



## Pacific trailblazers

Two students from the National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries (NICA) have blended their Pacific heritage with their knowledge of architecture to become two of New Zealand's – and possibly the world's – first research-led Pacific Masters of Architecture.

Lama Tone never imagined that a near-fatal neck injury would lead to a postgraduate degree in architecture. But for the former builder-turned-professional-rugby-player, a serious neck fracture in 2001 – his second in four years – gave the New Zealand-born Samoan athlete pause for thought.

"I hadn't planned on retiring at that stage of my career, so I had to dig deep and find out what I really wanted to do with my life," says 37-year-old Lama, who spent five years between 1996-2001 traveling the world as a member of Manu Samoa. "I enjoyed working as a builder and was always fascinated by the architecture I saw on my travels – so that became the inspiration for me to pursue architecture at the University."

As a child, New Zealand-born Tongan Charmaine 'Ilaiu spent hours drawing floor plans, and imagining different worlds and how people would live in the spaces she drew. Today, with her masters degree in hand, the 24-year-old wants to combine her creative skills with her desire to become a social entrepreneur.

"As a result of growing up in Otago, I am not only interested in Pacific architecture and art but also in community development," she says. "I want to help individuals, families and societies develop in a self-sustainable way that doesn't compromise the values of their community."

Lama and Charmaine share a strong respect for and commitment to their Pacific cultures, traditions and designs and their research reflects a desire to incorporate indigenous ideas and aesthetics into western architectural practices.

Lama's thesis, "Designing with Pacific Concepts", focuses on how contemporary New Zealand architects (most of whom are New Zealand European) use Pacific themes and ideas for designing sustainable, 21st century buildings. By interviewing professional architects and examining case studies, Lama

explores the ways in which mainstream forms of modernism and postmodernism have been enveloped within Pacific forms, themes and ideas.

"Pacific architecture is about community, the connection and engagement of people coming together within communal spaces," he says. "In contrast, mainstream architecture comes from the notion of individualism. As a Pacific Islander studying architecture, I believe it is important to know what and how relationships are forged between people and their architecture."

Charmaine's thesis, which began as a personal journey of understanding her architectural heritage, presents six case studies of contemporary fale archetypes in Tonga. These forms, she contends, reflect the ways in which the designs of the 19th century fale Tonga persist on the island today. And because Tonga was never colonised, the western homes seen on the island are not evidence of architectural assimilation but rather an act of appropriation, as Tongans respond to social and technological change.

"My research intends to highlight and assist in developing a culturally appropriate means of understanding existing Tongan architecture," says Charmaine. "It was challenging to straddle the two worldviews – the western and the indigenous – and understand how these different perspectives govern the way people live and interact with their buildings."

Lama and Charmaine's trailblazing research has established Pacific architecture as a new research discipline at postgraduate level. School of Architecture and Planning Senior Lecturer, Deidre Brown, who supervised both Lama and Charmaine, says their commitment to embarking on virtually unexplored paths of research makes her particularly proud of their achievements.

"Both of these students have produced high quality, cutting-edge research. I hope their efforts will be recognised within the professional industry and that one day, their work will help form the basis of a respected, if new, tradition of Pacific-influenced architecture in New Zealand."

Amber Older

