

TJIBAOU CULTURAL CENTRE, NOUMEA

By Howard Smith © 2002

<http://www.islamey.com/prof.html>

OF ALL architectural splendours in the South-west Pacific one edifice soars above all others in its visionary embodiment of an indigenous culture.

Indeed, the breathtaking Tjibaou Cultural Centre is a major drawcard for visitors to Nouvelle Calédonie while architects around the world see it as an unparalleled example of forward-looking construction, drawing upon both Kanak design models and the islanders' legendary life perspective.

In 1988 the Maignon-Oudinot Accords became a blueprint for a new unanimity and co-operation between New Caledonia's indigenous Melanesians and the French State, and from them sprang ADCK - an Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture.

By 1990 ADCK had set the Tjibaou Art and Cultural Centre Project into motion

and named it after charismatic Kanak leader, Jean Marie Tjibaou - assassinated the year before.

It was soon apparent that revolutionary Italian architect, Renzo Piano had not only submitted a winning design. He also insisted that in keeping with Kanak lore the building must achieve a symbiotic relationship with its natural surroundings.

To achieve this its 8 hectare site was located on Tina Peninsula, Noumea; a promontory where the Melanesia 2000 festival was held in 1975.

Piano's most striking design feature consists of ten soaring, sail-shaped houses; corresponding to the interior skeleton of traditional cone-shaped Kanak huts. All ten are built of 'iroko' wood (from Ghana) laminated with steel; the tallest reaches 33 metres skyward and they average area 90 square metres.

Openings in the outer shell channel prevailing monsoon winds from the sea, so the flow of air is regulated by skylights; a system perfected using

computer technology and scale models tested in a wind tunnel. This system gives the huts an audible 'voice'; similar to natural sounds heard in Kanak villages and forests.

When the breeze is light, skylights open to enhance the ventilation. As wind becomes stronger they close, starting with the ones at the bottom.

Each of the Tjibaou 'houses' serves a separate, specific purpose and all 10 are connected by an indoor 'backbone'; the central path common to traditional native villages. The 'houses' are further organised into three villages and the first of these is dedicated to exhibition activities and also incorporates a 400-seat auditorium and recording studio for performance arts.

The second village houses offices for historians, researchers, exhibition curators, and administrative staff. The 'houses' in front of these offices are occupied by a conference hall and multimedia library.

A third village, at the end of the path is located a little apart from the flow of visitors and its huts are used as studios for dance, painting, sculpture and music. Nearby is a school where children discover local art forms.

Kanak staff lead visitors along the encircling Pathway, an integral feature planted with indigenous New Caledonian flora. En route the guide explains how these species relate to Kanak origins beginning with the founding hero, Téra Kanaké. They serve to evoke elements of traditional belief and the close tie between creation, the nourishing earth, ancestral spirits and Kanak cosmology.

The ADCK brief is to enhance Kanak cultural heritage in all its forms; to encourage contemporary Kanak cultural expression, to promote cultural exchanges; notably within the South Pacific. Finally, it serves as a centre for research projects that further Kanak culture.

The centre has permanent Kanak and Pacific exhibitions; comprising monumental sculptures, artefacts, and a biographic record of Jean Marie Tjibaou. Temporary displays include contemporary and historic work by local and regional photographers, artists and potters. In addition there are

ongoing performances with live music and dance; recent shows featured choreographer Richard Digoue, singer-songwriter Edou , Fijian performers Black Rose, Aucklander Lemy Ponifasio, and Wetr; a group from Lifou Island.

Tjibaou Cultural Centre is regarded as having a significance gauged by its role in upholding and revitalising Kanak and Pacific arts; rather than by numbers. It is said to have cost \$US55 million and a local tour operator told me it receives a mere 65,000 visitors annually; 20,000+ of them people of New Calédonia.

However the figures stack up, its architecture is without parallel. "The centre is not, and could not be enclosed within a monumental structure," says Piano. "It is not a single building: but an assemblage of villages and open spaces planted with trees, of functions and routes, of solids and voids."

(ENDS)

howard smith | 8/120 ngaumutawa rd | masterton 8510 | new zealand |
enigma09@clear.net.nz | www.islamey.com
tel +64 6 377 5136 | cell 027 636 1902