

Future History Aotearoa

Teaching Landscape History in a Settler-Colonial Context

How landscape is understood is an historical concern. Land is respatialised and reshaped both consciously and unconsciously by various forces through time. In order to engage the present landscape, designers of the land—landscape architects—need knowledge of biopolitical systems to meaningfully read the patterns which shaped and continues to shape it. The study of land related history, in concert with techniques related to the apprehension of the landscape, are critical to landscape architectural education. As an educator and practitioner working across theory, history, and design studio, it has become evident landscape history must be taught with full disclosure of how hegemonic ways of seeing, which are socially, culturally and economically bound, bear upon how landscapes are understood and thus designed.

Tim Ingold reminds us landscape is 'not land, nor nature, nor space'. The term landscape is certainly one of those murky words that not only has contested definitions but is mobilised to very different effect. Within this evolving complexity, landscape is frequently asserted as a neutral idea when conflated with or used interchangeably with environment, yet the two ideas host a very different set of associations. Further, bearing its euro-western mobilisation, landscape is often mobilised as an ensemble of elements existing as parts of a larger whole, understood in turn as static backdrop.

In alignment with Augustine Berque's insight that Westerners 'see' and 'think' landscapes whereas others have 'worlds', indigenous Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand do not have a word for landscape. For Māori land is whenua, which also means placenta, or from which one is born, nourished and intrinsically connected. In Te Ao Māori context, or world view land is thus highly relational and constitutes an ontological dimension, not something can be understood as separate to living. Such an idea significantly bears upon what then landscape might mean.

Denis Cosgrove suggests landscape names that which, "distances us from the world in critical ways, defining a particular relationship with "nature" and those who appear in "nature". Such an idea points to a culturalistic leaning, that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space. At stake here is how an assumed perception, or undisclosed point of view is imbricated

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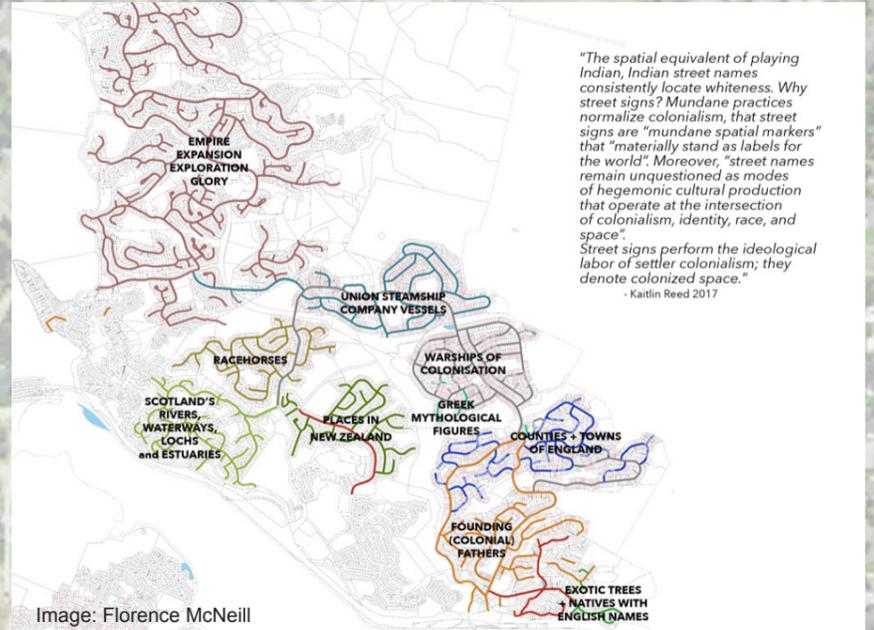


Image: Florence McNeill

within the idea of landscape. Landscape and perception are deeply entangled. When landscape is engaged historically, it is revealed that perception can be trapped in one form of contemplation or another. It is therefore vital that any study of the history of landscape equally interrogate ways of being and ways of seeing, or the ontological defaults different times and places bring into play.

As nation-state formed by colonisation, land and landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand clearly have particular potency across collective and individual domains. Settler colonialism names a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty. Settler-colonialism is an ongoing condition, where in Aotearoa New Zealand focuses land, belonging, and transcendence of the settler colonial past. Approaching landscape history with the settler-colonial vantage can cast a light on the repetition of certain spatial patterns—clearly useful for the landscape architect. Academic Fiona Johnson suggests that landscape architecture and urban design practices trace their lineage from the tactics of colonisation, through the mapmaker and the surveyor, such practises wield fine-grained 'spatial technologies of power'. It is thus essential the historical epistemological bearings of landscape are interrogated. Through the introduction of settler colonialism as a complicating power dynamic, it becomes possible to witness how unconscious spatial perceptions are bought into landscape design. The study of history in a 'relational way' provides the opportunity for students to both confront, develop insight and skills that expand the idea of perspective.

Within my teaching practice I have found it useful to bring a relational dimension to the very idea of landscape. My teaching work proceeds not to enclose landscape with yet another definition but install a relation, a situated relationship within how the landscape idea is transmitted from the past to the future. Through the teaching of history, I aim to bring about a different experience of the idea of landscape, one that doesn't step over or erase landscapes' legacy but carry it along through transformation. It's for these reasons we look deeply at the Euro-western historical and contemporary application of the landscape idea. It is becoming commonplace to mobilise indigenous knowledge (TEK) in the teaching of landscape. Of course such a positive tendency is suggestive of increasing diversity in how landscape is understood and mobilised towards justice. Yet equally, brings with it some concern. Several years ago the use of Mātauranga Māori (Indigenous knowledge) in landscape courses was broadly incentivised by the university. With respect to landscape I had concerns that by adding indigenous knowledge into unquestioned (European descendant—Pākehā) ways of seeing landscape through history, students were being emboldened into various acts of appropriation. Whilst acknowledging the founding treaty of New Zealand, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and Māori sovereignty or Tino Rangatiratanga that Te Tiriti gives rise to, as Pākehā I decided to overtly teach whiteness and white privilege as pertains to Aotearoa as a pathway to decolonisation of landscape practices. My aim here was to catalyse students into being with ideas of landscape in the complexity of bi-culturalism, rather than participate in 'additive' pedagogy which fails to equip Pākehā students with sufficient self-awareness and situated cultural competencies. Moving students towards what is at stake to be tangata Tiriti, or Treaty people, has proved to be meaningful and empowering and a way through what has been termed Pākehā paralysis. History is intrinsic to this journey.

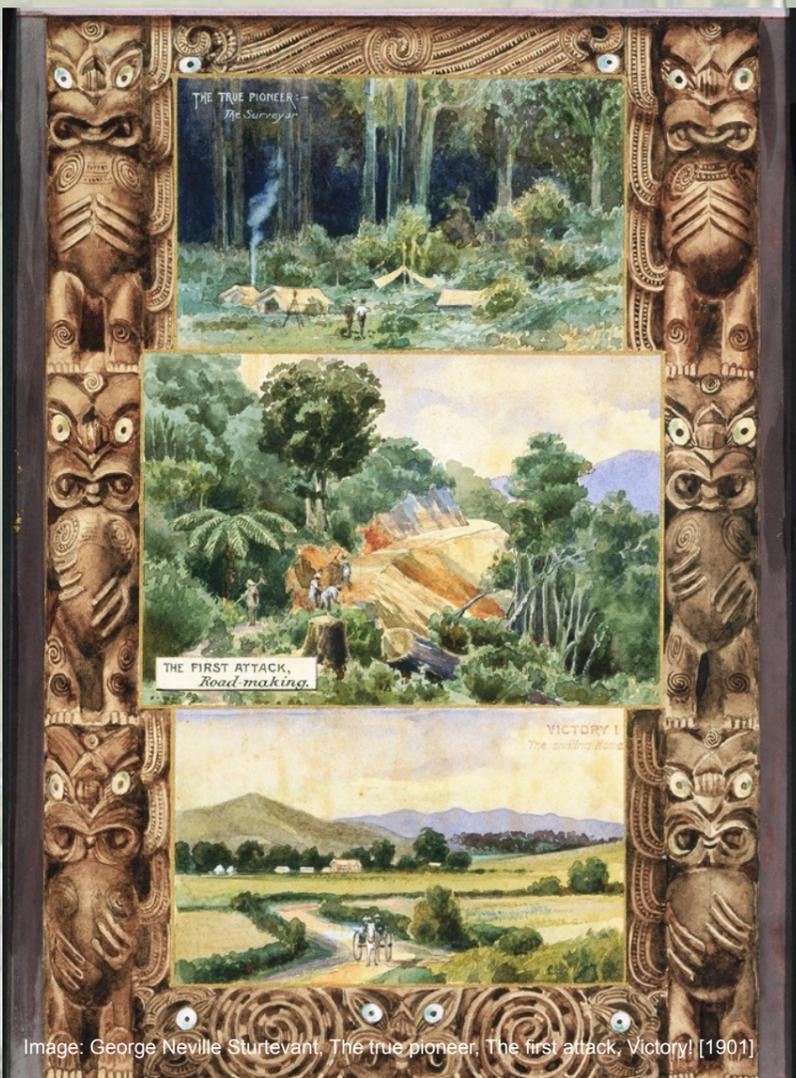


Image: George Neville Sturtevant. The true pioneer, The first attack, Victory! [1901]

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