

The Landscape of Simulation: Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve

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ABSTRACT

Using the tourist landscape of Whakarewarewa Thermal Region as an example, this paper looks at how landscapes of leisure enter the contemporary world as complex, contested sites which, while they are products of market forces, are also highly symbolically charged.

Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve is one of New Zealand's most popular tourist attractions. It is located on the outskirts of the city of Rotorua in a thermal field on the volcanic plateau of the North Island. This plateau itself lies within an earthquake zone that extends around the rim of the Pacific Ocean. A primeval landscape of mud pools, geysers, silica terraces and dribbling sulphate ponds, Whakarewarewa Thermal Park is also a landscape of commerce and commodity, of carved keyrings and snapshots contested by different factions in two hundred years of bitter struggle for economic priority.

It is estimated that 90% of tourists to New Zealand visit Whakarewarewa to view the natural wonders and encounter the indigenous Maori who provide their only contact with the primitive Other that they seek. Not only the landscape here is "primeval," the people who run it are too. The landscape of Whakarewarewa is a hyperreal geography in which spiritual experience is marketed along with the sensual.

Selling landscape is a not a new business. But in the late twentieth century there is a terrible poignancy to the business of saving ecosystems in order to use them as the wrappers of a spiritual "gift" which costs \$200 a night. This paper explores the myths that underpin the tourist landscape of Whakarewarewa and asks whether landscape professionals should reinforce or reveal these myths.

The Landscape of Simulation

I call my paper *The Landscape of Simulation* because I want to draw attention to issues of authenticity. A simulation, in the sense I am using it, is a copy of something *which has never existed*. Because the landscapes of recreation are cultural landscapes they are not only physical, geological, botanical - they are also ideological, social and political. It is this underside of leisure landscapes that is examined here. I will use a New Zealand landscape attraction to show that such environments proffer a simulated image of cohesion and naturalism which has never, and can never, exist.

Many recreational landscapes in New Zealand are situated on land once occupied by the indigenous people, the Maori, who came to New Zealand a thousand years before Europeans colonised it in the nineteenth hundreds. These sites often have a history of bitter struggle for ownership and control. Indeed, the modern history of the Maori people in New Zealand is one of resistance to dominance and control by the whites.

Since the 1970s, however, there has been a 'Maori renaissance.' A widescale reassertion and then acceptance of the right to Maori self-determination, language and cultural values has meant that many Maori tribes are once again in control of their lands and natural resources. With a huge increase in tourism (internal and overseas) Maori have found that both their culture and their ancestral lands are in demand as tourist experiences and destinations. In fact, tourism has played no small part in the re-establishment of Maori control over their own destiny as a people. The tourist revenue, both actual and potential, is huge. As a result of this, Maori-owned and operated recreational landscapes enter the contemporary world as complex, contested sites which, while they are products of market forces are also highly symbolically charged.

Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve is one of New Zealand's most popular tourist attractions. Administered by the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute, it includes a reconstruction of a Maori fortified village, various Maori cultural shows, a carving school, an audio-visual display of Maori culture and many souvenir shops. But its main attraction is the fact that it is the largest extant geyserfield in the country.

Whakarewarewa is located on the outskirts of the city of Rotorua in a thermal field on the volcanic plateau of the North Island. This plateau itself lies within an earthquake zone that extends around the rim of the Pacific Ocean. This recreation landscape is a primeval underworld of sulphur and unbearable heat locked in subterranean passages, a landscape of mud pools, geysers, silica terraces and dribbling sulphate ponds. It is estimated that 90% of tourists to New Zealand visit Whakarewarewa to view the natural wonders - and encounter the indigenous Maori.

Encounter the indigenous Maori? It seems that not only the landscape here is 'primeval,' the people who run it are too. The landscape of Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve is a themed geography in which landscape elements and social and physical space are not all that have been commodified. Among the other images and projections that are consumed at Whakarewarewa, Maori stand now, perhaps more than anything else, for an abstract archetypal quality as precious to Europeans as gold: spirituality. Tourist brochures commissioned by Maori businesses now make it clear that spiritual experience is marketed along with the sensual. Maori culture is known and revered among New Zealanders for its identification with nature and for the way in which care and respect for natural resources is woven into the lifeway of the people. Implicit in the advertisements for spiritual experience (which are aimed at whites, not other Maori) is the assumption, widespread amongst Maori, that European culture, recoded by capitalism, is spiritually bereft and that Europeans are a people in deep need of spiritual nourishment. Further, there is also the assumption, shared by Maori and European alike that, since the world has become a shopping mall in which everything is, or ought to be, available, spiritual enlightenment can also be purchased. At the landscape of Whakarewarewa everything has become commodified.

There they are, after all, on the brochures spread before you. They face you boldly, stepping out of their world (depicted behind them as forest, geysersland or carved stockade) into yours. They are half naked; their brown bodies are sleek and muscular. You turn the pages of the brochures. One photograph shows them as savage, frightening wielding clubs of war and challenging you with grotesque expressions. In another they are swaying gently to music, singing and smiling, twirling balls on string. These are Maori. They are violent, fearsome, and they are innocent, childlike. The brochures show us the noble savage who lives in a paradisaal, ideal geography, in tune with nature but ready to shred us limb from limb in order to save his world.

And the brochures tell us that we are not primitive. We cannot live in that world or that timeless time of the primitive, even the modern primitive. But we can visit - and that is what the brochures are about.

Te Maori Encounter, Marae Overnight Stay, Visit the World of the Maori, Be a Witness to..., Enjoy a Night of..., Experience the Pre-European Lifestyle of... This is a temporary 'going primitive.' You can come into our world of mystic oneness with nature, of unrepressed sexuality, of freedom and careless neverending song and play, BUT YOU MUST GO BACK. Back to your circumscribed existence as the fallen conquerors of the primitive within. We have all the things you have lost, the brochures say, and we will parade these wonders before you BUT YOU MUST PAY.

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century Europeans had often grumpily noted the rapid conversion of the Maori to the ways of capital:

'There is an accommodation-house, once kept by the white man at the village, but the Maori possessor of the soil, coveting the small profits made by his white brother, ousted him and assumed control.'
(Harris 1878)

'Once they were very hospitable, but now the European must pay for almost the words that are spoken to him. To witness one of their ceremonies is tantamount to taking a private box at the opera. They can be very amusing in their way, but the amusement must be paid for, by Europeans at least.' (Harris 1878)

But by the 1920s Maori culture was mostly available for free. During that period of giving up and letting go (the period of assimilation) Europeans were admitted deep into the sanctum sanctorum of Maori defeat. There were no charges at the door of representation. This is the period of the death masks of C. F. Goldie, a painter working in the early years of the twentieth century. His portraits of aged Maori men and women helped establish the conception that Maori were a dying race, a memento of a romantic past. By the 1980s, however, overwhelmed by the 'logic of late capitalism,' most aspects of Maori culture had been assigned a monetary value. Maori culture, like that of the European, has become a commodity. This is the reason for and the lesson of Whakarewarewa, the landscape of simulation. The primitive landscape, the primitive culture, the primitive him and herself are all vanished and in their place stand 'the primitive,' a construction of Western culture with which the Maori have an intimate complicity. It is at Whakarewarewa that European tourists in New Zealand come closest to the primitive Other that they seek. For Anglo Americans and Europeans New Zealand *is* nature. That clean green country at the end of the world is the place to go to come face to face with untrammelled, 'unspoilt' nature. The Maori are part of this natural experience. They are nature too. And this is part of the simulation, for both they and nature no longer exist. The Western conceptualisation of the primitive involves the marking of the native culture as over, as dead and gone, as eternally past, as (the brochure says) 'a world that unfolds before your eyes as you journey back in time' in order to 'experience the spirit of ancestral Maori.' Even as they present it to you they bury it in the past.

A recent commentator says: 'The real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be - has been, will be?- whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us.' (Torgovnick 1990) What do we want it to tell us? That, now that it is impossible to be spiritual, the spiritual is just \$12.00 a head?

Europeans and Maori have at the cracked and fissured landscape of Whakarewarewa entered into an 'arrangement'. The tourist is a consumer of images, memories, projections and desires. The Maori are doing their best to provide these commodities. What is for sale at Whakarewarewa is participation in the old ways and escape (be it ever so momentary) from the alienation and anomie of the modern world. Of course this arrangement has an ideological function. In fact it has two: not only does this 'landscape of recreation' permit a dominant culture to identify an indigenous population with nature in order to legitimise their marginalisation, but it also organises the geothermal landscape as a landscape of consumption similar to more archetypal themescapes such as Disney World. How did this arrangement come about?

Whakarewarewa was a contested landscape before the pakeha (white people) came to New Zealand. Two different tribes considered the land theirs by tradition and by right. They were able to coexist in relative harmony until the white people arrived and started buying land around Rotorua in the 1840s. For the whites the Whakarewarewa land was desirable for the same reasons as it was for the Maori who cooked and bathed in the thermal waters, and were kept warm by them in the harsh winter months. By 1853 the settler government was showing a great deal of interest in the area. It was already a tourist attraction, and there is no doubt that the government was keen to alienate the land from Maori for purposes of development and advantage. At this stage the Maori were charging 'exorbitant rates' for entry to the thermal area. The Maori, in fact, showed themselves to be 'able entrepreneurs.' They even charged visitors who made sketches of the village and hot springs. 'In some instances artists had had their sketches torn up and been evicted by villagers unable to extract the necessary fee.' (Waaka, 1982:57). The Minister of Native Affairs intervened, however, and eventually managed to persuade the tribe to overlook these charges 'as long as the villagers were included in the sketches.'

Using long-standing inter-tribal disagreement as its reason, the Native Land Court partitioned the Whakarewarewa land, awarding much more than an equal share to the tribe with which the government was negotiating to acquire land for the establishment of the new town. After all, interesting famous people had visited the region and written accounts. Tourist brochures and guide books published by travel firms and shipping lines gushed over it. The government saw a great deal of advantage in monopolising Rotorua's land interests and tourist attractions. One tribe had shown by land gifts and negotiation that they were prepared to assist the government in its ambitions, an attitude which favoured them in their land claims for the Whakarewarewa block. There was much enmity from the other tribe, particularly when the former eventually sold their holding to the government who immediately began developing the Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve into a tourist attraction. The Ngati Wahiao tribe, owners of the smaller block, still inhabit it. Visitors to the thermal area wander through their reconstructed village where they sell souvenirs. The village is now known as the 'residential, cultural and spiritual centre of Whakarewarewa.'

By 1900 the government had purchased and developed Rotorua township, established a sanatorium, the government house and gardens, built a new vehicular bridge to Whakarewarewa and begun its conversion into New Zealand's 'premier' tourist attraction by the construction of the Geysir Hotel. Various spa baths were developed on the site, using the mineral waters that bubbled abundantly from the hot earth. Visitors were able to take the baths and wander around the landscape marvelling at mud pools, geysers, boiling lakes of indescribably beautiful colours and sinter terraces, commenting as they went about the evil smell of sulphur that hung in the air. Maori built ceremonial houses on the land and began to work as guides, also organising concert parties to entertain tourists. Rotorua township syphoned off water from the underground streams. Virtually all the inhabitants of the town had constant, hot mineral water baths in their houses.

Through the twentieth century Maori-pakeha relations became more twisted and complex as the successive governments of New Zealand pursued an assimilation policy which assumed that Maori would forget their language, traditions and customs and become honorary Europeans. The policy nearly worked, but Maori proved resistant to attempts to purge them of the old ways. In fact the increasing participation of Maori in New Zealand society and daily life meant that issues of New Zealand culture and identity were becoming complicated and nuanced. Anglo-European New Zealanders saw the indigenous people as 'our Maori' at the same time as they were denying them access to the rights and privileges they themselves enjoyed.

Consequently, simultaneous to the promotion of Whakarewarewa as a live Maori enclave, representing landscape and Maori culture as seamlessly natural, and importantly as 'ours,' government policy was permitting both the physical landscape of Whakarewarewa and the Maori modifications to it to deteriorate to the point that visitors had to avert their gaze. The main bath house was pulled down in 1939 and the houses in the Maori village rapidly went to ruin. By 1967 the village had 'long been the target of unfavourable criticism,' being described as a 'henhouse' by the national newspaper (New Zealand Herald 1964).

Partly as a result of much negative criticism of Whakarewarewa, partly because the Maori renaissance had commenced, by the 1970s it was decided to redevelop the 'Thermal Wonderland' 'to the standard expected of an international tourist attraction.' In 1981 the chairman of the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute was reported in the newspaper as saying that 'America's Disneyland could teach Whakarewarewa a thing or two...We could take several good things from Disneyland,' its efficiency, cleanliness, pleasantness, the thematic areas and audio-visual aids, for instance, 'but we don't want the razzmatazz.' (New Zealand Herald 1981) He went on to say that the institute had to tread a fine line between fostering, maintaining and reinvigorating Maori arts and crafts and providing a tourist attraction.

How fine this line was, is illustrated by the suggestion, in the 1960s, that the Whakarewarewa village be redeveloped with government assistance. The problem was not so much that multiple ownership of individual sections was 'rife', but that a habitable architectural interpretation of traditional Maori housing for modern tourist consumption was required. In 1966 a letter from the Maori Affairs Department to the Secretary of the Whakarewarewa Tribal Committee stated that the department was 'concerned that the village should show overseas visitors the progress that the Maori people have made over the years' (Rowland 1971). At the same time there was a 'consensus of opinion' that 'the village would lose its character if European-style houses were built.' The solution recommended by the director of the Arts and Crafts Institute was that the new houses be 'L-shaped with carved barge boards and other carved and painted features.' That Maori culture and tradition should return to Whakarewarewa in the 1960s as decoration on otherwise European-style houses is indicative of the way Maori art and tradition re-entered New Zealand culture at that period: through the mediation of governmental and local body structures such as the Maori Affairs Department and the Rotorua City Council, and in particular, through funded Maori-run institutions like the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute with one eye on the tourist industry.

CONCLUSION

The consumption of Maori culture at Whakarewarewa is supported by a landscape that, like Maori-European relations, is shot through with rifts, pressure points, fault lines and fissures. Geologically the place is a threshold, a neither-nor zone, a never-never land. As indigenes the local Maori are on the edge of an Anglo-Europeanised global culture, geologically they are on the edge of the Rotorua Caldera. Social and geological factors have combined to produce a geography of marginalisation in which politics of land tenure, resource use, heritage reports, racialised media representations, redevelopment initiatives, tourist agendas, commercial interests and cultural identification needs blend and clash. This landscape is both a literal place and a symbolic threshold. It is a socially constructed space (a Maori village), a geotype (a thermal area) and a culturally inscribed place (a theme park).

Whakarewarewa takes its place in the tourist economy, then, as a site of political, economic and social power. Both European and Maori have an interest in controlling representations of the Whakarewarewa landscape. What is at stake? These representations must appear to be *natural* rather than *situated*. The landscape and the people who inhabit it must be seen to be authentic - visitors must touch the real, that is why they have come here. Underpinning all this are a number of myths that are prevalent in New Zealand culture. Among them are the ideas that nature is good and culture is bad, that old is pure and that new is corrupt, that tradition is stable and modernity ephemeral, that Maori are natural and Europeans are not. These powerful cultural signifiers direct all landscape change in this country, including that undertaken by landscape professionals.

In this IFLA Congress Call for Papers participants were invited to consider landscape change as the 'sensitive expression of culture.' When I ask myself, What cultural values are expressed in the landscape of Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve? I find it difficult to locate an essential or core value at all. With ambiguous, contested values crossing and recrossing the landscape it seems no longer possible to make clear distinctions between good and bad, cultural and natural, Maori and pakeha or even ugly and beautiful. These things are no longer opposites: '...each value or fragment of value shines for a moment in the heavens of simulation, then disappears into the void...' (Baudrillard 1993). And is Whakarewarewa not simply a microcosm of the global landscape? Is it not, in fact, a defining characteristic of our century that there is no landscape, no culture, no value, not even the spiritual, which is not irradiated by reproduction and simulation? This thought, it seems to me, puts the professional responsibility of the landscape architect neatly into perspective.

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