Recreating Tokelau:
Distilling the Essence of Place in a Community Center

Jacqueline McIntosh
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Philippe Campays
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Dr. Fabricio Chicca
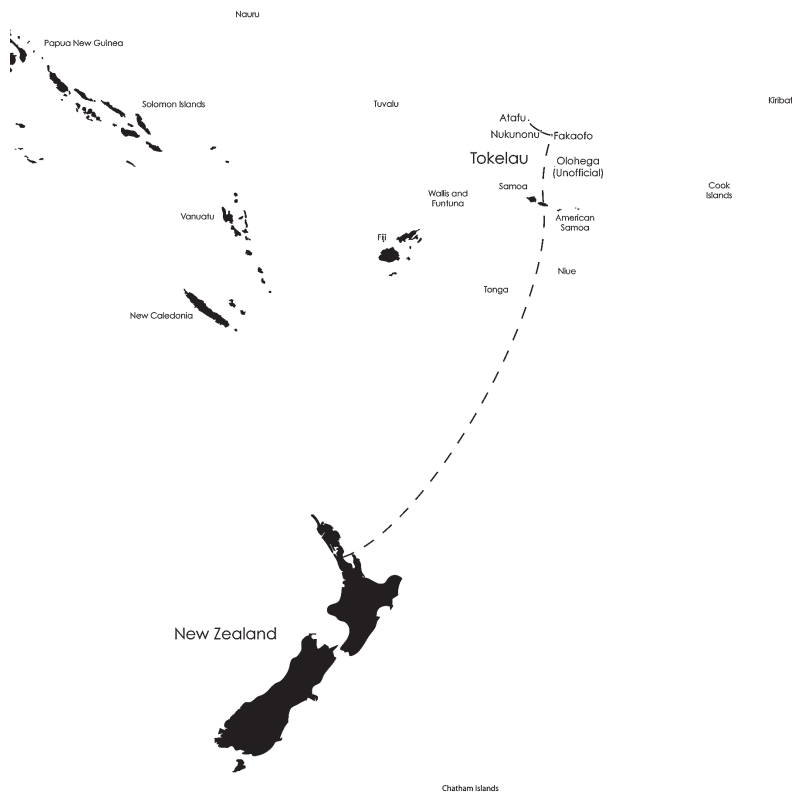*Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses a specific grassroots initiative of an economically disadvantaged Pacific Island community from Tokelau who has been displaced to New Zealand. To retain their island culture, community members sought to develop a centre as a source of their empowerment, one which would 'capture the essence of a Tokelau village'. They invited the School of Architecture at the University of Wellington to assist with its development. The guiding principles of this empowerment project are grassroots participation, mutual decision-making and shared implementation. The application of these principles is particularly befitting to participatory design methods. Despite some challenges, a number of benefits from this community's project can be cited. These include the strengthening of their sense of community, preservation of aspects of culture and a collective shared vision for the future. The fundamental idea here is that communities need to be able to seek, and receive help that empowers them rather than being offered potentially subsuming interventions. This was achieved through the development of trust between the university research team and the members of the Tokelau community. The opportunity for the university students and the Tokelau youth to engage and learn from each other were part of unanticipated additional outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly many Pacific Island communities have to leave their homeland for other countries due to the effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels and the subsequent economic impacts (Barnett & Adger, 2003; Brautigan & Woolcock, 2001). Tokelau, a nation composed of three small atolls in the middle of the South Pacific (see Figure 1) is one of those affected and has seen a steady exodus from its shores. Commencing after a significant hurricane in 1965 and continuing until 1992, New Zealand established a resettlement program to reduce food shortages and population pressure in the atolls (Brautigan & Woolcock, 2001). To date more than 70% of the population of Tokelau have elected to relocate to New Zealand, itself a South Pacific nation with a tradition of Polynesian immigration. This trend of migration is ongoing. Between 2011 and 2013 the Tokelau population remaining in Tokelau decreased by a further 2% (Tokelau National Statistics Office, 2013).

Figure 1. Map of Tokelau

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