



School of Architecture & Planning
Faculty of Creative Arts and
Industries
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand

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Tena koe

I am writing in support of the proposal to refurbish the Whare Whakamoemiti at Raetihi. The building is of outstanding historical, cultural and architectural merit, and it is in imminent danger of not being able to be saved if its refurbishment is not funded. My comments are based on my knowledge as a Māori architectural historian who has researched and published extensively on the subject, in particular Rātana churches. In the early 1990s, I researched this building based on interviews with senior āpotoro (ministers) in the Rātana Church. My great-grandfather, Hapeta Renata, was one of the Church's first āpotoro and helped establish the organisation's religious structure. I also attended the first hui with community members to discuss the building's refurbishment at the invitation of Christina van Bohemen on behalf of the New Zealand Institute of Architects Te Kāhui Whaihanga.

Historical and Cultural Significance

The Whakamoemiti has a close connection to an earlier poropiti (Māori prophet), Mere Rikiriki, a faith healer and aunt and mentor of Tahupotiki Wiremu Rātana. Rikiriki opened the original church building that was later physically converted into the Whakamoemiti when the community converted to the Rātana Church. During my research on Rātana churches, I was told that Rātana would visit the Raetihi Whakamoemiti whenever he was leaving from or returning to Rātana Pa on his journeys further north. This association with Rātana and his whanau has strengthened the mana of this building within the movement. It is an important physical reminder of the mana and contribution of women to Māori religion. The significance of the Rātana movement to Māori spirituality and politics cannot be overstated. A large proportion of the Māori population signed its religious covenant, Te Kawenata, and the political movement retained all four Māori seats in parliament for fifty years. Rātana architecture records the principles and values of the movement through its unique iconography (whetū marama, colours, inscriptions), and the Raetihi Whakamoemiti is an important expression of the Church and its continuing influence.

Architectural Significance

The Whakamoemiti is one of five in Aotearoa built in the style of the main Rātana Temple at Rātana Pa, Whanganui, and is the only one outside of Te Taitokerau (Northland; the others are at Mangamuka, Ahipara, Te Kao and Te Hapua). Bill Pehi added the distinctive 'Rātana' bell towers to

the original Raetihi church in 1957 and the domes were added in 1958. The bells were made with those used in the Ahipara Rātana Whakamoemihi at a foundry in Auckland in the 1960s. Further changes to the interior of the building and the fitting of a whetū marama to the front gable completed the transformation of the building from a standard simple Christian church to a Rātana temple. The building is thus connected to a long whakapapa of innovative Māori religious buildings that include nineteenth-century Ringatū meeting houses (which began the tradition of figurative painting demonstrated in the Whakamoemiti's interior) and early twentieth-century Ihiraira buildings (through the use of figurative symbolism, as seen on Rua Kenana's buildings Hiruhārama Hou and Hīona).

The Raetihi Whakamoemiti's striking appearance, enhanced by its situation on top of a prominent hill, has drawn attention from contemporary photographers, most notably Ans Westra (whose photograph of the Whakamoemiti's exterior is on the front cover of my book, Māori Architecture). The hilltop position has also exposed the building to severe weather and the Whakamoemiti is at a critical turning point in its life. If action is not taken now to repair the building it will not be possible to save it. Its loss will mark the closing of an important chapter in central North island Māori architecture and does not bode well for the continued maintenance of other Rātana whakamoemiti in the north.

For these historical, cultural and architectural reasons, I would strongly recommend that the refurbishment of the Raetihi Whakamoemiti be supported and would underline the time critical nature of the required interventions.

Noho ora mai ra



Dr Deidre Brown, (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu) MArch(Distn), PhD (Architecture), FNZIA, FRSNZ
Professor of Architecture
University of Auckland Waipapa Taumata Rau