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STAYING PUT

How Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei decided to fight the housing crisis: with well-designed homes on (gasp!) leasehold land.

TEXT BIANCA ZANDER — PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL LEWIS

Behind Bastion Point, in a suburb with a long and tumultuous history, a stronghold of 30 striking new houses occupies the ridgeline. Three storeys high, in dark-hued concrete and steel, they rise up on either side of Kupe Street like a fortress. Each terrace sits under a long, folded roof plane, a black steel cloak that dominates the skyline. This is bold architecture, built to endure. To stay put.

Kāinga Tuatahi – or first place – is a new housing development conceived and financed by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei to house its hapū members. Visually, and in other ways too, it signals a radical departure from the mid-century brick and weatherboard state houses that characterise the area.

“The state houses of the area were designed to be placed in any part of Auckland or New Zealand,” says Gary Lawson of Stevens Lawson Architects, who designed Kāinga Tuatahi to better reflect the surrounding landscape of dramatic volcanoes and ridgelines. A nod, too, to Arts & Crafts and traditional Māori architecture, especially in that roof plane, reminiscent of the eaves of a marae, or a kaitaka draped protectively over the homes. “We have tried to express something of unity, of togetherness in the forms.”

But however striking those forms, architecture isn’t really the story here. “The tradition of state houses being state-owned, and rented by families, is a very different model,” says Lawson. “The brilliance of the model Ngāti



Right From left, Tahinga o te ra Hunia, Taareikura Hunia, Mairangi Hunia, Alex Davis and Mihai Davis at Kāinga Tuatahi.

Whātua have created at Kāinga Tuatahi is that the homes are owned by the residents.”

Hapū members owning their own homes may not seem all that radical, until you consider the suburb’s history.

“Kāinga Tuatahi is really the manifestation of 65 years of struggle,” says Rangimarie Hunia, chief executive of Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei’s social development company, Whai Maia. “You can’t think about Kupe Street and Kāinga Tuatahi without understanding our history and the context from which we’ve come.

“In 1840 we had 38,000 hectares of prime Auckland land. Within five years of that, we became virtually landless. By the time 1951 rolls over, we went down from 38,000 hectares to just over a quarter of an acre – and that was a cemetery. We went from being the owners of Auckland to wards of the state within a period of probably four generations.”

“If you can manage to pay a market rent, that’s great, but you’ve got nothing left to save to move off that hamster wheel.”

On this point, the history books are clear. The loss of the Ōrākei block, as it came to be known, was one of the most shameful land grabs of the 19th century. By 1952, when the Crown had finagled the last remaining 12 acres out of Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, hapū members were evicted and their homes demolished. According to Waitangi Tribunal records, this was because the village was on the route the Queen would take on her official visit, and it was considered “a dreadful eyesore and potential disease centre”.

Displaced iwi were allowed back to live on a portion of their former tribal lands – but only in houses owned by the state. Hunia was part of this generation, growing up first in a state house, and then in a home built on tribal land with money loaned from Housing New Zealand on the caveat that the house was constructed on stilts. If anyone’s loan defaulted, the house could be taken away. “They said, ‘we don’t trust you, we’re going to build them on stilts,’” recalls Hunia. “So some homes are poor quality, low-cost and poorly designed.”

When the Bastion Point protest erupted in 1977, it was a long time coming. The previous year, adding insult to injury, the Crown had announced it was going to develop parks and high-cost housing on land it had acquired from Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. That development was scuppered, but it wasn’t until 1987 that three hectares of the Ōrākei block, along with an endowment of \$3 million, were returned to Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei in a Treaty of Waitangi settlement.

Fast forward 30 years, and after building up its asset base, and buying back state homes from Housing New Zealand, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei was finally in a position to build high-quality homes on the papakāinga.



Clockwise from top left A communal vege garden on Kupe St at Kāinga Tuatahi; Tahinga o te ra Hunia riding his bike; An apple tree in the communal garden; From left, Taareikura Hunia, Alex Davis, Mairangi Hunia, Tahinga o te ra Hunia, Kanui Hunia and Mihai Davis play a game of handball.

Enter the Auckland housing crisis.

“There were a whole bunch of people who could afford to service a mortgage but who couldn’t get a mortgage because they didn’t have a deposit,” says Kate Healy, chief operating officer of Whai Rawa, the commercial arm of the Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei group. “If you can manage to pay a market rent, that’s great, but you’ve got nothing left to save to move off that hamster wheel.”

To meet what was an increasingly pressing need, Kāinga Tuatahi, a modern, medium-density housing project on Kupe Street, was proposed, as an exemplar project for how the rest of the land holdings in Ōrākei could be developed.

“I’m trying to instill that we can actually have this. It sets a really good example for Māori as a whole, to look past all our tragedies.”

“We were focussed on home ownership for hapū members and so we could afford to take a different approach to it.” By different, Healy means that unlike the majority of property developers, they were not trying to make a profit. Nor did they have to make a return on the land, which wasn’t up for sale. Money could be spent on high quality building materials, and sustainable design. Finished homes ended up going for between \$418,000 for a two-bedroom townhouse, to \$680,000 for a four-bedroom terraced home – roughly half what you’d pay for a shoebox in the same area on the open market.

Residents are getting a bargain but there is a catch, and this will be hard for mortgage brokers and Pākehā to get their heads around. The properties are leasehold, a term that has never appealed to New Zealanders, despite its acceptance in other parts of the world. For 150 years, the house is yours, and then it goes back to the tribe. That lease can be sold to another hapū member at any time, but it can’t be sold on the open market. All well and good for the first 100 years, but once the lease gets down to 50, 20, 10 years... a whole new set of problems arise.

“The individuals will never ever own that land,” says Hunia. “That belongs to the people. It’s an inheritance and a legacy. But you have the honour and privilege of living on your tribal land for time immemorial.”

Banks, who don’t trade in honour and privilege, were so against this arrangement that Ngāti Whātua had to finance hapū mortgages from their own coffers. Says Healy: “We have a standard mortgagee/mortgagor relationship, and on a weekly basis [homeowners] pay a principal and interest payment but also make

Clockwise from top left A view of the housing looking west; From left, sisters Kanui, Mairangi and Taareikura Hunia; From left, Mihai Davis, Te Ahikaaroa Hunia, Alex Davis, and Tahinga o te ra Hunia.



Kirimoana Willoughby ⬆

A resident says Kāinga Tuatahi is her place in the world.

Kirimoana Willoughby, 32, lives with a flatmate in a two-bedroom unit that faces onto Kupe Street. Her parents are coming back to live with her in a few years’ time but for now they reside in Los Angeles, where Kirimoana grew up. Her mother, who is of Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei descent, works at movie studios, and her father, also Māori, owns a sales and marketing business. “While I wasn’t born here [she was born in Sydney], I still have always felt connected because all of my extended family are from here,” says Kirimoana, in a strong California accent. “I would come for visits in the summer holidays and every time I came I felt comfortable here – this is my place in the world.” When she turned 25, Kirimoana took the plunge and moved to New Zealand on her own “with 800 bucks in my pocket”. She learned to reo and immersed herself in tikanga Māori. “Growing up in the States, I wasn’t very connected to my Māoritanga so I wanted to find out what that was all about and how I fit in. That was hard but I got through it and I assimilated eventually into the Māori way of thinking.” She came to Auckland for a job to work for the Ngāti Whātua education team and never went back. “Working

for the tribe, I had to live close by to get to work so I lived in a little prefab in my auntie’s garage.” She points to a brown three-bedroom house that’s visible from her living room, where she lived with eight other people. She was sick all the time, put on weight. She soon told the tribal trust cordon they had to come up with an innovative way to house the hapū, and fast. “It had to be safe and healthy, warm and dry, because Māori health stats are the worst in the country.” Kirimoana is a Smokefree advisor at Middlemore Hospital, but struggles when her father’s far north whānau come to visit. “They’re country people and they roll how they want to roll, and they all smoke... it’s funny how to manage that dynamic, because I want them to come here. They’ve never seen this for Māori.” Her relatives perch on the edge of the couch, too scared to use her teacups. “To them it’s almost eerie but by inviting them I’m trying to instill that we can actually have this. It sets a really good example for Māori as a whole, to look past all of our tragedies in the past – it’s time to move forward – this is what forward could look like. It’s really awesome to be part of something that provides hope for everyone.”

Jasmine and Paul Soa, with son Lachlan

The Soas and sons Keenan, 18, Myles, 12, and Lachlan, 1, have reconnected to the land since moving to Kāinga Tuatahi.

Jasmine and Paul Soa, both 40, live in a spacious three-bedroom unit that comes with a decadent number of toilets – one each in the family bathroom, en-suite and a downstairs cloakroom. Jasmine whakapapas to Ngāti Whātua through her great nana, nana and mum, who passed away when Jasmine was nine. “Ever since we were children, my family grew up here. We didn’t live on the kāinga, the whenua, but we were very much involved as children and when this opportunity came up it was really a no-brainer for us.” Jasmine’s sisters, Leeann and Kandy Corvette, 51 and 42 respectively, have purchased one of the neighbouring four-bedroom units in the development. Paul is Grey Lynn “born and bred”. Since moving to Kāinga Tuatahi he’s reconnected with a few people he grew up with that he didn’t realise were Ngāti Whātua – or Jasmine’s cousins. “You start talking

to one another and realise, ‘oh my God, we’re actually really closely related!’” Paul works for an agricultural company, in logistics, and Jasmine is in sales at Vodafone. This isn’t the first home they’ve owned but to meet what they thought was a first homeowner criteria for Kāinga Tuatahi, they sold their house in Avondale and rented for a while. “Jasmine had been looking up here for about 10 years,” says Paul. “They actually let out a bit of land down in Kitemoana Street. Jaz put us forward for that, it didn’t quite happen. About five years later, this came up. So we always had our ear to the ground.” For Jasmine and her sisters, returning to the kāinga was a way of reconnecting, of coming back home. “My mum passed away 31 years ago this year, and it really was a dream for her, for us, her daughters, to come back and live on the kāinga.”



Julie and Phil Davis, son Konnor and wife Tha with grandson Irirangi Davis

A family who had been waiting for years to buy a home move in.

Phil Davis, 58, is the chairperson of the Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei Trust. For 25 years, he and wife Julie lived around the corner in Takitimu Street, in a home leased from Housing New Zealand before it was returned to Ngāti Whātua. “Our dream was to be able to buy a home, we’d just been waiting and waiting and waiting and then this project came up,” says Julie, 54, who recently left her job with Literacy Aotearoa to help raise the grandchildren. Together with son Konnor, 24, his wife Tha, 25, and daughter Lisa, the Davis family share the four-bedroom house and a mortgage. There’s no way, says Phil, they would be able to afford a home like this on the open market. “Opportunities are getting better and better for us because we’re with Ngāti Whātua,” says Phil. “They were able to finance it for us, gave us an opportunity to build on our own land. This is the first time we’ve ever done that.” Julie appreciates the security of living among whānau

after years of not knowing who her neighbours were. “Here, we know everyone. There’s something to pass on to the children, there’s a base, where we know they can come whenever they need to.” Phil has served on the Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei Trust board for 21 years, but this is his first term as chair. He’s softly spoken, prefers to be in the background, strumming his guitar, but has been there at every turn. “The first five terms, we had no money at all. Holding on to the land was a bit of a struggle for us. We did a lot of joint ventures with other groups on land throughout Auckland city that we could lease. People think Ngāti Whātua has just come up over the last four years but it’s been about 20-odd years since we started our real business. So it’s taken us a while to get here.”



contributions to a long-term sinking fund and a common maintenance fund. A portion of that goes to pay rates and a portion of that goes to pay insurance. We’ve packaged all that up together so homeowners just pay one sum a week, which is fixed.”

Kāinga Tuatahi also focuses on sustainability. Houses are equipped with solar panels, and Tesla power walls, which store excess power that can be distributed among all the units, with any excess going back into the grid. Common areas include serious recycling hubs, complete with all-weather flowcharts and bespoke collecting bins, although according to anecdote, residents have been a bit sniffy about communal rubbish sorting. Trash, it would seem, is a private matter.

Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei has 2,600 registered adult members. For the initial expressions of interest, they got 250 responses. About 65 applied for the homes, and 30 were successful. Or to frame it another way, the vast majority of hapū members – 90 percent – missed out on a fancy new home.

“Different people are getting different benefits,” agrees Healy. “And that’s an issue the Trust will continue to struggle with at the governance level. Equity versus equality is the discussion.” In addition to Kāinga Tuatahi, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei owns 65 former Housing New Zealand units in Ōrākei that they rent out to hapū

members for reasonable rents. When Ngāti Whātua took over the units, they were in “terrible condition,” says Healy. They have since been spruced up with insulation, new carpets, curtains, bathrooms and kitchens. “We’ve prolonged their life for a little bit but these are not structures that were built to last for a hundred years.” Life inside the units has vastly improved too. Anecdotal, hapū members have reported significantly fewer doctors’ visits, particularly in winter, and improved general wellbeing.

“There’s something to pass on to the children, there’s a base, where we know they can come to.”

There is much to learn here about how to solve the Auckland housing crisis. Granted, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei is an organisation with huge financial resources, but different, and more affordable, models of ownership need to be considered – and fast. Perhaps Auckland’s governing bodies could start by adopting the whakataukī, inscribed on the headstone of James Te Hikoi Paora at Okahu Bay, that drives the Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei Trust: “Mā tō tatou whanaungatanga e whakataki i te ritenga tika – By our kinship we strive to meet our present and future needs.” ●

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