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IS OUR HERITAGE FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS?

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This opinion piece serves as a preface to a forthcoming academic article soon to be published to raise awareness of the importance of Aotearoa New Zealand's heritage, the existing problems, and the role of digital recording of heritage buildings and sites.

Introduction

When 2021 Pritzker Prize laureates Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal were asked if they were optimistic about the future of architecture in urban environments, they said:

We must rely on the values of the existing situation to improve and transform. All the constraints can be turned into good. To act, we have no other option than to be optimistic, which does not mean to be unrealistic, otherwise, nothing is possible. It is an ambitious and exciting challenge.¹

When it comes to an urban environment, the first things that often come to mind are the buildings, structures and spaces that surround us and have meaning for us. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we also have explicitly significant buildings and structures that we consider part of our heritage, despite being relatively young compared to many other nations. The country's cultural heritage sites, buildings and objects are treasures of distinctive value. They can be roughly divided into four overlapping categories: archaeological sites, historic buildings and structures, places of significance to Māori, and cultural landscapes.² All ethnic groups residing in Aotearoa New Zealand have contributed to the country's cultural heritage, and "the result is an evolving mix of Polynesian, European, and also Asian, ways of seeing and doing, making each new

generation of New Zealanders slightly different from the previous one and yet intimately linked to it."³ These heritage sites and buildings are part of our urban and rural environment, and are assets with distinctive value and meaning to both Māori and Pākehā.

Falling Through the Gaps?

As we look around and read the news, it is hard to avoid the fact that cultural and natural heritage is threatened worldwide by rapid urbanisation, constantly changing and challenging economic circumstances, natural disasters, socio-political conditions, lack of public awareness, disparate national and local regulations, climate change and international conflicts. As one of the signatories to The Hague Convention, Aotearoa New Zealand pledged an obligation to ensure that all its communities' tangible and intangible heritage is protected for present and future generations. Keeping a commitment of this sort will be incredibly important for the country, considering the continual loss and degradation of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural heritage due to housing intensification, climate change and natural disasters. The Christchurch, Seddon and Kaikōura earthquakes (2011–2016) saw the loss of 140 heritage buildings, with another sixty lost to redevelopment. Between 2014 and 2018, authorities granted permission to demolish 1,393 pre-1900 buildings. On average, one marae is lost to fire annually. Thousands of buildings important to communities across Aotearoa New Zealand have never been formally recognised for their heritage value.⁴ It is yet to be counted how many heritage buildings have been damaged by floods, landslides and other consequences of cyclones in the current year alone. Despite signing a document as mentioned previously, there is little support or protection for cultural heritage

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- 1 Isla Sutherland, "All Constraints Can Be Turned into Good": Lacaton and Vassal," *ArchitectureAU*, July 28, 2022, <https://architectureau.com/articles/lacaton-and-vassal/>
 - 2 Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, *Historic and Cultural Heritage Management in New Zealand* (Wellington: Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 1996), 3.
 - 3 Rowan Taylor and Ian Smith, *The State of New Zealand's Environment* (Wellington: Ministry for the Environment, 1997), 21.
 - 4 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, *Strengthening Protections for Heritage Buildings. Report Identifying Issues Within New Zealand's Heritage Protection System* (Wellington: Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018), 8.



Figure 1. Christchurch Earthquake 2010, Photo: Alistair Paterson. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alpat/5326054606/in/photostream/>, CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED.



Figure 1. Christchurch Earthquake 2010, Photo: Alistair Paterson. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alpat/5326054606/in/photostream/>, CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED.

in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁵ It seems to ‘fall through the gaps’ of what is essential – relying on other professional groups to advocate for it due to a lack of care.

The main problem is that the issue of cultural heritage management does not come across as a priority for many. As members of the Digital Heritage Research Centre at Unitec | Te Pūkenga, we are in touch with industry partners, government representatives and the public. In the framework of our project Digitalisation of Heritage in New Zealand, we have conducted a survey and organised focus-group interviews with Aotearoa New Zealand professionals (e.g., architects, heritage architects, surveyors, construction-sector engineers and cultural heritage experts) and government representatives to understand the constraints, barriers and facilitative factors encountered by professionals related to the use of digital tools, equipment, and software for recording cultural heritage. This opinion piece is a (preliminary) alert based on our research.

As a result of our conversations with representatives throughout the sector, we found a shared misunderstanding of who is responsible for managing cultural heritage in Aotearoa New Zealand. Private companies and the public point to the government,

local councils or Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga to take responsibility for managing cultural heritage assets as part of their portfolio of properties. At the same time, representatives of these organisations indicated enormous numbers of daily issues they must deal with regarding cultural heritage. The issue of heritage loss is further accentuated by a property owner’s or developer’s unwillingness to consider the value of a cultural heritage building or site. Often, contracted workers plainly carry out tasks ordered by their clients, and if there are any attempts to conserve any part of a heritage building, it is left to the contractor’s own discretion. A shared vision acceptable for all sector actors and the public has not yet been formulated, through either a national policy statement on cultural heritage or a similar statement in the upcoming National Planning Framework.⁶ Based on our research and focus-group discussions, this is due to inadequacies of the current cultural heritage protection systems led by the government, which has failed to take a lead role so far, thus creating a lack of consideration of the importance of cultural heritage nationally, as well as resource constraints.⁷ The situation creates an ambitious and exciting challenge for architects, urban planners, and councils at times like this, when our cultural heritage is disappearing due to the fast growth of our cities and towns.

5 While the term ‘historic heritage’ relates to the current Resource Management Act legislation, in this paper we decided to use ‘cultural heritage’ instead, which relates to international rhetoric and the incoming Natural and Built Environments Act.

6 For information about the current national policy changes in the resource management space, see: Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, “Resource Management Reforms,” accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.hud.govt.nz/our-work/resource-management-reforms/>

7 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “Policy for Government Management of Cultural Heritage Places (2022),” <https://mch.govt.nz/publications/policy-government-management-cultural-heritage-places>. The Ministry for Culture and Heritage produced a revision to the “Guidance for Government Management of Cultural Heritage Places” policy document.



Figure 2. Carlile House, Grey Lynn, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Renata Jadresin Milic.

These are just a few headlines from recent years on landmarks that once played a significant role in the community:

- Million-Dollar Dumps: Auckland's \$5.8m Carlile House Deemed 'Dangerous Building'.⁸
- Historic Church up for Sale as Part of Khyber Pass Portfolio.⁹
- New Lynn's 'Landmark' St Andrew's Church Hall Being Demolished.¹⁰
- New Lynn's Heritage-Listed St Andrew's Sunday School Hall to Be Demolished.¹¹
- Heritage Trust Recommendations Ignored.¹²
- Urban Design Expert Calls on Timaru Council to Stop Demolition 'Before it's too Late'.¹³

Despite the widespread public anxiety about the loss of many historic and cultural sites across the country and the likelihood of their preventable loss, not everyone involved is interested in conserving them or recognising their heritage value. Therefore, a substantial number of heritage buildings across the country have been lost with little or no record of their condition pre-demolition,¹⁴ and only Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga's Lost Heritage list¹⁵ is keeping them from becoming forgotten. Some lucky and persistent communities have won the battles for their historic landmarks¹⁶ by changing the ownership, but in other cases, the community's long fight to save a building ends with demolition,¹⁷ or a building will eventually be demolished by neglect,¹⁸ hence, the country loses another priceless treasure.

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- 8 Caroline Williams, "Million-Dollar Dumps: Auckland's \$5.8m Carlile House Deemed 'Dangerous Building,'" *Stuff*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/property/300284552/million-dollar-dumps-aucklands-58m-carlile-house-deemed-dangerous-building>
- 9 Michele Vollemaere, "Historic Church up for Sale as Part of Khyber Pass Portfolio," *Stuff*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/property/300302274/historic-church-up-for-sale-as-part-of-khyber-pass-portfolio>
- 10 Kendall Hutt, "New Lynn's 'Landmark' St Andrew's Church Hall Being Demolished," *Stuff*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/117741543/new-lynn-landmark-st-andrews-church-hall-facing-demolition>
- 11 Michael Neilson, "New Lynn's Heritage-Listed St Andrew's Sunday School Hall to Be Demolished," *New Zealand Herald*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/new-lynn-heritage-listed-st-andrews-sunday-school-hall-to-be-demolished/YUDIKBDL5LCPJQLBJYJGWJ2DR4Y/>
- 12 Ben Heather, "Heritage Trust Recommendations Ignored," *Stuff*, November 19, 2011, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/5996494/Heritage-trust-recommendations-ignored>
- 13 Brooke Black, "Urban Design Expert Calls on Timaru Council to Stop Demolition 'Before it's too Late,'" *Stuff*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/timaru-herald/300975308/urban-design-expert-calls-on-timaru-council-to-stop-demolition-before-its-too-late>
- 14 "Shot Tower Saved for History," *Central Leader*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/central-leader/20230420/page/18>
- 15 "Lost Heritage," Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/places/lost-heritage>
- 16 Josephine Franks, "Auckland Church Supporters Aim to Raise \$1 Million in 23 Days to Buy Building," *Stuff*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/125068490/auckland-church-supporters-aim-to-raise-1-million-in-23-days-to-buy-building>; Mina Kerr-Lazenby, "Wealthy Philanthropist Ted Manson Saves Auckland Church," *Stuff*, July 07, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300350444/wealthy-philanthropist-ted-manson-saves-auckland-church>
- 17 Hutt, "New Lynn's 'Landmark' St Andrew's Church Hall Being Demolished."
- 18 Williams, "Million-Dollar Dumps."



Figure 3. Community activism, Carrington Hospital, Point Chevalier, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, community protests. Collage: Iman Khan. Image source: Chris Casey.



Figure 4. Colonial Ammunition Company shot tower, Mt Eden, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 1916. Model: Sam Smith and Maksym Khovalko, based on a drone recording by Renata Jardesin Milic and Regan Potangaroa, 2023.

Unless a building is at the end of its life cycle, either naturally or by non-human activity (e.g., natural disasters), we find the argument for demolition hard to accept. As Lacaton and Vassal state, “It is a lack of intelligence, observation, and ambition, but also a kind of arrogance towards previous generations, because what replaces the demolished buildings is not necessarily better.”¹⁹ We argue that present and future ambitions regarding urban and rural environments in Aotearoa New Zealand should focus on reusing, rethinking and enhancing the resilience of existing structures to avoid further damage and destruction. Not to mention the fact that there are technologies and methodologies that could support safeguarding and/or transforming cultural heritage, so why not use them?²⁰

Are Adaptive Reuse and System Thinking a Solution?

Abandoning and, later, demolishing a building is a loss in many ways. Structures, materials, carbon, money, historic moments and cultural values are lost. To many parties, it is certainly more convenient to erase a building as if it had never existed, without considering its possible new role within the community and the environment. But as a country, we should rethink the waste generated by constant demolition, especially if we care about our environment and sustainability. Adaptive reuse²¹ is a

19 Sutherland, “All Constraints Can Be Turned into Good.”

20 “Drone Footage Used to Make Digital Record of New Zealand’s Last Standing Shot Tower,” *Massey News*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/news/drone-footage-used-to-make-digital-record-of-new-zealands-last-standing-shot-tower/>; Amanda Harkness, “3D-Tech Helps Preserve New Zealand’s Most Important Buildings,” *ArchitectureNow*, July 5, 2022, <https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/digitally-driven-conservation/>; Renata Jardesin Milic, Peter McPherson, Graeme McConchie, Thomas Reutlinger, and Sian Singh, “Architectural History and Sustainable Architectural Heritage Education: Digitalisation of Heritage in New Zealand,” *Sustainability* 14, no. 24 (2022): 16432, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416432>; Richard Laing, “Built Heritage Modelling and Visualisation,” *Developments in the Built Environment* 4 (2020): 100017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dibe.2020.100017>; Jon Marcoux and Amalia Leifeste, “Impact of Digital Technologies on Historic Preservation Research at Multiple Scales,” *Technology | Architecture + Design* 6, no. 1 (2022): 22–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24751448.2022.2040299>

21 Ayman Othman and Heba Elsaay, “Adaptive Reuse: An Innovative Approach for Generating Sustainable Values for Historic Buildings in Developing Countries,” *Organization, Technology and Management in Construction: An International Journal* 10, no.1 (2018): 1704, <https://doi.org/10.2478/otmcj-2018-0002>; Robert Shipley, Steve Utz, and Michael Parsons, “Does Adaptive Reuse Pay? A Study of the Business of Building Renovation in Ontario, Canada,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12 (2006): 505–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250600940181>

process that breathes new life into old buildings. It is a process that changes or modifies a disused building and repurposes it for a contemporary use, while retaining its cultural heritage value.²² The benefits are many. Firstly, from conserving the embodied energy and materials invested in the original construction and reducing the carbon footprint associated with demolition and new construction. This significantly contributes to a greener future in an era of climate-change concerns. Secondly, adaptive reuse can foster economic growth, by creating jobs and rejuvenating the urban fabric; and can therefore inject vitality into neglected neighbourhoods by converting old buildings into thriving spaces and creating hubs that attract residents, tourists and businesses alike. From a financial perspective, reuse should be considered alongside any other long-term project when its benefits outweigh the initial investment over time. As an innovative approach, adaptive reuse can generate sustainable values for historic buildings in developing countries and worldwide.²³ To conclude this section, these are the words of Nigel Gilkison, a 30-year industry veteran from Timaru who holds a Master of Urban Design: “Buildings do not come with a ‘use-by-date’, they are not bananas. They can be adaptively reused, and they could easily last another 100 years or more if they are periodically upgraded and well maintained.”²⁴

Aotearoa New Zealand-specific toolkits, research papers and guides have started exploring the benefits of redesigned heritage and adaptive reuse nationwide. When investigating the adaptive reuse of industrial buildings in the case of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland’s CBD, Lydia Kiroff and Xiaotian Tan have listed the economic, environmental, and social benefits of adaptive reuse²⁵ and concluded on the drivers and results of the urban regeneration process and the role that real estate development plays in it.²⁶ Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

has developed nine case studies on how redesigned heritage can be adapted to the landscape of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and lists values that heritage places represent.²⁷ The same entity has also commissioned experts to develop a toolkit on adaptive reuse.²⁸ A positive sign is that the thinking process has already begun, not only within the heritage sector or academia but also among private developers. Successful examples of private concepts in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland are the Britomart precinct²⁹ (including the Hayman Kronfeld Building,³⁰ which is a refurbishment and amalgamation of two heritage-listed warehouses formerly known as the Barrington Building and Old Sofrana House), and the Domain Collection³¹ developments. These initiatives have started to present the potential benefits of what retention, reuse and preservation of cultural heritage assets can unveil for our towns and cities.

We truly believe that by using a sector-wide approach and collective thinking, even the hardest constraints could be turned into good, regarding heritage buildings in Aotearoa New Zealand. We argue that we can still create examples of contemporary heritage initiatives and transformative projects, and actively see the value in existing structures to maintain a connection to our past towards a more sustainable future. As a nation, we need to balance preserving history and accommodating modern needs within the urban landscape. Heritage conservation is not just an exercise in nostalgia; it is a testament to the profound impact of architecture and design on a community’s identity and wellbeing. To preserve our tales from the past, we need to save and reuse buildings that are living witnesses to our shared history – contributing significantly to the character of our urban and rural landscapes.

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- 22 Lydia Kiroff and Xiaotian Tan, “Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Buildings in a New Precinct in Auckland’s CBD,” Global Science and Technology Forum (ed.), *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Urban Planning and Property Development*, Singapore, 2015, 44–54; ICOMOS New Zealand Te Mana o Ngā Pouwhenua o Te Ao, *ICOMOS New Zealand Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage* (Auckland: ICOMOS New Zealand, 2010), https://icomos.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NZ_Charter.pdf; Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage, *Adaptive Reuse: Preserving Our Past, Building Our Future* (Canberra: Pirion, 2004); Buildings Department, *Practice Guidebook on Compliance with Building Safety and Health Requirements under the Buildings Ordinance for Adaptive Reuse of and Alteration Addition Works to Heritage Buildings* (Hong Kong: Buildings Department, 2012), <http://www.bd.gov.hk/english/documents/guideline/heritage.pdf>
- 23 Othman and Elsaay, “Adaptive Reuse: An Innovative Approach,” 1704.
- 24 Black, “Urban Design Expert Calls on Timaru Council to Stop Demolition ‘Before it’s too Late.’”
- 25 Kiroff and Tan, “Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Buildings,” 45–46.
- 26 Ibid, 53.
- 27 New Zealand Historic Places Trust. *Heritage Redesigned. Adapting Historic Places for Contemporary New Zealand* (Wellington: New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 2011), 28.
- 28 Glen Hazelton and Matt Philp, *Saving the Town. Heritage Toolkit* (Wellington: Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 2020), 30–41.
- 29 TwentyTwo, “Cities of the Future: Auckland’s Britomart Continues to Grow,” October 28, 2018, <https://www.twentytwo.co.nz/blog/cities-of-the-future-aucklands-britomart-continues-to-grow/>
- 30 Bill McKay, “Listening to the Building,” *ArchitectureNow*, September 22, 2023, <https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/listening-to-the-building/>
- 31 Warren and Mahoney, “Adaptive Reuse: Turning Potential into Performance,” *Perspectives*, October 7, 2022, <https://warrenandmahoney.com/articles/adaptivereuse>

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