the image of a painting). I believe that this is particularly applicable to the utilisation of our natural and cultural heritage in our

landscape. In representing the legacy that we have inherited from our forebears, we continue and partake in that legacy. I would like to think that we will not sit back and accept a pluralism that is largely based on international trends as the inherent New Zealand cultural condition. This does not mean to say that international trends should be viewed as invalid garden forms for New Zealand, but rather that a distinctive New Zealand garden style (or styles) should be based on New Zealand's culture and environment. By referring to the *genius loci* as our mentor, we can express our own histories, character and culture in our landscapes.

## References and notes

- [1] Rod Barnett, writing of the eclectic garden in *A History of the Garden in New Zealand* (Bradbury, M. ed., 1995, Viking, Auckland), describes the prevailing status of the New Zealand garden as a "colourful, contented heterogeneity".
- [2] Butt, J. ed. (1963). *The Poems of Alexander Pope*. Methuen, London.
- [3] Retrieved 20 July 2004 from <http://www.lincoln.ac.nz/esdd/groups/lag.htm>.
- [4] Genius loci, from the Latin, literally meaning "spirit of the place"; definition for "indigenous" from same source: Pearsall, J. ed. (1998) *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- [5] Egoz, S. and Bowring, J. (2004). Beyond the romantic and naïve: the search for a complex ecological aesthetic design language for landscape architecture in New Zealand. *Landscape Research* 29: 57-73.
- [6] Through literature such as *The Native Garden* (Gabites, H.I. and Lucas, R., 1998, Godwit, Auckland), increased media attention, and the associated marketability of native plants.
- [7] Most significantly at his own garden in the Borders area of Scotland. He delivers a fascinating discourse on the potentialities of integrating science with landscape design in his book, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (Jencks, C., 2003, Frances Lincoln, London).
- [8] Halprin wrote: "I view the earth and its life processes as a model for creative processes", as reproduced in *The Landscape of Man* (Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe, 1975, Thames & Hudson, London).
- [9] Oliver, P. ed. (1997). *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [10] Meurk, C. (2003). Cities are cultural and ecological keys to biodiversity futures. *New Zealand Garden Journal* 6(2): 3-10.
- [11] Salmond, L.J.E. (1986). *Old New Zealand Houses: 1800-1940*. Reed Methuen, Auckland.
- [12] Clark, J. and Walker, P. (2000). *Looking for the Local: Architecture and the New Zealand Modern*. Victoria University Press, Wellington.
- [13] The concept of dialogues in landscape are further discussed in Anne Whiston Spirn's excellent philosophical work, *The Language of Landscape* (1998, Yale University Press, New Haven).

Philip Smith attended Massey University between 1995 and 1998 to study landscape design (BAppISc). He is a landscape designer/contractor from Auckland where he has run his own business, O2 Landscapes, designing and installing gardens since the beginning of 2002. He has a

special interest in native plants and increasing their use in gardens (particularly threatened species), in the integration of native plants with flowering perennials and interesting exotic trees and shrubs, and in incorporating New Zealand identity into his gardens.