

An Island Practice

The Legends in Nuka'alofa, Tongatapu

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural
Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)
Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland
and the Queensland University of Technology,
Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5397pu6d6

Citation:

Davis, Michael. "An Island Practice: The Legers in Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 15-16. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural
Historians Australia
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

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The Legers in Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu

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Islands are necessarily places of innovation, where people are thrown back on local resources to find ways to meet needs, often with limited technical means. Innovation emerges from an essential drive to make things simpler rather than more complicated.¹ The architect might have a role to play here. In contrast, despite being very much an island nation, Aotearoa's construction industry falters along a path that emulates international compatriots operating in much larger economies. Regulation favours complexity of construction, products and productisation, and finer divisions of labour in pursuit of profit. But without the scales of economy and the breadth of offering present in distant neighbouring markets, here, building affordability is amiss. The architect is often dispensed with.

Recent events also demonstrate the fragility of this global model and the falsity of the narrative of benevolent international connectedness it is founded upon. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic severed flows of people and materials to, from, and within our shores; Cyclone Gabrielle wiped out communities and shifted landscapes; and the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai eruption and

ensuing tsunami showed (live) how tenuous our hold on terra firma might be.

In this mix of narrow specialisation, unaffordability, and vulnerability, how is knowledge held, and skill developed? How might we innovate when relationships – arguably the sites of innovation – are so heavily contractually modulated? Is this way of making buildings appropriate for an island? This paper asks: what form might the practice of architecture take to thrive in an island economy? In response, it offers an historical case study of the “multidisciplinary,” “entrepreneurial” (in current parlance) endeavours of one family in the colonial Pacific.

Party to activity in the Pacific from the mid-1800s, the Leger family consolidated their reputation as architect-builders in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, through their involvement in projects such as the Tongan Royal Palace (1867). Records of their operation exist primarily as oral accounts handed down and shared among family. The enquiry follows moments of resonance between those oral accounts, and written accounts extracted from sources that include the archives of the Catholic Church in the Western Pacific. In the process, Leger buildings are

1.

Andrew Barrie and Julia Gatley, “Towards a New Timber Architecture” in *Unfinished and Far Far Away: The Architecture of Irving Smith Architects*, ed. Aaron Betsky (Altrim Publishers, 2023), 78–79.

identified and drawn as evidence into discussion that speculates as to the nature of the practice that produced them.

The book *Making Ways: Alternative architectural practice in Aotearoa*² cast the net wide across local contemporaries to demonstrate the doing of architecture “differently.” Difference was articulated relative to imported models regulated and mediated into a place increasingly proximate to the margins of the building industry. The research presented a section through a community of practitioners at a moment in time. However, this paper turns the plane ninety degrees to take a section through time at a point in the community, to enable the author to examine the practices of forebears for a sense of how to understand and respond to the now. This leg into the Pacific is situated in relation to the work of historian Damon Salesa and architects Albert Refiti and Charmaine ‘Ilaiu Talei. Salesa provides an historiographical foundation; Refiti offers disciplinary focus that embeds concepts of *vā* and *talanoa*; and ‘Ilaiu Talei offers a palpable sense of architectural operation in the Pacific³ that the paper extrapolates.

Written from Aotearoa about the work of one concentrated group in the Pacific a

hundred and fifty years ago, the discussion looks to the past for some sense of future forms and potentials of the architectural discipline in island economies (including that of Aotearoa). It demonstrates a model of agile, vertically integrated architectural practice that emerged in response to massive shifts in operational conditions, perhaps similar to those we face now. Hypotheses concerning the sanctity of relationships, embodied knowledge, and the provenance of materials are presented. It begins with a provocation that for the practice of architecture to thrive on an island, one must first de-silo disciplines and un-sever design from making, and in so doing, dispense with the “architect.”

2.

Michael Davis and Kathy Waghorn, eds., *Making Ways: Alternative Architectural Practice in Aotearoa* (Objectspace, 2022).

3.

Charmaine ‘Ilaiu Talei, “The Architectural Vernacularization of Pacific Aid Practice,” in *Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory*, eds. Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O’Rourke and Marcel Vellinga (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 21–34.