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VĀ: A PRAXIS FOR PACIFIC ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: The architecture of Pacific peoples has always been people centred. Vā is the relational space that mediates Pacific peoples' relationships with one another and their environments. This paper extends the understanding of vā as a model of research and presents vā as a praxis framework for Pacific architectural action research. In an architectural project, I suggest vā can shape the whole process from conception to completion beyond just the built and occupied spaces. When practising architecture, I argue that vā can be a governing design principle as well as the approach to deliver Pacific architectural projects appropriately. Vā, therefore, is significant for all architects working in cross-cultural settings that involve Pacific peoples. Coming full circle back to my first publication, "Tauhi Vā: The First Space", the paper begins with an architectural understanding of vā before framing a scoping review of vā research published over the last 40 years. The paper then discusses how vā can be unsettling and innovative as a praxis for design, procurement, building and project management on an architectural project. As a Tongan architect and researcher, I draw on experiences from architectural projects in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Te Ao Moemoeā (Australia) and the wider Moana (Pacific Ocean) completed over the recent years.

Keywords: Pacific and Māori codesign, architectural vā praxis, Pacific architecture, Tongan architecture, vā, tauhi vā, teu le va

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Vā (Pacific relational spaces), as a construct, is a well-established Pacific research concept and methodology that emerged in Pacific research during the 1980s. This paper considers vā as discourse 40 years on and aims to extend existing studies of vā by demonstrating vā as a praxis, as illustrated through my lived experiences as an architect and researcher. To this end, case studies are presented from architectural projects conducted between 2017 and 2022.

If research methodology describes the approach to one's research and application of research methods, then praxis-based research best frames the findings of this paper because vā reaches across both architectural theory and its practice. As transformational research (Given 2008: 887), research praxis reflects and seeks to improve outcomes and, therefore, must shift between theory and practice. I propose vā as a research and design praxis that is essential to our understanding of Pacific architecture because vā

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combines ways of knowing, seeing, being and doing for Pacific peoples. The blurring between method, methodology and practice becomes more relevant when applying, observing, facilitating and corresponding to vā as a Pacific architect and researcher on Pacific and Māori architectural projects. Within this space, I operate between these roles, moving outside and inside the cultural communities, whilst seeking transformational outcomes through action research.

Space making in Pacific cultures is a highly sophisticated and ancient expertise. Fundamentally, at the core of making Pacific spaces are the sociospatial values that underlie the conception, curation and establishment of physical spaces. The values-driven process of Pacific space making is attributed to the praxis of vā. It could be argued that vā, as a concept of spatial relations reflecting social values, is not exclusive to Pacific architecture since all architecture since time immemorial has reflected the fundamental values and aspirations of its culture at the time. However, each culture has its own nuances, and for the architecture of Pacific peoples, vā as a praxis—bridging theory and practice—can develop designs and project approaches that are culturally specific for Pacific peoples.

With renewed interest in participatory design methods (cf. Mark and Hagen 2020) in recent years and particular emphasis on cross-cultural design engagements, vā reminds us how prevalent and established people-centred value systems are for Indigenous communities of the Moana (Pacific Ocean). Since relational spaces have always been critical to Pacific architecture, vā as a praxis demystifies how Pacific peoples use and occupy spaces, how we engage Pacific communities as stakeholders and clients on building projects, and how future projects could apply vā to frame their architectural design processes. Vā as a praxis has much to offer the predominantly western discourse of codesign methods.

This paper begins with positioning vā within my own work, before presenting a scoping review of academic literature to help inform future research about vā. The architectural examples presented within the discussion of the paper then seek to expand the current understandings of vā as a praxis from the viewpoint of cross-cultural architectural design.

ARCHITECTURAL POSITIONING OF VĀ

My first academic publication, titled "Tauhi Vā: The First Space" ('Ilaiū 2009), described how the contemporary fale (houses) in Tonga—although built as fakapapālangi (western-looking) residences—were in fact occupied according to anga faka-Tonga (Tongan ways of being and living) within built spaces. What, then, makes this fakapapālangi fale a Tongan fale is in fact that people within the domestic spaces enact tauhi vā (the nurturing of the Tongan relational spaces). That publication was a response to an earlier symposium in

honour of the renowned architectural historian and critic Joseph Rykwert and his 1972 book *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (Rykwert 1981). Rykwert's work was concerned with a return to architectural origins and the foundations of modern architecture across different societies. My paper returned to what is essential for Tongan architecture by reviewing the contemporary transformation of Tongan domestic buildings. I explained how Tongan customary behaviours have continued to organise and shape the contemporary fale. These sociospatial values, I argue, are more established than the building itself. I moved the discussion about Tongan architecture beyond the tangible realm to the relational realm of the "first space", as I described tauhi vā—this first space that is ever-present and embedded in all we do as Tongans. Vā is the relational space that nurtures, adorns and perpetuates the social connections between all Pacific peoples and their environments.

As a Tongan researcher with an emic understanding of my culture, I was able to see past just simply architectural westernisation (ʻIlaiū 2011) and similarly the colonised view of "mimicry" (Bhabha 2004) that is assumed by others unaware of Tongan values and aspirations. Moreover, I argued for the recognition of contemporary fale transformations as valid examples of Tongan architecture that unsettles the traditional depiction of a "primitive" thatched hut as our only form of architecture. This self-determining narrative disrupted the architectural history of Pacific spaces at the time, because, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021: 250) reinforces, "[w]hen Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms". It is in this same vein that the paper discusses vā as a praxis for architectural research and design: to determine an Indigenous approach to understanding and designing contemporary architecture of Pacific peoples.

I left Aotearoa New Zealand in 2010 to live abroad and practise architecture in Fiji and Australia. In 2022, I returned to take up an academic position at Te Pare School of Architecture and Planning, Waipapa Taumata Rau The University of Auckland, and it became evident to me that vā has become more widespread in its usage across architectural students' works, appearing in the studio and the teaching curriculum and beginning to influence how we begin and end university meetings. This is great to see. However, Pacific architectural students complained that the literature about vā is dispersed and fragmented. Although it is heartening to see greater interest in and publications about vā, a valid critique is that it has resulted in a "cluttering", to borrow Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi's use of the word (2005), where focus is undefined and there are inevitable gaps. An objective of this paper is to position vā in architectural research and contribute to

organising the existing literature by reviewing what has been published to date about vā for future students. This is a scoping review to determine the extent and major facets of the discourse, and therefore is by no means an exhaustive list, as my focus is on architecture. I started at this point more than ten years ago when I left Aotearoa, and now as an emerging academic, this paper is my own reconnection to the ways of thinking, making and doing that have always made true sense to me as a Pacific architect and researcher.

VĀ DISCOURSE WITHIN ACADEMIA

Vā is a way of being for many Pacific peoples that existed well before any academic mentioned it. It is a construct formed from within Pacific communities, using their respective ideologies and terminologies, to frame sociospatial relationships established between themselves, others and their environments. Moreover, by enacting vā these relationships are maintained according to the communal values and aspirations of their time, and the reciprocal actions enable the relationships to continue and thrive, such as tauhi vā in the Tongan context, or teu le va in the nurturing of Sāmoan relations. Vā for this paper is both the sociospatial values performed in time and space and the generative ability of vā to create or respond to architectural spaces that all together mediate Pacific peoples' relationships with one another and their environments.

From a scoping review of the Pacific research published about vā over the last 40 years, I present four categories, as tabulated in Table 1. The first category of publications discusses vā by way of explaining other prominent research objectives. Within this category are, for example, works about Sāmoan polity (Shore 1982), Tongan ethnographic studies (Morton 1996) and works examining Tongan perspectives of health and wellbeing (Young-Leslie 1999).

The second category presents Pacific-led explanations to theorise the meaning of vā. Here in this category, literature is traced back to the writings of Sāmoan poet and academic Albert Wendt regarding postcolonial identities in Aotearoa New Zealand (Wendt 1996). By the early 2000s, such discussions were moving from sporadic mentions within academic studies towards focused works to broaden our understanding of Pacific relational spaces and connections. This includes, for example, the work of Tongan academic Konai Helu Thaman (2008) about vā as a paradigm to nurture intercultural relationships and improve pedagogies for Pacific education. At the same time, Tongan academic Hūfanga ʻOkusitino Māhina was developing the tā–vā theory (2004), with fellow Tongan academic Tēvita Kaʻili (2008, 2017) contributing to it thereafter. The Sāmoan interpretation of vā within Sāmoan mobility studies has also been addressed by Sāmoan academic Saʻiliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009).

Māhina, Kaʻili and Lilomaiava-Doktor moved the discourse into the third category where vā is discussed through its various Pacific manifestations. It is here, in this third category, that my publication "Tauhi Vā: The First Space" (ʻIlaiū 2009) as it relates to fale architectural transformations is also situated. An important work relating to Sāmoan architectural spaces and vā is Albert Refiti's PhD thesis (2014), with Refiti co-founding a research platform, Vā Moana/Pacific Spaces, in 2012 to foster further discussions. Refiti's earlier work (2002) refers to vā as an ordering mechanism for the "in-between" spaces of Pacific architecture.

Finally, the fourth category of literature seeks to rationalise a research and learning framework guided by vā. It is in the last two emergent categorical themes of vā that I locate this paper. Teu le va has been featured in the context of improving Pasifika education (Airini *et al*. 2010) and its relevance to Sāmoan relational ethics to research (Anae 2016, 2017). In recent years, the work of ʻEma Wolfgramm-Foliaki and Hinekura Smith (2020) return us to Indigenous translations of vā and now connect its usage to the Māori word kā (to ignite). Wolfgramm-Foliaki and Smith's study of vā is part of a proposed framework to promote collaborative efforts across Pasifika and Māori research and educational aims in Aotearoa. Literature in this final category has also shifted towards studies of vā as a research method, such as the work of Faleolo (2021), who combines talanoa moe (and) vā (conversations nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships) as an approach to e-talanoa (online conversations; see Faʻavae *et al*. 2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic. I propose that these publications within the fourth category all attempt to rationalise a praxis of vā for Pacific research and education.

Given the increased interest within architectural education, I see the need to organise the academic interpretations of vā to develop ways of learning the construct and promote further research along these suggested categories of vā, as a growing discourse. This scoping review of literature is an attempt to establish the existing positions, as part of the decluttering of existing discussions about vā. It is however prudent for anyone using this analysis to avoid formularising and generalising vā across Pacific peoples. Instead, any researcher using vā should clearly define their use of vā drawing from the various existing positions and take into consideration the nuanced meanings of vā for different Pacific peoples. At present the literature about vā is defined mainly by academics of Sāmoan and Tongan descent and their experiences. Although their positions appear parallel, they do show an important theoretical difference in current discourse. The key distinction is marked by vā in relation to tā (time; markers of time, like things or people). According to Māhina (2004) and Kaʻili (2017), there is a need to consider how tā interacts with vā to fully comprehend vā in the Tongan sense. The architectural findings of this paper do sit within this

conception of vā marked by tā, because the realisation of Pacific values is manifested through the architecture. However, the findings also support the transformational praxis of vā, as presented in Anae's educational work (Airini *et al*. 2010), whereby vā can guide architects working with Pacific peoples and the delivery approach of Pacific architectural projects. Vā within the study of architecture, then, is multidimensional and influences design thinking, design process, project relationships, project delivery and the architectural outcome itself.

Table 1. Four categories that emerge from the vā discourse from 1980s to 2020s according to selected published sources.

Vā: to explain other ideas	Vā: theorising its meanings from an Indigenous perspective	Vā: translating its tangible and intangible manifestations	Vā: as a framework for learning and research
Shore 1982; Morton 1996; Young-Leslie 1999	Wendt 1996; Refiti 2002; Māhina 2004; Thaman 2008; Ka'ili 2008, 2017; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009	Refiti 2002; Māhina 2004; 'Ilaiū 2009; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009; Ka'ili 2017	Airini *et al*. 2010; Anae 2016, 2017; Wolfgramm-Foliaki and Smith 2020; Faleolo 2021; Fa'avae *et al.* 2022

VĀ AS ARCHITECTURAL PRAXIS: CROSS-CULTURAL DESIGN IN AOTEAROA

Cross-cultural design describes how architectural design is negotiated across cultures. Over the last ten years, the architectural industry in Aotearoa has experienced a significant shift towards greater recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi). In turn, this has enabled Māori peoples' cultural narratives to determine appropriate placemaking designs, and particularly on projects funded by Māori iwi (tribal groups) and by the New Zealand government alike. Although Pacific peoples are not Indigenous to Aotearoa, their narratives and motifs are reflected in the design of, for example, shopping centres and community and religious spaces. Moving across to domestic buildings, in 2002 Housing New Zealand published its *Pacific Housing Design Guide* (Faumuina & Associates). Also, in recent years, Pacific communities have been a focus of Kāinga Ora government housing projects, such as the Modernising Pasifika Homes development in Māngere, Auckland, that began in 2022 (Kāinga Ora n.d.). The need for cross-cultural

design expertise has therefore increased with such demand in Aotearoa.

Architectural practices specialising in cross-cultural design prior to the early 2000s were exclusive to firms managed by Māori or Pacific peoples—like the late Rewi Thompson, designTRIBE directed by Rau Hoskins, and Faumuina Architects directed by Polisi Faumuina—that all inherently had connections to these communities and were motivated to work with their respective cultural groups. Larger architectural firms employed to provide full architectural services for Pacific-styled or Māori-styled buildings in Aotearoa would also work with such cultural design experts. A good example is the architectural firm Jasmax that led the design services for the University of Auckland Fale Pasifika in the early 2000s and collaborated with many Pacific cultural experts and artisans. Some large architectural practices had in-house cultural designers, like Creative Spaces and its Tongan architect, Andrew Tuʻinukuafe. However, it was still considered a niche area of design more than a decade ago. But today, such shifts within the architectural industry and acknowledgement of Māori rangatiratanga (sovereignty) as tangata whenua (Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) in the design process and as custodians of project sites has meant a design trend towards appropriate cross-cultural design processes. Over the last decade cultural advisory groups with Māori and Pacific graduates leading the process have emerged within firms that were once exclusively mainstream in their architectural services. Indigenous-led design associations like Ngā Aho and architectural companies directed by Māori and Pacific directors like TOA, MAU Studio and New Pacific Architecture are also a response to the need for more cross-cultural design experts. Within this context, vā is being socialised and, I would add, treated as a praxis, beyond it being just a design idea and research methodology for architecture.

Architectural design services commonly start with a brief from the client and stakeholders, although the brief is sometimes generated together with the architects. The briefing process is project-dependent, but at its centre is how one chooses to engage their client and stakeholders to understand their values and aspirations from which to design. The briefing process ranges from community-wide forums to providing voluntary feedback on design proposals or gathering community data for a project—all referred to as community engagement. Similarly, there is stakeholder or user group engagement, which is similar to community engagement; however, this kind of engagement is limited to stakeholders or user groups directly affected by the project outcomes. With standard engagement processes the design authority typically flows one way from architectural professionals outwards. Codesign, on the other hand—although not entirely studied in relation to Indigenous communities—describes the coming together of professionals and non-professionals to collectively inform the design outcomes. Vā as praxis abuts neatly into such participatory design methods used on cross-

cultural design projects, because nurturing vā as a design professional means being mindful about, but not limited to, the delivery of services and how to enable Pacific stakeholders' full participation, alongside identifying their sociospatial perceptions of vā for the actual design of the project.

Vā as a praxis is about the decentring of architects or design professionals as the sole designer and learning how to listen without designing ahead. Vā is critical to gaining the trust of Pacific peoples before they fully participate and share their knowledges. It is no surprise then that those who specialise in codesign within cross-cultural design in Aotearoa are usually of Pacific or Māori ancestry, because their cultural upbringing and experiences develop and hone relational soft skills needed to facilitate collective design practices: they can learn and share genealogies; listen to and respect kaumātua or mātu'a (people with cultural seniority) included on projects; appreciate and easily grasp the allegory within storytelling; read the room and navigate social spaces; think allegorically about design and cultural translation; and also understand the sense of time and trusting reciprocation within the relational space.

The architectural translation of cultural knowledges, gifted by the Indigenous community for the designers to use, is part of the codesign process. Since vā is also about cultural values and enactment of those values within a space, then designing Pacific and Māori architecture is about being an expert at understanding and translating those values and aspirations and the tikanga of Māori peoples, anga faka-Tonga of Tongans or other equivalents like fa'a Sāmoa for Sāmoans, which all refer to culturally specific customary behaviours and ways of being. In designing cross-cultural spaces, an architect learns how to translate these cultural concepts and their culturally specific nuances into the design of the built environment in the most culturally appropriate and acceptable way. Vā, then, becomes a praxis that concurrently is the driving design principle and frames the design process and the project delivery, alongside being the approach to nurture the project relationships.

The development of cultural narratives takes time, and this is not always a smooth process within an architectural programme governed by client budget and timelines and existing power dynamics within cultural groups. But patience and nurturing the vā that has been established with cultural stakeholders can then lead to a successful project embedded with cultural meaning. On the Tauranga Moana courthouse project in Aotearoa, the presence of Māori kaumātua at every formal codesign meeting ensured immediate endorsement of design decisions. As I observed, the inclusion of cultural seniority on this project provided a strong relational space, or vā, with the esteemed values of old and continuation of accepted tikanga for the project's spaces. Since each Pacific and Māori community provides voices for their own realities, the design engagement methods should not be

formulaic. Rather it is necessary that architects, within or outside of Pacific and Māori cultures, aim to be more innovative, be more agile, be better at listening (and being quiet), enable safe spaces for communities to engage meaningfully and acknowledge other experiences that may exceed their own worldview to operate successfully within vā.

VĀ AS ARCHITECTURAL PRAXIS: PROCUREMENT OF CULTURAL AND BUILDING EXPERTS

Typically for architectural design services the project phases consist of pre-design, concept design, preliminary design, developed design and detailed design prior to the construction and defects liability phases. Historically, cross-cultural engagements were conducted only at the start of projects, but with the shift to codesign approaches, Māori and Pacific communities are increasingly engaged throughout all project design phases, as important partners on a project. Procurement consists of not only obtaining architectural services or building labour but also finding the building materials. I begin with procurement, because it is here that Pacific architecture traditionally begins (ʻIlaiū 2007: 137, 145; ʻIlaiū Talei 2018: 710). Pacific peoples historically had our own approach to procurement, which often starts with who one knows. In other words, the vā between the building owner and their environment and the people with building skills available to them is what initiated the project.

To find a tufunga (builder; artisan; craftsperson), one's social network is considered to determine at best a family or clan member, or a contact who can recommend someone else. This initial act of building then starts with finding the most suitable tufunga from amongst the existing relationships with building experts available in the community. An advantage when sourcing a relative or an acquaintance is the opportunity to gain building services at a more affordable rate or engage in customary transactions of reciprocity. The latter means that the service by the tufunga can be returned by the receiving party at another time or through another way, such as through a meʻaʻofa (monetary gift) at a daughter's wedding, assistance with agricultural planting and harvesting, or later providing pigs and root crops for a funeral.

Historically, the tufunga would orchestrate the collection of the suitable natural vegetation and the people to harvest and prepare raw materials for thatching, floor materials and structural elements. In Tonga, I found the collection of materials involved relatives sourcing upcycled building materials from demolition yards, inorganic materials left on suburban curbsides, or websites like Gumtree (in Australia) or Trade Me (in Aotearoa) where leftover building materials may be sold. I coined the term "architectural remittances" (ʻIlaiū 2009: 28; ʻIlaiū Talei 2018) to describe this procurement praxis of maintaining and nurturing the vā between family members located in the village and those within the diaspora. Kaʻili

(2017: 5) refers to the symmetrical aesthetics of māfana (warmth) in the relationship, when the enactment of tauhi vā occurs through fetokoni'aki (mutual support) in Tongan communities, which is also a cultural value of other Pacific peoples. Importantly, what I want to draw attention to is that the contemporary sourcing and gathering of construction materials and expertise by Pacific peoples today reflects and perpetuates earlier methods of building procurement that is still based on vā.

During my experience on large infrastructure aid projects in the southwestern Pacific Islands, I observed how the procurement of cultural specialists or local expertise is required within the project tendering documents ('Ilaiū Talei, forthcoming). This meant that foreign companies were required to source local consultants and provide capacity-building services to be eligible for the project's services. These Indigenous-centred procurement methods for aid projects are similar to what is occurring in Aotearoa with the inclusion of mana whenua (specific Māori custodians of a territory) on government projects. However, sourcing the right people for the job involves finding cultural advisors who can determine the iwi-endorsed cultural representatives for the project. Architectural projects involving Māori often start with meetings to determine genealogies and descent lines to the whenua (land) of the project. On government projects in particular, it is also common for both the client side and architect side to have cultural engagement advisors, strengthening a sense of reciprocity. By pairing cultural expertise across the client and design team, kotahitanga (cohesion and unity) in the design vision is better aligned.

Although there have been some significant improvements in making space for cultural experts and the participation of Indigenous communities, it is not always a smooth and simple process. This may include the oversight by a client to allow within a project budget the me'a'ofa or koha (monetary gift) to cultural stakeholders to compensate them for their engagement. Reciprocity is not always understood as a value of vā by non-Moana peoples. Thus, it falls on informed design professionals to request and support this enactment of vā as a praxis.

VĀ AS ARCHITECTURAL PRAXIS: BUILDING WITH VĀ

My parents' house in Ōtara, Auckland, has a garage that was renovated in the early 1990s into a granny flat by my uncle Tauē. My mother employed her brother to extend our family's living and sleeping spaces beyond our four-bedroom house. Included in my parents' reasoning was the desire to uphold faka'apa'apa (respectful cultural relations) between my older brother and us girls, who were staying in the main house. The vā that existed between my mother and her brother was also governed by the customary values of fahu (a type of Tongan matriarchal system), since my mother is the eldest sister

amongst her siblings. My mother, on the other hand, did not overburden her brother and reciprocated by giving him a cash payment at the end of his services, paying for all the materials and providing all his daily meals on our construction site. Thus, via these sociospatial transactions in our Auckland suburban family home, vā was maintained and nurtured.

My personal anecdote and lived experience is not different from historical ways of building in Pacific communities, which relied on collective efforts to gather raw materials, make the building materials, organise and instruct the building labourers, make the food for those working and provide the construction labour. It is very true the Pacific saying that before one builds a fale, they plant their garden full of crops to feed and thank the future workers, emphasising again how the intangible relational space, or vā, initiates the tangible built spaces. The blessing of the site prior to the builders beginning work on site and the blessing at the completion of the project brings full circle the vā required to finish the building. Such associated building ceremonies continue on important community-engaged projects, and in Aotearoa on government projects mana whenua are notified to attend and bless the site prior to land disruption. Just as in the past, once a project reaches completion it concludes with a celebration and feasting, and so we are reminded of the vā that was activated and nurtured during the project and now reciprocated.

For the construction of a Queensland Government correctional project that I worked on from 2020 to 2021, there was an allowance for Australian Aboriginals to collect, inspect and advise on cultural artefacts found during ground excavation. In New Zealand and Australia, heritage specialists are engaged to advise on how to adhere to cultural heritage laws.[1] Their guidance involves establishing a process to mitigate the destruction of taonga (valued cultural landscapes and artefacts) or Aboriginal cultural artefacts that may be found during site excavation and involve cultural landowners in managing coincidental finds. As these illustrations explain, vā as a praxis continues to order the relations involved during the construction phase between ancestral land, artefacts of that land, the land's owners and those involved in the architectural project.

VĀ AS ARCHITECTURAL PRAXIS: DESIGNING WITH VĀ

While I was working on the refurbishment of Fuaʻamotu International Airport in Tonga as a project architect, I sat in a meeting room with the Tongan client-side project manager, Tongan airport stakeholders, my design colleagues and the Pākehā (New Zealand European) construction manager. Our meeting began with a lotu (Christian prayer). Prior to the lotu there was informal banter of "Ko hai koe pea ʻoku ke haʻu mei fē ʻi Tonga?" (Who are you and where do you come from in Tonga?). My client, knowing that I am Tongan, wished to first connect with my ancestral origins. I found that this

establishment of vā—to understand one's whakapapa (genealogy) from past to present—represents an innate need to make connections and develop a relationship prior to getting to official business (ʻIlaiū Talei, forthcoming). In my meetings with mana whenua on the Tauranga Moana courthouse project the need for creating and nurturing vā was no different. Formal meetings began with a karakia (Māori prayer or incantation) and, when required, a round of whakawhanaungatanga (establishing and maintaining relationships) for team introductions. Without this human transparency, warm-up and display of professional vulnerability, it is generally sensed that such meetings did not start off appropriately. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the protocol to offer a karakia prior to a Zoom meeting continued. I have observed that such vā-derived protocols can be unsettling for some, because they require learning a new language and taking on customary practices that go beyond one's belief systems. However, by indigenising these architectural meetings, a safe cultural space was created for those involved from Pacific and Māori communities, and others learnt new approaches to design engagement.

On the Tauranga Moana courthouse project, mana whenua highlighted the need for a full cultural immersion trip consisting of a wānanga (educational cultural sleepover) at the site's local marae (a communal centre of buildings and courtyard spaces used by a particular Māori clan group) and a hīkoi (walk; trek) to visit and experience the wider site's taonga surrounding the project. To be guided by vā as architects means that we should be open to sources of inspiration beyond the project site, which acknowledges the cultural milieu of time and space for Indigenous peoples involved in the projects. Attributed to the relational values of mana whenua on this project, such hīkoi adapted the typical architectural project for architects to first engage the people of the land and what they value as taonga. In doing so, this design process inspired, challenged preconceptions and educated non-Māori designers on what is specifically valuable to mana whenua, or the Māori representatives of that site. Such innovations to cross-cultural design projects present exciting opportunities to enact and deepen vā as a praxis for architectural design for Pacific and Māori communities alike.

Beyond pre-design phases, a project may make space for Indigenous communities to advise or generate artistic works for the architectural project. Engaging local cultural artists can embed appropriate meanings that support placemaking strategies for the project. This may include a design for the ceiling, carpet or tile layouts, the façade design of the building or the patterns on the structural pou (posts), all reflecting a selection of cultural values and narratives. Such a collaborative design and building approach can strengthen the vā between designers and cultural representatives, offering the latter a sense of ownership and a culturally safe and welcoming environment that reflects ancestral narratives for future generations.

CONCLUSION

Vā within architecture, with its own distinct cultural descriptors (including tauhi vā and teu le va), is at present a cultural design concept that Auckland-based educators and students (primarily of Pacific descent) explore through architectural school projects. Within the architectural industry, it has yet to emerge distinctly as a governing design principle or design praxis of architectural projects—but this paper argues that it can. Codesign approaches need to be customised to suit Pacific peoples and their architectural approaches. Architects working on cross-cultural design critically need to understand the importance of vā to Pacific communities before vā can emerge more meaningfully as a formalised praxis. Having Pacific architects and designers positioned as design leads on the right architectural projects is also crucial to manifesting what vā *can be*. Wellington's new Fale Malae, designed in collaboration with Albert Refiti, Michel Tuffery and the firm Jasmax, is a sign of what is to come.

The future of vā as a praxis will become more critical as participatory design processes underscore successful and aspirational architecture for Pacific and Māori communities. Currently such projects do follow cultural protocols that foster whakawhanaungatanga and vā. However, it is hoped that cultural introductions at the start of architectural research and practice projects do not end there, without further meaningful engagement. I assert that vā as a praxis is central to Pacific project delivery, design processes and design outcomes, and it should continue from this precedent when developing contemporary forms of Pacific architecture. My illustrations demonstrate how vā can inform all of the relationships of the project, including the holistic connections to a project site. Moreover, vā influences *how* we conduct community or stakeholder engagement and the participatory design process. Vā as a praxis frames the management of the project delivery, sets its realistic timeframes and embeds culturally appropriate activities to support relationships before the design activities even begin. Vā is about understanding well the values and aspirations of the community engaged. Vā is about how to translate those values through the architecture and creating safe and inclusive spaces. Vā is about protecting taonga found in construction sites and its safeguarding. Vā is an all-encompassing and multifaceted praxis, perpetuating cultural meaning and values throughout the entire life cycle of an architectural project.

Future research focused on developing codesign tools for engagement according to vā and as applicable to Pacific peoples is very much needed. Vā influences design thinking and design process on architectural projects and moves easily between methodology and method as action research. The architectural dialogue of vā is focused predominantly on the occupation of spaces, but, as this paper argues, there is more to say about vā before

relational spaces are enveloped within the tangible architectural form. For this reason, reframing vā as a praxis is a critical step for those researching and practising Pacific architecture in the future.

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NOTES

1. This is done in accordance with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014 and Protected Objects Act 1975.

GLOSSARY

The terms included in this glossary are Tongan unless otherwise stated.

anga faka-Tonga	Tongan customary behaviours and ways of being
e-talanoa	online conversations
faʻa Sāmoa	Sāmoan customary behaviours and ways of being (Sāmoan)
fahu	head person(s) within a type of Tongan matriarchal system
fakaʻapaʻapa	respectful cultural relations
fale	house
fakapapālangi	western-styled; Europeanised
fetokoniʻaki	mutual support
hīkoi	walk; trek (Māori)
iwi	tribal group (Māori)
kā	to ignite (Māori)
karakia	prayer or incantation (Māori)
kaumātua	people with cultural seniority (Māori)
koha	monetary gift (Māori)
kotahitanga	cohesion and unity (Māori)
lotu	Christian prayer
māfana	warmth
mana whenua	specific Māori custodians of a territory (Māori)
marae	a communal centre of buildings and courtyard spaces used by a particular Māori clan group (Māori)

mātuʻa	people with cultural seniority
meʻaʻofa	monetary gift
Moana	Pacific Ocean
Pākehā	New Zealand European (Māori)
pou	posts of a building (Māori, Tongan)
rangatiratanga	sovereignty (Māori)
tā	time; markers of time, like things or people
talanoa moe vā	conversations nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships
tangata whenua	Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand (Māori)
taonga	valued cultural landscapes and artefacts (Māori)
tauhi vā	nurturing of Tongan relational space
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitingi (Māori)
teu le va	nurturing of relational spaces (Sāmoan)
tikanga	Māori customary behaviours and ways of being (Māori)
tufunga	builder; artisan; craftsperson
vā	relational space that mediates Pacific peoples' relationships with one another and environments
wānanga	educational cultural sleepover at a marae (Māori)
whakapapa	genealogy (Māori)
whakawhanaungatanga	establishing and maintaining relationships (Māori)
whenua	land (Māori)

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