

HPA/ICOMOS Conference: Auckland: 11-13 Nov 2022:

Address by Felicity Wong, Historic Places Wellington chair 12 November

Based on a talk given by Dr Ben Schrader to the Mt Victoria Historical Society's AGM in 2021

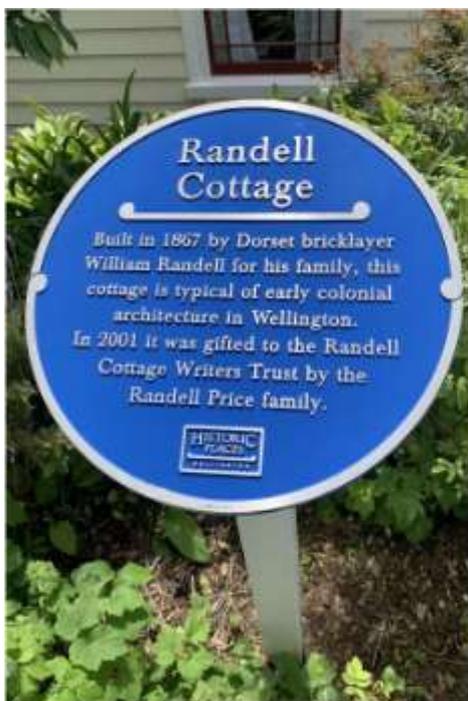


Kia koutou and acknowledgment to the people of this place.

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.

I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.

Thanks to my colleague, 2022 J D Stout Fellow Dr Ben Schrader for much of this talk, and to my HPW colleagues Deb Cranko, Christina Mackay, Nigel Isaacs and Richard Norman here today.



First just to say how thrilled I am to see our first Wellington blue plaque, opened last weekend at Randell Cottage during Heritage Week. I came across this poster from 1991 Heritage Week and despite a lull, it's great to have just had a big week of heritage celebration in Wellington.

Culture is being contested and heritage is at the front line. In Wellington over the past 24 months politicians gave encouragement to a campaign publicly led by Renters United and Generation Zero for a

sustained attack on our built heritage. It surprised and troubled many of us, and quickly spread to Auckland and Christchurch. Heritage was positioned as the emblem and scapegoat for a range of city ills:

unaffordable housing, restrictive and officious planning, poor health for renters, generational warfare, Nimbyism, colonialism, and more.

The catch-cry of its critics was it is people, not buildings, that make cities and that a city's urban identity and sense of place arises from the people who live there with nothing to do with its physical form. That means people would still flock to places like Cuba Street even if it was made up of modern mirror glass tower blocks, rather than the whimsical, hotch-potch of different-aged structures that characterise it now. We only have to look at the lifelessness of northern Lambton Quay in the weekend to know it's a false narrative and I observe the problem for downtown Auckland.

It's truer to say that both people and buildings make cities. The diverse built environments of cities, and the different ways people engage with it, is what makes urban identities and a unique sense of place. As the urban guru Jan Gehl puts it: 'First we shape the cities – then they shape us.'

It's worth reminding of why built heritage is important. In his 2019 book *Why Old Places Matter*, American heritage practitioner, Thompson Mayes, identified 14 reasons why old places are important in community life and I'm going to mention six of them: continuity, memory, history, beauty, architecture and identity, and add the newest one, climate action.

### 1) Continuity

Old places provide a sense of continuity. In a world that's constantly changing, old places provide people with a sense of being a part of a continuum, which is necessary for them to be psychologically and emotionally healthy. As the architectural theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa acknowledges: 'Architecture enables us to see and understand the slow process of history and to participate in time cycles that surpass the scope of an individual life.'

## CONTINUITY



Wellington Railway Station is such a place for me. As a small child we lived across the road from Ava Station and I fell asleep nightly to the sound of commuter and long-distance freight trains. Wellington was the centre of the country's network of railways, roads and shipping. Built in 1937 on 28 hectares of reclamation, this building has been a continuous part of

my life, from a young child travelling into town to meet my solo working mother; as a college student travelling each day to my office cleaning job, then to law school, and now with my bike to take my grandchildren to playcentre. The Gray Young Beaux-Arts style temple to travel, with its eight Doric columns 13m high, has one of Wellington's finest interior spaces. Its station booking hall has a terrazzo floor inlaid with a compass design, granite and marble walls in mottled dados, and a vaulted ceiling. A walking Mahatma Gandhi graces its garden. It was distressing when a Green politician cynically and wrongly blamed Heritage New Zealand last year for delays in the trains getting electronic ticketing.



## 2) Memory

Old buildings serve as mnemonic aids. They are important in activating both individual and collective memory (shared by the larger society). As the American conservation architect Mary DeNadai writes: 'Old buildings are like memories you can touch'



MEMORY

A personal example is the Dominion Farmers Institute Building on Featherston Street. My mother worked nearby and in the primary school holidays I caught the train to town to meet her. I navigated the city by memorable buildings, and always visited the foyer of this building to see a giant feathered Moa in its foyer. I didn't know the building was the lobbying HQ of the farmers' co-operative movement, built during WWI when the country's economy was almost entirely dependent on agricultural production and

whose leader wanted a "proven structure of distinctive architecture" proximate to Parliament, but I later went on to join the Department of Conservation.

Memories are often contested, and the history of old places is viewed differently over time and reinterpreted as our conceptions of what is important changes. A good illustration of this is the colonial villas debate which I'll come back to later.

## 3) History

The capacity of an old place to convey or stimulate a relation or reaction to the past is part of the fundamental nature and meaning of heritage objects. Many people feel the exhilaration of experiencing the place where something actually happened.

As Joseph Farrell writes: 'old places and old things stimulate my historical imagination in a personal way - that is, in a way that's different from reading about the past ... For many, places and things are a much more effective way of being in touch with the past than reading is.'



William Clayton's Italianate Government buildings, on Lambton Quay, are a strong symbolic statement of the presence of central government in Wellington. These massive wooden buildings, constructed in 1876, were by far the largest in the country. They provided accommodation for Cabinet Ministers and almost the entire civil service, including the Colonial Secretary's Office, Treasury, Public Works, Native Department, Customs, Justice, Immigration, Education, and Crown Lands. The building was planned in 1873 and completed in 1876 just as provincial government had its demise. As a diplomat representing my country these

buildings held special historic meaning for me, and satisfaction that they were restored and repurposed to house Victoria University of Wellington's law school by leading heritage developer, Maurice Clark.

#### 4) Beauty

As Mayes notes: '[R]egardless of how beauty is defined, people perceive and desire beauty in their lives and in their communities. And they find beauty in old places.' Old places may be beautiful for their design, but sometimes they're beautiful because of the mark of time that has been left on them – ruins have long been examples of the sublime.



BEAUTY

Feelings and opinions about beauty change over time. The history of preservation demonstrates a process of the ugly transforming into the beautiful. Victorian buildings were condemned as the worst expressions of a degraded era; Art Deco was considered commercial and hideous; industrial buildings were treated as having no architectural value; Mid-Century Modern was dated. All of these were once considered ugly and now (generally) considered beautiful.

It's always easier to save a place that people consider beautiful than a place – no matter how historically significant – that people think is ugly. The Gordon Wilson Flats on the Terrace is a good example of that. Despite its recognised national heritage values few Wellingtonians can see past its perceived ugliness.

## 5). Architecture



People love and revere historic buildings for their art and craftsmanship and for the way they make us feel. Few can feel unmoved standing in the aisle of a medieval cathedral and seeing the stone pillars rising to the heavens, or stepping into the dimmed space of a whare whakairo (carved meeting house) and viewing an iwi or hapu's tīpuna in the building's structure.

As Pallasma points out: 'the significance of architecture is not in its form, but in the capacity to reveal deeper layers of existence.' This is to say that it allows us to better understand the people who made the places and their value systems, sometimes through the symbolic and

historic meanings that the places reveal. This is obviously much harder to do when the place no longer exists.

## 6) Identity

Last week I listened to an interview with a controversial young filmmaker who's made a film about a local antique dealer. He said: "I don't feel like I live here in LA. I don't feel like I live in NZ. I don't really think in that way. I'll just be where ever feels convenient and works best at the time."<sup>1</sup> He said that what anchors him was his audience connected through the internet. Geography was no longer important to him. I think the replacement of geography by being from nowhere is at the root of our generational dispute about the value of built heritage. In the Wellington villas debate, when boomers spoke up for their neighbourhoods, and expressed concern about loss of sun and privacy from up-zoned over-bearing new builds, the campaign leaders said "just move somewhere else".

Old places are important in the construction of individual and collective identities. As the influential geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains: "What can the past mean to us? People look back for various reasons but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. ... the passion for preservation arises out of the need for tangible objects that can support a sense of identity."

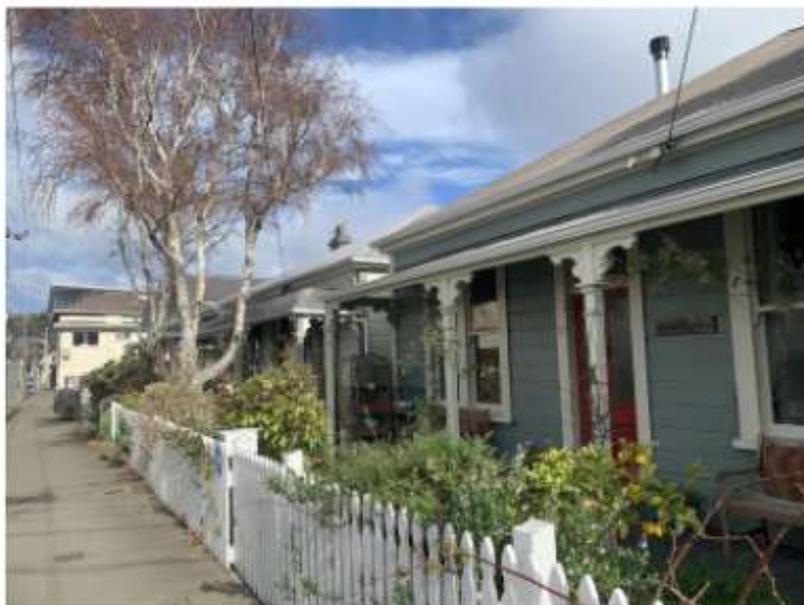
That is obvious in places like Mt Victoria where we have cottages dating from the 1870s; villas from the 1890s; 1930s Art Deco apartment buildings and 1950s Modernist



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/130212590/why-david-farriers-new-film-mister-organ-forced-him-to-escape-new-zealand>

ones. There are 19th century workshops and 20th century factories adaptively reused as apartments. There are also many townhouses dating from the 1970s up to the present. In other words, the passage of time is manifest in Mt Vic's streetscapes, and it creates and endorses our sense of identity as Wellingtonians.

The wooden houses nestled into the hills is our character and as such it's our historical sense of identity.



For some they are tangible links to settler endeavours to create a prosperous city; for others they are painful reminders of the impact of colonialism on what became of the region's mana whenua. The fact these arguments occur underscore the importance of place to identity. Despite conflicting points of view, the place itself transcends specific interpretations.

Old places contribute to collective identities, such as the Treaty House at Waitangi. It was deliberately constructed as a national monument in the 1930s to relate the ideal of New Zealanders as one people. The process of redefining who "we" are is continuous and contested. We saw this during the 1980s when the Treaty House and grounds became a place of Māori protest. Protestors rejected the one-people discourse and shone light on the perennial failure of the Crown to honour its Treaty commitments. In that way the Treaty House became a tangible site for transforming identity.

People can survive the loss of places that support their identity. And often these places survive in memory. But the continued presence of old places helps us know who we are and who we may become in the future.



I believe the attack on character in the heritage suburbs of Wellington is like an attack on my identity. There was provision in the Government's legislation to preserve these suburbs but local and central politicians have taken the view that there is too much of that identity and a new identity must be forged.

#### 7) Climate Action

The specific attack on heritage suburbs in the inner city is based on a false narrative that new density is

good for carbon emissions. The evidence shows that building taller buildings is not climate friendly unless whole of life carbon accounting is addressed in the materials, operation and eventual demolition of the new build. Concrete and steel production amount to 15% of global emissions. Concrete emissions come from Portland cement's high temperature kiln which creates the chemical process.

Construction waste also makes up some 45% of our landfills.

A comprehensive Australian study recently reported on greenhouse gas emissions, per post code, that a person is responsible for at the final point of consumption. Contrary to expectations, the findings revealed that emissions are greater per person living in city high density areas. The annual per capita in the city high density areas averaged 27.9 tonnes and in the outer low density suburban areas 17.5 tonnes.

We hosted a talk by globally recognised NZ climate architects, Professor Brenda Vale & Dr Robert Vale, whose book "Time to Eat the Dog" explained the reasons including energy consumed by the use of elevators, clothes dryers, air-conditioners as well as lighting and air conditioning in common areas such as parking garages and foyers. Embodied energy, which is the energy of construction amortised for the life of the building is much higher from higher rise, due to the steel, concrete, aluminium and glass components and its method of construction including excavation. An additional factor is likely to be lower occupancy rates.

Building taller to accommodate a growing population not only does not save space but also significantly increases emissions.

Jasmax's Paul Jurasovich says the first question is do you need a new building at all? They reviewed development options and found that adaptive reuse made the most sense for its B201 project at Auckland university. The project recognised the embodied energy in the existing huge brutalist building and reduced its heavy concrete facade (eliminating the costly need for strengthening), and reconfigured it for more efficient use, daylight and ventilation.

The architecture also acknowledged the historic trading Pā of Waipapa and the waka that were traditionally brought ashore at Te Tōangaroa thereby recognising the historical purpose the site had for mana whenua, and reflecting it in the form and arrangement of the building which drew on the location's heritage.

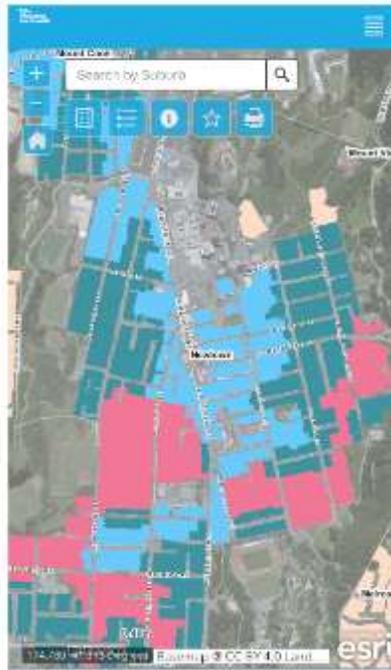
Recognising the generational gap we now face, I would like to see NZ adopt the German initiative "Young Buys Old" where grants are available specifically to young people, to adaptively reuse city buildings for apartments.

Old buildings have already had their impact on the climate. Whole of life carbon accounting will show that these cottages stopped emitting a hundred years ago, while new concrete, and steel structures will still be emitting in 50 years, which is their pathetic expected lifespan.

These sustainable tiny homes made of native timber enable a sustainable urban lifestyle in Wellington. We are not arguing about density per se, but about unsustainable density at the direct expense of sustainable heritage in our old inner-city suburbs.

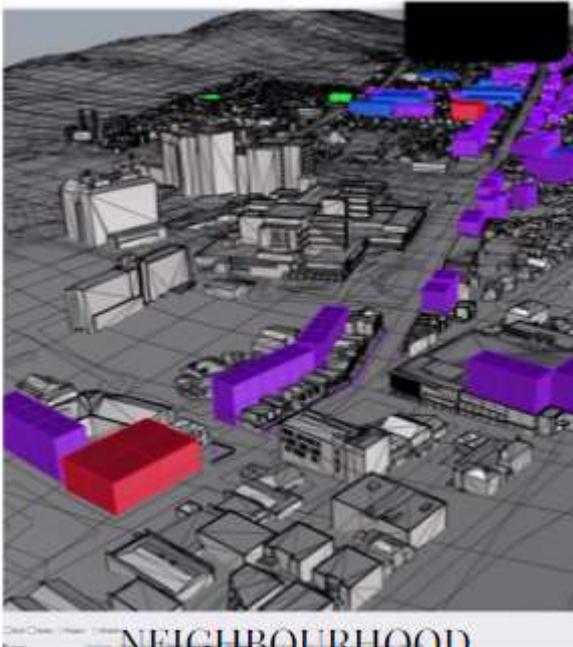
Wellington's population has decreased by more than 2%, and house prices have dropped by 19%. Some of the pressure has lifted but the lag in planning meanwhile risks destroying Wellington's wooden, walkable, dense, and sustainably built heritage.

# PLANNING



## Conclusion

In providing a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world, in activating our personal and societal memories; in contributing to our individual and collective memories; in providing beauty in our lives; in allowing us to see where history happened, and by enabling better understandings of the people who built them, old buildings really do matter. They are climate friendly and are easily net zero emitters.



NEIGHBOURHOOD  
PLANNING

It should now be evident that its buildings, as well as people, which make cities what they are. Cities are not made by people alone. Cities need to be designed at the neighbourhood level involving the people of that place, and here is Martin Hanley's Red Design alternative for fitting 3000 additional people into Newtown without destroying its heritage and character.

Thank you