Understanding how the Tongan idea of fakalakalaka relates to the Western idea of sustainable design when building houses in Tonga

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ABSTRACT

Fakalakalaka is a term often used by Tongan people to describe how they have moved forward or ‘how to do development’ (Horan, 2002, p. 216; Thaman, 2002, p. 234). As an under researched concept, fakalakalaka is mentioned briefly in literature regarding Tongan development studies, education, and social anthropology. To date, it is the ethnographic work of Ruth Faleolo, an educator and researcher in development studies and education, who established an in-depth analysis of this concept (2012; nee ‘Ilaiu, 1997). This paper particularly builds upon Faleolo’s analysis, and significantly presents an ethnographic dimension of fakalakalaka as it relates to architecture, house building and building materials.

Through participant research, fieldwork observation with photography and drawings, the paper discusses recent findings from a remote and urban Tongan village. Three intangible and five more tangible senses of fakalakalaka as applied to building houses in Tonga are presented. Moreover, this paper begins to examine how this Tongan concept of fakalakalaka in house building compares to Western ideas about sustainable design and the juxtaposition raises questions as to whether the Tongan impetuses of fakalakalaka are compatible with Western notions of sustainable development. Fakalakalaka is certainly a momentum to be reckoned with, however as this paper shows, an understanding of fakalakalaka is imperative and learning how to guide it towards a more sustainable form of development would be most progressive.

Key words: Tonga, development, built environment, architecture, house building, sustainable design and building materials.