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Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects

Tikanga Māori inspires award-winning student architecture project

A project that mapped three parts of the pōwhiri process to imagine a new kind of contemporary Māori architecture has won the top prize at an annual national competition for final-year architecture students.

[Download images of this project from Google Drive.]

Ben Tunui (Ngāti Awa, Te Ātiawa) won the award for his project 'Utu', which Ben says, "draws architectural form and spatial composition from Māori rituals of encounter, and questions how elements of contemporary tikanga Māori can be expressed architecturally".

The prestigious Te Kāhui Whaihanga Resene Student Design Awards, which are contested by graduating students from New Zealand's three Schools of Architecture (the University of Auckland, Unitec and Victoria University), were judged across two days, 2-3 December, at St-Matthew-in-the-City in Auckland, and announced at a ceremony on 3 December.

Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects President Judi Keith-Brown, the convenor of the awards jury which also included Nelson architect William Samuels and Ngā Aho Te Wai Pounamu co-chair Keri Whaitiri (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāi Tahu), said Ben was the unanimous choice for the top award.

"We quickly agreed Ben's thesis presentation marks the emergence of a genuinely important new voice in New Zealand architecture," Keith-Brown said. "Ben's clear proposition, methodical interrogation of his idea, creative exposition of his findings and beautiful yet tangible final designs reveal an already impressive architectural mind at work."

"This is a visionary architecture that is immersed in whakapapa, wairua, tikanga, kawa – and aroha," said Whaitiri in the official citation for the winning project. "Māori architecture and material culture has long been subject to colonial definition through western instruments of cartography, anthropology, history and theory. This project offers a staged methodology that allows for innovative and experimental development of propositions as described in a rich and alluring selection of images, drawings and models."

Ben received $5000 cash and a $1000 voucher from Unity Books as his prize.

Three highly commended prizes also awarded

Book vouchers were also awarded to three students whose projects were highly commended: Izzat Ramli and Abby-Jane Taylor from the University of Auckland, and Dimitri Thamel from Unitec.

The awards jury praised Izzat's entry, an ambitious plan for the relocation of Jakarta in response to climate change, which drew on etymology, architectural traditions and Pacific voyaging typologies to imagine a new Oceanic architecture.

"Izzat's project makes a clear case for the idea of transience and impermeability as a response to climate change and sea level rise," said the judges.

Abby-Jane Taylor wowed the jury by meticulously cataloguing every component of the deconsecrated Christ Church at Pukehou, Hawke's Bay, and reassembling them into three theoretical new forms that sensitively and beautifully enhance their community while retaining the materiality of the church.

"This project clearly identifies notions of assembly, disassembly and adaptability that allow for recognition of the value of heritage material while 're-designating' it as a renewable, reconfigurable resource," said the judges.

A trip to Sri Lanka in 2018 inspired Dimitri Thamel's project. After meeting Indian Tamil tea pickers who live in decrepit colonial houses under indentured and engrained conditions of poverty in Nuwara Eliya, Dimitri designed an architecture that provides healthy, dignified, flexible housing for this community.

"Dimitri's drawings are exquisite and, combined with his empassioned storytelling approach, made this a deeply affecting project. We'll never drink a cup of tea in the same way again," said the judges.

Dimitri is fundraising to make his project a reality: here is his Givealittle page.

The finalists

Two highly technological architectural theses were presented by Jordan Anderson and Jacky Ziyi Zheng.

Jordan's project 'Collegial Computing' used code to create a design process that recognises computers as partners and colleagues. An array of 'colleagues' displayed digitally generated architectural forms designed using Jordan's code, which itself revealed Jordan's unique design sensibility.

Jacky used Extended Reality (XR) technology to create a prototype for a built environment that allows us to read, activate, interact and receive feedback from our architecture. His 'CyberBio Architecture' lives inside a dome where it can be fed, humidified, petted and spoken to using XR.

In another work that embraces the power of technology, Alex Helg's dystopian project 'Auckland 2070' imagined a walled city where residents live in socially distanced tower blocks and interact with the world and each other using virtual reality (VR). His atmospheric project was inspired by science-fiction, gaming and speculative design.

University of Auckland student Sam Moloney looked to his campus's aging Student Union building for his thesis project, and elevated it (both figuratively and literally) through a series of bold, expressive interventions. By reinterpreting Brutalist ideas and details, Sam proposed a cohesive series of buildings which sat neatly within the wider urban environment.

Also looking to his university for inspiration, Taine Murray envisioned a new architecture school for Unitec informed by Te Aranga design principles. He used this scenario to formulate a manifesto for best-practice regenerative architecture that is grounded in site, place and ecologically aligned value systems.

Olivia Chiang was inspired by the Fukushima triple disaster for her project, which proposed a memorial landscape for the Namie community to help them remember the past and move forward. It seeks to draw people back to the region, offering a place of memorial that becomes a hub of interaction.

In the awards' first-ever group project, Mitra Homolja and Ellie Tuckey created a design methodology that proposes a true process of collaboration as a way to decolonise architecture.

"By focusing on process rather than outcome, empowering young people and deploying a dual briefing system, this team have created a new way of doing architecture that we can't wait to see deployed throughout our industry," said the judges.

All of this year's thesis projects were constrained by the events of 2020, and in particular the collective experience we now call "lockdown". Emma Rea took this experience as the opportunity for a forensic examination of her kitchen and the rituals performed therein.

Emma's slow, contemplative drawing project took something as seemingly mundane as a kitchen table and used it to show us the unreliability of language, etymology, translation and the subjectivity of pencil and paper. The delicacy of her work perfectly expressed the simultaneous intimacy and disconnection of lockdown.

This year's awards jury and overall remarks

The jury for the Student Design Awards typically includes an Australian judge, but the events of this year provided an opportunity to reflect on that practice, said Keith-Brown, who convened the judging panel. "From 2020 onwards, one of our judges will be from Ngā Aho, the network of Māori design professionals," Keith-Brown said. "This commitment is the latest we've made as a result of signing Te Kawenata o Rata, a covenant of ongoing cooperation between our two organisations, in 2017.

"As a result of this partnership, we were fortunate to welcome to the 2020 jury Keri Whaitiri (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāi Tahu). Keri has worked as an architect, educator and cultural design adviser.

Keith-Brown said she was inspired by the work of all this year's students, and heartened that such talented graduates were about to enter the architectural profession.

"It was amazing to see the huge range of work on offer, and it made the judging process extremely challenging! We were heartened to be presented with projects that ranged from highly technological to philanthropic to highly artistic, and everything in between. The future of architecture is certainly bright and exciting."

The Student Design Awards are organised by Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects and supported by Resene.

Twelve fifth-year architecture projects are selected to enter the competition, four from each of the Schools of Architecture at the University of Auckland, Unitec and Victoria University of Wellington.

For images of award-winners and their projects visit this Google folder. Photo credit for portraits of students and project displays to David St George; photo credits to students for all other imagery].

See below for a list of all students, their project titles and universities.

ENDS

List of students and universities

Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau (The University of Auckland) – School of Architecture and Planning

- Sam Moloney – Construction as Language
- Izzat Ramli – Continuum: Reimagining the Future of an Arguably Broken Oceania
- Abby-Jane Taylor – Reassembling the Assembly
- Jacky Ziyi Zheng – CyberBio Architecture

Head of School: Deidre Brown (09 373 7599, deidre.brown@auckland.ac.nz)

Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka, Unitec Institute of Technology, School of Architecture

- Olivia Chiang – Living Memorial: 10 Years After the Fukushima Triple Disaster
- Alex Helg – Auckland 2070
- Taine Murray – A Regenerative Manifesto
- Dimitri Thamel – 'The Boneva' (To Drink Tea)

Head of School: Andre Brown (021 641 663, andre.brown@vuw.ac.nz)

Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington School of Architecture

- Jordan Anderson – Collegial Computation
- Mitra Homolja & Ellie Tuckey – The Mana ki te Mana Table: decolonising architectural process through co-design and spatialising tools
- Emma Rea – House as Autobiography: An Architectural Mis-Translation of My Kitchen
- Ben Tunui – Utu

Head of School: Peter McPherson (021 710 067, pmcpherson@unitec.ac.nz)

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