Empowerment through Collaboration: Community, Educator, and Museum

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, more than half of the Tokelau population has relocated to New Zealand due to limited natural resources and overcrowding of the 10km² land area. In the Wellington region Tokelau groups have sought to maintain their cultural traditions and this paper discusses a collaboration between Te Umiumiga, a Tokelau Hutt Valley community, and the School of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington, in the design and development of a sustainable, cultural community centre complex. Outcomes included a museum exhibition, which involved a further collaboration with Pataka Art + Museum and a project with the Tokelau youth. University staff and students were empowered to engage directly with the community, undertaking design work, the construction of furniture, an exploration of alternative energy sources and community garden initiatives.

Keywords: Climate Change, Collaboration, Community, Cultural Heritage, Empowerment, Exhibition, Participatory Design, Tokelau

INTRODUCTION

Tokelau is one of the world’s smallest and most remote countries and is made up of three tiny atolls in the Pacific Ocean (Statistics New Zealand 2012) (Figure 1). Climate change has resulted in ongoing depopulation and today more than 75% of Tokelau people have relocated to New Zealand (NZ) in search of better economic prospects (Connell 2015). The Tokelau community in Wellington (NZ) have sought to maintain their traditions and resist the social and economic pressure to assimilate in the culture of their host country. This paper discusses a series of activities which were the result of collaboration between the Te Umiumiga, a Tokelau Hutt Valley community, and the School of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington, in which participatory design methods were employed in the design and development of a sustainable, cultural community centre complex. Tokelau elders instigated the collaboration, believing that the development of a centre would revitalise their community and support the preservation and well-being of their cultural heritage. The community had managed to purchase a site containing a group of industrial buildings which they intended to develop for this purpose.

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Figure 1. Map of Tokelau relative to New Zealand

Developing Collaborative Relationships

Tokelau elders made contact with the School of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington to share their desire for the creation of a community centre that would, ‘capture the essence of a Tokelau village,’ and act as a source of community empowerment to help retain their traditional island culture. This was a challenge that attracted a small group of academic staff with interests in participatory design, sustainable architecture, social well-being, collective memory and the use of live projects to educate their students. ‘Live projects’ are those that engage real citizens in real-time contexts, and encourage students to become active citizens of a community dedicated to cultural and ecological health (Morrow 2012).

Academic staff at the School of Architecture lacked detailed knowledge of Tokelau’s history and culture, and seeking to find a student of Tokelau descent in the School of Architecture proved difficult. This is consistent with an under representation of Tokelau (and Pacific Island)
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