

Architecture and the Representation of Culture: The Tjibaou Cultural Center in New Caledonia

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Introduction

Immigration is often imagined as a group of people moving to a place where the new immigrants remain a minority. However, over the past five hundred years, the practice of colonialism has created quite the opposite effect in many places: the immigrants take over to become the dominant culture of the new place: these cultural situations are known in current postcolonial literature by the benign term: “settler” cultures. It is only now, as political colonialism fades, that the indigenous people whose cultures were overwhelmed by these colonizing immigrants are gaining a voice in how their now-diminished cultures are being represented.

In their struggle to be recognized as legitimate players in their national cultures, many indigenous people have formed new institutions to represent their ways of being in the world—often in the form of cultural preservation and development agencies. While recognized as essential to cultural autonomy and advancement, these institutions present many new problems for the cultures they are representing. For some it forces a singularizing view of indigenous cultures that had great variety even within a small geographical sphere. For others, the size and structure of these institutions are anathema to traditional practices. And finally, for most, these institutions require physical facilities of a size and nature for which there is often no precedent within the indigenous culture.

The architectural questions this situation raises are messy and difficult. There is no way to avoid the fact that whatever structure is to house such a cultural institution will be symbolic on many levels. Its mere existence is political, much less its form and expression. Such a building project will exist in huge tension and ambiguity. It must embody many things for many people—and must avoid being patronizing, sentimental, or culturally ignorant. In addition, the building is a kind of cultural translator, since the culture it supports is marginalized in its own place and not understood by the majority of the population. The majority will be seeking clues to the minority culture not only in the activities and contents of the building, but also in the structure itself. This is both an architectural opportunity and a serious challenge.

While there certainly cannot be a singular way or formula for navigating through the design and construction of such a project, there are important lessons to be learned from an examination of the recently completed cultural center for the Kanak people

of the French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia. Here the Renzo Piano Building Workshop faced these issues explicitly and directly, and used their workshop process, their unrelenting search for appropriate expression, and their capacity for technological invention to answer some of the perplexing symbolic difficulties of the Kanak situation.

Cultural Circumstances

New Caledonia sits on the western edge of Oceania, about 1000 kilometers off the eastern coast of Australia. It is a French Overseas Territory that consists of a main island, Grande Terre, over 480 kilometers long, and several outlying islands. When Europeans first arrived at least 27 distinct languages were spoken among the indigenous Melanesian peoples of the islands, the Kanak.

The history of the Kanak people after initial contact with Europeans in 1774 is shamefully similar to the stories of indigenous peoples worldwide. Early curiosity on the islander’s part quickly gave way to hostility when the presence of foreigners led to decimation of the population through introduced diseases, occupation of and removal from ancestral lands, desecration of sacred sites, political disenfranchisement, confinement to reservations, destruction of cultural artifacts and traditions, and insistence on the superiority of the introduced culture.

The Kanak, with a warrior tradition, did not always accept this treatment peacefully. Many armed, bloody conflicts and revolts occurred, especially after the island group became a French colony in 1853. While the plight of the Kanak became somewhat better when the world began to de-colonialize after World War II, history, racism, and lack of educational and economic opportunity continue to plague their position in the modern life and prosperity of New Caledonia. They remain a predominantly rural people, working as farmers, miners, and laborers.

In the course of the development of international discourse about civil rights in the 60’s, certain Kanak leaders became quite articulate about their place not only on the political margins of New Caledonian life, but also its cultural margins. As was the case in most 18th and 19th century European colonies, New Caledonia had been transformed during its 150 years of colonial rule to reflect France as much as possible in the remote,

rugged, and sub-tropical locale.¹ This transformation of the landscape, imposition of the French language, and imitation of the cultural spaces, activities, and behaviors of the colonizing nation made the urbanized parts of New Caledonia completely foreign to the Kanak. Their own landscape, languages, and cultural spaces were systematically destroyed and devalued in the process—held to be “primitive” in the terms of the imposed French culture. As a key leader of the Kanak Liberation movement, Jean-Marie Tjibaou put it, “While I can share what I have of French culture with a non-Kanak in this country today, it is impossible for him to share with me the universal aspects of my culture”.²

In 1988, the most recent outbreak of violence between the Kanak and the French threatened the Territory with outright civil war. This was averted by the signing of the Matignon Accord in the same year. The leader who negotiated the Accord for the Kanak was Jean-Marie Tjibaou who argued unrelentingly that cultural presence was essential to political inclusion. “For me”, Tjibaou said, “culture is capital; it is the thing which gives knowledge of life”.³ The Accord included, at the insistence of the Kanak, the explicit support and development of Kanak culture as an integrated part of the overwhelmingly French New Caledonian culture. This was to be achieved through the establishment and funding of the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (ADCK). Tjibaou was adamant that this Agency should have a cultural center, and that it must be located in Noumea, the mostly white capital, and not in some remote rural location. The Center would not only present and preserve traditional Kanak culture, dance, art, and language, but would allow for its development and interaction with other Pacific Islanders and the world.⁴ A former priest, the non-violent Tjibaou, was assassinated one year after the signing of the Accord by a Kanak extremist.

This assassination demonstrated the need for an immediate gesture to secure peace. In 1989, the French government committed to the Cultural Center, which appropriately bears Tjibaou’s name. In a move that might be interpreted either as a masterful public-relations pseudo-apology, as cynical post-colonial grandstanding, or perhaps as both, Francois Mitterand included the Kanak Cultural Center on the list of major building projects that would serve as a legacy of his government. It was the only one of the so-called “Grands Projets” to be located outside of France. And so the colonizers co-opted the project that the Kanak had to threaten violence in order to achieve. The building could appear to the outside world to be a gift from the kindly, paternalistic French to exhibit their generous enlightened post-colonial attitudes. The high profile international competition for the building only further emphasized the grandiose quality of the French gesture.

Piano was compelled to address with this building the exhausted, cynical, and justifiably angry Kanak people. Marginalized for generations in their own land to the point of taking up weapons in order to make themselves heard, the Kanak had little reason to believe that this project was going to serve

their best interests. It must have been hard to accept this French gesture, no matter how large, when it was made under duress, and seemed so small in comparison to the size, duration, and brutality of colonial offenses—the most recent one a massacre of some 20 rebels in 1988. “Ambiguity haunted this facility”, writes Alban Bensa, the anthropologist who worked with Piano throughout the project.⁵

Working with Ambiguity

Piano assembled his Building Workshop team for the competition for this project, it included Paul Vincent, his Associate in Paris, and Alban Bensa, the noted anthropologist with specialized knowledge of the Kanak people. The inclusion of the articulate and politicized Bensa on his team assured from the outset that Piano, already sensitized to the issues, had an understanding of the highly politicized situation he was entering. There was no way to avoid the fact that the building would be taken symbolically: for better or worse. “I had to create a symbol:”, says Piano, “a cultural center devoted to Kanak civilization, the place that would represent them to foreigners and that would pass on their memory to their grandchildren. Nothing could have been more loaded with symbolic expectations.”⁶

It is clear from Piano’s writings about the project that the past as well as this particular historical moment were foremost in his mind as he began to work on his competition entry. He was self-conscious of his position as an outsider, and perhaps was aware of the post-colonial contradictions of how the project came to be. In his Logbook Piano writes:

“It has to said that, quite apart from good intentions, from the rejection of any form of colonialism, and from the respect due other cultures, there was no alternative. A proposal based upon our own models would simply not have worked in New Caledonia. It was not feasible to offer a standard product of Western architecture, with a layer of camouflage over the top: it would have looked like an armored car covered with palm leaves”.⁷

With this Piano entered a difficult terrain in today’s post-structuralist, hyper-politically correct world—he committed himself to a politicized and symbolic project. I think the story of how the project came to be what we see here, and why, demonstrates that Piano sought at every possible juncture to return the building to the Kanak; in concept, in space, and in expression. The Kanak people hold Piano in continued respect for the way that he approached the project. Emmanuel Kasarherou, Cultural Director of the Center said, “From the beginning, Renzo Piano had a deep understanding of the need for a unique building. He understood the Kanak spirit in a way that the other competitors did not. He was open-minded and could admit when he needed help.”⁸ After years of coping with colonial arrogance, Piano’s approach must have indeed been refreshing for the Kanak people.

Creating a Legible Landscape

Before European intrusion, a Kanak's particular geographical place was a defining quality of his or her being. With a rugged landscape and a culture that incorporated suspicion of strangers, Kanak language groups grew up isolated from one another, and confined and identified by geographical enclosure. This attachment to place, and the language that went with it, made the displacement imposed by the French particularly devastating for Kanak identity. People were removed from the valley or mountain shoulder that was the center of their world and placed on reservations with strangers. However, the embedding of the culture in the landscape, a way of living primarily outside of buildings, and the use, appreciation, and cultural signification of stones and plants, has survived beyond forced removal into the present day. This connection to the land is one of the primary ways that Piano connected the project to the Kanak people.

The site for the project, the Tina Peninsula, is on the outskirts of Noumea—New Caledonia's unsentimental and unremarkable capital of 70,000. The Agency had initially wanted the project in Noumea proper as a forceful cultural presence in the midst of the very French city, and were at first dismayed at the relative remoteness of the site. The finger of land divides a tranquil lagoon from a bay connected to the ocean. The quiet lagoon side is lined with dense mangroves rising out of the waters edge. Originally other native trees covered the peninsula, with the exception of a well-worn path along the small ridge that ran the length of the peninsula, and a clearing off the path near the center of the site. The bay side of the small ridge was more windswept and showed signs of having survived fierce storms. On his first visit to the site Piano sketched three ideas that were woven with a number of Kanak traditions about nature and the landscape throughout the site development: 1) the intense heat of the sub-tropical sun, 2) the almost constant presence of wind, and 3) an image of the cross-section of the site in which the building would reinforce the natural barrier the ridge provided for the ecology of the lagoon—giving the site two very different faces. In addition, Piano saw the many existing trees as a site asset and strove to retain them. This suggested that the building should keep to the path and clearing.

Alban Bensa helped the Workshop to understand that the Kanak had no built history. With the mild sub-tropical climate of New Caledonia, there was little need to develop elaborate buildings. Instead the Kanak developed a deep and subtle relationship with the landscape. Large stones and rock outcroppings bear proper names and have important stories that accompany them.⁹ Extensive knowledge of native vegetation is used not only for food and medicine, but as cultural markers of boundary, entrance, greeting, and occupation as well. For instance, the towering thin columnar pine, the male symbol, is planted alongside the female symbol, the coconut tree, wherever there is a settlement, thus marking human occupation in an otherwise low growing landscape. Another plant, with red coloring on its leaves, marks the threshold of land that is occupied.

While the Kanak had no permanent buildings, they did have a building tradition—one of small wood frame buildings erected on earthen bases and topped with thatch roofs. Due to the sub-tropical climate and the temporary nature of available building materials, these structures had to be renewed periodically. The form of the buildings differed from island to island; on Grand Terre they were round in plan with conical roofs.¹⁰ The Kanak also had a tradition of making buildings in groups, with the head man's house (or *grande case*) at the end of a long, open public allee formed by other buildings clustered along either side. The allee was a well-tended closely cropped lawn planted with trees, providing a shady central gathering place. Buildings were seldom placed close together, and the landscape always slid between them. Due to the nature of the buildings and the lush vegetation, the village was always being created, and was never completed. As long as this tradition of inhabiting a place was unbroken, there was little need for a heritage of permanent buildings. The activity itself served as the cultural link to the past.

This landscape focus of the Kanak people, overlaid with Piano's experience and reading of the site, became the place where the Building Workshop began its design. First they had to devise a strategy for a building program of 8550 square meters, that would incorporate in a deep, rather than superficial, way the landscape traditions and habitation sensibilities of the Kanak, while answering the demands of a state-of-the-art cultural center. To achieve this the team began investigating how to break down the scale and bulk of the building and connect its pieces to the landscape, to create a place that would seem familiar to the Kanak who would be using it. "As an expression of a link with nature", Piano wrote, "which constitutes age-old tradition the Centre is not, could not be, enclosed in a monumental form. For this reason, it is not about a unique edifice: it is an ensemble of villages and of stands of trees, of functions and paths, full and empty spaces".¹¹

This attitude led to a site strategy of using the existing path along the peninsula ridge as an allee, not unlike the open allees in Kanak villages. This one, however was exceedingly long and narrow by comparison, and would need to be covered to protect people from the intense sun and frequent rain. The program elements were strung along the allee, with openings in between them to allow the inhabitants of the building to always be connected to the landscape and the elements. Service and storage areas were pushed into the ground to reduce building bulk and leave much of the site unbuild. Parking was moved off the peninsula toward the mainland. People would approach the building on foot through the landscape.

Further refinements were made to these landscape ideas after Piano won the competition, and began including Octave Tonga, the Director of the Center, Marie-Claude Tjibaou, President of the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture and Jean-Marie's widow, and other Kanak people on the Workshop Team. The deeply embedded relationship to nature is further cultivated

at the Center in the Kanak Path, an interpretive path that organizes a series of landscapes along a wandering walkway between the building and the lagoon. The Path ties large, carefully placed rocks and local vegetation to the Kanak creation myth and to daily cultivation of taro and yam fields. During the opening days of the Center, the Kanak path was crowded with Kanak people clearly excited by the recognition of their well-known myth and their landscape at this new place. For non-Kanak people it unveils and makes more legible the rural New Caledonian landscape as well as the deep violence done to the Kanak through colonial displacement.

Ways of moving through the landscape were also incorporated. Kanak tradition holds that an indirect path is the proper way to approach a building, especially the dwelling of an important person. As a result of this, the entry to the building is not at the end of the allee, where conventional Western architectural logic would have it. Instead one follows a path that approaches the end of the building, then swings away from it toward the lagoon, up a small rise, then turns toward the building to enter it under a wide porch along the side. Alternately, one can take the Kanak Path, which wanders three-quarters of the way around the building, allowing entry mid-way along the bay side, under the cafe porch. While first time non-Kanak visitors search in goal-oriented confusion for the entrance, Kanak visitors wander calmly toward it.

Finally, many mature tall columnar pines and coconut trees have been transplanted to the site, and the building is surrounded by lawns. These crucial elements of an inhabited Kanak landscape are essential to making the Kanak feel “at home” with the project.

Emmanuel Kasarherou states, “It was very intelligent to use the landscape to introduce the building. This is a way the Kanak people can understand”¹² This sort of embedding of the project in the landscape would not have been possible on a more limited site in the center of Noumea. In the end, the peninsula has turned out to be the ideal site—rural enough to be comfortable for the Kanak who come to it from small towns and villages, yet close enough to Noumea to attract visitors and participants in cultural activities, and to provide access to urban infrastructure and services.

Materials and Technique

So Piano seems to have gotten the site strategy right through the disposition of the building on the site, the development of the landscape, and the inclusion of familiar elements. However, the site strategy as stated does not yet hold anything that would suggest building form or technology—except for the suggestion that passive strategies for ventilation should be used to help maintain connection to the landscape. Much more difficult, and perhaps more controversial, was discovering the form and materials the building should take.

The local building industry in New Caledonia has a quite lim-

ited repertoire of material experience: almost every building is reinforced concrete frame with block infill. Local steel fabrication is limited primarily to the rough functional work needed by the huge nickel mining industry of the territory. The only refined building craft tradition found locally is fine carpentry and cabinet-making. This dearth of construction options made two things clear: first, that such impoverished material range was not likely to supply the symbolic and cultural presence needed in this projects, and two, it clear that, given Piano’s obvious dedication to elegant buildings, local skills and technology were not up to making any building he would design. It was almost a foregone conclusion that much of the building materials and technology would have to be imported, especially if the building was to live up to its French role as the last of the “Grands Projects”.

This did not create an obstacle for Piano—instead it points to another reason his selection as architect for this project was fortuitous. The RPBW commonly uses a kit-of-parts approach for its projects. This comes in part from a refined modernist sensibility about repetition and pattern, as well as a concern about quality of construction. With the kit-of-parts approach, the pieces could be fabricated overseas, then shipped to the site, where local labor could put it all together. This is the very practice that was used by Gustav Eiffel for his many train station projects in South America. It allowed the latest in building technology to be used to create great buildings in parts of the world where the technology would not otherwise be available.

It might be argued that this view of technology and building is a type of colonialism: that it universalizes a place and a people, ignoring their own sensibilities. In the case of Eiffel and the trains that were populating South America at the turn of the century, there was no local tradition of building that could possibly contain the huge machines. This is also the case, in a different sense, for the Tjibaou Cultural Center: there is no precedent in the Kanak building tradition for the accommodation of computers, large works of art, studio space for visiting international artists, telephone and fax service, or contemporary dance performances.

At this point in time, the Kanak culture has already been irretrievably altered—it exists right now in an international condition. It would be patronizing to expect these people to return to their pre-colonial era way of life or technology; to not share in the material prosperity their land has created. “The return to tradition is a myth,” said Jean-Marie Tjibaou, “No people has ever achieved that. The search for identity, for a model, I believe lies before us...”¹³ And so forward is where Piano searched for architectural and tectonic expression free of what was available in the locale. Alban Bensa suggests that he accomplished even more than that: “Local traditions are not copied but transfigured by contemporary architecture, which draws its substance from what is specific in Kanak culture, giving it universal legibility and thus turning towards other civilizations and the future”¹⁴

Transforming Symbols

As Piano has proven over and over in his career as an architect, there is no line for him between design and the technical manifestation of the design. The modification and invention of building technology and detail is part and parcel of how he works as an architect, and of how he runs his practice as a Building Workshop. For him “technique means knowing how to integrate the most sophisticated technology with the creative, manual, and intellectual input of the individual; from the architect to who-ever participates in the construction and, if possible, also he for whom the architecture is intended.”¹⁵

Throughout New Caledonia, one can locate a Kanak house or a village by looking for the great columnar pines that they plant upon occupation of a site. These rise as distinctive vertical markers of inhabitation in the sometimes rugged landscape. Likewise, particularly on Grande Terre, traditional Kanak *grande case* are capped by a tall conical thatched roof many times the height of the building. Piano takes the pine tree and the *case* as a point of departure for what came to be the iconic forms of the project. He found in the modernist notion of material and structural expression a place where the old might become new. Traditionally the *cases* are circular wood framed structures that rise from a built-up earthen base. Pole rafters rest on exterior walls and meet at the top of a towering central pole. Cross pieces are then lashed between wall posts and between rafters to support the deep thatch of the exterior. The structural dynamics and methods of making are revealed in the unfinished interior.

Through a series of disciplined study models the Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW) transformed the *cases*. They stripped off the thatch and refined the cross pieces as battens with rhythmic spacing. They removed the central pole, opened the pole rafters like petals of a flower to become vertical structure with their tips no longer meeting, and changed the rafters into curved glulam ribs that step down in height as they form the circle with the tallest opposite the circulation allee. The resulting interior space is a circular room opening onto the allee and roofed with a flat disc tilted up from the entrance toward the high point of the ribs.

Once this general form was achieved, the RPBW further refined this form in response to the tropical climate and widely varying wind conditions of the site. They developed a

double skin system on the walls of the *cases* to allow the exterior wall to shade the interior wall and leaving a space for a thermal chimney in between. Their wind tunnel tests demonstrated that all the *cases* should be oriented with their highest sides toward the prevailing wind which gave them both structural and ventilation advantages, and provided the logic for the spacing of the exterior battens. They tied the glulams together with galvanized steel bracing to form a three dimensional circular truss designed to withstand hurricane force winds. The interior skin consists of louvered panels that are operated by computer to maximize natural cooling.

At one point in the design process, the Kanak on the Building

Workshop Team were reviewing the design of the transformed *cases*. They admitted to Piano that they still did not completely understand the structures. After questioning, it turned out that, while they knew how the cases were supported, what they were saying was that the technical expression of the structure of the *cases* was somehow disguised. They went on to say that in the Kanak tradition of building, the process of construction and the structural forces were all still legible in the finished building. The RPBW reworked the structural expression of the *cases* based upon these comments until the Kanak on the Team felt that the legibility of the forces were similar to their traditional construction expression.¹⁶

In the end, the *cases* have a deep reference to their traditional predecessors, yet become something equally authentic while completely new. They have lost their earthbound sensibility and their solid silhouette. Now they soar up from the ground, and like the pines, the tops feather out against the sky. The edge of building and sky seem to shift over the course of the day and in different light: sometimes making a distinct lace-like pattern, sometimes appearing to blend almost seamlessly.

The transformed *cases* by themselves were not sufficient to contain the symbolic and the programmatic demands of the Center. There needed to be something else, something of the world beyond the shores of New Caledonia—beyond the specific history of this particular colonial occupation. For this Piano chose a clear international vocabulary of horizontally proportioned glass and steel flat-roofed boxes, modified for the climate. These provide a visual and cultural foil for the soaring curving shapes of the *cases*—and perhaps suggest the distance still to be traversed in Kanak healing and cultural visibility. Piano says: “Above all, (it was) to be a project synonymous with peace, enabling valuable dialogue to be established with the other communities in the territory and throughout the Pacific. It should”, he continues,

“enable the Melanese to express their cultural roots and to impress upon this magical location their identity and their open-mindedness with regard to the future. The strength of the building and of its setting must be inherent in the gentle but clearly affirmed transition between the earliest Kanak culture and the innovative demands of modernity. Indeed, we must bear in mind that we are at the threshold of the 21st century and that we can use a certain type of technology, advanced but kind, compatible with the notion of memory, not opposed or unsuited to it. We have to reconcile modernity and technology with nature and tradition.”¹⁷

Making It Right

Having determined that minimal construction and fabrications skills and technology existed in New Caledonia, RPBW began looking globally for the best materials possible. For the cases

they wanted wood that was farmed, was unusually stable and therefore could be laminated in large pieces, had natural insect repelling qualities, and would require little maintenance. They found iroko, a kind of mahogany grown in Guinea that is insect and moisture resistant and ages to a silvery grey over time.

The fabrication of the wood into the giant glulam ribs used for the cases could only be accomplished at five fabricators world-wide. Piano's Paris-based team chose to work with a fabricator in France. After the ribs were fabricated they were slung onto the deck (as they could not fit into the opening of the hold) of the only ship large enough to take them that plied the waters to New Caledonia. The cast steel connectors and footings of the cases as well as all of the other major building components were likewise prefabricated and shipped to the islands. One doesn't need much experience with building site glitches to imagine the continuous headaches the remote fabrication and shipping schedules created on the construction site.

The running of the construction site is the final place where Piano's sensitivity to the historical and cultural context of the project played out. He sent as his site architect a Frenchman named William Vassal, who had worked closely on the design of the project for years. Vassal set the tone for the site when on the first day he insisted on walking the heavy equipment operators over the site before they started clearing and grading to explain the project and why certain trees should be maintained. This was so effective in getting the operators to work carefully with the existing vegetation of the site, that he later had to negotiate with them to remove a tree or two for aesthetic reasons. Vassal continued this interactive mode of supervision of crews not used to the daily presence of an architect on the site or to reading drawings prepared for unique building systems: explaining, demonstrating, collaborating, providing unconventional drawings, and always insisting on the best work possible under the circumstances. He says in retrospect, "Everyone was proud to work on the project. They all went the extra distance to make sure it was a good building."¹⁸

Conclusion

So this is how the project looks. It nestles into the subtle topography of the small peninsula. The experience of the place is of a series of small buildings clustered together in the landscape. Ten of the transformed cases line the bay side of the central alley. They clearly symbolize the Kanak—radically changed from their pre-colonial past and looking toward the future. The alley itself and the pieces that line up on the lagoon side of it, are a blatantly international style assembly of steel and glass, with interior floors and finishes of wood, except in the galleries, where white walls are the rule. The double layered flat roofs of these pieces are held even, with the bulk of the spaces pressed underground so that the cases can soar above them. The flat roofs extend beyond the building to make great shaded porches

on the northwestern side of the building. The galleries inside are great high clean Renzo Piano galleries, full of filtered daylight and bringing to mind his galleries for the Menil Collection in Houston. Clearly this part of the building symbolizes the international community which the Kanak are entering.

The project is remarkable for the fact that it avoids both international arrogance and picturesque sentimentality, both dangers in designing for indigenous communities. Instead it walks the delicate line between tradition and international culture.

William Vassal tells the following story:

"We were showing the building site to a group of Kanak people, with (Director of the Center) Octave Tonga, and I was explaining to them the work of Piano and the team, and we arrived in front of a case. I said, 'here is a hut'. The Kanak said nothing and spoke together in the Kanak language, and Tonga translated that they were asking where the hut was. I tried to explain in place of Renzo that this was the remembering of a hut. He wanted to do the transition between modernity and tradition. Also he uses this sentence from the South American writer, Borges, that the work of the creators, like architect, is just on the border between memory and oblivion. When Piano explained that it was the remembering of a hut, it was just what you remember of a hut before you begin to forget it and you begin to do something else. So this is what I said to the Kanaks, and they talked together again, and the oldest one said, 'This hut is like ours, before we put the thatched roof on it.' He stopped speaking and started again, 'This is not us anymore, but it's still us.'"¹⁹

It is obvious from this story and from the project as you see it here that the Tjibaou Cultural Center sits outside of easy politically correct condemnations, either cultural or environmental. Its form is derived from Piano's innate technological curiosity combined with his dedication to making the building legible to the Kanak and revealing of their culture. It exists in the swirling cross-currents of the changing structures of power in New Caledonia, and the world. Piano accepted this flickering condition and strove, with his collaborators, to make the building that is a sensitive container for the fragile, battered, but optimistic spirits of the Kanak people as they move forward to become, once again, cultural participants in their own land.

Alban Bensa, with characteristic clarity, sums it up this way:

"For Kanaks, the cultural center is like the sculpted prow of a canoe heading for independence. But while it projects an ultra-modern image of 'custom' for the purposes of international media, it also unsettles a population still composed mainly of farmers and workers, and thus figures the deep social and ideological currents that are changing the Kanaks. As for the public authorities, they seem intent on making this monumental

facility (which Mitterand had already foreseen on a postage stamp design) the flagship for the new role France hopes to play in a Pacific at long last nuclear free and calm. Cutting across anti-colonial feeling and continued French presence in New Caledonia, midway between a tribute to Kanak civilization and progressive European architectural thought serving our modernity, and amidst the difficult coming together of living traditions and those that are represented, the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center focalizes the tensions of its own ambiguity.”²⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This observation is developed in response to ideas articulated by Said, pgs 225-226
- ² RPBW, Press Kit
- ³ Tjibaou, Exhibit
- ⁴ The text of the Matignon-Oudinot Accord of 1988 states that the role of the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture is “to accord full value to the Kanak cultural heritage in all its forms: archeological, ethnographic and linguistic; to encourage contemporary forms of Kanak culture; to promote cultural exchange, especially within the South Pacific region; to define and conduct research programs of value to Kanak culture.”
- ⁵ Bensa, *Architecture d’aujourd’hui*
- ⁶ Piano, *Logbook*
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ Kasarherou, Author Interview
- ⁹ Clifford, Author Interview
- ¹⁰ Miyake, A+U
- ¹¹ RPBW, *op cit*
- ¹² Kasarherou, *op cit*
- ¹³ RPBW, *op cit*
- ¹⁴ Bensa, *op cit*
- ¹⁵ Franco Zagari, “The Piano Effect”, as quoted by Kenneth Frampton
- ¹⁶ Vassal, Author Interview
- ¹⁷ *op cit*, Piano, *Logbook*
- ¹⁸ Vassal, Author Interview
- ¹⁹ Vassal, A+U Interview
- ²⁰ Bensa, *op cit*

The outline of the Kanak history and many of the facts presented here are the result of a series of interviews with William

Vassal, RPBW site architect, over a three day period in June 1998 in Noumea. I am indebted to his generosity and patience.

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