

MAHI NGATAHI WORKSHOP

(AI) Summary

The meeting was a facilitated workshop on culturally grounded practice, centring Māori partnership, disability inclusion, and ethical commissioning in arts projects. Participants discussed language, power, consent, funding, and practical ways to move from token consultation to genuine co-leadership.

Facilitators emphasised Te Reo nuance and the limits of English translation, giving examples such as mahi and storytelling that prioritise relationships and process. The group advised using identity-preserving formatting, Te Tiriti o Waitangi terminology, and avoiding bracketed qualifiers. Positionality and unequal standing were highlighted: treating people "the same" can reproduce colonial norms.

Attendees clarified mana whenua responsibilities for Ōtautahi/Christchurch versus wider Ngāi Tahu identity, described specific place names (Ōtākaro/Avon, Ōpāwaho/Heathcote, Ihutai), and linked historical dispossession and infrastructure siting to current public health and wellbeing. Te Matapōpore was noted as a charitable trust formed to partner on anchor projects, and Victoria Square was highlighted as a contested trading and symbolic site. The group warned against late-stage "blessing" and tokenistic engagement; correct mana whenua groups must be consulted for specific places.

Discussion examined power dynamics in projects: who can say yes or no, who bears risk, who is paid, and how funder drawdown structures confer directional control. Participants criticised KPIs that mismatch cultural and ecological work, described artists being underpaid for expanded roles (damage control, advocacy), and framed many pressures as structural rather than personal failings. Consent for image use, timing of advisory input, and the harms of rushed engagement were emphasised as risks of extraction.

The workshop foregrounded centring disabled artists through sustained, reciprocal relationships rather than one-off consultation. Practical guidance included starting relationship work early, preparing before approaching communities, asking how collaboration materially benefits partners, and recognising that meaningful consultation takes time and resources. A two-year sensory-access mapping partnership was described as an example where funder timelines were intentionally extended to enable co-leadership and shared budgeting.

Participants shared coping and safety strategies for practitioners facing ethical-versus-economic pressures, and the facilitator assigned individual exercises analyzing projects against five questions about decision-making, consultation timing, blame, funding, and meaningful change. The session closed with a karakia, gratitude, and logistical notes: a summary and recordings will be posted on the Toi Ōtautahi website, monthly and wellbeing workshops were announced (including an August arts-market workshop), and the venue's booking and newsletter options were reiterated. ---

1. MAHI NGATAHI

In te reo Māori, there is so much nuance. One of the things that is very different to Western ways of working is that things are less prescriptive to the individual. Often it's about the process and not the product. So if you look at Maui stories, for example, it's not really about Maui taming the sun, it's really about Maui and his relationship to his ancestors. His relationship to the sun, to nature, his relationship to his whānau, you know, being able to have the sun out so that they can have food, so that he can share with his family. So those things are more important than just catching the sun.

Working together is not the same as inviting someone in, asking them to bless the Kai, to translate your intentions, to soften your guilt or to make your project look more culturally responsive than it actually is.

A lot of creative organisations say they want diversity, mana whenua engagement, Māori audiences, Pacific voices, Indigenous knowledge, access, inclusion, belonging. It sounds beautiful. But the real question is not: do you want culture in the room? It is: what are you prepared to change when culture enters the room? Because people often want the story, the language, the blessing, the credibility and the authenticity, but not the obligations that come with the relationship. Good intentions are not enough. Good people can still reproduce colonial systems. It is not enough to have a Māori in the room. If it was, David Seymour could run this workshop. This is about practice. Who has the power to say yes or no? Who carries the risk? Who gets paid? Who gets consulted after everything is already decided? We made the exhibition, now we just need some Māoris to bless it.

2. ISMS & POSITIONALITY

Um, who benefits if the project goes well, and who carries the mamae, the pain, if it goes badly? Most racism in the arts does not arrive wearing a little villain costume. This is not a Marvel movie. It usually arrives quietly: we just need a quick cultural check; can you connect us with someone Māori, or mana whenua? We have already written the proposal, but now we need community engagement. We do not have much budget, but it is great exposure. Or: we treat everyone the same. Well, guess what? I do not want to be treated the same all the time, as though the world was made for cisgendered, straight, privileged white men. And the last time anyone looked at me, that is certainly not what they saw. They remind me every day.

Positionality is about recognising that none of us stands in the same place, and when it is difficult to understand Māori, Indigenous or other experiences of being othered, we can begin with the places where we have felt it ourselves, through gender, sexuality, race, moko kauae, mataora, class, disability or stereotypes because positionality always comes back to power.

3. INTERROGATING, NAVIGATING, CRITIQUING, LEADING

Okay, interrogating, navigating, critiquing, leading. This is the brief for today's workshop, and I've highlighted and bolded a few things. Have a look and tell me why you think I've made those parts stand out. And remember: this is the "Auntie told me off" feeling. We are going to get things wrong in these spaces. Sometimes we stay quiet because we are scared of saying the wrong thing, but this is the place to have a go. I'll step in if something becomes unsafe.

Participant: You've highlighted the English translation because you can't assume a word in one language means exactly the same thing in another. We don't translate English that way.

Exactly. Language has nuance, and the language we use in briefs matters. Why do you think I've highlighted the brackets?

Participant: Because it changes how someone's identity is being described.

Yes. People often edit my words to suit their copy, including putting parts of my identity in brackets, as though they are optional or need explaining. But I am those things. We need to ask whether we are changing someone's language simply to make it fit more comfortably for us. One more: why have I highlighted Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

Participant: Because it is not the same as the English Treaty, and we also need to question what "engagement" actually means.

Exactly. The Treaty of Waitangi and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are not interchangeable. And we often talk about engagement or partnership while still holding all the power. If power is not genuinely shared, it is not a partnership.

4. NOT QUITE A STUFF QUIZ

Participants worked through these questions together, or reflected on them individually. The point was not to get ten out of ten, but to notice what we already know, and what we should learn before approaching Māori artists or mana whenua. Turns out, collectively we know a lot, but individually lots of work to be done.

Who are the mana whenua of Ōtautahi Christchurch?

Participants identified Ngāi Tūāhuriri, one of the papatipu rūnanga of Ngāi Tahu. We also discussed why knowing the correct mana whenua for the specific place matters.

Which river is Ōtākaro?

The Avon River. We also identified Ōpāwaho as the Heathcote River.

Was Ōtautahi always the Māori name for the whole city?

No. Ōtautahi originally referred to a particular settlement and area, rather than the whole of Christchurch. Its use as the name for the entire city came later and remains contested.

What and where is Ihutai?

Ihutai is the Avon–Heathcote Estuary, where Ōtākaro and Ōpāwaho meet. It was an important mahinga kai site, and its pollution shows how Māori food-gathering places have often carried the environmental cost of colonisation.

What was Kaiapoi Pā, and why is it significant?

Participants described it as a major Ngāi Tahu stronghold, centre of trade and governance, and home to many important leaders. Its destruction by Te Rauparaha had devastating consequences for Ngāi Tahu communities.

Why was Matapopore established after the earthquakes?

Matapopore was established by Ngāi Tūāhuriri to bring mana whenua values, histories and narratives into the rebuild of Christchurch and its major public projects.

Why was the Arts Centre named Te Matatiki Toi Ora?

The name is loosely translated as "the spring of living art" and connects the site to the springs and waterways beneath it, as well as its creative purpose.

Why are Victoria Square and Market Place significant to local Māori?

Participants identified the area as an important historic trading place and a site where Māori and Pākehā histories, authority and relationships continue to meet.

Is working with an individual Māori artist the same as engaging with mana whenua?

No. Being Māori does not automatically give someone the authority, knowledge or responsibility to speak for mana whenua. Assuming it does can place Māori artists in an uncomfortable or even traumatic position.

What is problematic about asking mana whenua to bless, name, translate or “culturalise” a project after the important decisions have already been made?

Participants identified this as tokenism rather than partnership. Mana whenua are being asked to decorate or validate the project, without having any real power to shape it.

5. SHIT, AUNTY TOLD ME OFF & FEELINGS

Your feelings and hauora matter, but this is not about making the work easy. You will make mistakes, get things wrong and learn. The hard part is realising that some of what we were taught about culture, relationships and engagement is incomplete—or simply wrong. As storytellers, we know there is always something missing and always a chance we will get it wrong. That does not mean we stop making art. It means we do the work, stay open, and make sure we have done everything we can.

Getting it wrong is vulnerable, but this is often the exact point where discomfort turns into anger at Indigenous people, white tears, or some other harm, so we need to stay with it and talk about what happens next.

6. POWER. WHO HAS IT?

Follow the money. It usually shows you where the power sits.

Power also hides inside ordinary project structures:

- who writes the brief?
- who controls the deadlines?
- who defines success?
- who approves the work?
- who can safely say no?
- who can walk away without losing income or opportunity?

Artists are often brought in to repair a rushed brief, an unrealistic deadline or badly handled cultural work, then blamed when they cannot fix it quickly enough. These are not only individual failures. They are built into funding systems, KPIs, contracts and inherited organisational habits.

7. BAD HABITS

Common bad habits include:

- asking for cultural advice two weeks before launch
- collecting community stories while outsiders retain full control
- asking one Māori artist to represent Māori or mana whenua
- expecting unpaid cultural, emotional or relational labour
- asking people to bless, name, translate or validate a project after the important decisions are made

Consultation is not automatically relationship. Consultation can simply collect information while leaving all the power where it already was. Relationship requires time, trust, accountability and the real possibility that the project will change.

A relationship is only real if the people invited in have enough power to change the project. Remember you have to factor in time and \$\$ like you would with any consultation, even having someone looking over your brief for cultural content is labour.

8. MY PRACTICE

- Who shaped the original idea?
- Who is missing?
- Who holds the money and controls the timetable?
- Who carries the cultural, emotional or reputational risk?
- Who is doing unpaid work?
- What happens when someone disagrees?
- What am I genuinely prepared to give up?

A real relationship may require giving up money, authorship, certainty, control, the original timeline or even the original idea. Shared power does not mean everyone does the same job. It means roles, resources and decisions are negotiated rather than imposed.

The question is not whether we invited people in. The question is whether their presence was allowed to change anything.

9. WHAT YOU SAID AND THEMES

Some of the things you raised were the fear of getting it wrong, appropriation, tokenism, who to approach, overburdening mana whenua, representing other people's stories, and how to listen properly.

You are going to get things wrong. Aunty is going to tell you off. I still get told off. But "I don't want to get in trouble" cannot become an excuse for doing nothing. The communities I belong to notice the effort. You have to begin, prepare as well as you can, and be willing to learn. Appropriation and appreciation can sit very close together. There is no perfect checklist, but you can ask: Where does the power sit? Who am I in a relationship with? What do I know about this place, its mana whenua, its iwi and the language I am using? If you are already wondering whether something is appropriative, that is probably a sign to slow down and look more closely.

10. MAHI ATU - GETTIN IT DONE!

"I didn't learn that at school" is not an answer. Neither did most of us. You have to read, research and do the work yourself. Of the te reo Māori speakers, speakers, producers and scholars I know, we have all paid to learn about ourselves, we learn in our down time and we learn

Too often, people decide they are ready to learn and expect Indigenous people, artists or scholars, who may have spent decades doing this work to come all the way back and meet them at the beginning. You cannot keep expecting people to come to you. You need to do the work to meet them.

As an aside, there are decades of resources out there telling you about Māori storytelling, decolonisation, Indigenous content, history, context and how to be an excellent co-conspirator, ally and activator.

Who you approach matters, but so does what you bring. Ask yourself:

- How does this relationship benefit the other person?
- What can I offer?
- Am I paying for their time and knowledge?
- Am I asking someone to do work I could have done myself?
- Am I always taking?
- Am I listening?

Mana whenua and rūnanga are often overworked and under-resourced. They may be working with councils, schools, government agencies, developers and major organisations. You can approach them, but you cannot assume they have the capacity to carry your project.

Look at the relationships and expertise already around you. Some organisations have Māori advisory groups or people specifically paid to do this work. Use the knowledge that already exists. Research intellectual property, consent, cultural authority and local context before you ask someone else to explain the basics.

Your listening posture matters too. Am I here to listen, or am I here to keep talking until I get the answer I want? Saying, “another Māori person said I could,” is not listening. It is shopping around for permission.

11. COMMITMENTS

Think about what you will do:

- in the next week
- in the next six months
- in the next year
- over the next 25 years

What will you stop doing? What will you start doing? What will you pay for, give up or change? Ask the questions

The deeper question is relationship: how am I in relation to this place, the land, the water I drink, the communities around me and the systems I work inside? Am I prepared to move through those relationships with critique, care and responsibility?

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