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# Kahikatea Collective

Exploring Visual Identity and Narrative  
Design to Connect People and Place

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Masters of Design at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Nikita Dornan  
2025



## Research Question

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How can visual communication design strengthen community pride and connection among diverse users by reinforcing a sense of place and identity within the Petone Community House?

## Abstract

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This exegesis proposes an exploration of how design can foster a sense of community, identity, and connection within a specific space, the Petone Community House, situated in Petone, New Zealand. This exegesis responds to the absence of a personalised visual identity that reflects the character and values of the diverse community members who use this space. Through a visual communication design lens, the project employs narrative-building and visual identity and branding strategies to create site-specific design interventions that embed a sense of place.

Introducing the Kahikatea Collective, a concept guided by values of the Community House and the inspiration of the metaphor of the kahikatea tree, which once formed part of Petone's native podocarp forest. Like the interconnected root systems of the kahikatea, the Community House serves as a place where people come together to support, learn, and grow. This metaphor underpins the collaborative nature of the project and reinforces the importance of shared strength and unity.

Guided by the values of koha, kaitiakitanga, oranga, manaakitanga, māramatanga, and wairua, each space within the Community House is reimagined to reflect these principles. The final design outcomes offer a visual identity that is rooted in place, responsive to its people, and inclusive in its purpose. This exegesis illustrates how design can serve as a connective tool, supporting local identity, fostering spatial belonging, and reimagining shared environments as culturally rich, inclusive, and meaningful.

## Acknowledgements

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This exegesis marks the end of a deeply rewarding and transformative chapter, and I am incredibly grateful to those who have supported me along the way.

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To the staff and community at Petone Community House – thank you for welcoming me so warmly and for generously sharing your stories, time, and trust. A special thank you to Tamlyn Somerford for her invaluable support with the community engagement process and for guiding me through the consent procedures with care and clarity.

To my friends and whānau – thank you for your ongoing support, for being there through the ups and downs, and for helping me keep perspective along the way. Your presence and encouragement have meant a great deal.

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## He Mihi

Tēnā koutou katoa

Ko Tongariro te maunga  
 Ko Taupō-nui-a-Tia te moana  
 Ko Te Arawa tōku waka  
 Ko Ngāti Tūwharetoa te iwi  
 Nō Hepi Te Heuheu ahau  
 Ko Nikita tōku ingoa

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

**Tēnei te mihi ki te mana whenua ki a Te Āti Awa me  
 ngā waka katoa i tau mai nei ki Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara.**

I acknowledge the guardians of this land, Te Ātiawa, and  
 all those waka that have come ashore here in Wellington.



**Fig 1:** Lake Taupō, 2024

## My Background

Tēnā koe, my name is Nikita Dornan (Ngāti Tūwharetoa). In 2023, I completed a Bachelor of Design, majoring in Visual Communication at Massey University. My design practice is grounded in the belief that design can create meaningful connections between people and place, serving as a tool for social engagement. This belief led me to undertake a Master of Design to further explore the role of design in community-focused contexts.

My interest in pursuing a community-centered research project stems from a belief in design's power to tell stories that connect and uplift diverse groups, an approach that has shaped the focus of this project. Being locally based in Petone has given me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the area's history and to engage with those who use and support the Petone Community House. These connections have informed the direction of the research. I approached this project with the view that design is not simply about aesthetics, but about honouring lived experiences, histories, and storytelling that define and enrich a space.

# Part One: Building the Context

Introduction

Connecting Place, People and Purpose

Petone and the Whenua

Petone Today: The Communities

Research Framing



Fig 2: Outside Petone Community House, 2025

## Introduction

### Project Overview

As a local designer based in Petone, Wellington, I have had the opportunity to use this Masters of Design as a platform to propose a new design vision for the Petone Community House (the House). Located on 6 Britannia Street, Petone, the House serves as a meeting space for communities, individuals, and groups. The House offers a place for these communities to exchange skills and knowledge within various contexts, including clubs and workshops such as chess groups, music lessons, and motorbike enthusiast meetups. The House provides a way for community groups to come together within its meeting rooms and various shared spaces, including a kitchen and recreational areas.



Fig 3: House at 6 Britannia Street Wellington, 1969

### The Opportunity

The House itself is part of Petone's local heritage, originally serving as a doctor's boarding house. Now owned by the Hutt City Council, it operates as a community-run space, designed for the people, by the people, to foster connection and belonging. This exegesis explores how design methodologies and research strategies can be applied to reimagine the Petone Community House as a place that strengthens the relationship between the community and the House itself. It serves as an exploratory proposal for how visual communication design can foster community pride and connection through a locally grounded visual identity.



Fig 4: Kahikatea Canopy, Science Learning Hub, 2024

### Introducing The Kahikatea Metaphor

In response to the absence of a brand identity for the House, an issue shared by many community houses across the Wellington region, this project proposes a narrative design shaped by key themes that reflect Petone's natural environment, ancestral ties to the land, and the community connections that define the House today. The kāhikatea tree is used as a central metaphor, symbolising strength, interconnectedness, and a deep sense of belonging. Just as the kāhikatea is supported by a network of interwoven roots, the House is sustained by its diverse communities, each contributing to a shared and meaningful visual identity. In this research project, Part 4 explores the Kāhikatea Collective in detail, outlining how this narrative has been developed to inform the design outcomes presented in Part 5.



Fig 5: Front of House, Petone Community House, 2025

## Connecting Place, People, and Purpose

This project began back in 2023 through an invitation from a board member of the Petone Community House, offering an opportunity to explore how design could support this community space. My passion for design stems from its potential to be a tool for creating meaningful change within communities through visual communication design. Design can educate, connect, and empower communities, creating stronger bonds within gathering places. Guided by these values, this Masters of Design reimagines the Petone Community House to encourage engagement and a strong sense of place.

To the communities of Petone and the wider Wellington region, the Petone Community House is more than just a building; it's a shared space where people come together for interaction and collaboration, whether through clubs, workshops, or informal meetings. For example, groups like chess clubs, music lessons, and motorbike enthusiast meetups reflect the diversity of engagement that are already taking part within the House.



Fig 6: Room 4, Petone Community House, 2025

This research project addresses an opportunity I recognised within this space. The House accommodates a wide range of users with varied needs; however, the interior design has remained neutral across all areas of the House and does not respond to the diverse communities groups that use it. While this neutrality does serve as a purpose for flexibility, ensuring the space can accommodate a wide range of users, it also risks making parts of the space feel impersonal or disconnected from the communities it serves. Drawing on my background in visual communication design, I aim to use this lens and the flexibility of the space to create a stronger sense of community connection and identity within the House.



Fig 7: Snapshot of the Community Visual Design Mood Board, 2025

Visual communication design can make intangible values, such as identity and history, visible and felt within a space. As later explored in this exegesis, this can be achieved through elements such as signage, wayfinding, graphics, typography, and colour. When applied through a storytelling lens, these tools can help express the narrative of the House, reconnecting people to the place.



Fig 8: Petone Beach, 2025

## Petone and the Whenua

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Petone, originally known as Pito-one in Māori, meaning ‘the end of the sand beach’, is a small suburb of Lower Hutt, Wellington, located at the southern end of Aotearoa New Zealand’s North Island. This area holds deep cultural and historical significance for tangata whenua, particularly Te Āti Awa. The early settlement of Petone developed near the pā of Te Puni, a paramount Te Āti Awa chief. The land and coastline were central to Māori ways of life, grounding people in whakapapa and forming strong connections to the place. As highlighted in *Folk, Knowledge, Place* (Lindsay-Latimer et al., 2024), Indigenous knowledge systems are shaped through reciprocal relationships with place, where identity and belonging are inseparable from the whenua (land).

Although Petone remains a site of enduring significance for Māori, it also reflects a layered colonial history. Many heritage buildings still stand today, shaping the area’s character and reflecting an ongoing dialogue between past and present. However, in the 1800s, the natural landscape of Petone was far from the urban form seen today; it was characterised by wild wetlands, swampy terrain, and frequent flooding, as described in “The Valley of Disappointment” (Memon, 2010). The area was once surrounded by podocarp forest, part of a wider ecosystem that has largely been altered or lost due to urban development.



Fig 9: Jackson Street Petone, 2025

## Petone Today: The Communities

Today, Petone is known as a suburb with a vibrant seaside atmosphere, blending heritage, culture, and modern development. Full of character, Petone is recognised for its natural landscape, including beachside walks, as well as its boutique shops, cafés, and preserved historic buildings that reflect the area's layered history.

Petone's communities reflect an identity shaped by heritage, cultural diversity, and the natural environment. According to the 2023 Petone Central Census, the population totals 7,734 people, with 1290 of those identifying as being of Māori descent (Stats NZ, 2023). This includes Māori communities affiliated with Te Āti Awa, who, while no longer primarily based in the area, maintain a significant ancestral connection. This connection is evident in sites such as the Te Puni Street Cemetery, which remains in use today.

The Petone Community House is one example of a place that supports a wide range of social and cultural activities. It offers a space for people of different generations and backgrounds to connect, share knowledge, and engage in collaborative initiatives, reinforcing the area's strong sense of community.

Petone also has a family-friendly atmosphere, offering a balanced environment for a diverse range of residents, from young professionals to retirees and intergenerational families. Understanding these dynamics has been central to shaping this research project. Based on this understanding, I have defined the research questions that will be addressed through the project, supported by the design challenge it seeks to explore.

## Research Question

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How can visual communication design strengthen community pride and connection among diverse users by reinforcing a sense of place and identity within the Petone Community House?

## Design Challenge

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In my Masters of Design, I propose a design challenge for the Community House. Although it supports diverse users with various backgrounds and needs, the space currently lacks a visual identity that reflects the place and its surroundings.

Visual communication design offers an opportunity to create shared meaning, spark a sense of belonging, and portray the land's history, transforming the House into a space that feels meaningful based on a narrative.

**This aims to ensure that all communities feel a connection to the Petone Community House.**

# Part Two: Contextual Review

Contextual Overview

Values of the Petone Community House

The House's current identity system

Understanding the Māori Worldview

Reconnecting Community and Place

Placemaking as a framework

Applying branding principles to place

Design as a Tool for Community Building

Key Takeaways



Fig 10: Visualising Design Outcomes for Each Space

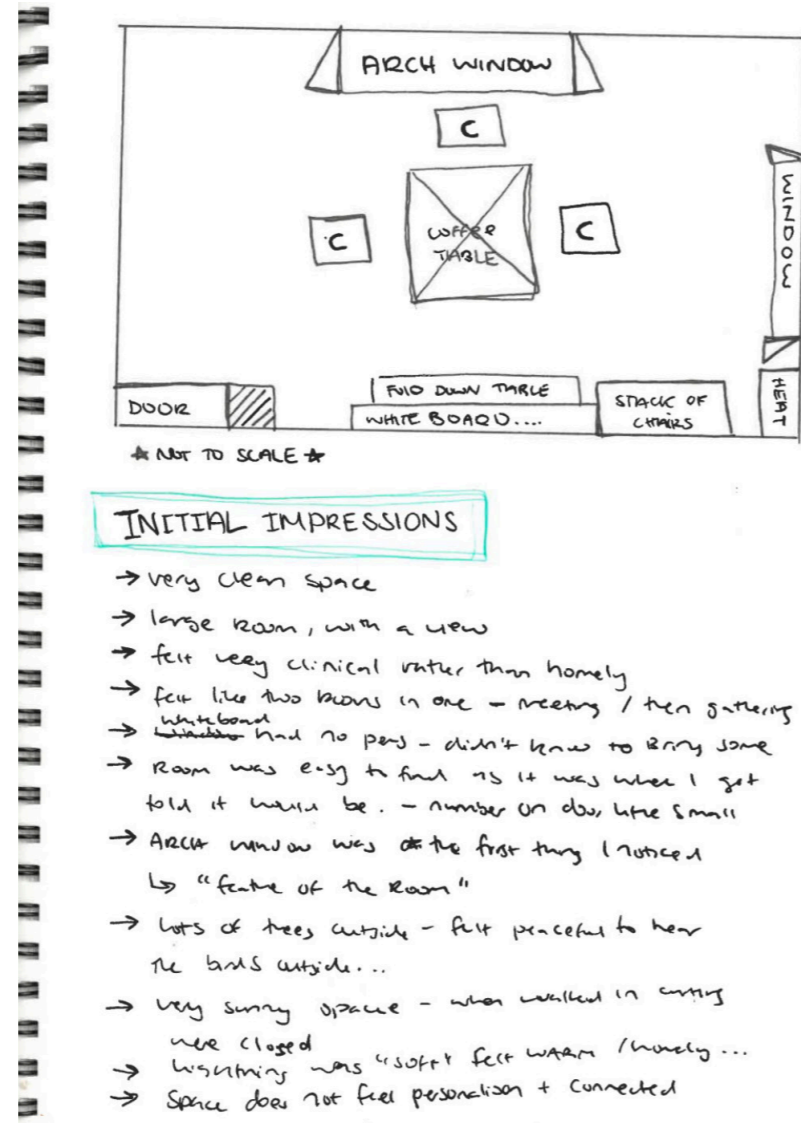


Fig 11: Snapshot of Site Analysis for Room 4

## Contextual Overview

This research project proposes ways in which community groups using the House can develop a deeper sense of connection to the place. As a resident of the Petone community for the past 12 years, I chose to engage with the space by observing how other groups use the House, and I did this by personally hiring out the meeting rooms. This allowed me to actively experience the environment firsthand and observe how it functions in everyday use. Through this research process, I gained valuable insights into the atmosphere and how the space supports connection and collaboration among the community groups who use this space.

Throughout this chapter, I examine the theories and philosophies that have guided this exegesis, aiming to identify and address the community's needs. Ensuring that the spaces within the House reflect not only the identity and narrative of its users but also the House itself and the land that surrounds the House.

## Values of the Petone Community House

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The values of the Petone Community House play a key role in this project, as they are central to the House's identity and guide my design approach and decision-making throughout. Visual communication is essential in translating these values into tangible design elements. Through the considered use of colour, symbols, and layout, my design aims to personalise shared spaces and reflect aspects of local history, all within the narrative I have crafted.

### Community House values include:

#### **Inclusiveness**

we recognise that diversity is a strength and will seek to involve all people as active participants in our community.

#### **Responsive**

we will strengthen the efforts of individuals and groups to meet community needs and make a positive difference in our community.

#### **Quality**

we will strive for excellence in the delivery of our services and activities.

#### **Connected**

we will work with others through local links and partnerships to enhance community well-being.

#### **Accessible**

we will provide fair and open access to volunteer opportunities and community support.

#### **Forward-looking**

we will strengthen the efforts of individuals and groups to meet community needs and make a positive difference in our community.

#### **Quality**

we will recognise the need for continual review and improvement.

#### **Impact-focused**

we believe that success is measured by outcomes and will seek to deliver results that benefit both individuals and the community.

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These values have guided my design approach, ensuring that the visual identity aligns with the House's purpose. Inclusiveness and Accessibility informed a welcoming and easy-to-navigate design, while Connection shaped elements that reflect sharing local history through a collective narrative. Through colour, layout, and symbolism, the design embodies the House's commitment to being responsive, impact-focused, and forward-looking.



Fig 12: Petone Community House, Welcome Sign, 2024

## The House's Current Visual Identity System

The current identity of the Petone Community House has been visually crafted to align with the other community houses across the Hutt Valley region, applying a consistent branding strategy that creates regional cohesiveness. This consistency contributes to the structure of the house's overall appearance, yet it also takes away from the house's personality. The current visual identity does not reflect the character, stories, or values specific to Petone. This lack of personality within the identity makes it challenging for community members to see themselves represented in the space. Additionally, the limited sense of personal connection then restricts engagement and emotional ties to the community house.

### Bridging the Gap: Responding to the Absence of Identity in Community Houses

My Masters of Design responds to the noticeable gap previously identified, the lack of a visual identity for the Community House. This absence of tailored branding and design elements results in a limited sense of connection and community pride among those who use the space. Through visual research and case studies, I found that this issue extends beyond the Petone Community House to other community houses within the Wellington region. These spaces currently rely on the default branding of the Hutt City Council, which lacks the community-specific narratives needed to reflect the diverse groups that use them.

This project examines how visual communication design can foster a stronger sense of place by developing a narrative identity grounded in the land, local history, and the surrounding area of the House. My design strategies aim to foster deeper connections between the community and the space, resulting in a meaningful and inclusive visual identity proposed for integration throughout the House.

## Understanding the Māori Worldview

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As part of my research, I examined how the Māori worldview plays a significant role in the project. It provided a meaningful lens not only during the research phase but also in shaping the design outcomes discussed in Part 5. This perspective helped deepen the understanding of the relationship between land, community, and identity through the lens of language and culture. This approach was further supported by conversations with House staff, who expressed a desire to increase the presence of Te Reo Māori through subtle cues in the visual language and design elements incorporated into the space. These ideas are further supported throughout the context review in my literature research and visual design exploration discussed in this part.

### Māori Values and Environmental History

At the beginning of my research into creating a narrative for a community, I explored the early history of Petone, particularly what the area was like before it became the industrial suburb we know today. Through literature research, I discovered that Petone was once a podocarp forest inhabited by Māori. When I shared these findings with staff at the Community House, they expressed interest in using this history as a theme. They appreciated the idea of connecting the House whānau (community members) with the natural land on which the House now stands.

These conversations, along with the staff's request to incorporate more Te Reo Māori into the space, led me to explore how Māori values could be integrated alongside the forest concept. This became the foundation of the project's narrative. My findings were drawn from the article Key Māori values strengthen the mapping of forest ecosystem services by Phil O'B. Lyver, Puke Timoti, Andrew M. Gormley, Christopher J. Jones, Sarah J. Richardson, Brenda L. Tahī, and Suzie Greenhalgh, published in *Ecosystem Services* in 2017.

The authors introduce the concept of Ahikāroa, meaning 'connection to place', a value that closely aligns with the aim of this project: to create a narrative and identity that fosters a deeper sense of connection between the community and the House. The article also cites Hariata Haumate of Ruatāhuna (2014), who states: 'Our genealogical ties [to the land] are truly special... Everything is bound by our forest environment.' This reinforces the idea that the forest is not merely a resource, but a living presence, an integral part of a community's collective identity that links land and people.

### Tukutuku as Inspiration

Tukutuku panels are traditional Māori ornamental lattice-work between upright slabs of the walls in a traditional house (Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, n.d.). These panels of work are used to as way for Māori to communicate stories within woven patterns. Each pattern, however, vary in design and name depending on which iwi they are from. In terms of this research project, I have drawn inspiration from the visual design of tukutuku patterns, offering a visual language that is grounded in Māori identity. However, rather than directly replicating these patterns, as part of my design process I have used these as underlying visual motif and a visual cue explored in Part 5. This approach was taken to allow for the creation of visual cues that acknowledge Māori culture without disrespecting the design or culture in any way. This allowed for the design outcomes for this project visual hint at a cultural aspects, aligning with the language and values behind the narrative created while remaining appropriate for modern and community based design outcomes.

Image findings



Fig 13: Visual Snapshot of Historical Findings – Petone, 2025

# Reconnecting Community and Place

The Petone Community House is more than just a physical structure; it is a space that serves a diverse group of community members, nurtures relationships, and fosters collaboration within its shared meeting spaces. My project aims to strengthen the connection between the community and the House by creating a sense of community pride and belonging, expressed through the design outcomes developed in this project.

As discussed, currently, the House’s visual system is limited. The welcome signage follows standardised branding that is currently used across other community houses in the Hutt Valley region, while the interior remains neutral, with white walls, minimal decor that allows for flexibility within the meeting spaces. However, this neutrality also results in a lack of identity and emotional connection as these do not reflect the diverse stories, values, and land history.

By drawing on local stories, environmental context, and history through my literature and secondary research, I have developed a design approach that reflects an aspect of the land’s heritage. This narrative informs the visual elements explored in Part 5 of this exegesis. These outcomes seek to reconnect the community with the House as a shared, inclusive place that honours both aspects of its past to inform the present.

From site visits, staff conversations, and visual communication design methodologies, this chapter builds on key research themes identified throughout the project, including:

1. Placemaking as a framework
2. Branding principles
3. Design as a Tool for Community Building

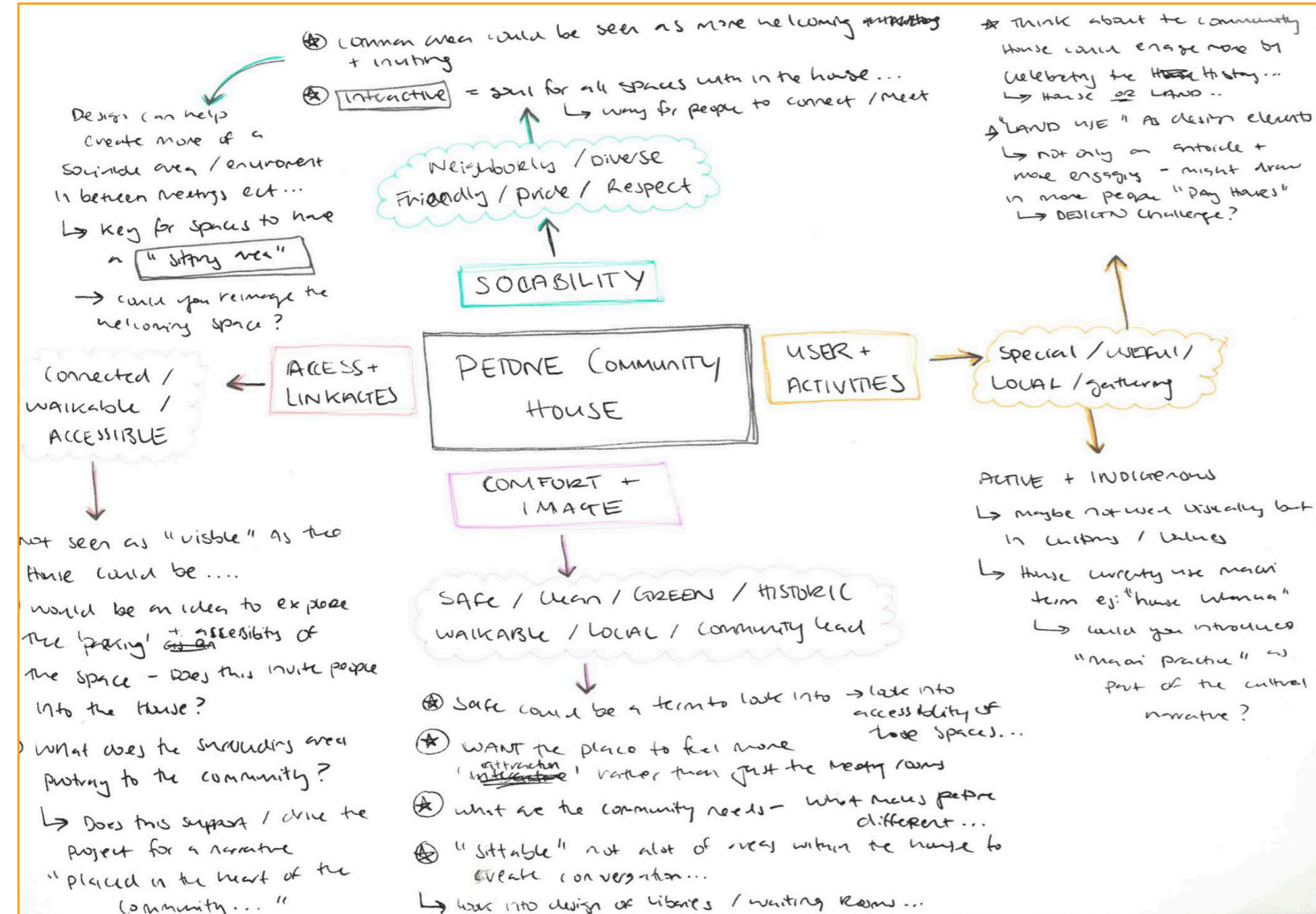


Fig 14: Visual Exploration of Placemaking at Petone Community House 2024

## Placemaking as a framework

This section outlines how placemaking principles have influenced the direction of the project. Placemaking is a people-centred approach in which communities actively participate in the planning, designing, and managing of public spaces to make them more accessible, comfortable, and engaging (Placemaking Education, 2025). Central to this approach is the concept of a 'place vision', a shared goal that reflects the needs and aspirations of the people who use the space. Drawing on this framework, the project aims to create a welcoming and inclusive environment at the House that is both meaningful and responsive to its community.

This project focuses on applying placemaking theories that have informed the overall approach, beginning with the foundational principles outlined by Eke Panuku Development Auckland (2024). They state: "Placemaking for Eke Panuku is about building relationships, between people and place." This perspective aligns with the central theme of my project: to connect the communities of Petone to the House. It reinforces the idea that placemaking is more than creating aesthetically pleasing spaces; it is a design approach centred on fostering human connection. This philosophy has guided the project to identify and respond to the needs of the community, ensuring the spaces within the House reflect not only the identity and narrative of its users but also those of the House itself and the land it inhabits.



Fig 15: Placemaking Aotearoa 'Temporary Mural', 2024

### Case Study: Placemaking Aotearoa

Throughout the early stages of my research I came across an organisation called Placemaking Aotearoa, which was founded based on creating a community network where individuals and/or groups in New Zealand could come together to help reimagine public spaces via the placemaking process, with the overall goal was to create a network that could develop and share better placemaking tools. They express these goals as:

- ◆ Share knowledge and resources to elevate our advocacy for community-led public space development.
- ◆ Share candid failures/lessons so that others don't have to learn the hard way.
- ◆ Back each other up when advocating for kaupapa-led system change.

This exemplar shows how they created real-world applications across the country, such as the 'Representation Papakura' project, where they used place-based storytelling of local history with a concept of indigenous knowledge to contribute to a meaningful outcome.



Fig 16: Papakura Youth Feature in New Photography Exhibition – Our Auckland, 2018

### Representation Papakura – Fresh Concept

Collaborators:  
Sean Atavenitia, Grant Priestm Papakura Business Association

This project applied placemaking principles in the Papakura town centre, where collaborators showcased young talent through photography, displaying 105 images across 13 empty shop windows. The photographs celebrated not only the youth of Papakura but also highlighted the diversity of sport in the area. These images were described by photographer Sean Atavenitia as being “focused on local youths, the images sparked involvement from families, friends, coaches, sports teams, and the general public.”

### Critical Reflection

I chose this example of placemaking because it closely aligns with my goal of creating a community-focused design project. The use of photography as a visual language stood out to me as a powerful tool for engagement and communication within a community setting. This case study demonstrates how visual storytelling can create a strong sense of identity within a space by celebrating local narratives and enabling people to see themselves reflected in their environment. It reinforces the idea that visual communication design can strengthen identity and connection among diverse community members within a shared environment, an approach I aimed to apply in my master's research project.

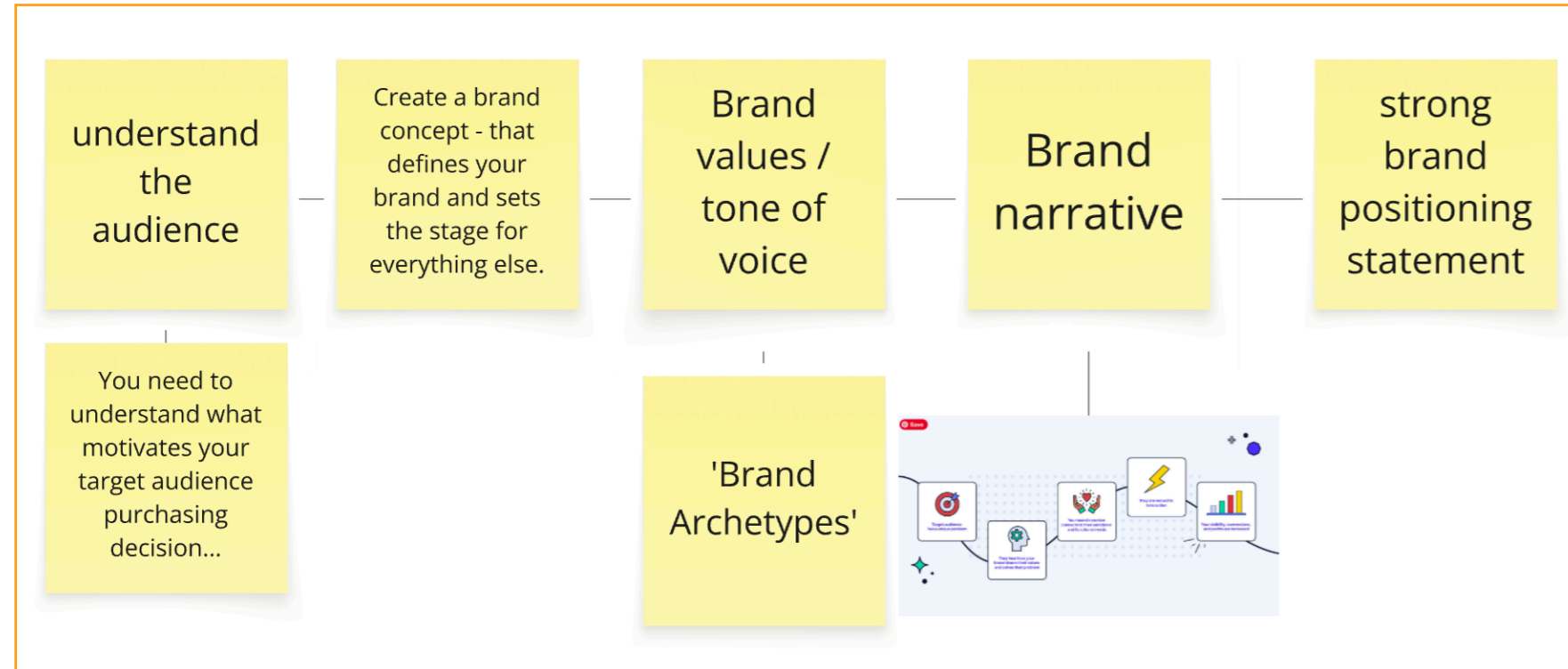


Fig 17: Visual Snapshot of Branding Concepts and Project Guide, 2025

## Applying branding principles to place

A brand can be defined as a combination of visual and verbal elements that communicate an organisation's identity and values to its audience or community. According to The Branding Journal, author Marion Andrivet (2015) describes a brand as "not just the physical features that create a brand but also the feelings that consumers develop towards the company or its product." This aligns with my background in branding, as a visual communicator, I approach design through the lens of evoking emotion, aiming to create a connection between the audience and the brief. This reinforces the idea that, as designers, we can shape identity in ways that evoke meaningful feelings toward a brand or a place. In this project, I applied this principle to guide the creation of a space where community members would feel welcome and connected every time they entered the House.

This led my research to explore place branding, which Richards and Duif (2019) describe as "the application of product branding to places" (p. 142). The concept of using place branding aimed to enhance the development of a strong narrative for the House, supporting the creation of its identity through visual storytelling methods. By building a strong narrative within the Petone Community House, I aim to create a connection with the community, one that brings purpose and offers a glimpse into the history of the land on which the House now stands.

## Reading Literature Review – Placemaking + Branding

Small Cities with Big Dreams: Creative Placemaking and Branding Strategies –  
Greg Richards and Lian Duif, 2019, pp. 141 - 162 Chapter 6

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To gain insights into how placemaking and branding theories can shape a project, I reviewed literature on how the theories of place branding and place identity could help contribute to the development of a narrative for the Petone Community House.

One of the concepts from the literature was using branding strategies to create a ‘unique’ feature for the place itself. Richards and Duif (2019, p. 142), stated that “it is not just the brand or story of the city that needs to be improved, but also the reality.” Providing insight into how a city’s brand must reflect its unique qualities as both a community and a place, a brand for a community house should be authentic, more than just a marketable image. Richards and Duif (2019, p. 142) cite Kavaratziz and Ashworth (2005, p. 510), who state that a place needs to be differentiated through a unique brand identity, “perceived in the minds of

place customers as possessing qualities superior.” This quote prompted me to consider what makes the House unique or recognisable compared to other areas of the Wellington region.

I reflected on what people associate with Petone, such as the beach, the history of early settlement, and the relationship between the settlers and the land. This influenced my thinking about how I want the House to be perceived, not only by the current communities using the space but also by the wider Wellington community who may use it in the future. The perspective of the House through the narrative I have created is vital in developing a successful place brand.

Another key concept from the text is the importance of creating a narrative that reflects a story unique to the place, to foster an emotional connection with the audience or community. Richards and Duif (2019, p. 141) describe this as “telling engaging stories to create distinction.” By building a place identity through storytelling and narrative development, there is potential to reflect both the past and present, creating a sense of belonging for the communities who use the House. In this project, I aimed to use this method as a way to tell the story of the natural land, shaping the perception of the House through this identity.

Lastly, a key insight from this text was the importance of building a story around a place that speaks to a broad community. Richards and Duif (2019, p. 147) cite the Singapore Tourism Board (STB 2016: 5) as an example, noting how they crafted a compelling narrative for Singapore: “unique identity and history, told in endless ways by different people. It is about being confident in who and what we are, and not being everything to everybody.” This example highlights how every place has its own distinct story, shaped not only by its history but also by its people and environment. It also offers a valuable insight: rather than designing this project to appeal to everyone, I could instead embrace authenticity by reflecting the true essence of the land the House sits on. This inspired me to use the natural environment as a guide for building my narrative, which is explored further in this writing.



Fig 18: Hutt City Council Brand Guidelines, 2023

### Case Study: Hutt City Council Branding

I chose to look into the Hutt City Council branding, this was because the House is currently owned by the Hutt City Council, and the original branding and identity of the current community house is founded on the early 2000s brand identity. I explored the updated Hutt City Council branding released in 2023. These guidelines offered valuable insight into the community-centred design approach adopted across the Hutt Valley region. This case study helped me identify the unique identity of the Hutt Valley, which reflects values such as innovation, diversity, and community. Another aspect I examined was the visual language used in the branding, including earthy and water-inspired tones in the colour palette, clean and legible typography, and the symbolic use of map guidelines as a recurring brand element. This clean and modern aesthetic is designed to resonate with the diverse communities of the Lower Hutt region. This is an aspect I aspired to bring to the community visual system I made for the House.

#### Critical Reflection

Examining the Hutt City Council branding helped inform my understanding of how a visual identity can reflect community values such as inclusivity and connection to place. This influenced my design approach for creating a visual system for the Petone Community House, one that feels modern, aligns with the House's values, and reflects aspects of Petone's natural and cultural landscape that could be shared within the space.



Fig 19: Willis Land Branding in Context, 2024

### Case Study: Willis Lane Branding

I selected this project as a case study as it was a good example of how placemaking and branding have been used to create a visual identity for a place. The concept of this brand was reimagining the space of the underground hallways of Wellington and transforming them into a subterranean epicentre of late-night revelry. The meaning behind the narrative of the brand identity that we now see is that Willis Lane is based on inspiration from the railway stations and repurposed industrial buildings of New York City. The project designers from Werk have stated that, "we approached the brand identity as a piece of placemaking, choosing simplicity, legibility and utility as core creative drivers." Suggesting that the designers treated the branding as not just a logo and visual system, but they viewed this project as a way to shape the experience and evoke a feeling towards a place for consumers.

#### Critical Reflection

Upon analysing how the underground area of Wellington was branded, I found myself disagreeing with the style guide used for the project. In my view, the branding should have more accurately reflected the true essence and culture of Wellington to make the space feel authentic to the people of the region. While the New York City-inspired aesthetic is visually appealing, it does not represent Wellington as a place, which creates a disconnect for users engaging with the visual identity. This insight informed my project, where I aimed for the Community House to reflect the identity of Petone through its visual system, while also fostering a sense of connection and belonging for the surrounding communities.



## Design as a Tool for Community Building

Design can be used as a powerful tool for community building, specifically through placemaking and branding, which help shape a community's identity and pride. As part of my research, I investigated several community centres across the Wellington and Hutt Valley region to understand how these strategies are applied in practice.

From this selection, I focused on two key case studies: the recently established Te Mako Naenae Community Centre and Waitohi Johnsonville Community Hub. Te Mako Naenae Community Centre demonstrates an approach to placemaking by incorporating local voice and cultural reference within their design and naming to reflect the local history of Naenae. In contrast, Waitohi Johnsonville Community Hub integrates multiple services, such as a library, community rooms, and creative collaboration spaces, under a visual and spatial identity to create a welcoming environment and multifunctional hub. These case studies are examples of how design can create community spaces to reinforce a sense of place.



**Fig 21:** Te Mako Naenae Community Centre Open For Business, Hutt City Council, 2025



**Fig 22:** Te Mako – Naenae Community Centre, 2025

## Case Study: Te Mako Naenae Community Centre

Te Mako Naenae Community Centre is a new community space that opened in June 2024, housed in the former Naenae Post Office, which originally opened in 1959. I chose to explore this case study because the centre was designed in consultation with the Naenae community. The concept behind the project was to create a place where people could gather, connect, access essential services, and participate in events held within the space. In 2023, the Whakatupu Ngaengae Community Advisory Group held a series of workshops dedicated to getting community feedback on the designs and arrangements for the upcoming centre. The name Te Mako was proposed by the Community Advisory Group, who had worked closely on the project. The reason behind this was that Te Mako served as a way to honour Te Āti Awa rangatira Wiremu Tako (Wī Tako) Ngātata as part of Naenae's local history.

### Critical Reflection

In this case study, I admire its community-led design approach, which involved consistent and active consultation with the local community. It serves as a strong example of a people-centred design process, grounded in the core values of co-design and placemaking, where ongoing communication directly informs the purpose and function of the space based on community needs.

I had hoped to apply a similar co-design process with the Petone Community House, using collaborative workshops and shared communication between myself and the communities that use the House. However, due to time constraints within this research project and the limited availability of community members during the research period, I was unable to carry out the co-design phase as planned. This is explained further in Chapter 3 in the section on challenges.



Fig 23: Waitohi Johnsonville Library & Community Hub, Athfield Architects, 2025

### Case Study: Waitohi Johnsonville Community Hub

The Waitohi Community Hub, located in Johnsonville, Wellington, is a prime example of how a place can connect multiple community assets in one location. I chose this as a case study because it brings together diverse community groups, all supported within a single, inclusive space. Exploring further into the architecture and structure of the building, this has been designed with future generations in mind. This design approach was shaped by a narrative that expresses the story of the place, reflected in the use of cultural patterns, natural materials like tree-like timber, and forest-inspired colour palettes.

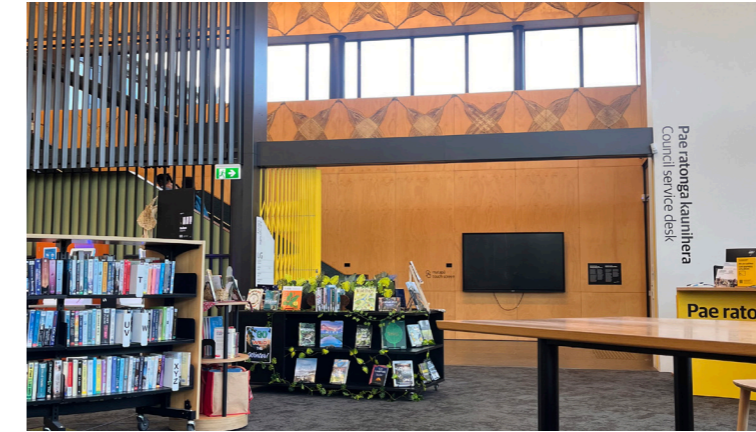


Fig 24: Waitohi Johnsonville Library, Front Entrance, 2025

### Critical Reflection

When I visited the community hub, I felt inspired and energised by the space. This was largely due to the multiple opportunities for creative expression. The hubs offer multiple creative labs, including facilities for laser cutting and 3D printing, known collectively as 'The Hive'. These resources create a sense of belonging and mutual support. The diverse range of communities that use this space is truly inspiring, as it encourages learning, innovation, and collaboration. It is an ideal space for sharing knowledge and engaging in creative projects, creating a sense of community through shared achievements.



Fig 25: Waitohi Johnsonville Library & Community Hub, Athfield Architects, 2025

Upon further investigation of this hub, I discovered that the place was named after 'Waitohi', after the stream that once flowed through Johnsonville. According to the Wellington City Council website, "The name of Waitohi was never adopted by the colonists. The surveyors and other company officials, through language difficulties and a lack of awareness of the deep love Māori had for their land, either failed to pick up the name or overlooked its significance."

I was inspired by the naming of the Waitohi hub, as it reflects a respect for natural and cultural heritage by reconnecting the place to its original identity. This approach showed me how naming and local narratives can ground a space in its history and foster a sense of belonging. In my project, I applied this thinking by embedding place-based stories into the identity of the Community House to build emotional connection and community pride.

## Reading Literature Review

Pūrākau: Our world is made of stories” by John Stansfield 2020

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As part of my research journey and exploration into building a sense of community pride and identity through storytelling, I reviewed literature on the use of pūrākau as a guiding method and the significance of storytelling within community contexts. One key concept from this reading is that shared stories about a place can foster belonging and collective pride, encouraging a sense of unity and collective action. Stansfield (2020, p. 87), citing Shevellar (2011), states that “stories about ‘place’ have a central role in community development and the establishment of identity.” Stansfield further adds, “Shared identity of place creates bonds that enable collaboration” (p. 87). This demonstrates that storytelling is not only about preserving memories, it also plays a vital role in how communities connect, understand one another, and build pride in their shared environment. It emphasizes the idea that storytelling helps establish a collective identity and nurtures a strong sense of place.

Another concept the text had was about the deep connection between storytelling and cultural identity. This is emphasised by explaining how storytelling is not just a method of communication but part of our culture and helps shape communities into understanding who they are. Stansfield explains this further by citing Dixon (1995) by stating, “This reminds me of the importance of stories, and that storytelling is part of our culture and cultural identity. In community development the stories of the community are an important part of its identity, and thus are a mechanism for members to identify with the community.” From this, Dixon refers that “stories of the community are an important part of its identity”, emphasising how the community sense of pride can be built through collective experiences and narratives that therefore can be shared among members. These stories can help define what the community values are and why they matter.

### Critical Reflection

Reflecting on this literature has deepened my understanding and appreciation of storytelling as a method of communication. It can also be a powerful cultural practice that contributes to shaping community identity and pride, reinforcing the importance of developing local narratives. This reflection made me consider how storytelling can be a tool to honour the past and inspire the future of communities through shared narratives and collaboration. Introducing pūrākau into this research project and my design approaches would have helped ensure that community voices were central to shaping meaningful, place-based outcomes. However, due to the challenges outlined in Part 3 of this research, I chose not to use pūrākau in my design process and instead acknowledged the value it holds. This decision was based on my limited cultural knowledge and lack of appropriate guidance in applying this method, so I chose to focus on the brand narrative principles as part of my methodologies.

## Key Takeaways: Contextual Review

The contextual overview for this research project highlights key themes that have shaped the design direction and design approaches. Below each point highlights how the research, cultural values, and design research frameworks have informed the need for a community identity that supports the aim of connecting people of the community to the House.

- ◆ **Community Values**  
Guided the visual identity to align with the purpose and spirit of the Petone Community House.
- ◆ **Bridging the Identity Gap**  
Addressed the absence of a clear identity system in community houses.
- ◆ **Māori Worldview**  
Provided a meaningful lens that shaped both research and design.
- ◆ **Connection to Place**  
Local stories and history informed a place-based design approach.
- ◆ **Placemaking Framework**  
Influenced how the design fosters belonging and participation.
- ◆ **Place-Based Branding**  
Applied branding principles to reflect community identity.
- ◆ **Design for Community Building**  
Demonstrated how design strengthens pride and connection through placemaking and storytelling.



Fig 26: Outside Front of Petone Community House, 2025

# Part Three: Design Methodologies

Exploring Design Pathways:  
The Double Diamond Approach

Exploring Design Pathways:  
Branding Principles

Exploring Design Pathways:  
Placemaking & Co-design

Placemaking methods explored

Navigating the Design Process

Key Takeaways

## Exploring Design Pathways: The Double Diamond

My main design research method for this project is the Double Diamond model, Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver, to guide my research and design process, a framework I have consistently applied in my design practice over the years.

### Discover Stage:

This stage involved broad research to understand user needs and motivations. As Raposo (2022, p. 22) notes, empathy and openness are key to observing users. I conducted community observations and informal conversations with staff at The House, which informed a 'place vision' central to the project.

### Define Stage:

Here, research insights were organised to identify key patterns and user needs. Raposo (2022, p. 22) describes this stage as essential for finding behavioural patterns. I identified a disconnect between the community and shared spaces, which shaped the design challenge: reconnecting the Petone community with The House through narrative design.

### Development Stage:

This phase focused on creating and testing design ideas. Although co-creation workshops were planned, constraints limited community involvement. Instead, I refined concepts to be shared in the Deliver stage. (Raposo, 2022, p. 22)

### Deliver Stage:

This stage involves implementing and testing the final design. While not completed within the project timeframe, I aim to deliver the outcomes post-submission as a way to give back to the House.

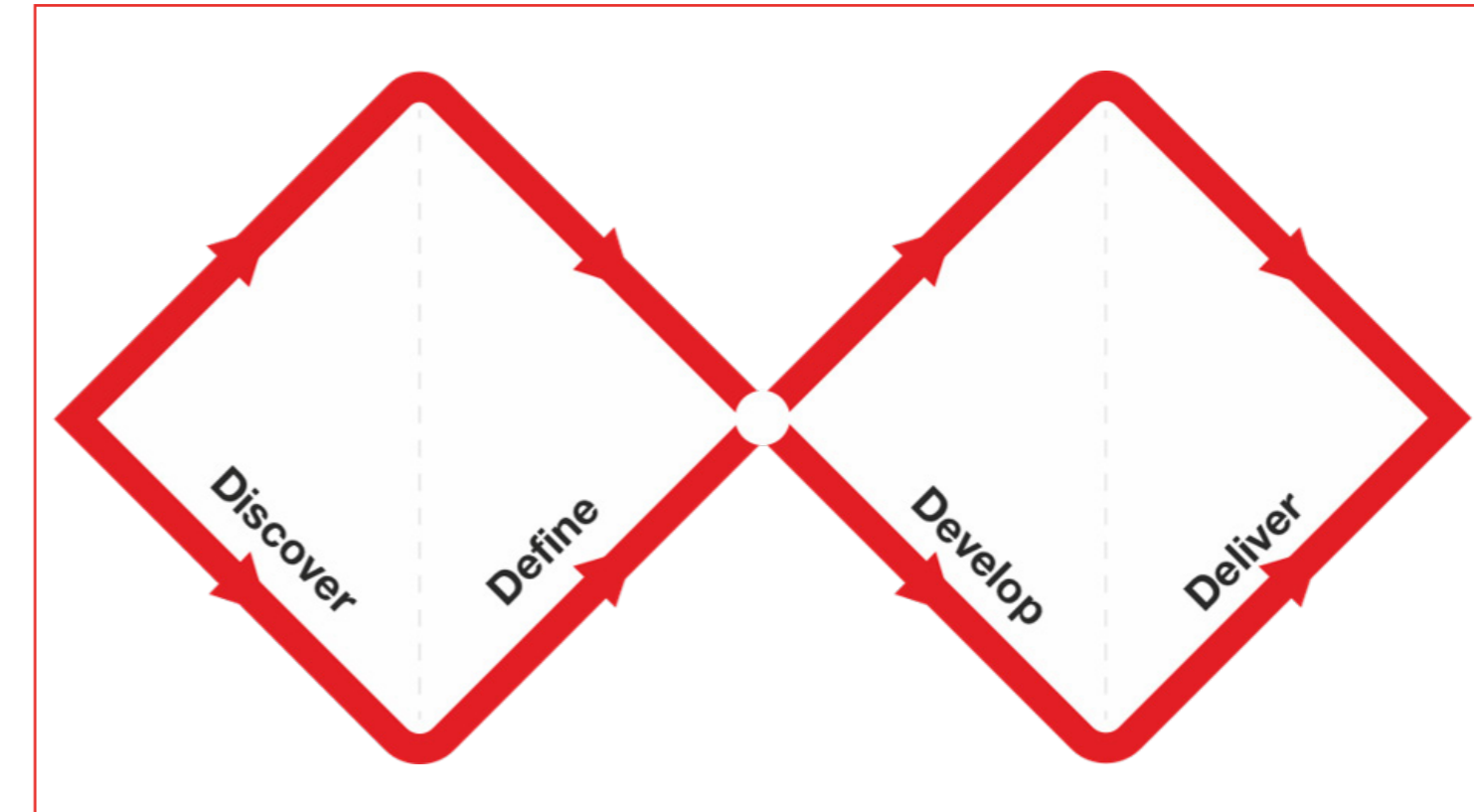


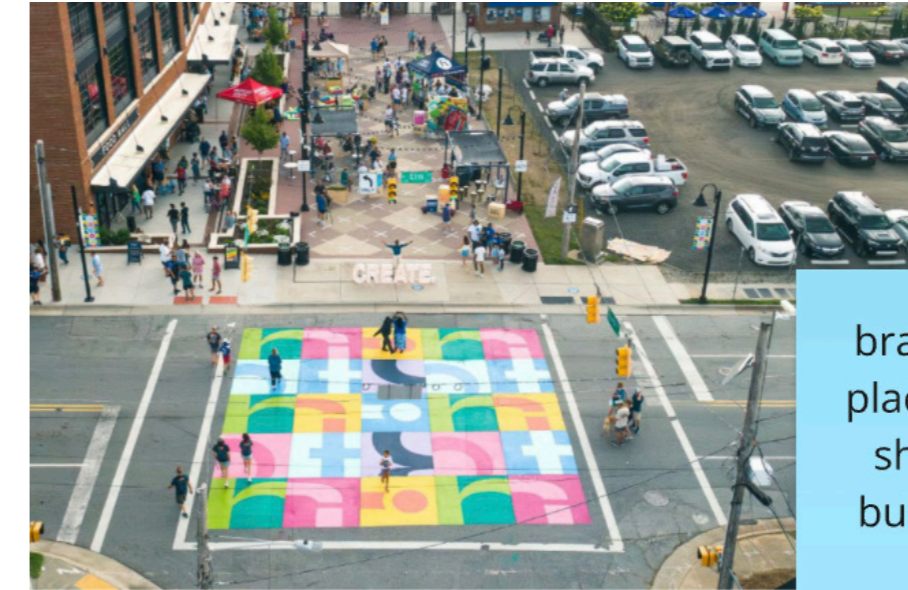
Fig 27: The Double Diamond by the Design Council, 2025

## Exploring Design Pathways: Branding Principles

### Narrative Development

As part of my design process, I used brand strategies and principles to create the narrative and design outcomes discussed in Part 5. Branding principles provided the foundation for shaping the visual identity of this research project, ensuring that decisions around colour, typography, and the icon bank were developed into a cohesive and recognisable system.

Central to this was the creation of a narrative for the research project, guided by brand narrative principles that supported the core value of connection within the Kahikatea Collective. This narrative informed the tone and visual direction of the design outcomes, ensuring they felt authentic and meaningful for the community audience. The brand I developed reinforces a sense of community pride and belonging within the House.



brand itself isn't creating great places. But if your brand values should enact change to your built environment, one way or another.

**Places are actually revealing your brand and what you value**

Fig 28: Snapshot of Brand Summary from the Research Phase, 2025

## Exploring Design Pathways: Placemaking & Co-design

### Challenges

During the early stages of my project, I aimed to involve the community as much as possible in the design process. Since the Petone Community House is a space for, and run by, the community, it was important to me that local voices and perspectives played a key role in shaping its redesign. Community engagement was not only intended to inform the design direction but also to foster a sense of ownership and a shared vision.

As the project progressed, however, I found that meaningful engagement was challenging due to limited resources, time constraints, and communication barriers. Unfortunately, these challenges meant I was unable to host workshops or connect with as many community members as I had hoped. Despite this, the input I received from staff and a few active community participants proved invaluable in identifying key needs and opportunities within the House.

### Critical Reflection

Limiting the opportunity to gather first-hand community input meant that I had to rely on secondary research methods. This included studying precedent projects such as 'Studio C,' which, within a company setting, created workshops to envision the future of the Petone Library and gathered local insights about the area.

While this provided valuable perspectives, it also highlighted the challenges associated with processes like placemaking and co-design. These methods are incredibly valuable, but their effectiveness can be limited without direct community engagement. This insight emphasized the importance of strong partnerships or institutional support and resources to enable a more inclusive and participatory design process.



Fig 29: Placemaking Aotearoa, The Ei Project, 2025



Fig 30: Front of Petone Community House, 2025

# Placemaking Methods Explored

Despite limitations on direct engagement, I drew on placemaking theory and precedent case studies to shape my approach, beginning with site analysis and observational research to understand the spatial context and current use.

Inspired by people-centred strategies from initiatives like Placemaking Aotearoa, these insights informed design outcomes that reinforce the narrative of place and strengthen community connection.



Fig 30: Set Up of Space in Room 7, At Petone Community House, 2025

## Site Visit

During site visits to the House, I spent time in each room to understand how the spaces functioned. I observed current use patterns and identified opportunities where design could strengthen connections between people and their environment. Most rooms served basic functions, meeting rooms had stacked chairs, minimal or removed sofas, tables, and storage lockers. These spaces felt neutral; while this suited varied needs, it revealed a lack of character.

What stood out was the absence of identity. Rooms were numbered but lacked defining colours, patterns, or visual cues, elements that could reduce the disconnect between space and users. This observation became the foundation for my design focus: using narrative to guide outcomes and create more engaging spaces.

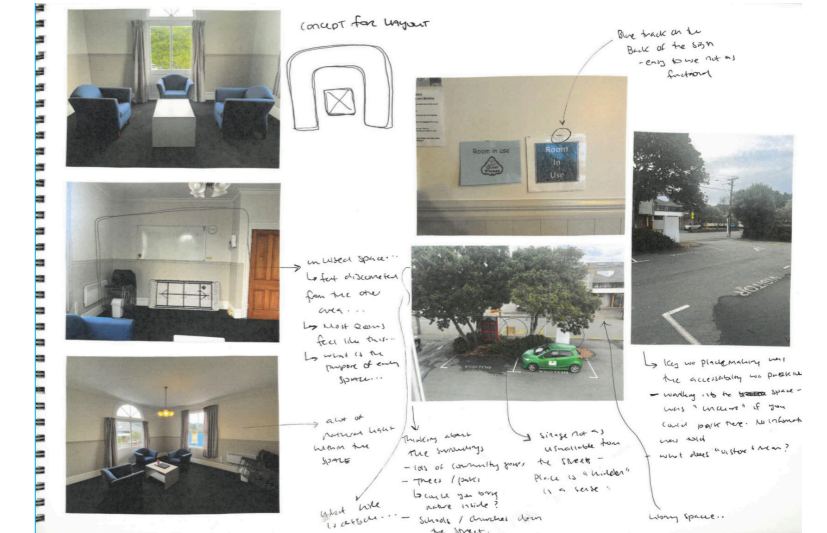


Fig 31: Snapshot of Room Analysis, Room 4, 2025

Areas like the kitchen and entrance supported informal interaction, while meeting rooms felt underused and socially disconnected, showing a misalignment between intended function and actual use. These insights shaped a visual communication design approach that uses storytelling and identity to support more inclusive interactions. I proposed using visual elements and icons to personalise shared spaces, enhancing welcome, aiding wayfinding, and strengthening the community's connection to the House.



Fig 32: Room Set Up At Petone Community House, Room 4, 2025

### Conversations with Staff

As part of my research process, I conducted informal interviews, including conversations with staff at the Petone Community House and a limited number of community members. These discussions highlighted the strong desire for the House to feel more personalised, reflecting both its history and the values of those who use it.

Staff shared that the spaces often felt too neutral or impersonal, which limited a deeper emotional connection to the environment. This feedback directly influenced my design direction, reinforcing the need to develop a narrative that could shape more meaningful and engaging spatial experiences.

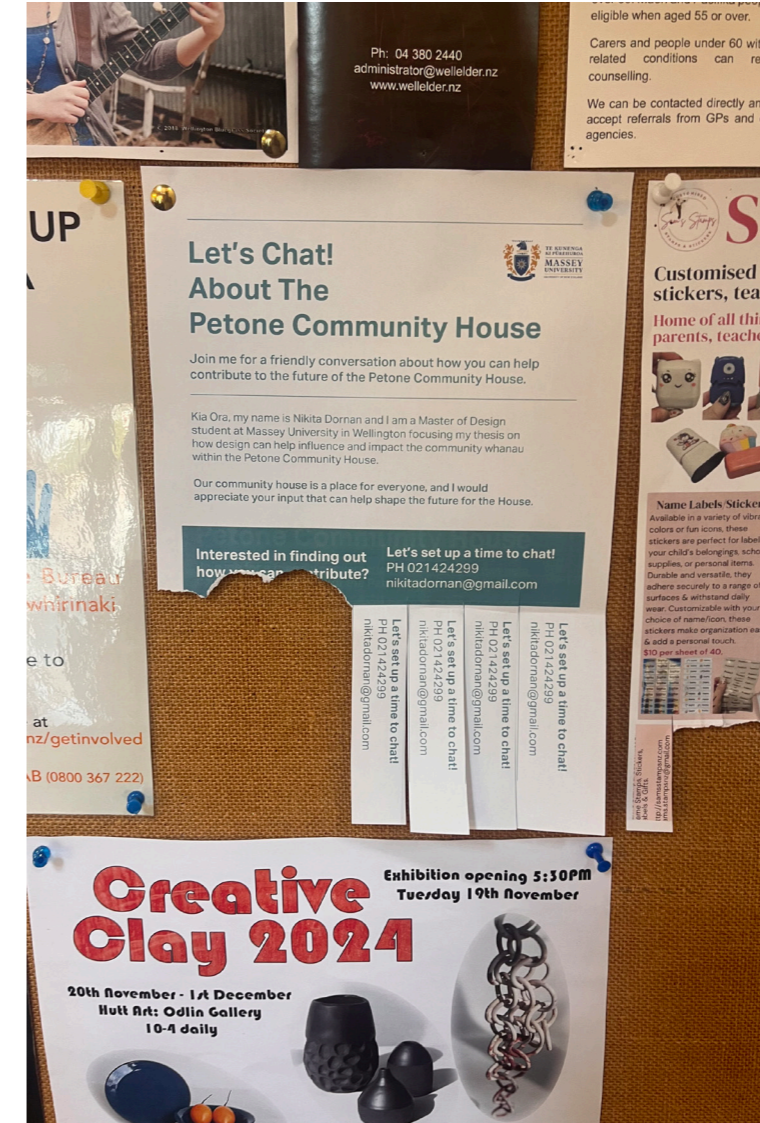


Fig 33: Visual of Poster Designed for Community Engagement, 2025

### Methods of Community Engagement

In order to communicate with the Community House's members, I used posters on their noticeboard, Facebook posts, and the email newsletter to reach a wide audience. While these channels were effective in showcasing my project and raising awareness, direct responses were limited. This highlighted the challenges of encouraging active engagement through these forms of communication.

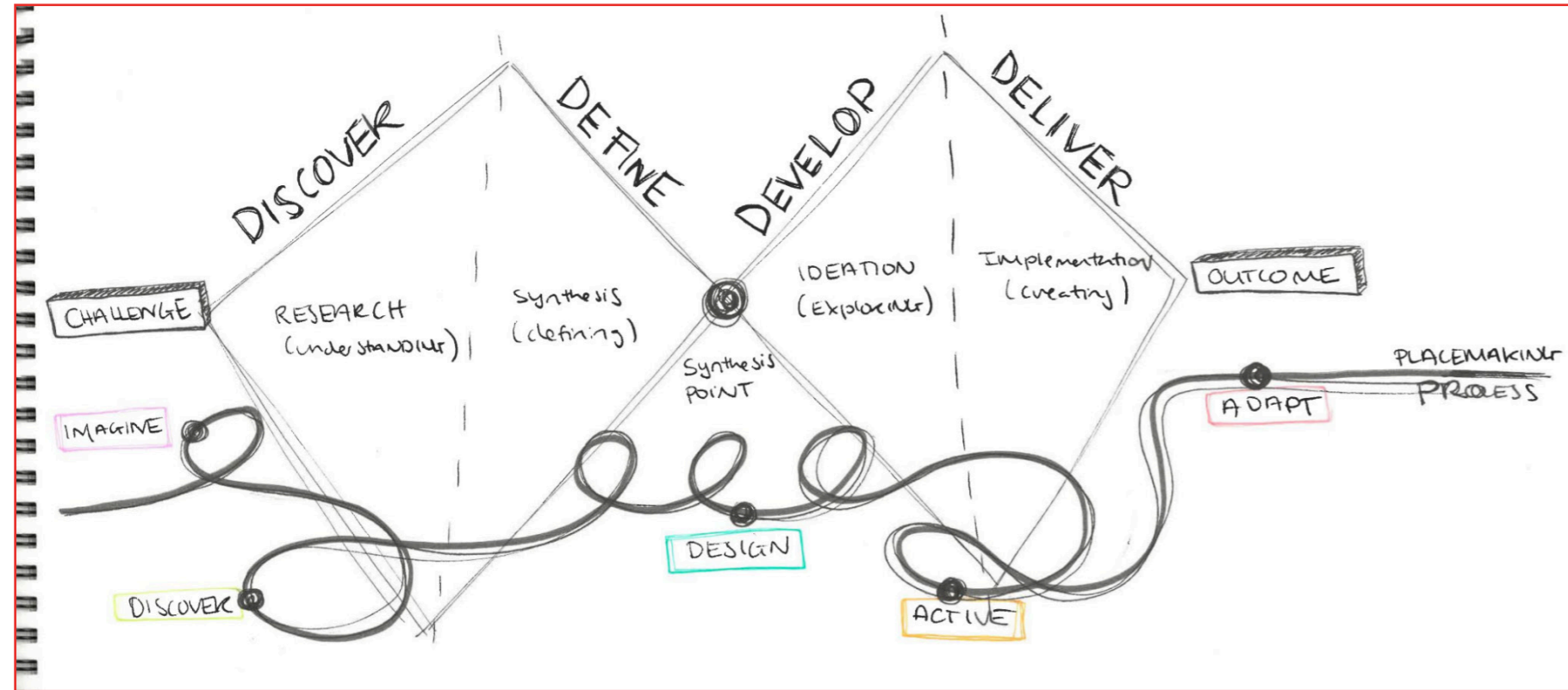


Fig 34: Snapshot Visuals of Design Process, Including Double Diamond & Placemaking, 2025

## Navigating the Design Process

Throughout this research project, my design process drew heavily from the principles of placemaking and branding. Alongside these two methods, I used the Double Diamond framework; Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver, as a guiding structure to navigate each design phase, allowing for broad exploration and refinement. All these methods involved exploring a range of community needs, narratives, and spatial possibilities, followed by synthesising information and making decisions throughout the research and design phases. Placemaking encouraged me to think beyond aesthetics by focusing on how each space within the House could be engaging and comfortable, without feeling overwhelming.

Branding principles helped establish a consistent visual language that was carried across all design decisions and outcomes. At times, this process felt like creative chaos, especially when concepts were deconstructed, challenged, or re-evaluated. This part of the process became a catalyst for refining and rethinking, allowing for greater clarity and intention moving forward with the research project. The blue line in the diagram represents this non-linear process, highlighting moments of refinement and reflection that were essential to this research project in connecting people to place.

## Key Takeaways: Design Methodologies

Reflecting on this chapter highlights key insights and methods that shaped the direction of the design outcome, as outlined below:

- ♦ The research and design methodologies used for this project included the double diamond, placemaking, and co-design exploration.
- ♦ Discovered community needs via site visits, observations, and informal interviews with staff and a few community members.
- ♦ Defined a core design challenge: reconnecting people to the Petone Community House through narrative and identity.
- ♦ Used branding principles to create a cohesive visual language, building community pride and emotional connection.
- ♦ Placemaking strategies guided spatial interpretation, leading to proposals for personalised, welcoming spaces.
- ♦ Faced challenges with limited direct community involvement, relying instead on secondary methods and staff insights.
- ♦ Despite “creative chaos,” the process was non-linear and reflective, catalysing clearer, community-focused design solutions.

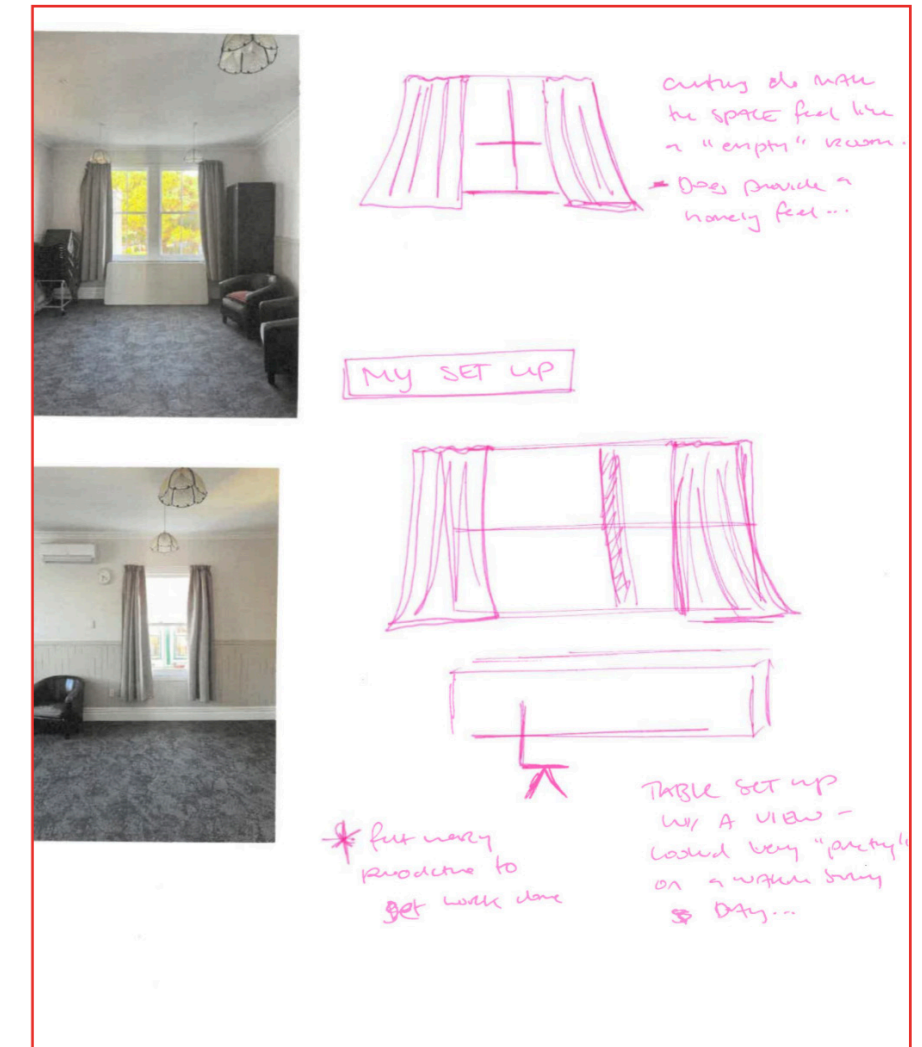


Fig 35: Snapshot of Room Analysis of Room 7, 2025

# Part Four: **Kahikatea Narrative**

**Building The narrative**

**The Kahikatea Collective**

**Bringing The Narrative To Life**

**Key Takeaways**

# Building The Narrative

## Narrative as Foundation

To develop a design outcome that genuinely responds to the needs and values of the communities using the House, I began by analysing the local context and the history of the surrounding area, elements that have shaped the House as it stands today. This research included conversations with a local historian at the Petone Library, alongside a review of literature and photographic analysis to understand the land's past. These steps were essential in shaping a meaningful design response.

Given the diversity of groups that use the space, the House functions as a meeting place and a reflection of the people and communities who engage with it. This understanding led to my initial focus: developing a narrative using branding principles to explore the layers of identity and history embedded within the House. This approach helped ensure that the design outcomes were grounded in the values and stories that define the House, allowing future users to connect with the space on a deeper level.

## Building the House's Narrative

With this foundation of purpose, I began weaving the narrative that would guide the visual elements of this project. The narrative for this project has been shaped by key themes that reflect Petone's natural history, ancestral ties to the land, and community connections that help define the House today. These themes have informed the visual elements and design choices, aiming to reflect the layered identity of Petone's surroundings and foster a deeper connection between people and place.

To develop this narrative as part of my design process, I undertook steps to gather information and translate these themes into design elements that I proposed could shape the experience within the space through the development of a visual language.

To help further shape the narrative of the Kahikatea Collective for the House, I drew on key branding principles as a guide. This included using clarity, consistency, and emotional connection to inform how these themes could be visually communicated. Building this brand narrative involved not just storytelling techniques, but creating a framework that weaves together identity, values, and a connection to place in a way that is both authentic and recognisable within a community environment.

### Steps taken to build the narrative included:

- ◆ Conducting site visits and conversations with staff to gain perspectives and insights into day-to-day use.
- ◆ Using photo analysis and literature to trace the local history of the surrounding area.
- ◆ Prototyping a visual language through symbolic references that reflect the narrative.

This process allowed the design to move beyond visual aesthetics and communicate a cohesive narrative framework that tells the story of the place.

## The Kahikatea Collective

### Introducing the Kahikatea Collective

Through my research and review of the literature, I discovered that the land now known as Petone was once part of a thriving natural landscape, rich with native forests and wetlands. This environment supported a diverse ecosystem long before urban development transformed it into the community we see today.

My vision for the project and its narrative, to connect the community to the House, was inspired by the intersection of nature and urban life that characterises the area today, while also honoring the land's historical roots. By weaving stories of the natural past into the House's narrative, the design invites the community to reflect on and appreciate the deeper heritage of the land.

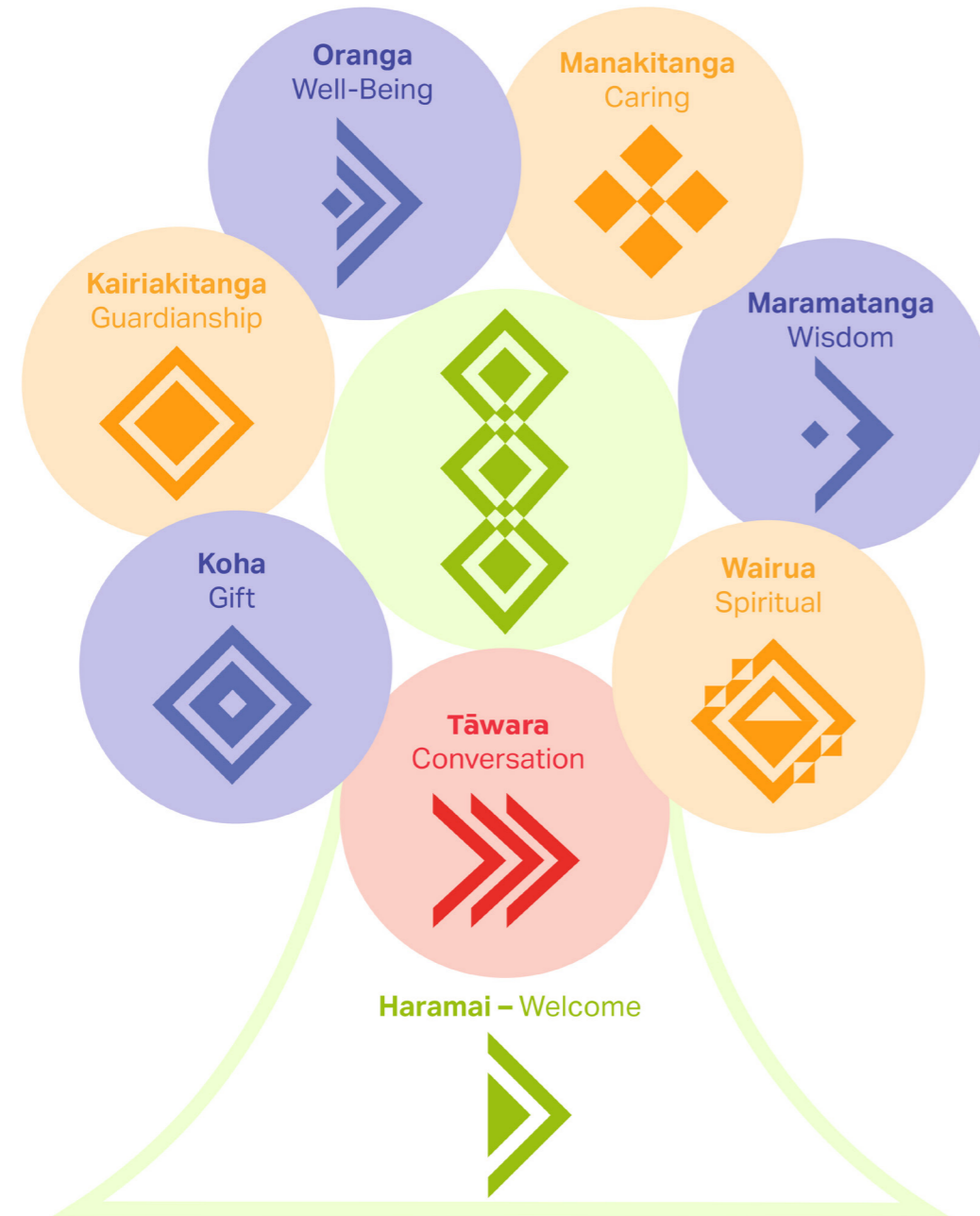
Using the forest as a central metaphor for this narrative, I chose to focus on the kahikatea, an ancient tree that once dominated the wetland podocarp forests across Aotearoa. As the tallest native tree in the country, the kahikatea was once a key part of Petone's natural landscape. Like the kahikatea, which intertwines its roots with others for strength, the Community House thrives on collaboration and connection. This shared space brings people together to support, learn, and grow, fostering an interconnected future rooted in community.

### Understanding Cultural Importance

According to My Native Forest (2025), the kahikatea tree is "valued for its spiritual significance and was believed to connect the earthly and spiritual realms." Drawing inspiration from the kahikatea, the design of the Petone Community House incorporates its symbolic meaning into the visual and spatial language of the space. Through this narrative, the design aims to create a deeper connection to place by embedding cultural significance and meaning into the design language.



Fig 36: Visual of Kahikatea Collective Poster, 2025



## Bringing The Narrative to Life

### Narrative as Design Tool

This section explores the narrative of the Kahikatea Collective and how it has been translated into visual design elements that reflect the identity and values of the Community House. It unpacks the symbolic meaning of the kahikatea tree, its connection to community, and explains how this narrative was integrated into the space through the development of visual icons and motifs. These elements were intentionally designed to embed deeper meaning within the environment and strengthen the connection between the community and the space.

The following spaces within the House each embody space-specific values based on the kahikatea tree ecosystem, translated through visual motifs and spatial associations.



### **Kahikatea Collective – The House**

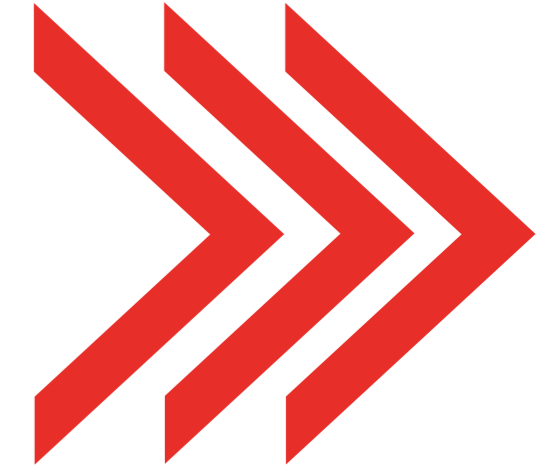
Like the kahikatea, once part of Petone's Podocarp forest, the Community House thrives on collaboration and connection. Just as kahikatea intertwine their roots for strength, this shared space unites the community to support, learn, and grow together, fostering an interconnected future.



### **Haramai Space – Welcome**

At the front entrance of the House, the value of haramai, meaning “welcome,” is displayed. This was chosen to create a sense of belonging, allowing communities to feel accepted and connected as they enter the space.

This value of haramai is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea roots. Like the intertwining roots of the tree that strengthen and support one another, they symbolise the foundation of the Community House, a place where community members come together to uplift and care for the shared space from the moment they arrive.



### **Tāwara Space – Conversation**

In the kitchen space, the value of tāwara, meaning “conversation,” is displayed. This was chosen to reflect the kitchen's role as a social hub, a place where people can connect and engage in conversation while using the meeting rooms.

The value of tāwara is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea branches. Just as the branches of the kahikatea reach outward, gathering light and nourishment for the tree, the kitchen is a space that nourishes both body and community. More than just a place to prepare food, it is where the community comes together, builds connections, and fosters a sense of belonging and togetherness.



### Kaitiakitanga Space – Guardianship

Room 3 is a gathering space used for workshops and large groups, making it a key area for shared learning and connection. This inspired the use of the value kaitiakitanga, meaning “guardianship,” which reflects the responsibility to care for both the space and one another within the Community House.

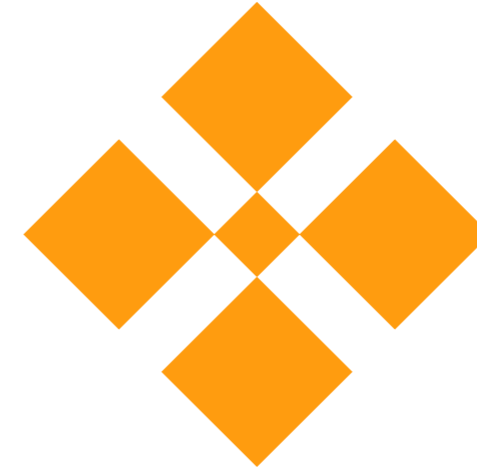
This value of guardianship is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea tree trunk. Just as the sturdy trunk provides strength and protection for the forest, this space stands as a pillar of the Community House, embodying guardianship and the passing down of knowledge. As the heart of the House, it brings people together, fostering collaboration, connection, and support.



### Oranga Space – Well-being

Room 4 is a space commonly used for smaller groups, including mental health counselling, family meetings, and personal events. This inspired the use of the value oranga, meaning “well-being.” The room offers a quiet and comfortable environment that supports emotional and mental wellness, reflecting the importance of healing and care.

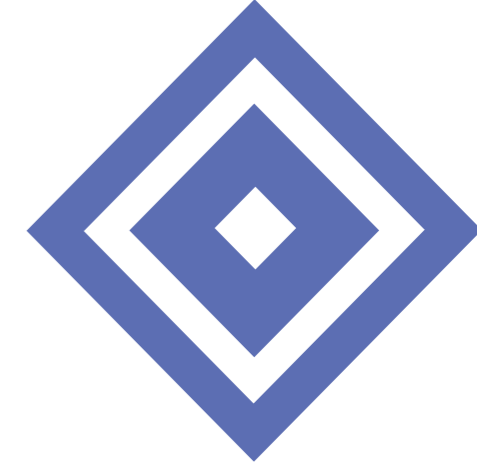
The value of oranga is visually represented through the motif of the bellbird. Like the bellbird, this space symbolises harmony and communication. Just as the bird’s song fills the forest, the design encourages open conversations and a sense of calm, reinforcing the room’s role in supporting well-being.



### Manakitanga Space – Caring

Room 6 is one of the larger rooms used primarily for workshops, including yoga, family meetings, and music sessions. This inspired the use of the value manakitanga, meaning “caring,” as the room offers a space for learning, comfort, and support, reflecting the care and consideration shared during these activities.

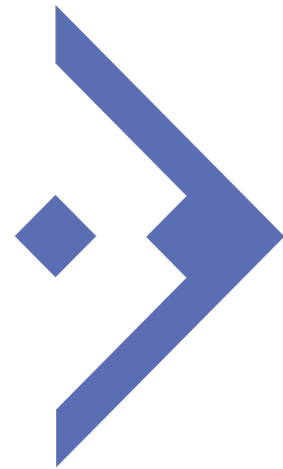
The value of manakitanga is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea berries. Just as the berries of the Kahikatea nourish and sustain the forest, offering care and resources to the ecosystem, this space is where care and support flow.



### Koha Space – Gift

Room 10 was offered as a gift to the Community House, which inspired the use of the value koha, meaning “gift.” This value reflects generosity and shared use, emphasising the room’s role in fostering mutual support and connection within the community.

The value of the gift is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea seed. Just as the seeds of the Kahikatea are a gift that nurture the tree’s growth and resilience, this space has been offered as an opportunity for growth. Like the seeds that give back to the ecosystem, this room fosters collaboration and the creation of connections within the community.



### Maramatanga Space – Wisdom

Room 9 is the smallest and private room within the house that can be hired. This space is mainly used for small discussions and groups, like one-on-one discussion groups, music lessons, counseling, and family meetings. This inspired the use of the value maramatanga, meaning “wisdom”, as this space provides an environment where knowledge can be shared and exchanged.

The value of maramatanga is visually represented through the motif of the tūi. Just like the tūi, this space is for conversation and reflection. Inspired by the tūi voice echoing through the forest, this symbolises the community coming together to a place where knowledge is shared.



### Wairua Space – Spiritual

Room 7 is one of the larger rooms, used for learning, religious group events, and workshops. This informed the use of the value wairua, meaning “spiritual,” to reflect the space’s role in supporting personal growth, reflection, and collective well-being.

The value of wairua is visually represented through the motif of the wētā. Like the wētā, this space fosters connection and spiritual growth. Inspired by this ancient guardian of Aotearoa’s forests, the wētā symbolises the wisdom of the land and the strength of those who gather here.

### Framing Identity Through Collective Values

Together, these values and visual motifs from the Kahikatea Collective are a part of the visual narrative framework that reimagines how the Petone Community House is a space rooted in place, people, and a shared purpose. By applying these cultural meanings encourages the community to engage more meaningfully with each space and collaborate.

## Key Takeaways: Kahikatea Narrative

Reflecting on this part highlights the structure and thought process behind the narrative that shapes this project, as outlined below:

- ◆ This chapter explored how a narrative-driven design approach was developed to reflect the identity, values, and history of the Petone Community House.
- ◆ Research into local history, conversations with community members, and photographic analysis informed the foundation of the design response.
- ◆ The design was guided by branding principles to express layered identities through a visual narrative.
- ◆ The Kahikatea Collective became the central metaphor, symbolising strength, connection, and rootedness in place.
- ◆ Each space within the House was paired with a Māori value and visual motif drawn from the Kahikatea ecosystem, reflecting its use and purpose.
- ◆ The outcome is a cohesive visual framework that embeds cultural meaning, inviting deeper engagement between people and place.
- ◆ Ultimately, this narrative approach reimagines the House as a space of shared purpose, belonging, and community connection.

# Part Five:

# Design Reflection

Design Opportunities Through Room  
Analysis

Kahikatea Collective Visual Identity

Visual Storytelling Through Symbols

Design Reflections

Design Elements

Bringing the Brand to Life

Conclusion

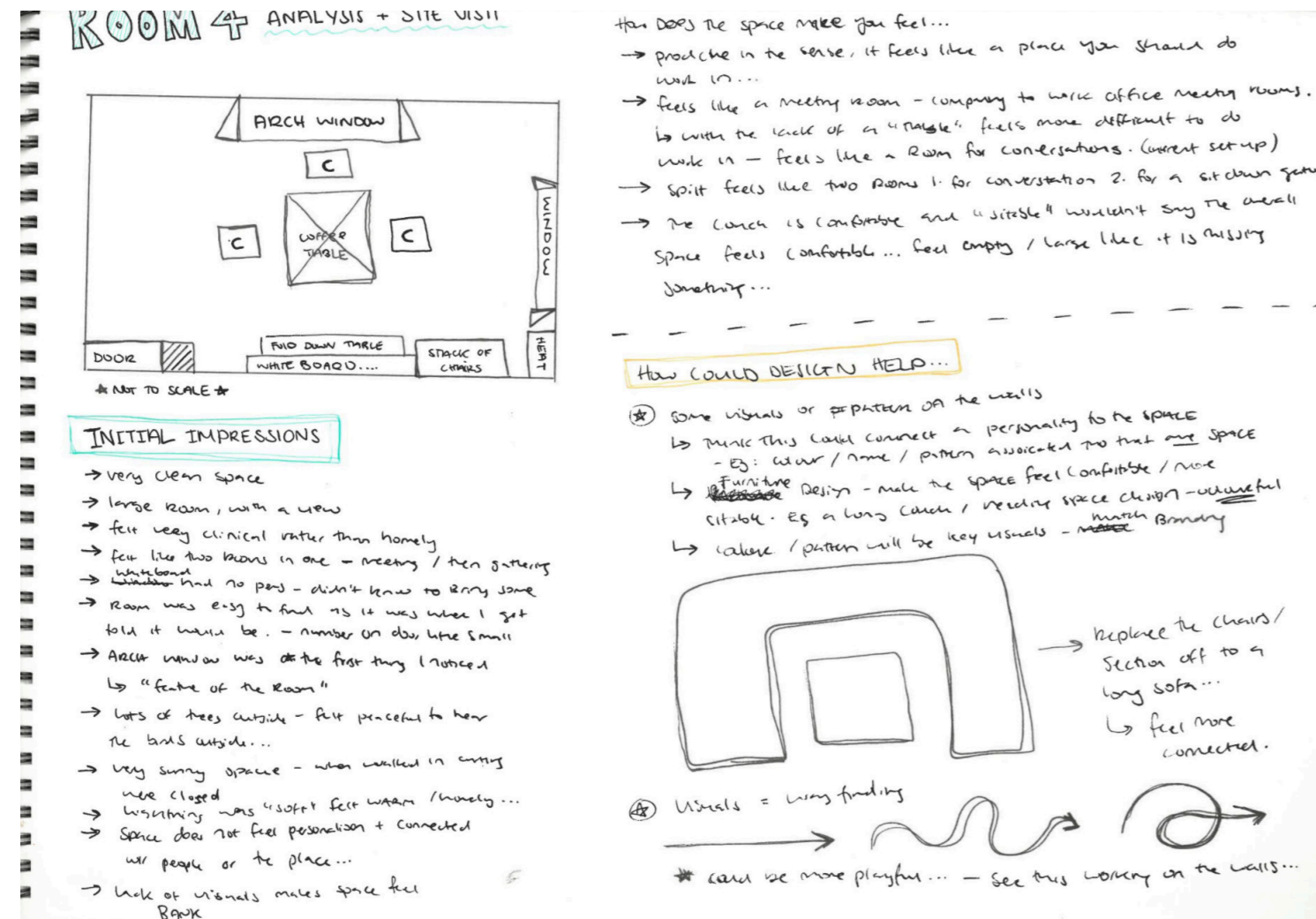


Fig 37: Snapshot of Room Analysis and Design Process of Room 4, 2025

## Design Opportunities Through Room Analysis

As part of my design process, I undertook a room analysis of each space to understand how the areas within the House were currently being utilised. This analysis helped me gain insights into how design opportunities could support and enhance the aims of this research project. These insights informed how the design outcomes could foster stronger connections between the community and the House, supporting a shared identity and encouraging a sense of community pride within each space through the Kahikatea Collective narrative.

This approach was chosen as it aligned with the principles of placemaking, designing with the audience/community in mind to help create meaningful and inclusive environments that reflect the community's needs. With this in mind, each space within the House was given a distinct value and meaning, reflected through the visual identity presented to the community. From this, I divided the spaces based on size and function. This allowed me to identify the specific needs for design responses that aligned with each space.

These included the following elements, which are outlined in detail on the next pages.



Fig 38: Snapshot of Photo Collection of Room 10, 2025

### Conversational Spaces Smaller meeting rooms 4, 9, 10

These were identified as “neutral spaces,” as they are used for conversations, small workshops, and family meetings. From this, the proposed design outcomes needed to be subtle and not overwhelming. This included wall graphics and informative content about the space, allowing community members to engage with and learn about the meaning behind its personalised identity.

The icons in this series were represented through the violet blue tones in the colour palette, chosen to symbolise reflection and calmness within the space, as these are smaller areas primarily used for private conversations.

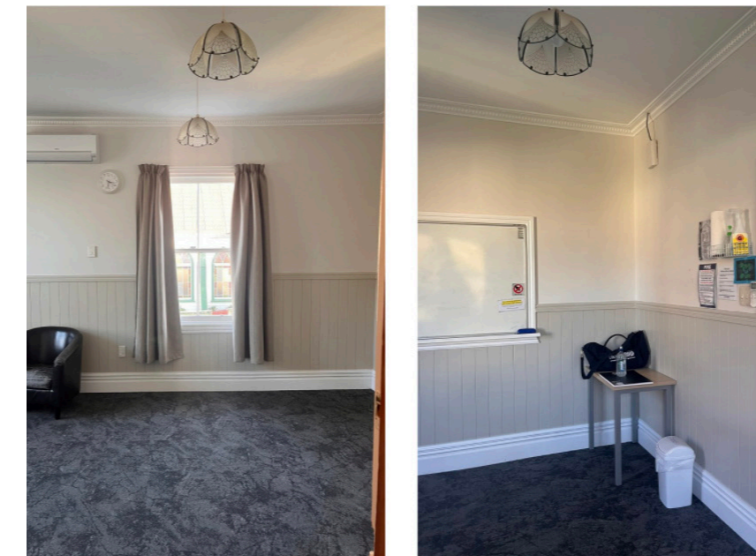


Fig 39: Snapshot of Photo Collection of Room 7, 2025

### Collaborative Spaces Larger meeting rooms 3, 6, 7

These were identified as “gathering spaces,” as they were used for larger workshop groups, including support groups. From this, the proposed design outcomes needed to be visible but not overwhelming, creating a welcoming and inclusive space that felt engaging for all. This included larger wall graphics featuring pattern and colour, along with informative content to help community members learn about the meaning behind the space.

The icons in this series were represented through the orange tones in the colour palette, chosen to symbolise the warmth and energy within the space, as these spaces are primarily used for larger workshop groups.



Fig 40: Front of House Entrance at Petone Community House, 2025

### Transitional Space Front of House

This space was identified as a “welcoming space”, as this is where community members are first introduced to the Kahikatea Collective narrative. This space serves as the starting point for the narrative experience, establishing the values and identity that support the overall design outcomes.

In this space, these elements were represented through the use of green, similar to the Kahikatea Collective logo, to create visual consistency across the identity system. Green was chosen for its strong association with nature and growth, key themes reflected in the Kahikatea narrative. It reinforces the concept of connection to the Kahikatea tree ecosystem and reflects the purpose of these spaces as places for gathering and support within the meeting rooms.



Fig :41 Kitchen at Petone Community House, 2025

### Transitional Space Common areas & Kitchen

This space was identified as a “conversational space,” as it is where community members move through while still being introduced to the narrative. Although not a primary destination, it functions as an in-between space that reinforces the values and identity supporting the overall design outcomes, encouraging everyday interaction with the narrative throughout the House.

In this space, the icons were represented in red to subtly signal shared utilities and points of contact. The use of red in this transitional area also contributed to the social atmosphere by creating a sense of energy and warmth, encouraging conversation and fostering a shared presence within the space.



## Kahikatea Collective Visual Identity

The visual identity centers on the diamond shape, inspired by the upward-reaching leaf of the kahikatea tree and the geometric patterns found in tukutuku panels. This diamond shape, used throughout the visual system, was chosen to symbolise strength and connection within this community group, reflecting the values of the Kahikatea Collective and the concept that individuals, like Kahikatea trees in a forest, grow stronger together.

This symbol has been repeated and applied throughout the design outcomes in multiple spaces, as the diamond serves as a flexible visual style that represents community unity across all outcomes, including graphic elements on wall displays and signage that invite community members into the space. The personalisation of each room contributes to a cohesive visual identity, helping to connect people to place.

## Visual Storytelling Through Symbols

As part of my design process and outcomes, I proposed that each space within the House be personalised to help connect people to each space. These icons were carefully crafted to reflect the value and purpose of each room. The inspiration behind each one was drawn from the Kahikatea narrative design and the symbolism of the diamond shape, based on the Kahikatea tree ecosystem, which included features of the trees, insects, and animals. This approach ensured clarity and consistency across all design elements within this research and aligned with the branding principles.

These included key components, each of which is presented on the following pages.



### Kahikatea Collective Logo

Just as Kahikatea intertwine their roots for strength, this shared space unites the community to support, learn, and grow together, fostering an interconnected future.

#### Design Intent:

This logo for the collective was designed around the concept of kahikatea trees standing together as one, symbolising strength in diversity. It reflects the variety of groups that use the House and make up the wider community. The overlapping diamond shapes represent this coming together, with the larger diamonds symbolising unity and shared purpose. The filled central shape represents the three key areas within the House, small rooms, large rooms, and communal spaces, which have been the overarching focus of this project.

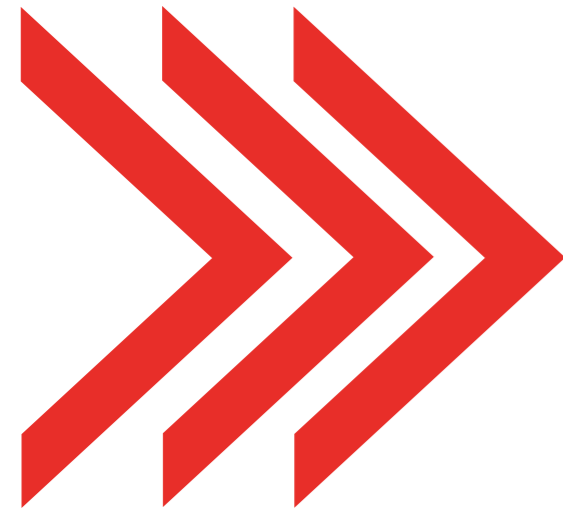


### Haramai Symbol

The value of haramai (welcome) is symbolised through the intertwining roots of the kahikatea, representing the supportive foundation of the Community House, a place where people come together to uplift and care for the shared space from the moment they arrive.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol has been designed as an abstraction of intertwining roots to represent welcome and foundation. It was created by refining the Kahikatea Collective logo and rotating it to the side, forming an arrow shape that can serve multiple purposes at the front of the House, including wayfinding. This reinforces the concept that every member of the Community House is part of its foundation from the moment they walk through the front door.

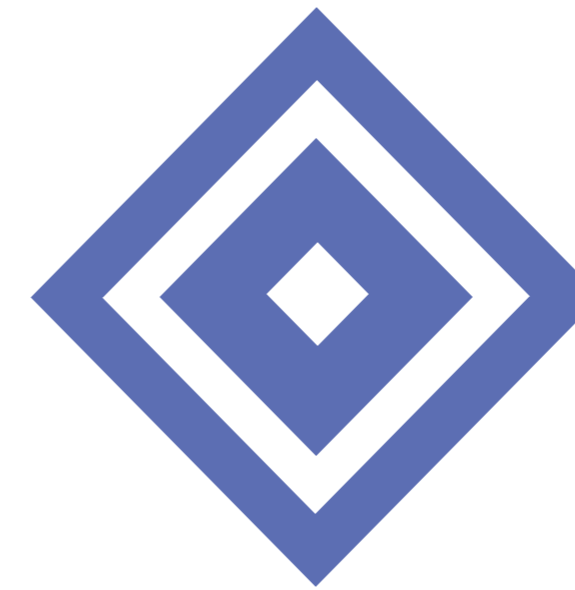


### Tāwara Symbol

The value of tāwara (conversation) is represented by the kahikatea branches, symbolising nourishment and growth. Like the branches, the kitchen extends outward as a space that feeds both body and community, fostering connection and belonging.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol has been designed as an abstraction of the kahikatea branches, reflecting outward movement. Similar to the haramai space, the arrow shape is formed to represent transitional areas where community members pass through. The three lines were intentionally included to symbolise the spreading of stories and ideas, encouraging connections to form within this shared space.

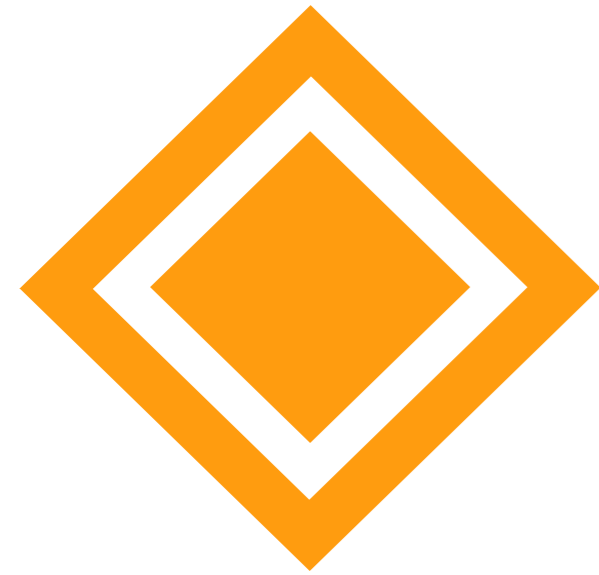


### Koha Symbol

The value of the koha (gift) is symbolised by the kahikatea seed, representing growth and resilience. Like seeds that nourish the ecosystem, this space fosters collaboration and community connection.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol has been design with the abstraction to emphasis of giving by representing a seed. Created using a repetition of the diamond shape, this motif symbolises a small but meaningful act of generosity to the House. The single use of a seed reflects how even just one contribution can create the potential for future growth within the community.



### Kaitiakitanga Symbol

The value of Kaitiakitanga (guardianship) is symbolised by the kahikatea trunk, representing strength, protection, and the passing down of knowledge. As the heart of the House, this space fosters connection, collaboration, and support.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol was drawn from the abstraction of the trunk in mind, communicating the steadfastness and embodying the central support system of the community.



### Oranga Symbol

The oranga (well-being) value is symbolised by the bellbird motif, representing harmony and communication. Just as the bird's song fills the forest, the design promotes open conversations and calmness, enhancing well-being in the space.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol was inspired by the bellbird. In the abstraction, I chose to highlight the bird's two-toned wings, which is reflected in the two lines forming the shape of its beak. This symbolises how communication and support play a vital role in fostering well-being, especially within this space.



### Manakitanga Symbol

The value of manakitanga (caring) is illustrated by the kahikatea berry motif, symbolising nourishment and support. This space reflects the care and resources that flow to sustain the community.

#### Design Intent:

This symbol was inspired by the berry and is represented by a small diamond in the center as the branch, with four diamonds connected around it symbolising the berries on the tree. This design represents the care within the space and embodies the giving and receiving of support, emphasising that this space nurtures both individuals and the wider community.



### Maramatanga Symbol

The value of maramatanga (wisdom) is embodied by the tūi motif, representing conversation and reflection. Inspired by the tūi's voice in the forest, this space symbolises a community gathering to share knowledge.

#### Design Intent:

This icon is inspired by the tūi and is represented by a symbol similar to the Oranga icon. To emphasise the tūi, an additional diamond was added to symbolise the bird's distinctive white beak. This supports the concept of the community gathering to share knowledge.



### Wairua Symbol

The value of wairua (spiritual) is represented by the wētā motif, symbolizing connection and spiritual growth. Inspired by this ancient guardian of Aotearoa’s forests, the wētā reflects the land’s wisdom and the strength of those who gather here.

#### Design Intent:

The wētā served as the inspiration for this icon. Its distinctive spiked leg has been abstracted and incorporated into the diamond-based visual system to harmonise with the other icons. This design decision reflects how the wētā’s role as a guardian of the forest, which symbolises spiritual connection within the community.

## Design Reflections

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As part of this visual system and the design intention that has been developed, it created a cohesive visual identity that could be used across a range of touch points including signage, graphics, and wall displays. Guided by the diamond shape, an abstraction that was inspired by the upward-reaching kahikatea leaf and tukutuku patterns. These shapes were chosen to echo the cultural and nature symbolism; they are also able to visually show the diverse values of the Kahikatea Collective. This diamond reinforces the strength, connection, and community growth which aligns with the narrative of the kahikatea trees standing stronger together as one being the House.

Overall, I believe this approach reflected my personal design style, which looks into abstracting natural forms from everyday objects to help communicate a narrative. By using this approach, this supports translating the values of koha, kaitiakitanga, oranga, manaakitanga, māramatanga, and wairua within each space of the House. The result being this visual system has crafted a brand and identity for the Petone Community House by connecting people to place through visual communication design and narrative design.

## Design Elements: Colour, Typography, and Pattern

The design elements as part of the visual system were carefully chosen to reflect the identity and the values of the Kahikatea Collective.



Fig 42: Kahikatea Berry Season, Story, Northland Regional Council, 2025

### Colour Palette

The colour palette was inspired by the imagery of the Kahikatea tree, particularly its berries and seeds. I drew on this inspiration to incorporate the native New Zealand forest greens alongside the red and blue berries, with a contrasting touch of orange.

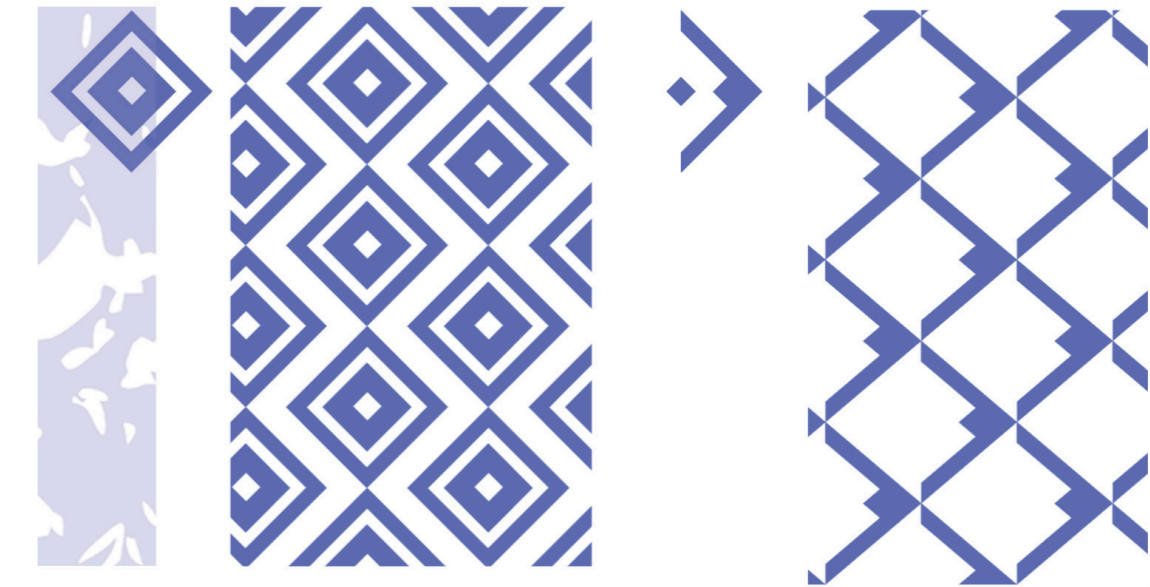
The shades of these colours were intentionally chosen to reflect a more mature audience, using muted and earthy tones instead of a bright, contrasting palette. The decision behind this was to create a calm yet welcoming atmosphere that also feels respectful to a wide audience, particularly as the meeting rooms are often used by the older generation. The use of warm colours was intended to highlight and support the overall narrative without overwhelming each space.

**Headers:  
bold,  
Apronasans**      Body Copy:  
regular,  
Apronasans

### Typography

The type Apronasans was chosen for this brand for its clean and modern feel, making it an ideal choice for a community-facing visual identity system. Due to its highly legible form, the simplicity ensures that this typeface is accessible across a diverse range of community members. Based on the rounded edges of the type, this hints at reflecting the welcoming and inclusive environment of the Kahikatea Collective narrative that reinforces the overarching theme of connection of the people of the community to the House.

By using this typeface of Apronasans across multiple design touchpoints, this creates a familiar and approachable role in the House's visual identity. Therefore, strengthens the sense of community pride by helping community members feel welcomed and connected as they navigate and engage within the different spaces of the House. Not only does the typeface serve as a tool for the brand kit, but it also plays a role in making this visual system feel cohesive and community-focused.



### Pattern

Within this design exploration, patterns of the symbols were used to create additional visual elements across the different design outcomes. Inspired by traditional tukutuku weaving and the branching forms of the kahikatea tree, these patterns create a visual flow that reinforces the overall theme of this research project: interconnectedness and community.

Together, these elements work cohesively to create the visual identity system that defines the Kahikatea Collective, connecting people to place.

## Bringing the Brand to Life – Visual Expressions of the Kahikatea Collective Identity

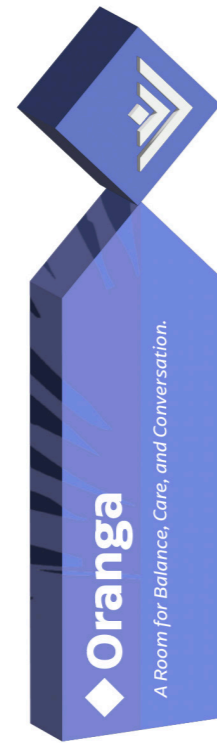
This section highlights key visual elements of the Kahikatea Collective brand, including colour, typography, and symbols. These examples demonstrate how the identity reflects the collective's values, story, and connection to place.

### Kahikatea Collective Logo



# Door Signs

Small Rooms      Large Rooms



Kitchen      Front of House



# Poster Promotion



# Information Posters

**»»» Tāwara Space**  
**Conversation**

The value of tāwara is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea branches. Just as the branches of the kahikatea reach outward, gathering light and nourishment for the tree, the kitchen is a space that nourishes both body and community.

More than just a place to prepare food, it is where the community comes together, builds connections, and fosters a sense of belonging and togetherness.

**◆ Koha Space**  
**Gift**

The value of the gift is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea seed. Just as the seeds of the Kahikatea are a gift that nurture the tree's growth and resilience, this space has been offered as an opportunity for growth.

Like the seeds that give back to the ecosystem, this room fosters collaboration and the creation of connections within the community.

**◆ Kaitiakitanga Space**  
**Guardianship**

This value of guardianship is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea tree trunk. Just as the sturdy trunk provides strength and protection for the forest, this space stands as a pillar of the Community House, embodying guardianship and the passing down of knowledge.

As the heart of the House, it brings people together, fostering collaboration, connection, and support.

**» Haramai Space**  
**Welcome**

This value of haramai is visually represented through the motif of the Kahikatea roots. Like the intertwining roots of the tree that strengthen and support one another, they symbolise the foundation of the Community House, a place where community members come together to uplift and care for the shared space from the moment they arrive.

## Haramai Space – In Context



## Tāwara Space – In Context



## Kaitiakitanga Space – In Context



## Koha Space – In Context



## Conclusion: Grounding Identity Through Design

This Master of Design exegesis explores how design can foster a sense of community identity and pride by strengthening the connection between the community and the physical place of the House. It responds to the absence of a brand identity for the House, an issue shared by many community houses across the Wellington region. This research project investigates how the development of a visual identity system, grounded in a narrative called the Kahikatea Collective, could address this gap.

The kahikatea tree, once part of Petone's Podocarp forest, serves as a metaphor for the Community House, which similarly thrives on collaboration and connection. Just as kahikatea intertwine their roots for strength, this shared space unites the community to support, learn, and grow together, fostering an interconnected future. This concept became the foundation for the Kahikatea Collective.

Through visual research, case studies, and an exploration of the core values guiding the House's purpose and vision, my design approach aimed to bridge the identity gap. By responding to values such as inclusiveness, accessibility, connection, responsiveness, and impact-focused outcomes, I developed a visual identity grounded in a narrative that reimagines what the land of Petone was like before industrialisation. This narrative also aims to honour the diversity of the groups who gather at the House.

The research incorporates principles of branding and placemaking. Drawing on Richards and Duif's (2019) insights, it aligns with the importance of "telling engaging stories to create distinction" and building an emotional connection to place. This theoretical framework informed my brand strategy, using narrative not only as a branding tool but also as a way to foster community pride within the space. While the project draws on community insights gathered through informal conversations between staff and the researcher, the final design outcomes were developed independently, with the intention of being shared with the community for feedback at a later stage.

By reflecting both the natural environment and the diverse community who use the House, the design outcomes aim to instil a deeper sense of pride and ownership. This was supported through the creation of a stylised icon system, abstract representations of the kahikatea tree's ecosystem, paired with motifs inspired by tukutuku weaving. Together, these elements embody the interconnectedness and resilience of the community.

This project demonstrates that visual communication design can be a powerful tool for fostering connection to place by building pride through a brand identity and narrative. The proposed identity system goes beyond aesthetics: it acts as a connector, linking people to place and spotlighting a piece of Petone's land history. By integrating cultural values into visual design methods, the project also offers a framework for other community houses seeking to strengthen their own identities.

Ultimately, this Master of Design project demonstrates that when design is grounded in community and place, it can move beyond surface-level branding strategies to create meaningful change, connecting people to place, enriching communities, and celebrating local history through narrative and visual identity.

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<b>Fig 9:</b>	Photography of Jackson Street Petone, personal photograph by author, 2025.	<b>Fig 18:</b>	Hutt City Council Brand Guidelines, 2023. <a href="https://www.huttcity.govt.nz/">https://www.huttcity.govt.nz/</a> . Accessed 2 July 2025.			<b>Fig 40:</b>	Photography of Front of House Entrance at Petone Community House, personal photograph by author, 2025.	<b>Fig 41:</b>	Photography of Kitchen at Petone Community House, personal photograph by author, 2025.		

