

high on a HILL

BY DAVID EGGLETON



comments on the process of making, on the overlays of sign and circumstance, of which the Bluff Hill lookout is an example on a larger scale.

Bulldozed out of the hill itself, made of poured concrete and clad in cut stone taken from a local quarry, the lookout's squat, turret-like structure has an imposing rotundity. The pathway that leads to the viewing platform is a spiralling ramp that provides a theatrical sense of gradual ascension to a sublime view. The shape evokes not only the Maori koru (echoing the sternpost of Aoraki's waka), but also the Celtic spiral. A scroll-like concrete entranceway is planned, and a 360-degree stone map running round the top and inscribed with the original Maori place names, their English translations, and modern-day place names, is about to be installed.

Mulqueen collaborated with Harold Ashwell, a kaumatua of the Awarua iwi, in establishing Maori identification of dozens of landmarks. The cost of the whole project – over a quarter of a million dollars – has been met by the Community Trust and other local sponsors (including the smelter).

The lookout is at once a pragmatic structure and a symbol of the spirit of place. It's a ceremonial object, one stripped down and wound up like a coiled watch-spring. Poetic inscriptions will be stationed like signposts along the path, pointing to buried meanings and recovered memories. The translations from the Maori, with their rituals of naming, of turning one language into another, commemorate historical moments of loss, but, because they also preserve meaning, they act, too, as a kind of restoration.

Totemic, tomb-like, a tumulus, an earthwork, the Bluff Hill lookout is the end result of a complicated network of personal associations, of abstract theorising, of community needs and of land zoning. It is also a successful example of public sculpture at work.

names he liberally scattered around mingle promiscuously today with Maori place names. Mulqueen is fascinated by the way the intermingled names acknowledge the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial layers of the region's makeup: "You live with these [Maori] words and you don't know what they mean ..." His voice trails away, then he reaches for a quote from Maori historian Sydney Mead: "These named features and known landmarks reflect local truths."

Mulqueen is the artist as cultural worker, as well as object-maker. He trained as a jeweller in Invercargill in the early 70s, then moved to Dunedin to study art and design. In 1983 he co-founded the Fluxus Jewellery Workshop with Kobi Bosshard. More recently he has been studying and lecturing at art schools in Australia and Ireland. "Leaving the landscape where I grew up," he says, "helped me to focus on where I was from."

Since 1988 Mulqueen has been returning periodically to Bluff and its environs as a source of inspiration. His high-quality craft metalwork – necklaces and rings – has led him to a preoccupation with both myths of place and myths of industrialisation, and Bluff Harbour is at the centre. Tiwai Point, the location of the Comalco aluminium smelter, was once the site of a pre-European stone quarry for tool-making. Bluff basalt was traded

almost as widely as West Coast greenstone. Mulqueen, working with precious metals and precious stones, is very aware of how cultural meanings can be coaxed out of raw materials.

In 1994 he assembled a solo exhibition (shown in Invercargill, Rotorua, Pukaranga and Canberra) entitled *Papakihau "Slapped by the Wind"*, which incorporated stone basalt flakes, shaped by wind and water, together with objects made from cast metals. He forged, or fused, adzes, paddles, axes and shapes suggestive of canoe prows, combining ancient forms with new materials, making each object an entangled thing, a junction point for different narratives. With some exhibits he placed aluminium ingots – an exportable commodity made with imported Australian bauxite – alongside naturally occurring materials, objects of stone and wood, on which he had stamped cultural inscriptions (numbers and words).

Mulqueen's ongoing sculptural projects continue to revolve around the meanings – political, economic, environmental – generated by the smelter. Shrapnel-like fragments of aluminium become expressive signs – or mysterious ciphers –



Bluff Hill. It's there at the southernmost point of the South Island, the dominant landmark, so high that from everywhere else it looks like an island rising out of the sea. The Maori name for it is Motupohue – "island of flowers". It's the burial site of a Maori chief, and in one Ngai Tahu creation myth it's also the stern of the canoe of Aoraki, with the Marlborough Sounds representing the shattered prow. From the new lookout at the top, the view includes a panorama rolling inland to the plains of Southland, and behind them in the distance the mountains of Central Otago. The lookout, which is being completed in stages, was designed by artist Stephen Mulqueen, born and bred in the Bluff Harbour area. He received the design commission from the Department of Conservation after the previous viewing platform was demolished, following the Cave Creek platform disaster of 1995.

Bluff Hill – a hill with a view – is a chunk of land that has acquired a certain amount of archeological density. It is a hill with a history, a loaded cultural site. It was a marker point for the ships of sealers, whalers and flax traders. It became a pilot station, then a signal station. The government surveyor, John Turnbull Thomson, who was responsible for naming much of present-day Southland and Otago, used Bluff Hill as his southern base-peg. The English, Irish and Scottish