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The debate over Wellington Public Library, whether to save it or scrap it, continues. Architect Ken Davis, who worked on the Wellington Civic Centre and Public Library project with Athfield, says practical solutions are being ignored. He lays out his expert opinion.

I began my first job out of Architecture School, at Athfield Architects, one month after the 1987 sharemarket crash. My boss was Ian Athfield, the enfant terrible of New Zealand architecture. I worked with "Ath" and a group of 30 talented architects and designers in offices located in his famous house, an extraordinary cluster of buildings clinging to a Khandallah hillside, overlooking Wellington Harbour.

By the time I joined the office in 1987, Ath had been embraced by the new post-Rogernomics corporate world of neo-liberalism. Post-Modernism, an art theory and design style, was its architectural emblem and it was all the rage.

Ath, an architectural chameleon, embraced Post-Modernism more than others, as an opportunity to enrich and explore architectural form. The iconic metal nikau palm trees that adorn the library building, now a symbol of Wellington, are a legacy of Ath's journey with fellow architect Rewi Thompson to LA to collaborate with international "Starchitect" Frank Gehry, on an entry short-listed for the Museum of New Zealand competition in 1989.

This is the context in which the Wellington Public Library and Civic Centre were created.

It was Ath's first commission for a major public building. While it is a fine example of Post-Modern architecture, with its classical references, idiosyncratic whimsy and visual games, the library building does not represent the private and corporate interests at the centre of this movement. Ath subverted the Post-Modern programme and created a public building that is civic, open, generous and accessible, and offered innovations such as the first bilingual signage and first parenting room in a public building in New Zealand, and first café in a public library in Australasia. Upon its opening in 1991, it was universally applauded and became loved as a building for the people. It epitomised Ath's essential humanity. In its first year it welcomed over a million people.

His design approach focused not only on the buildings as objects, but how those objects were arranged and the quality of the space between them. The design of the library building, its scale and form, and its positioning on the site are crucial to the original success of the Civic Square, a space designed for public gathering, celebration, and protest.

In March last year, the library building was suddenly closed because it was deemed earthquake prone, even though it had survived the 2016 Kaikoura earthquake without any damage. Almost immediately came calls from politicians, including the former Mayor, to tear it down and start again with something flash and new.

There was immediate public resistance to the mayor’s tone-deaf utterances. This is a building of not only considerable architectural and urban design significance, but a building that attracted over 3,000 people per day (1.1 million/year) or approx 32 million since it was opened to the public at the end of 1991. It has become popularly known as "Wellington's Living Room."

In July last year, the New Zealand Institute of Architects undertook a "Save it or Scrap it" campaign advocating the retention of the building. It proved effective until a new structural report on the building, released last month, triggered calls, again from our local body politicians including the current mayor, for the library's demolition and replacement with a new building "fit for the 21st Century."

The preservation campaign included input from local structural engineer Adam Thornton, famous for moving the Museum Hotel to make room for Te Papa. Adam undertook detailed analysis of the library building's structure and proposed a pragmatic, cost-effective set of options for seismically upgrading the building. They ranged from a simple, low cost, quick fix to address the potential collapse of precast concrete floor slabs (bolting steel angles to the sides of the beams under the floor slabs, to seat them more securely) for approximately $10 million, taking 6–10 months, to full base isolation, which would cost about $30 million and take 3–4 years.
The quick fix, it was reiterated at the council’s public meeting of the 27 May, would lift the building well above the 34% of NBS mandated for Wellington, and make the building safe for an early public re-opening, much sooner and at lower cost than other more extensive and expensive options.

In a July 2019 public NZIA talk, Adam Thornton proposed starting with the quick, cost-effective seismic upgrade to the floor slabs, to get the Library occupied again: “then take a breath, pay for the Town Hall, pay for the St James and come back in 10 years time and do the rest of the building” (meaning base isolation and upgrading of the library facility.)

Good architecture is robust, flexible, resilient and enduring and the Wellington public library building is all of those things. In the 1990s Civic Centre development, our 1930s library building was converted to a contemporary public art gallery and our 19th century Old Town Hall was upgraded to a state of the art concert hall, and is now being strengthened for use as Victoria University music school and home to the NZSO. So too the Library can be tweaked, modified and modernised to serve the needs of a 21st Century library, as good as anything that Christchurch’s Turangā Library might offer.

In 1989 in the midst of a recession, the Wellington City Council committed to the construction of the Wellington Civic Centre project. The largest construction project in the country at the time, it stimulated and sustained the Wellington construction economy, when needed. A local council providing fiscal stimulus when the light-handed governments of the period chose austerity with catastrophic effects on the national economy.

From the economic carnage of the 1987 crash and subsequent recession, a new, dynamic, smart, vibrant Wellington City emerged – still the best and only real city in New Zealand, and I say that as an Auckland resident.

Wellington councillors need to be reminded of the environmental cost of destroying the building; its demolition would be inconsistent with the council’s own sustainability policy “Te Atakura – First to Zero”, its blueprint for “a zero-carbon capital city”. Angela Foster (NZIA’s Wellington Branch Chair) set out this cost in an excellent opinion piece, “Wellington library building more than just bricks and mortar” in the Dominion Post last year: it takes decades for new buildings to compensate for the climate-change impacts of their construction.

If the government and WCC are looking for “shovel-ready” projects, the best, most cost effective and quickest to get under way are sustainable projects to increase the earthquake, climate-change and Covid-19 resilience of our existing building stock, especially in Wellington. The Public Library and Civic Centre falls squarely into this category. Getting the building open to the public quickly, and the human and commercial activity that will be generated, will also help the commercial and emotional recovery of the CBD from the effects of the Covid-19 shutdown.

The latest proposals for the library building involve costs ranging from a $36-million base case seismic upgrade, to $200-million for a high resilience, fully refurbished option for the existing library building or approximately $160 million for a new building of similar size. But Adam Thornton’s intelligent proposal for a $10-million quick fix seismic upgrade of the Library Building is a compelling option that a council in search of cost-effective “shovel-ready” projects must seriously consider.

Also worth taking into account is the cost to the council, cash-strapped from Covid-19, of their current commercial leases for three temporary CBD Library pop-ups and a new Johnsonville collection and distribution centre, while the library stands empty.

Given the building’s obvious popularity, council should not underestimate public support for saving the Library building. The public of Wellington is not stupid, and any attempt to destroy the building, which has great public meaning and value, and forms a key part of an important heritage precinct, could result in prolonged delay from protest and legal challenge.

Agh, both feted and hated, was one of New Zealand’s most significant/important architects, possibly our most significant/important, history will tell. His extraordinary body of work – houses, apartment buildings, schools, office buildings, public buildings and civic spaces – is unrivalled in New Zealand. He is the Antoni Gaudí of the South Pacific. To destroy the Wellington Public Library, the “Living Room of our City” would be a gross act of cultural vandalism, the citizens of Wellington ought not to let this happen.

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Ken is the Director of Ken Davis Architects, a boutique, award-winning architecture and urban design practice that operates in Auckland and Wellington. Ken has taught at Victoria University of Wellington and Wellington Institute of Technology. He is a member of the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) and has served on a number of review panels and development subcommittees including the Wellington Civic Centre Design Review, the Wellington Waterfront Development, and the Cuba Precinct Urban Design Study. Although Ken is currently living in Auckland, he is a Wellington City Council rate payer.