

*Rewi*



# *Rewi*

Āta haere,  
kia tere

Jeremy Hansen  
and Jade Kake

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# He mihi

We battle, strive and live to tame this great fish that Māui caught. Our youthfulness allows us to be playful, energetic, lively, enthusiastic, experimental, and not overburdened by the weight of our past.

Our architecture is about the land, the sea and the sky . . . sometimes submerged, grounded, suspended, but always in a continuous process of negotiation, experimentation, enthusiasm . . .

Kei roto i te āhuatanga o te ao  
Mai i te mana me te tū rangatira  
Mai i te aroha me te māhaki

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou,  
tēnā koutou katoa.

*From within our place/world  
With dignity and respect  
With love and humility*

Rewi Thompson (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Raukawa)  
Fragment of a mihimihi for *Future Islands*, the New Zealand  
exhibition at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, 2016

Rewi Thompson, photographed  
in 2016. *Jane Ussher*





Ko tihisang; Je awang

ko. Manu ke. awa.

ko. Je Ahangya. a. Hwa

ko. Je Ho a abant

Awatn man Man

# Introduction

*Kōrero*

*tīmatanga*

He ika kai ake i raro, he rapake ake i raro  
*As a fish nibbles from below, so the ascent  
of a hill begins from below*

I first met Rewi Thompson in the mid-2000s, early in my 11-year stint editing *HOME* magazine. I sought him out because I wanted to publish his house, which had been chosen as one of New Zealand's 50 best by Douglas Lloyd Jenkins and Bill McKay in a previous issue of the magazine. The article was illustrated with a single photograph of Rewi's house, a building so mysteriously aloof that I wanted to try to understand what was going on inside it, as well as in the mind of its architect. So I called Rewi and asked if I could come over.

Rewi demurred on the opportunity of a visit to his place and of publishing it in full, saying it still needed a bit of work. Instead, he suggested I publish a house he'd designed for a friend on a slender site in Newmarket. I happily agreed: while Rewi's own home is a bold and intriguing piece of sculpture, the Newmarket house is a quiet presence in its street, with a similarly gentle, ethereal interior (the original owners still live there and are giving the house a freshening up, so we couldn't photograph it for this book).

When I visited the Newmarket house with Rewi, he told me how he'd paid careful attention to the way it might nurture family dynamics — a void in the centre allowed easy communication between upstairs and downstairs, for example, and spaces were unconventionally flexible instead of rigidly programmed, allowing the patterns of life within to evolve organically over time. This was architecture as a nurturing, adaptive presence, refusing to impose a specific style of living on its occupants. Yet the building also possessed a quiet strength, conscious of its role in offering privacy and protection to the family. Like all of Rewi's work, it was simple but complex, layered but straightforward. It also appeared to confidently embrace these contradictions.

I was an architectural novice (I trained as a journalist, not an architect); Rewi was kind and interesting and never seemed inclined to draw attention to my naivety. I enjoyed talking to him, partly because conversations with him were often intriguingly oblique and gossamer-like, their meaning sometimes seeming to hover tantalisingly out of reach. At the time we first met he was working with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei on its housing strategy. I was interested in the vision of medium-density living he suggested for the papakāinga and his confidence that it would help build a solid future on land the hapū had fought so hard to retain.

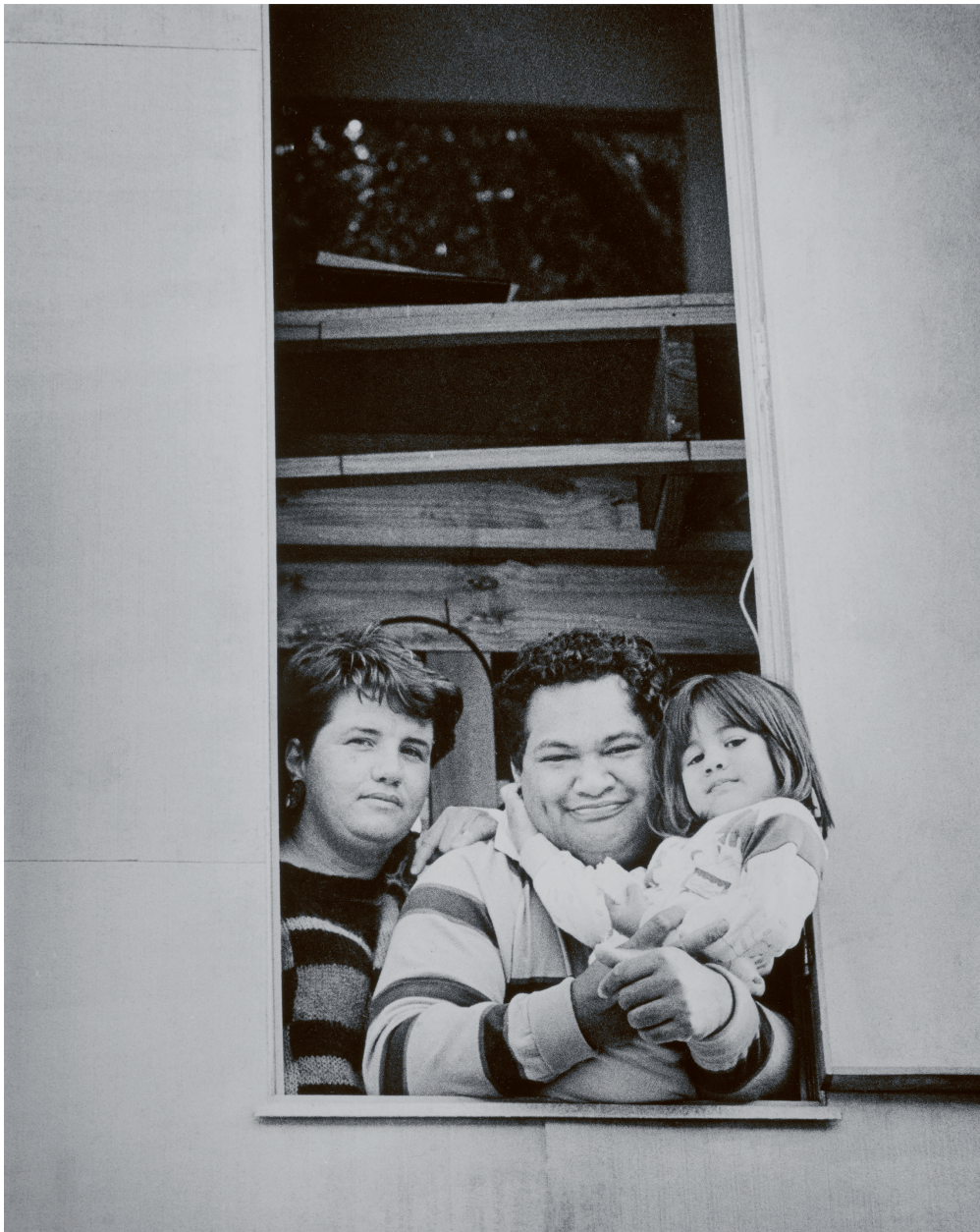
We met occasionally over the next few years, once at the Wishart House on the Hokianga Harbour — a home that features in this book and of which he was rightfully proud — and other times at various architectural gatherings. I last spoke to him in 2016 about his Everyday Homes project, a group of over 50 state-owned houses he'd designed for the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland suburb of Northcote in his then-new job at Isthmus Group. He seemed energised and optimistic, and I was glad to see that, after years of working solo, he'd found a firm that understood his talents and had the scale and resources to support them. I was excited about the projects he and the Isthmus team might tackle next, and he seemed to feel this way, too. Sadly, he died suddenly just a few months later.





The Sumich House in Newmarket, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, photographed by James Stokes and featured in the October/November 2006 issue of NZ Home & Entertaining (later HOME) magazine. Rewi also designed the home's dining table.





Leona, Rewi and Lucy Thompson at the Thompson House, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, around 1989–90. *Lucy Thompson collection*

Architectural careers are usually measured by the volume and quality of built work. Rewi's completed buildings were never sufficient in number to make him a figure of popular acclaim like his friends and contemporaries Ian Athfield and Roger Walker. Yet he created some remarkable, nationally important structures, including Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington's City to Sea Bridge, the striking canopies at the Ōtara Town Centre, and Puukenga, the School of Māori Studies at Auckland's Unitec Institute of Technology Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka. His work in designing rehabilitative buildings for the incarcerated or the mentally unwell was radical and humane and is still shaping the way these facilities are created today.

His designs broke the binary that associates Māori with the natural world and Pākehā with the urban, showing that Māori narratives were just as relevant and potent in creating urban forms. While working as an adjunct professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland, he was at the vanguard of a cultural shift, his studio classes giving a generation of Māori, Pasifika, Pākehā and Tauiwi students the confidence to engage with Māori design principles in their work. Now some of his former students are sharing his approach with subsequent generations as teachers, and most large architecture and landscape design firms have Māori design units within them. Not all of this is due to Rewi, but his contributions to this transformation cannot be underestimated.

Rewi was beloved in the architecture profession and revered by many of his students. But whenever I showed my non-architect friends images of the exterior of Rewi's home they expressed amazement that they had never heard of him. When I told them about some of the speculative drawings in his archives — prismatic buildings on water with a *Tyrannosaurus rex* inside, for example, or the Te Papa proposal Rewi created with Ian Athfield and the Canadian-American architect Frank Gehry — they were fascinated and wanted to know more.

In late 2019, my friend Jade Kake and I spoke of our shared admiration for Rewi and the way his buildings and his teaching had advanced the possibilities of what architecture in Aotearoa New Zealand could be. A prevailing modesty in this country's architectural climate has meant its buildings are often grounded in the pragmatics of form and function. In stark and ambitious contrast, many of Rewi's designs are fearlessly conceptual. His references to Māori narratives are not decorative but deeply embedded; there is also an inherent generosity in his work that means it feels like an exploration of the possibilities of a positive post-colonial future. Rewi's approach to architecture, wrote University of Auckland professor Deidre Brown in an obituary for her friend and colleague, was 'fundamentally concerned with land and people, and conviction that architecture could return identity and well-being to people suffering from cultural estrangement'.

Jade and I discussed how a book about Rewi might further this conversation by introducing his work to a wider audience. We also hoped it might ensure that his contributions as a teacher, designer and collaborator were better remembered. We began by asking Rewi's daughter, Lucy, if she was comfortable with the idea of us making this book about her father and his work; she was supportive and has worked with us throughout.

Neither Jade nor I was interested in the idea of a so-called definitive biography, mostly because the idea of defining Rewi seemed antithetical to his multi-faceted and slightly dreamy way of being. Instead, we thought it would be more interesting and accessible to create a book full of conversations with Rewi's friends, collaborators and students, all of whom knew him better than we did. We also spent many hours in Rewi's archives at the University of Auckland, leafing through designs from straightforward villa renovations to fantastical schemes such as those towards the end of this book.

Our method of putting together this book was organic rather than comprehensive, the result of following our instincts and interests in attempting to gather a group of people and projects that showcase the breadth of Rewi's gifts and achievements. We selected drawings from the archives that caught our eyes, that revealed some of the evolution of his completed and unbuilt designs or that were just straight-out beautiful. We hoped that by combining this archival material with photographs of some of Rewi's completed projects we could create a book that offers multiple perspectives on a fascinating architect and the scope of his imagination.



Rewi was as passionate about rugby as he was about architecture. His long association with Wellington's Oriental-Rongotai club included a stint as team vice-captain in 1972.  
*Lucy Thompson collection*

Rewi was born in 1954. He was of Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Porou descent and was raised in Wellington, where his father worked as a bus driver. 'My parents were poor and we lived a sheltered life,' Rewi wrote in a 1987 essay for *NZ Architect* magazine, 'but we knew the fundamental qualities of integrity, and I'm proud of that.' He first trained as a civil and structural engineer at Wellington Polytechnic, then worked as a structural draughtsperson at Structon Group in Wellington. He gravitated towards the architecture team, some of whom encouraged him to go to architecture school. He graduated with honours from the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland in 1980, becoming one of just a handful of Māori architects in the country's history at the time.

His architectural verve was evident early in his time at the school. Former students told us stories of rushing down to Brick Studio to check out his drawings as word spread of their bravery and originality. Around the time he graduated, he won the AAA/Monier Design Award for Ngāti Pōneke Marae, a breathtaking, dream-like conceptual structure with a lean linear form that emerges from Wellington Harbour to rest on the side of Tangi-te-keo Mount Victoria. The project fused Māori design principles with a bold futurism akin to the superstructures being dreamed up by the Japanese Metabolist movement around that time. It gained Rewi national media attention and signalled the arrival of a significant new talent.

**ORIENTAL-RONGOTAI FOOTBALL CLUB INC.**  
**3rd 1st Team — 1972**  
**Runners-up 3rd 1st Grade**

POINTS FOR - - - 332		PLAYED - - - - 15
POINTS AGAINST - 123		WON - - - - 11
		DREW - - - - 2
		LOST - - - - 2

**Back Row:** D. G. ABRAHAM B. N. HARRIS G. S. ROSS A. J. REES A. G. STEVENSON T. T. METUARIKI I. J. NIVEN  
**Middle Row:** M. I. RICHARDSON K. M. BULL A. R. BOND I. T. A. FINLAYSON P. A. BRAMLEY L. C. PHIPPS-BLACK  
**Sitting:** D. D. BOND (Club Captain) T. W. DWYER (President) R. G. SIMPSON G. D. ROSS (Captain) R. M. THOMPSON (Vice Captain)  
C. N. H. BRIDGE (Coach) S. R. McMASTER (Manager)  
**Absent:** B. WEBBLING T. O'BRIEN G. COOPER P. PHILIPS (Assistant Manger)

*Redfern Studio, Wellington.*



From left: Rewi in a kapa haka group in Wellington when he was a child; his wedding day with Leona in 1981; in his Auckland studio in the 1980s.  
Lucy Thompson collection

Rewi's career got off to a roaring start: as well as the projects listed above, he designed homes and home alterations; rugby clubrooms for Oriental Rongotai, his old Wellington club (rugby was a passion as enduring as architecture); marae complexes in Matauri Bay, Ōtara and Glen Innes; 20 state houses at Wiri; temporary canopies in the Auckland Domain for Pope John Paul's 1986 visit; offices and a warehouse for a pharmaceutical company in Manukau City; the Capital Discovery Place Te Aho a Māui children's museum in Wellington; and proposals for a new visitor centre at Te Rerenga Wairua Cape Rēinga, a cultural centre in Rotorua, and much more.

In the late 1980s this momentum stalled. When we began this book, I often thought about the buildings Rewi might have made had his career continued on its early trajectory. How would the country be different, for example, had the scheme Rewi developed for Te Papa with Athfield and Gehry been realised? Could the experimental state houses he designed in Wiri have been used as a model for higher-density housing elsewhere? How different might our built environment look and feel if people had listened more closely to his advocacy for a strong response to landscape, and taken courage from the bravura way he seized opportunities and crafted unique responses to them?

We asked many people why Rewi's prolific output hadn't continued at the pace of his early career. The variety of answers suggests a confluence of circumstances. The 1987 stock market crash froze the construction industry, putting many architects out of work. Later, Rewi's wife Leona, whom he had met in Wellington in 1975 and who worked as a teacher, was ill with cancer for long periods before she died. Rewi moved his office home so he could care for her; for a long time after she died, a number of people we spoke to noted how he seemed, quite understandably, lost in a fog of grief.

The economy improved a few years later, but Rewi seemed unable to regain the momentum he'd established. He didn't have the financial means to rebuild a team of a size that would allow him to confidently take on larger commissions, and his work shifted from schemes he was leading to projects led by other firms on which he provided advice, often as a cultural consultant. He was also diabetic and had challenges managing his health.



He didn't fit the visible stereotype of an architect; he had a casual demeanour and speaking declaratively wasn't his style. We heard one excruciating anecdote in which a public servant mistook him for a state housing tenant instead of an architect who was there to discuss the new state homes he was designing. Some people we spoke to — both Māori and Pākehā — acknowledged racism as a career-limiting possibility but did not believe it played a decisive influence in Rewi's case, pointing to the number of significant projects he won early in his career as evidence of a culture that was ready and able to welcome his point of view.

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Now I look back on all the questions I asked about what might have been had Rewi's career not stalled in this manner and realise I was missing quite a lot of the point. It's true that, had things been different, he might have designed some tremendous buildings. But his diminished built output doesn't mean his influence waned. The opportunity to teach at the University of Auckland as an adjunct professor in 2002 undoubtedly came at the right time for Rewi — some people we spoke to said it was a lifeline for him, financially and emotionally — but it is also the area where his impact has arguably been the greatest.

His teaching empowered a generation of students to feel comfortable grappling with Māori design concepts, looking to the land and its history as the foundations of their architectural narratives. Students like Karamia Müller, now a lecturer at the University of Auckland's School of Architecture herself, attest not just to the sense of possibility opened up by a brown face in a senior position at the university, but also to the confidence Rewi's teaching could bring to the act of creating architecture in this colonised land. This, perhaps, is Rewi's most profound contribution, echoing and multiplying through generations and helping architects strive to make places that feel as if they belong here.

Rewi's notion of belonging, of course, was different to many of his contemporaries. There is a strand of architectural thinking in this country that prides itself on blending in, of receding into the bush, buildings that, to borrow the words of influential Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, 'touch the earth lightly'. This is entirely valid as an approach, possessing a kind of deference that appears to acknowledge the primacy of landscape — so much so that these attempts at camouflage can feel like apologies for occupying the land at all.

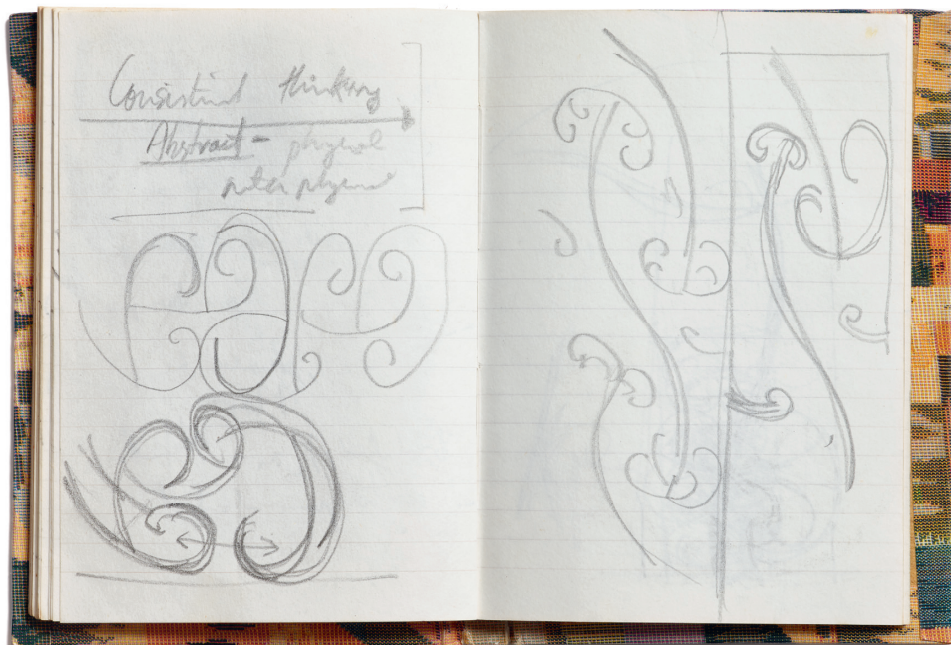
Rewi's buildings never tried to hide: he often advocated for an architectural response as strong as the landscape around it. One of the last buildings he designed was a studio for artist Katharina Grosse on a beautiful coastal site prone to dramatic storms. In our interview, Katharina mentioned that many buildings in the area seemed determined to disappear into the landscape as much as possible, but that Rewi was not interested in this approach. 'He thought you can be very powerful here,' she said. At the same time, he didn't aspire to permanence. Instead, he was comfortable with the idea of buildings assuming new lives or, more radically, eventually crumbling to dust.

Since the Architectural Group issued its 1946 manifesto espousing the creation of a uniquely New Zealand style of architecture, people have wrestled with the question of what, if anything, makes architecture from this country distinctive. (In The Group's case, this meant lightweight timber structures that rejected uptight English-style blueprints and relaxed into Auckland's balmy climate.) These attempts at cultural simplification — they happen in literature and other creative fields, too — and their whiff of insecure parochialism can

get dull and reductive. But they also explore issues of what it means to live here and how architecture might ask questions that lead to a better understanding of ourselves and this place.

There's a clear line between the gentle approach advocated by The Group and the recessive structures many New Zealand architects design today, a line Rewi's bold buildings appear happy to cross. Rewi's buildings are different, too, from the neo-Colonial approaches for which Athfield and Walker became famous in the 1970s, in which they rejected sleek modernist style and playfully sampled the country's vernacular heritage. It's true that Rewi's buildings were partly grounded in the post-modern context in which he was educated, defined by its rejection of modernism's rectilinear orthodoxy, but many buildings from the post-modern era now read as empty provocations. Rewi's designs may possess a similar enthusiasm for the spectacular, but they also feel as though they have a deeper reason for being.

Rewi didn't write frequently — his preferred mode of thinking seemed to be endless doodling in his notebooks — but he left behind some intriguing articles that reveal something of the development of his unique architectural approach. His designs possessed a deep sense of confidence from the start, but friends such as Mike Barns — who is also Māori and who became friends with Rewi in Wellington, starting architecture school shortly before him — say Rewi's work was an ongoing exploration of his identity, an identity in which he was less secure than his confident designs might have suggested. 'I think he felt like taura here [a domestic migrant] in the city: I'm in the city, but I don't really understand my roots,' Mike told us.



Rewi 'was always drawing', his daughter Lucy says, and rarely went anywhere without a notebook. They are an insight into Rewi's creative process and Lucy has kept many of them. *Samuel Hartnett*

Rewi's rapid rise to prominence as one of the few Māori architects in the country meant he was often asked (by Pākehā architects and journalists, for the most part) to define not only his own architectural approach but also Māori architecture as a whole, something he understandably bridled against. In 'Māori Architecture — A Myth', an article published in *NZ Architect* magazine in 1987, his frustration bubbled over into italics. 'As individuals we have the freedom to choose our own approach to our work,' he wrote. 'For instance, because I'm Maori, that doesn't necessarily mean that my work is Maori architecture. Sure, there are times when Maori influence is appropriate, *but not all the bloody time mate.*'

It was something he had to reconcile at his own pace. By 1988, an article Rewi wrote in *The Landscape*, the magazine of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects Tuia Pito Ora, seems to display a greater level of comfort with referencing Māori influences in his work:

It is no secret that ties to our ancestral land are very important and significant. The acknowledgment of this can be expressed in my parents' return to their Marae, and reinforced in our tribal legends, beliefs and cultural heritage. For these reasons, the means of land or environment has a more human and spiritual significance; a source of life and development of one's own wairua (spirit) and peace of mind. It is this spiritual connection with our land that is often the inspiration for design.

Rewi expanded on this line of thought in the academic journal *Transition* in 1995:

From a Maori perspective there is a different value system. That is, for Maoris the affiliation with the land is spiritual as opposed to an understanding that is commercial which pervades a western viewpoint. This leads to a different interpretation of architecture relative to the site. Here we take the site as being New Zealand, not only as a place but as a culture . . . In this sense the site or context of the work is the land but also the culture because the land is cultural. The land or the site can be seen to be an emblem of these divergent expectations. The works we do are not posed as solutions or as a resolution to this, but are part of an ongoing process and therefore are unfinished.

Rewi's work asks questions for all of us about what it means to occupy this land, questions many would prefer to ignore or to have him do the work of explaining. In this context, the blank face of his house becomes a refreshing act of refusal, in which a man sometimes defined by his agreeability refuses to play games of glib explanation and suburban gentility, and decides to issue a challenge instead.

Rewi's home is a place that refuses to privilege this country's scenic beauty as a triumphal force, instead delving into darker histories of volcanic eruptions and territorial battles. 'Auckland is a violent place, that is not only in geological terms of the volcanic cores, or even the Maori myths of the volcanos, or historically where it has been the site of wars — Maori vs Maori and later Maori vs the colonials,' Rewi told the architecture lecturer Ross Jenner for a story in the academic journal *Lotus International* in 2000. 'But now it is violent, where people fight over land, they fight a war for a view of the water . . . The house or the project . . . is the object of negotiation. The object is a part of this reconciliation that is central to the process of culture: they have to get used to it or burn it down.'



Even now, after spending hours in his archives and talking to his friends and colleagues, Rewi's house remains a mystery to me, which may be part of the point: Jenner described Rewi's buildings as 'a call to attend to the limits of one's thinking. And to the encounter with what lies outside one's own thinking.' They are a challenge for all of us to think about our places here: how we fit and how, with a clear-eyed view of history and a bold look to the possibilities of the future, we might get better at doing so.

Jenner also wrote: 'Thompson's practice is devoted to exploring what bi-culturalism might mean architecturally. He recognises that, in such a context architecture must be the site of complex cultural negotiation, a daring act of becoming.'

The words 'a daring act of becoming' rang in my ears as I first read them because they explain something of what makes Rewi such a compelling figure. His designs are not feel-good narratives, but rather deeply personal buildings that make us contemplate the complex nature of living here. Their bravery and their imperfections — the way they thumb their nose at the commonly held architectural goal of resolving every aspect of a building so it leaves no questions open for debate — embrace of the inherent messiness of the act of becoming. They also acknowledge that, whether you're an individual or a multicultural nation, the act of becoming will be challenging, frustrating, at times uplifting — and eternally incomplete.

When Jeremy and I first discussed the idea of writing a book on Rewi Thompson, my first thought (as it often is) was, ‘Am I the right person to be doing this?’ I had met Rewi only a handful of times. The first was in 2013 in Carin Wilson’s office (I was working with Carin on a project for the Independent Māori Statutory Board, which would later lead to Te Aranga principles and design methodology being integrated into Auckland Council policy and processes); Rewi and Carin were finishing a meeting. The last time was at a Ngā Aho wānanga at Waipapa Marae at the University of Auckland, when we were working together towards what would become Te Kawenata o Rata, the covenant between Ngā Aho and Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects. There may have been other encounters in between, but those were the first and last, and the ones that left an impact on me.

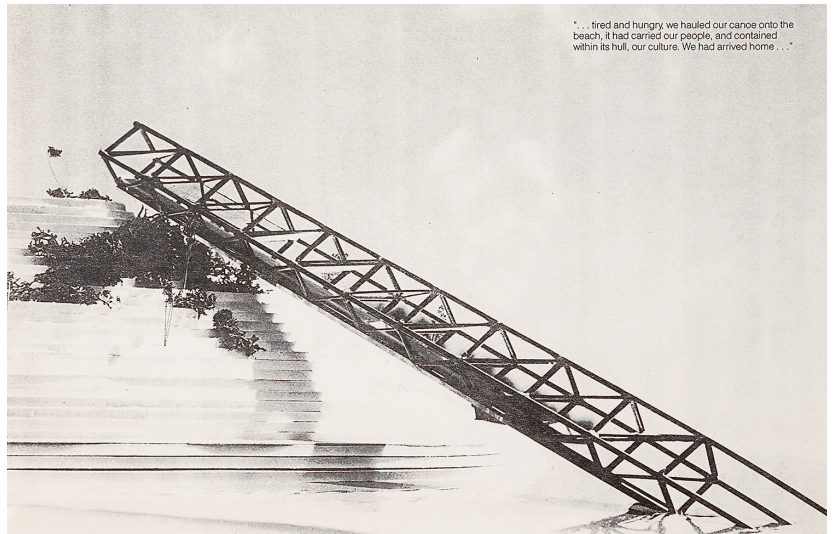
Although the question lingered in my mind, the response to my pātai was ‘Mēnā kāhore au e mahi pērā, mā wai atu?’ ‘If not me, then who?’ In some ways, I felt that being someone who was not close to Rewi, but who was undoubtedly a beneficiary of the work he and others such as Mike Barns, Tere Insley, and later Rau Hoskins and Derek Kawiti, had laid down in the generations before, was an advantage. I was familiar with his work, and as a student and graduate I was fast becoming embedded in the kind of work that Rewi had been among the first to do. It was not lost on me that the young Māori architects and designers of my generation (and those who follow) are able to stand as Māori and have the kind of Māori-centric careers we have because of the foundational work of Rewi and others.

Something I discovered is that Rewi did not always have an easy relationship with his own ahurea Māori, particularly in how this related to architecture. I was interested to understand Rewi in his context, as someone who started working in architecture at the beginning of the Māori renaissance and whose career matured in the decades that followed. Although my grandfather was not an architect, I was often reminded of my koro as I listened to people describe Rewi: a gentle man, a humble man, softly spoken but commanding respect. They both loved rugby, and loved their families. My koro, too, was close to his daughter(s) and heartbroken when his wife passed. But the other thing they had in common was that they were both navigating an overwhelmingly Pākehā world as men who were visibly Māori.

—

In this context, it’s easier to understand Rewi’s reluctance to be labelled as a ‘Māori architect’ when to be labelled Māori may have meant to be considered less than, or else tokenised within a majority Pākehā environment. This isn’t to minimise the many genuine and close relationships Rewi had with his Pākehā friends and colleagues. Particularly in the early stages of his architectural career, Rewi wanted to be taken seriously as an architect, not as a Māori

This photograph of a model of Ngāti Pōneke Marae, the award-winning conceptual design by Rewi, was published in a 1988 edition of *The Landscape*, the magazine of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects.



architect, which was fraught and carried all of these connotations at a time when Māori architecture was not considered architecture and instead confined to the realms of anthropology.

At that time, Professor Mike Austin was one of those lone voices advocating for the legitimacy of Māori and Pacific architecture. Mike was also one of Rewi's lecturers at the School of Architecture and Planning in the 1970s. As Mike recalls: 'I was with Rewi one night, and I said, "Rewi, you need to start taking this Māori architecture seriously." And he said, "No, I don't want to do that." I think I said, "Why don't you involve yourself in this?" He said very clearly to me, "I don't want to be a Māori architect, Mike. I want to be an architect."'

Rewi entered the architecture school at the University of Auckland in 1977. The school admitted around 90 students each year and at the time he enrolled Rewi, with Mike Barns (Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau) and Tere Insley (Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau-ā-Apanui), was one of three openly Māori students. He may have been only the fourth or fifth ever to have enrolled at that time. We don't know whether Rewi had any direct involvement, but the burgeoning Māori political awareness had reached the university by then. In 1979 the Māori students group He Taua (including Hilda Halkyard, Hone Harawira and Ben Dalton) challenged the engineering students' racist mock haka.

In 1980, as a student, Rewi also created the Ngāti Pōneke Marae scheme as a competition entry (there is more about this later in the book). The scheme won the AAA Monier Tile Award and according to Mike Barns (a judge for the competition alongside Kerry Morrow and John Scott), it was a critical point in Rewi's understanding and strengthening of his own Māori identity: 'I think it confirmed his validity as a Māori commentator, and probably gave him a lot more confidence in those early days around his architectural capability.'

Rewi rarely wrote about his own work (he preferred drawing, and allowing the work to speak for itself), but some of his writing from the late 1980s explicitly addresses his relationship with this nebulous idea of 'Māori architecture': 'the notion of developing a Pākehā or Māori Architecture sounds absurd . . . For instance, because I'm Māori, that doesn't necessarily mean that my work is Māori Architecture.'



If Rewi and Mike were among a very small number of Māori architecture students, then upon graduation they faced becoming the only Māori within their professional architectural firms. Rewi was the only Māori at Structon Group, the architecture and engineering firm, when he worked there as a graduate from 1978 to 1982.

When Rewi launched his own practice in 1983, he was beginning to establish himself as an architect, but also growing to understand his own Māori identity in relation to his work. It would be too simplistic to characterise Rewi's work during this period as a rejection of his Māoritanga. It would be more accurate to describe his developing attitudes and experiences as a journey. As the society around him changed, Rewi became more anchored in his Māoritanga, and the opportunities to openly practise as a Māori architect — without fear of dismissal — began to emerge. As Mike Barns notes, 'He was finding his Māoriness through his architecture but he never claimed to be an expert in tikanga or Māori architecture. He expressed what he knew and it was unfolding as he grew in life. His architecture was his own personal journey and his Māoriness was becoming more and more evident.'

Through the late 1980s and into early 1990s, he began to produce explicitly cultural work, mostly through large-scale civic work, such as the Ōtara Town Centre Canopy and a series of significant civic works in Te Whanganui-a-Tara. This would mark the beginning of a consultant model or collaborative approach to architecture, whereby Māori perspectives and skills were incorporated as part of the wider project team.

By the mid-1990s, he was collaborating with health planners and specialist health architects to inject the cultural dimension. This was the beginning of Rewi's work bringing a Māori perspective to larger, complex institutional projects.

Rewi may not have been involved in more direct political activism, but he was political in and through his work. His involvement in the design of Northland Region Corrections Facility at Ngāwhā (1999–2005), in collaboration with Mike Barns, Stephenson & Turner and Cox Group, was another critical point in both Rewi's career and his emerging sense of himself as an architect who was Māori. The project was contentious, and not supported by mana whenua hapū Ngāti Rangī in the beginning. Rewi and Mike, in particular, were motivated by a belief that Māori needed to be doing this work for Māori. At its core, the project was about restorative justice and healing for incarcerated people, the overwhelming majority of whom were (and are) Māori.

Rewi was also involved in several education projects that considered kaupapa Māori approaches to education and alternative visions for sharing and co-creating knowledge. In these projects, Rewi worked alongside highly

Rewi and his friends at social gatherings and working together on DIY projects. These images are from an album of photographs from the 1970s compiled by Rewi's friend Allan Stevenson for Lucy, Rewi's daughter, after Rewi's death in 2016. *Lucy Thompson collection*

regarded kāumatua, such as Haare Williams and Hare Paniora, and tribal leaders such as Sir Robert Mahuta. In relation to the Waikato-Tainui college project, Rewi's whakapapa to Ngāti Raukawa and the connections to the Kingitanga were seen as particularly important in terms of his ability to understand and interpret Sir Robert Mahuta's expansive vision for the project as well as the cultural themes and motifs of significance to Waikato-Tainui.

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Although his built projects have been significant, Rewi's influence extends far beyond the physical realm. Arguably, his most important contributions have been as a thinker and an educator. His philosophical contributions to architecture included an intentionally slow, careful process whereby you listened to the land, to what the whenua was trying to tell you. Many of the people we interviewed spoke of Rewi's quiet, gentle nature, but also of his commanding presence. When he spoke, people listened. Colleagues and students who knew Rewi during his time as an educator at the university considered him to be a brilliant conceptual thinker, and a great architect. They also directly acknowledged Rewi's cultural expertise and grounding in this space, for which he had become widely known and respected by this time.

Rewi's relationship to his Māori identity was not always straightforward, and at times complex. I get the sense from our interviews and Rewi's own writings that he arrived at this identity through his work, and in his own time. Rewi's reluctance to be labelled as a Māori architect came at least partially from his desire to be taken seriously as an architect, and at least partially from his humility. As an urban Māori raised away from the hau kāinga, he perhaps felt a degree of insecurity in his identity, as well as a desire to 'get things right', because of his reverence and respect for his culture.

Where he gained his grounding, his place to stand, was in his profession as an architect. Through his architectural training and skillset, he was able to express himself spatially, and give spatial expression to, at times, radical ideas. He didn't necessarily want to be considered the expert in this space, and would much rather that the ideas, the architecture, speak for themselves.

Rewi was a product of his time, and of a society that was moving through a period of rapid change, but he was also an active agent in shaping and changing our society: through his architecture, and through his engagement with mātauranga Māori and his own Māori culture.

In April 2023, shortly before this book went to print, I had the privilege of visiting Ūawa Tolaga Bay for the first time. On this brief trip, I visited Te Rāwheoro Marae (which belongs to Ngāti Patuwhare of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti) and the adjacent urupā, where Rewi is at rest with his wife, Leona, and his parents, Bobby and Mei Thompson. There's a lane close by, opposite the marae, where the Thompson whānau ūkaipō, or ancestral lands, are located and where many of the Thompson whānau still live. On this visit, I learned of Te Rāwheoro as a whare wānanga. Established in the fifteenth century by Hingāngāroa, the father of Hauiti, the wānanga specialised in visual arts, alongside karakia and whakapapa. Whakairo, i te ao kikokiko, ā-wairua hoki — both physical and spiritual — was a particularly significant kaupapa of this whare wānanga. I felt this additional context was the missing piece for me in understanding Rewi and his legacy. In retrospect, it seems an obvious and natural extension of this whakapapa that Rewi should have pursued architecture in the ways that he did.

On the notion of legacy, Mike Austin sums it up simply: 'That's his legacy and everybody who came in touch with him felt this. He lifted architecture in people's minds. He was always the architect. He was never anything else.'