Historic Preservation in Urban New Zealand:
AN HISTORIAN’S PERSPECTIVE

IN JUNE 1983 Dr N.C. Begg, chairman of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, introduced the first issue of the Trust's new magazine, Historic Places in New Zealand: 'A generation or two ago the very idea of New Zealand having historic places would have seemed strange to many New Zealanders. An "historic place" was a 600-year-old castle in Britain, a battlefield where one European king defeated another, or a monument built by a dead civilisation. European New Zealanders were separated from their roots by distance as well as time. Happily there is now a growing understanding in this country that New Zealand itself has a past, reaching back many centuries into Polynesian history and more than 200 years in post-European [sic] times.' Eight years later the editor of Historic Places found that 'the tendency to disparage New Zealand’s past remains deep-rooted'. His evidence included a reviewer’s comment that 'by world standards New Zealand history is almost laughably short', and the suggestion by the Associate Minister of Finance, Richard Prebble, that it might be better if Parliament Buildings were bulldozed rather than restored. The Trust in his view 'still has its work cut out convincing people New Zealand is not “a land without a past”'. 'Many New Zealanders appear still to think that people haven’t been here long enough to forge a real history.'

In June 1996 the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment’s report, Historic and Cultural Heritage Management in New Zealand, began with the statement that ‘New Zealand is a young country in terms of human settlement.’ However, the principal thrust of the report was to attribute the continuing massive loss of heritage buildings to incoherent lines of responsibility, inadequate resourcing, and ineffectual management systems and to seek remedies in these areas. Historians may not be satisfied that this account presents a completely adequate strategy for developing a ‘heritage’ policy for New Zealand. They may, for instance, want to analyse in more depth the sources of those disparaging perceptions of New Zealand’s past which have repeatedly been

1 Historic Places in New Zealand, 1 (June 1983), p.2. Hereafter referred to as NZHP (in accordance with the 1990 title change to New Zealand Historic Places).
3 Historic and Cultural Heritage Management in New Zealand, Wellington, 1996, p.iii.
identified as being the root of much of the public indifference to what happens to heritage in this country. Where have such perceptions come from, how deeply rooted are they, and have they changed substantially in the last few years, as the Parliamentary Commissioner’s report and numerous other statements on heritage seem to imply? The attitude to the past which assigns a low priority to preserving memorials of it is not necessarily most accurately perceived as a negative phenomenon. It derives in large part from the progressive ethos of a New World country.\(^4\) The past has traditionally been seen in ‘new societies’ as an obstacle to progress, the obliteration of the evidence of which is a reassuring sign that progress is indeed occurring. If vestiges of the past such as ‘primitive’ old buildings of the ‘pioneer era’ are deliberately retained, it has been in order that they can serve as tokens or indicators of the distance that has been travelled since they were erected.\(^5\)

At first sight what has been happening recently in some urban communities may seem to suggest a substantial change in such attitudes. Old buildings are coming to be perceived as a potentially exploitable asset instead of as a constant reminder of stalled progress and unfulfilled aspirations. Dunedin is one of New Zealand’s best-known examples of the adoption of a strategy of revitalization through emphasis on heritage.\(^6\) But this interest in heritage is still to a large extent controlled and motivated by concern for the future. Aspects of the past appeal insofar as they can be used to accomplish future-oriented goals. In a landmark report in 1977 Geoff Cowan wrote that it was its heritage that made Dunedin distinctive and urged its adoption as ‘a framework around which to build the Dunedin of the future’.\(^7\) A 1991 report for the Dunedin City Council argued: ‘A fundamental reason for retaining our heritage is the sustenance of community pride, purpose and initiative. Without heritage a community has nothing to build upon, except ambition. Dunedin has a wealth of heritage that represents vigorous enterprise, richness of wealth and purpose in previous times. Future purpose and enterprise in Dunedin will draw substantially on the city’s past achievements and reputation. This important resource therefore is essential to our future.’\(^8\)

\(^4\) ‘...many Americans have viewed history with real hostility. Reverence for the past, after all, is contrary to the very essence of the American dream, the dream of progress, of growth, of a better future. It was, after all, the hope of a better future which drove Europeans to emigrate from the Old World with its entrenched traditional injustices, all of them sanctioned by historic precedent, and come to the New World which was unencumbered by the dead hand of the past. Small wonder that in this country the words “young” and “progressive” and “innovative” and “new” all carry with them a strong positive connotation.’ Peirce F. Lewis, ‘The Future of Our Past: Our Clouded Vision of Historic Preservation’, in Pamela Thurber, ed., Controversies In Historic Preservation: Understanding the Preservation Movement Today, Washington DC, 1985, pp.3-4.

\(^5\) These ideas are explored in David Hamer, New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier, New York, 1990, pp.166-75.


\(^7\) Geoff Cowan, Dunedin Heritage, Dunedin, 1977, p.17.

\(^8\) Community and Development and Services Committee, Dunedin City Council, Our Heritage, Dunedin, 1991, p.5.
view is one example of how an historical perspective might inform the assessment of the current state of historic preservation in New Zealand's towns and cities.

This article is based on the premise that there are substantial differences between the perspectives of historians and preservationists on the history that is involved in preservation. This divergence has been concealed by the limited role that historians have played in the development of preservationism. Until quite recently preservationism was focused on a limited range of very special places, one of a kind, often in remote locations which most people visited only while on vacation. Historians, if they took an interest in preservation at all, were inclined to dismiss it as either of marginal relevance to their broad concerns or as elitist because of the emphasis on sites and structures associated with the wealthy and famous. Historians and preservationists have tended to inhabit separate worlds which only rarely intersect and overlap. On the one hand, historians have traditionally been concerned principally with the written text and archival sources. On the other hand, there has been the increasing professionalization of preservationists and the growing dominance both of complex bureaucratic processes and of sophisticated conservation techniques and skills for the achieving of preservation. In this context detached and academic considerations as to underlying historical purposes and rationales have often become obscured.

William J. Murtagh, the first Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places in the United States, has written that many preservation leaders 'have become preoccupied with how to preserve, either politically, economically, or technically, with little or no discrimination as to what they are preserving and why'.

It is in answering the 'why' questions that historians have a contribution to make. These questions relate not just to why buildings should be preserved but also to why preservation has taken place and is continuing to take place in certain formats and according to certain criteria. There is a need to apply historical analysis to historic preservation itself.

Historians need to be aware of the implications of the increasing incorporation of preservation into the fabric of everyday life in towns and cities. People are discovering that, for example, a downtown business district with which they are very familiar and where they transact daily business is being regarded, and deemed worthy of protection, as 'historic'. The result is the rise of a significant new medium through which interpretations of New Zealand's history are entering the public consciousness. What I propose in this article is a framework that might be applied to the interpretation of historic preservation from an historian's point of view. I shall test the application of it to New Zealand urban preservation with particular reference to the developments of the last decade.

The argument is that the preserved state of a structure may be interpreted as embodying a combination of contributions from three stages or layers of history. The first of these is the history which is now being highlighted in and made the

9 The enormous gulf between preservationists and historians is discussed by Alan Mayne in 'City as Artifact: Heritage Preservation in Comparative Perspective', in Martin V. Melosi, ed., Urban Public Policy: Historical Modes and Methods, University Park, Pennslyvania, 1993, pp.155-6.

justification for its preservation. That may be the initial history of the structure itself, where for example it is the work of a distinguished architect. But it may also be some event or sequence of events which occurred within or in relation to the structure at some point subsequent to its initial construction. The second can be called the stage of survival and of continued use, perhaps for quite different purposes, since the time of that history. Thirdly, there is the modern era when it has been decided that certain attributes of the structure are worthy of preservation as of ‘historical significance’. The historian is interested in the history of this entire sequence or continuum and the process by which ingredients from each stage in it have fused ultimately to create the phenomenon of a preserved building. The historian’s conclusion is certain to be that what has emerged and exists today is very different from anything that actually ever existed at any previous given point in history!

Historians are, of course, particularly interested in the ‘original’ history that is now being remembered and preserved. Research by historians provides a substantial part of the evidence on which historic preservationists’ assessments as to what is historically ‘significant’ are based. To the general public it may seem — and the interpretations normally presented encourage them to think — that that is all there is to it. One just establishes what the appearance of a building was at the time when it is deemed to have been historically ‘significant’, restores it to that appearance, and lays on an appropriate regime of interpretation, and one has a coincidence between history and historic preservation. But historians — and increasing numbers of preservationists as well — know that there is far more to it than that. They want to know also in particular about the history of a building between the time of the original history and the point at which it was decided that the building should be preserved. This means that the historian should also be concerned with the history of survival. Indeed, sometimes it becomes apparent that the survival itself is, and deserves to be highlighted as, the major element in the historical narrative.

Among the questions that an historian should ask are why some buildings survive and not others, and whether this is entirely a matter of accident or whether there are certain kinds of buildings which have a better chance of surviving than others, for example because of their superior adaptability to new uses. How representative — and representative of what — are the structures which survive today and are being preserved and made to tell a story about the past? Is there something about them which has aided survival as compared with other structures which have disappeared or changed beyond recognition? Survivals are often remnants of once much larger areas of similar structures, fragments of what used to be a much larger whole. Seeing them in this light raises the question of why they are still here while other districts of a similar kind have changed beyond recognition. These questions need answers because of the claims that are often made both in justifying the preservation of such survivors and in the subsequent interpretation of their significance that they are ‘representative’ of some more general phenomenon, most other examples of which have disappeared.

The interest of historians in this particular aspect of the story of historic
preservation, the history of, and the reasons for, survival and non-survival, can be linked to their preoccupation with change over time. The significance of the developments which preceded the transformation of a structure or district into an ‘historic’ artefact is customarily underplayed in the interpretations that accompany historic preservation. There is often inadequate acknowledgement of what has happened between the original ‘historic’ point in time, which is usually highlighted, and the point when a different generation decided that what was left from that era should be deemed ‘historic’. There are all sorts of biases in the public presentation of the outcomes of historic preservation efforts and strategies which account for this neglect. Preservationists have to know about and understand what happened in that intervening period, of course, but too often what the public seems to want is the illusion that what finally emerges is as if that intervening era had never occurred. The historian is unlikely to be particularly sympathetic to what used to be the predominant emphasis of preservationism (and still has by no means disappeared, as the history of the recent restoration of Pompallier House at Russell shows), the taking of a building back to its appearance at the ‘historically significant’ point of time.

The third phase is the one that is marked by the intervention of historic preservation itself. Historians are interested in the history of historic preservation: its modes, formats and priorities, and how and why these change. A building, originally seen as significant in relation to the ‘original’ history, may eventually become of additional or even greater interest because of the mode of historic preservation that it represents and what that signifies about the history and the values and ideas of the age in which it was preserved. When one visits an historical site, the aspects of its character that principally attract one’s attention are often those that relate to its restoration, rather than features of the ‘original’ history. The story of preservation can be a dramatic one, sometimes more interesting than the history surrounding the structure itself. The growth of professional and technical expertise among preservationists has produced some remarkable achievements of which they are legitimately proud, and the pride and satisfaction tend to dominate the discourse about a great deal of historic preservationism. One goes now to a restored building or a gentrified district to marvel at the feats of restoration, conservation and adaptation as much as to learn about the history of the era in which the building or district was brought into existence. The modern context is usually so different that it is difficult not to be drawn away into a different historical dimension than the one associated with the ‘original’ history.

How might this sort of analysis, combining the contributions from original history, an era of survival, and the intervention of historic preservation, be applied to the state of preservation in New Zealand’s towns and cities today? I propose to examine different kinds of structure and district to assess the reasons for variations among them in the scale and character of survival. Here one finds that the basic distinction is between the era before and the era following the introduction of regimes, laws and processes for ensuring, or at least enhancing the prospects of, the survival of structures deemed historically significant. In the earlier era structures took their chances, and accident played a major role in such
survivals as occurred. Until very recently historic preservation has not been accorded any sort of priority in city planning either in New Zealand or overseas. Indeed, there was a predominantly negative attitude in most city planning to the remains of the past. There were a number of reasons for this. After the Second World War there was strong support for rebuilding, stimulated by the reconstruction of Europe's war-ravaged cities. Urban renewal in the United States and other countries illustrated this mood very well. The trend in architecture in the postwar era was strongly in the direction of rejecting and discarding as much ornamentation and other forms of reference to historical styles as possible. By that time substantial elements of the legacies of the Victorian and Edwardian urban pasts were becoming very dilapidated and antiquated and were tainted by association with the depression years. The past had strongly negative connotations.

The large inner-city houses that were once the residences of the affluent middle classes proved to be particularly vulnerable to the forces of urban change during this era. They had what now appears as quite a brief period of popularity, largely in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then quickly lost their suitability as single-family dwellings. They were too large to maintain economically with the decline of the supply of servants. As cities grew and commercial pressures on inner-city space intensified, there were changes in the character of the environments of the big houses. Well-to-do people — such as the Beauchamps, Katherine Mansfield's family — used their wealth to move to more salubrious areas. The flight of the middle classes to the suburbs left inner-city mansions stranded like beached whales. Many, indeed most, have subsequently disappeared, but a few were able or allowed to survive if they could achieve a new usefulness, for example for institutions such as clubs and art galleries or for conversion into offices. Some were adapted for use as hostels and boarding-houses. This however has often led to significant deterioration in their fabric and the eventual loss of many through neglect. A few exceptions have been restored in our own time, but New Zealand has very few districts of such houses left, and the few survivors are left isolated in an environment of non-congruous structures. In Wellington, for instance, Dransfield House, the home of the city's first elected mayor, survives at the southern end of Willis Street. The City Council considered but rejected moving it to more congenial

11 In New Zealand and overseas 'heritage' buildings have been acquiring a new cachet for use by certain professions, notably lawyers and architects.

12 The large villa at 265 Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington, became a hospital probably only 20 or 30 years after construction. It later returned to being a private residence, then was a boarding house, and now is an Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Centre. Woodside, an inner-city Wellington home of the 1880s (215 Vivian Street), was turned into apartments and has probably survived into our own time only because it went back into family occupation from 1929 to 1975. It is now a boarding house once more.

13 Princes Street in Auckland is perhaps an exception. In Wellington there is a cluster of large turn-of-the-century houses on The Terrace between Boulcott Street and Salamanca Road such as Somerled House and Carrigafoyle. Development of high-rise office blocks on The Terrace reached the point north of the entrance to the motorway, and developers from the early 1970s began to buy up houses to the south and convert them for offices and apartments.
surroundings. It is now used as a sort of anchor for one end of the Council’s new Aro Valley Heritage Trail. A very small number of these houses, such as Olveston in Dunedin or Highwic in Auckland, survive as museum showplaces of the lifestyles of the rich.

Attitudes to the preservation of old buildings underwent significant changes in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ornamentation and historical reference were back in architecture in the pastiche forms favoured by post-modernism. There had been a major reaction to the approaches to urban planning favoured in the 1950s and 1960s. The rapidity and unsettlement associated with change had induced nostalgia for the past. Techniques of conservation were being perfected to the point where old structures could be restored to their original mint condition — and better — and all traces of the intervening decay and dilapidation eradicated.

The intervention of historic preservation, the third phase, has also to be seen in relation to the history of our own time; indeed it is an integral part of it. Present-day priorities as well as assumptions as to what ought to be deemed ‘historic’ will be represented in what is preserved and what is not. After all, preservation is an expensive kind of enterprise, and public agencies, responsible for the outlaying of public monies, have to be sensitive to the public’s views on what deserves to be kept from the past.

An event of major traumatic significance for historic preservation in New Zealand was the property boom of the 1980s. It is often referred to as the major catalyst for the new wave of action on historic preservation because of the devastating effect on older structures in the central business districts of several cities, especially Auckland and Wellington, of the boom in construction of new office buildings. These districts had remained relatively stable since their basic format and stock of buildings had been established in the early part of the twentieth century. Change there had been, but it was gradual and assimilable. The pace of change in the late 1970s and early and mid-1980s was unprecedented and led to wholesale destruction of large parts of what had become the classic streetscapes of commercial downtown New Zealand. The demolitions that took place in the main cities during the early and mid-eighties changed the inherited cityscape greatly. The aftermath of the boom — the stockmarket crash of 1987 and the resulting downturn in the economy — was equally significant. There was now an over-supply of office space, and pressure for the demolition of old commercial and office buildings temporarily slackened. This was the period that preservationists have seen as a temporary and precious ‘breathing space’. The map of urban historic preservation that has emerged from the era of the 1980s and early 1990s is to a considerable extent a representation of the relative intensities of the pressures for development that were felt during that period. Many buildings that disappeared were in locations which were particularly subject to such pressures. By contrast, buildings that survived have tended to be in locations where there has been a lesser intensity of interest in development or

14 The house was leased by the Wellington Arts Centre until 1989.
where plans were cut short by the recession of the late 1980s, by the bankruptcy of a company, or by mobilization of citizen resistance when demolition was threatened.

Historic preservation has had rapidly to try to come to terms with the advancing and (more often) receding tides of state activity over the last decade. The upsurge of interest in historic preservation coincided with the massive governmental restructuring of the 1980s and was further stimulated by its impacts. For, along with the reduction and even elimination of many services that the state had traditionally provided went large-scale redundancies for the buildings that had housed them and that had become community landmarks. Public reaction became a significant catalyst for preservation action. The loss of buildings such as post offices became symbolic of the undermining of community structures without the consent and participation of the people who had used them. A 1987 Heylen survey quoted by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment found that nearly 60% of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘too many important old buildings in our cities are pulled down’.

The changed and diminished role of the state was, of course, particularly evident in the capital city and was symbolized by three buildings that stand within a short distance of one another in Wellington: the Old Government Buildings, now converted after years of vacancy to use by the Law Faculty of Victoria University; the Public Trust building, converted into shops and offices; and the State Insurance building, which faces an uncertain future. But it was not just at the national level that buildings were abruptly deprived of the purposes for which they had been constructed many years before. Historic preservationists have had to confront the implications of large-scale redundancies among many different kinds of local facilities. There has been a trend either to the closure of a wide range of suburban services such as police stations, post offices, fire stations and branch libraries, or to their continuation in more convenient modern premises. The premises thus vacated are at risk unless some viable new use can be found for them. For example, the 1930s fire station at Northland in Wellington, which will become redundant in the next couple of years as a new station is built in Karori, has been sold for conversion to apartments. There has also been the challenge of the large number of railway stations that have become redundant. Many have been demolished, while others succumb in their exposed and unprotected locations to vandalism and the elements. A few have been recycled and adapted to new uses, but resources are not available to save more than a handful. Changes in police activity have rendered many inner-city police stations out-of-date and unneeded. Again this is relatively recent: many of the buildings have only been vacated in the last decade or so. Some now still stand,

16 Historic and Cultural Heritage Management, p.4.
17 The restoration of the Carterton station by the Wairarapa Railway Restoration Society is described in Margaret Christensen, ‘Survival and Revival’, NZHP, 48 (July 1994), pp.17-19. In the early 1990s numerous articles on railway stations appeared in this magazine. See for instance Paul Mahoney, ‘Train Time in Marlborough’, NZHP, 38 (September 1992), pp.16-20. This article noted that only three of Marlborough’s 26 railway stations remained and called for their preservation.
even although they have an uncertain future: 20 or 30 years ago they would almost certainly have been demolished.\textsuperscript{18}

The day on which a large number of rural post offices were closed, 1 February 1988, was recorded in \textit{Historic Places} as ‘a sad day for many rural communities in New Zealand’. Many of the buildings in which these post offices were housed were of considerable historic value: ‘their future must be of concern to all who value New Zealand’s heritage’.\textsuperscript{19} However, the very fact that preservationists were taking an interest in the fate of such humble structures as small-town and rural post offices and regarding them as ‘heritage’ that ought to be preserved and protected was a change of some significance. Had the closures occurred ten or 20 years earlier, such sentiments might not have been expressed or, if expressed, paid much attention to. But the recency of the closures had brought the post offices into an era in which preservationist attitudes have some influence. The destructions of the early 1980s — such as the post office at Bulls — were unlikely to be repeated on such a scale. The controversy over the conversion of the old Dargaville post office, which became vacant in 1990, to off-license premises was an interesting revelation of the sentiment which had become attached to such buildings and was now proving to be an obstacle in the way of their destruction. One objector referred to the proposal as ‘desecration of a landmark’ while another felt that graphic advertising on its exterior would ‘deface’ what had been ‘the pride of Dargaville and the focal point of the town’.\textsuperscript{20}

Since 1989, when the New Zealand Post Office was privatized and New Zealand Post under its new ownership began selling off surplus buildings, many old post offices have been readily adapted to a wide range of contemporary uses including restaurants and private homes.\textsuperscript{21}

The sheer volume and pace of the changes over the last two decades have forced the emphasis to be on reactive or ‘brushfire’ preservationism. A predominant shared characteristic of many of the structures that have been preserved in recent years is that their preservation is the outcome of a successful campaign in reaction to a demolition threat from a developer or a public authority. This

\textsuperscript{18} Wellington examples include the Taranaki Street Police Station which closed in the late 1980s. From further back there is the old Mount Cook station which has been used as a storage depot for the Museum. See also John Mitchell, ‘A Continuous Presence in Onehunga’, NZHP, 19 (December 1987), pp.3-4 (on the Onehunga police station).

\textsuperscript{19} Ewen McGregor, ‘Otane Post Office’, NZHP, 44 (June 1988), pp.5-6. The article lamented the ‘vandalising’ of the Otane post office shortly before it was closed: the New Zealand Post Office replaced the original wooden joinery with aluminium and gave the building ‘an inappropriate modern frontage’.

\textsuperscript{20} The objections were not upheld. The land was rezoned commercial B, and an off-license was granted in 1992. The venture closed a year later, and a community group took over the building. Julia Gatley, ‘An Old Post Office Re-used’, NZHP, 44 (November 1993), pp.51-3. For another example of community effort to save a post office building and convert it to community purposes see Lois Galer, ‘Port Chalmers: A Mayor Prepared to Muck In’, NZHP, 19 (December 1987), pp.18-19.

array of preserved structures reflects the pressures and the politics of the present rather than an attempt at a systematic representation of the past. What typically has happened is that the actual, impending or rumoured destruction of landmark structures has aroused alarm and galvanized people into working to secure the preservation either of those structures, if still standing, or of other structures of a similar kind that also appear to be endangered. Such campaigns have had repercussions on the development of historic preservation consciousness and the mobilization of opinion on behalf of preservation. In Wanganui an overnight demolition of a classified building by developers was the catalyst for the launching of that town’s Main Street programme. Demolitions in the early 1980s were a principal catalyst for Napier’s downtown programme. Another example is the impact of the threatened demolition of the Missions to Seamen building (1903) in Stout Street in Wellington in the 1980s. That building was not saved because a use had been found for it. Indeed, its owners, the government, had other uses for the site and in 1986 were on the point of demolishing it. The ensuing campaign to save it involved a coalition of agencies and individuals who were concerned at the widespread loss of heritage which was occurring at the time in Wellington. The building became a symbol and a rallying-point. It still stands today, externally very well restored. It took some time to find a viable modern usage for the building: it was refurbished for apartments in 1994.

One distinguishing feature of recent urban change has been the actual or potential destruction of entire districts. This has been the catalyst for the projection of historic preservation into a wider dimension beyond the traditional concentration on the saving of individual buildings. An example is the impact of the construction of the Wellington Motorway and of threats to extend it. This sword of Damocles has been hanging over portions of the inner city for the last two decades. A report by American traffic consultants in 1963 recommended that the motorway go as far as the Mount Victoria Tunnel. As work proceeded, there was substantial destruction of old houses in Thorndon. Reactions to this were more in sorrow than anger. The attitude that ‘progress’ and the needs of the modern city must prevail seemed to predominate. The catalyst for preservationist action was the impact of the motorway construction when it moved on past the residential areas of Thorndon and reached the Bolton Street Cemetery. The protests that ensued represent a sort of Pakeha parallel to Maori protests about damage to their ancient burial sites (there were Maori graves in the cemetery as

22 Craig Mills, ‘On Main Street’, NZHP, 43 (September 1993), pp.4-6.
24 See the entry on the building in Volume 3 of the Wellington City Council’s Heritage Building Inventory, Wellington, 1993, n.p. The entry describes the campaign as the start of the political career of New Zealand’s first Green City Councillor, Stephen Rainbow. Rainbow himself refers to the episode in his introduction to the Inventory as the occasion when he first became aware of a wider community interest in saving threatened old buildings. See also David Kernohan, Wellington’s Old Buildings : A photographic guide to old buildings in central Wellington, Wellington, 1994, pp.60-61.
Work on the motorway stopped in 1978 because of lack of funds, and the debate as to whether or not it was to resume continued to be principally about funding and traffic issues, relating to the need to relieve increasing city congestion. It seemed to be a traffic issue, not one driven by concern for historic preservation. The extension resurfaced as an issue at the end of the 1980s and has continued to be prominent in Wellington politics and public debate down to the present day. But still nothing has actually happened. All this delay has allowed concern for menaced districts in its planned path to mount and counter-measures to be formulated. Two areas in particular have attracted attention. The threat to a group of old workers' cottages in Footscray Avenue has led to the identification of this cluster as a ‘precinct’. In this way historic preservation enters into present-day politics and controversy: here is one more obstacle in the way of the motorway extension. The other, larger area is Upper Cuba Street. Rents have remained low here because of the constant threat to the properties, and so old buildings have become tenanted and a new sense of community has developed.

Developments of this kind have in turn forced a considerable change in the formats of historic preservation. It had hitherto seemed reasonably safe for preservationists to concentrate on saving individual structures and not worry too much about what was happening to their contexts and settings. But the large-scale damage done to downtown streetscapes in the last two decades has obliged preservationists to recognize that many of the buildings which they wish to protect are being rendered vulnerable, not so much by changes to the buildings themselves as by changes in their surroundings. Around a building there often exists a zone of protection afforded by all sorts of other features of the townscape which individually have not been seen as especially worthy of preservation according to traditional criteria. Preservationists have been converted to a more environmental strategy for preservation as it has become increasingly clear that a focus on individual buildings is too narrow and that, in the interests of the survival of individual structures themselves, an effort must be made to protect their contexts. Once those deteriorate or are transformed into the settings for incompatible buildings or activities, buildings can lose a great deal of their meaning. They are then made more vulnerable because their historical significance is much harder to understand. Context frequently performs an essential fortifying and validating function for an ‘historic’ structure. The strategy adopted by the Historic Places Trust with regard to the Oamaru Customs Building is a significant early example of the relationship that has developed between preservation at the individual structure level and at the precinct level. The Trust decided to buy this building in 1980 to avert a threatened demolition. It was motivated, in particular, by fear that loss of the building would greatly diminish the entire wharf area precinct and weaken local enthusiasm for

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preserving other buildings in the precinct. The aim was to show by example that buildings in this area could be rehabilitated.\(^\text{27}\)

The dramatic collapse of development activity as a result of the stockmarket crash in 1987 left a legacy of gaps in the urban scene. Spaces where old buildings had been removed and were not being replaced have become a feature of cityscapes as probably never before. There has also been a growth of informed awareness of what gaps in the urban fabric represent. Books have appeared on the loss of buildings and of streetscapes, notably the work of John Wilson on Christchurch.\(^\text{28}\) Especially important in this regard have been numerous books of photographs which have provided a much better idea of what cities used to look like and of what has been lost.\(^\text{29}\)

The trend towards a district format for historic preservation was reinforced by the growing interest of urban planners both in the contribution of heritage features to urban design and in precinct planning.\(^\text{30}\) A key word in the planning lexicon is ‘streetscape’. In the newly fashionable holistic approach to urban design the architectural characteristics of the contributing structures still usually play a significant role, but many other features not traditionally associated with historic preservationism are now also being brought into the picture. In Nelson, for example, where efforts have been under way to preserve Albion Square and have the entire area designated as an historic reserve, the argument has been that ‘the character of Nelson City derives from its over-all “streetscapes” rather than from the visual quality or historic importance of a few singularly attractive or notable buildings’. Demolition and defacement were seen to be destroying the integrity of Nelson’s streetscapes. ‘Conservation of whole streetscapes’ has been described as being ‘of vital importance in Nelson’.\(^\text{31}\)

At Petone buildings ‘of minor importance’ have been deliberately included in the development of a preservation strategy for Jackson Street. The reasons for what is clearly regarded as a novel approach have been described thus: ‘By doing this, the value of streetscape and of historical continuity are able to be emphasised. We want to develop public awareness of the importance of Historic Areas and zones. Much of our architecture is comparatively modest in nature. Such architecture gains immeasurably when it is seen in a context of supporting buildings of a like kind, and not left stranded amongst unsympathetic neighbours. Even opera stars need

\(^{27}\) John Wilson, ‘The Trust sets an example with the Oamaru Customs Building’, NZHP, 1 (June 1983), pp.8-9.

\(^{28}\) John Wilson, Lost Christchurch, Springston, 1984. John Wilson, ‘Christchurch... on the path to destruction?’, NZHP, 13 (June 1986), pp.5-7.

\(^{29}\) The most notable of these have been the books by William Main, including Auckland Through a Victorian Lens, Wellington, 1977, Wellington Through a Victorian Lens, Wellington, 1972, and Bragge’s Wellington and the Wairarapa, Wellington, 1974. But there have been many others, for example Stephen Barnett, A Picture Book of Old Auckland, 1981, and David Johnson, Wellington: A Pictorial History, Wellington, 1995.


help from the chorus. We must work to make people understand this.'

Increasingly judgements about individual buildings are being made in this kind of context. For example, the contribution of the old Government Buildings in Christchurch to the streetscape was mentioned as a justification for their being saved for conversion to apartments.

If one compares historic preservation in New Zealand with what has happened in the United States, one notes the lateness of this emergence of interest in preservation at the district level. Its emergence in New Zealand during the 1980s coincided with and indeed reflected the growth of a precinct focus in urban design and planning. In the United States, by contrast, Historic District development began in the 1920s with Charleston, South Carolina. Prior to the post-1966 bureaucratization of procedures via the National Register and then the enmeshing of district preservation in municipal planning there had been a half-century of maturing of the concept by developments deeply rooted in particular local cultures. 

District preservation in New Zealand started at the point at which planning objectives and the bureaucratization associated with achieving and implementing them were becoming predominant in historic preservation in cities all over the world.

The cultural roots that would nourish a preservation strategy emphasizing districts are shallow in New Zealand as compared with the United States. Let us take two examples. Numerous local authorities have been starting, or at least giving thought to starting, Main Street programmes. This idea originated in the United States where a large-scale programme, inaugurated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has been operating for some years. The aim of such programmes is to bring customers back to downtown business districts by rehabilitating their environments. There is a strong emphasis on restoring the buildings whose frequently flamboyant and richly detailed architecture embodies the confidence and optimism of the business communities in their heyday, usually in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The term 'Main Street' introduces terminology that is far more familiar to Americans than it is to New Zealanders. Indeed, it is part of American culture, a term which has a resonance in American discourse which has been largely absent in the antipodean context. 'Main Street' is more than just a very common street-name in the US. It is also short-hand for an idealized way of life, and, in its physical form, embodies what has been called a 'symbolic landscape'.

The term 'Main Street' sends out all sorts of often contradictory signals to Americans. On the one hand, it was the title of Sinclair Lewis's famous novel which helped to make it the epitome of the narrow, claustrophobic small community from which anyone of enterprise took the earliest available opportunity to escape. On

32 Con Flinkenberg, 'From the Chair', Newsletter Wellington Branch Committee of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, (March 1995), p.3.
34 David Hamer, History in Urban Places: The Historic Districts of the United States, Columbus, Ohio, forthcoming.
the other hand, it has become the focus of immense nostalgia for the idealized sort of American community that is identified with the core values of the ‘American way of life’. 36 Many Main Streets, in their restored state, are now used — to the considerable economic benefit of the communities involved — as film- sets. One of the best-known settings in American popular culture is Main Street at Disneyland, Anaheim, which is said to be an idealized representation of the Main Street in Walt Disney’s home town of Marceline, Missouri. 37 In the United States the imagery and the nostalgic associations have provided powerful themes on which to base the restoration of small town commercial districts. It remains to be discovered how much of this exists in New Zealand culture and can be drawn on for this kind of exercise. The ‘historic’ dimension of historic preservation can become very diluted and compromised in this kind of programme if there is a weak cultural foundation to the theme chosen as the focus.

The terminology is significant in another respect. New Zealand is avoiding the use of the word ‘district’, which is standard in the United States. ‘Area’ is much vaguer, and ‘precinct’ has a bureaucratic ring which fits in with the dominance of planning considerations in this country. In the United States the word ‘district’ has cultural connotations which are largely absent in New Zealand. American area preservation has had broad cultural dimensions, especially as a consequence of having become caught up in the enthusiasm for neighbourhood preservation of the 1970s. The vitality of American community life was seen then as being particularly dependent on the health and integrity of the neighbour- hood, frequently referred to as the most fundamental unit in the community structure. It is doubtful whether attitudes of this kind have had much prominence or influence in New Zealand. 38

While the intervention of historic preservation has assumed substantial importance in determining what does and what does not continue to survive from the past, other more traditional influences on survival continue to operate, although aspects of preservation strategy, such as financial incentives or local authority zoning, may contribute to the context within which they have an effect. In general, the survival of structures remains very dependent on their viability for new uses. Some types of building, for instance, are now proving suitable for adaptive reuse as bars and restaurants. The landmark location of some buildings has afforded them some protection. While buildings in conspicuous sites are vulnerable because of the commercial pressures for new development in such locations, sentiment may attach to the structures already there because they have been landmarks in people’s lives, even symbols for the city. Some such structures survive because they make, or can be made to make, dramatic and

36 Books that commemorate this side of small town life and link it to historic preservation include Carole Rifkind, Main Street: The Face of Urban America, New York, 1977, and Pat Ross, Remembering Main Street: An American Album, New York, 1994. See also Richard V. Francaviglia, Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America, Iowa City, 1996.


38 They are notably absent, for instance, from the array of justifications for heritage preservation presented in the recent report on heritage by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment.
appealing contrasts with more recent structures. A Wellington example of this is Plimmer House on Boulcott Street, moved forward on its site as part of a deal that permitted the building of larger modern structures behind.

Fifteen or 20 years ago the closure of such large commercial premises as central-city markets would very likely have been followed by extensive demolition and site clearance for new development. But the closures have been recent enough to be affected both by preservationism and by the development of reuse potential for these premises of a kind that did not exist several decades ago, namely lifestyle changes associated with the growth of a central-city bar and restaurant culture for which they are providing attractive and adaptable venues. Warehouse areas such as Blair and Allen Streets in Wellington are, as a result, in a process of transition rather than of demolition. The collapse of wharf operations of the traditional kind has had a particularly dramatic impact, leaving a legacy of many huge wharf sheds and warehouses which are now being subjected to a great variety of forms of adaptive reuse. By now there are numerous overseas examples of waterfront rehabilitations which have been successful both commercially and through the impact they have had on the image of the city where they have taken place. Extensive adaptive uses have been found for many of the structures in these locations and so there has been an alternative to demolition.

Many older commercial buildings, even some that date back only to the 1950s and 1960s, have become out-of-date and unusable for modern office requirements. There has been a large-scale abandonment of them in favour of buildings designed for modern needs. Banks are a good example of this. The old Bank of New Zealand buildings stand derelict on Wellington’s Lambton Quay and adjacent streets while the Bank’s headquarters operate nearby in a completely different type of structure, a huge office tower with banking facilities in an underground area cheek by jowl with fast-food outlets and an arcade of retail businesses. The huge halls dominated by their tellers are not needed in this age of ATMs and other forms of automated banking. The trend to inner-city living has produced some new kinds of adaptive reuse for the older commercial buildings. Some are being subdivided into inner-city apartments.

Numerous commercial districts are being turned into historic precincts. Quite a few are in small towns and provincial centres. Most of those which have survived have streetscapes which reflect a boom period, usually in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The legacy of that era is one both of homogeneity and of exploitable architectural flamboyance. These districts have been vulnerable either to neglect, as economies have declined, with business moving to suburban locations and supermarkets, or to requirements for the

39 Among the historic areas registered by the Historic Places Trust the following include commercial buildings: Victoria Road, Devonport; Customs Street, Vulcan Lane, and Quay Street, Auckland; Gladstone Road, Masonic Hotel, and Peel Street, Gisborne; Hastings Historic Area; Napier City Centre Historic Area; Cuba Street and South Lambton Quay, Wellington; Trafalgar Street, Nelson; King Street, Temuka; Stafford Street, Timaru; Harbour/Tyne Street, Oamaru; Port Chalmers Historic Area; George Street and Burlington Street, Dunedin; and Dee Street and Tay Street, Invercargill.
upgrading of commercial infrastructures. The chances of the original streetscapes surviving with any sort of integrity have not been high. On the other hand, these are districts where, because of their centrality and conspicuousness, as well as larger concerns about the community's future, the destruction of familiar landmark structures may have operated to jolt the community and awaken and foster a demand for historic preservation.

The adoption of an environmental or contextual approach to historic preservation places emphasis on discovering and highlighting what collections of buildings have in common and downplaying their differences. The format for doing this which is coming into vogue in New Zealand, and is already well established overseas, may be summed up in the word 'theme'.

'Theming' appears at various levels of preservation and is an aspect of heritage policy about which historians have considerable reservations. There has been a marked trend towards using themes with a heritage component in the promotion of urban revitalization. In 1993 the Mainstreet New Zealand Handbook advised that 'the establishment of an identity or theme for your town is important because it provides a “hook” on which to hang design themes, seasonal promotions and an entire marketing strategy'. In two recent books Claudia Bell has explored the wide range of themes that towns are using to foster a distinct identity for themselves. Heritage features are prominent among these. One of the earliest examples of a heritage-based theme predominating in the planning of a town is Arrowtown in central Otago. The 1970 District Scheme designated a 'special commercial zone' in which street facades were required to be similar in design to 'early Pioneering architecture as built in the Arrowtown District between 1850 and 1900'. The major reason for this, as explained by Marilyn Lusk, was that Arrowtown was dependent on its 'historical associations for its distinctiveness and appeal'. The 'economic necessity of increasing Arrowtown’s uniqueness to maintain its appeal to visitors is the main argument for emphasizing its history'. This meant that 'for coherence of style and credibility' it was necessary to 'emphasize one particular period'. The reason for choosing the late nineteenth century was that by that time the buildings had 'acquired a Victorian veneer of respectability and careful detailing and finish even if only extending to the depth of the facade'. Since then the design guide approach to maintaining the historic character of an urban district has been increasingly utilized. The sophistication of this technique extends now to the use of computer databases to establish predominant characteristics (rooflines, types of windows, setbacks, etc.) as a prelude to defining desired or mandatory design features.

A few places, of which Napier and Oamaru are so far the most notable examples, have decided to make heritage preservation and enhancement the focus of a tourist-oriented strategy. The Art Deco development at Napier has been particularly influential in promoting the idea of a ‘theme’ deriving from one facet of the city’s past as a means to achieve the revitalization of the image of an inner-city area. In Feilding, for instance, development of a strategy to protect and exploit the town’s architectural heritage was strongly influenced by what had happened in Napier. In 1993 the Feilding Edwardian Project Incorporated was established with a grant from the Manawatu District Council. A committee of local business people decided to follow the Mainstreet Programme formula to revitalize the CBD, and one person was employed for three months to explore ways of implementing an Edwardian theme.

For the historian the theme approach raises considerable difficulties. The history of any town or city involves considerable and constant change. Focusing the interpretation of that history into one period or episode or predominating characteristic falsifies it. What has happened overseas and will happen here is that districts which are designated as ‘historic’, and to which various regimes of protection and enhancement of heritage characteristics are then applied, tend to become historicized districts made over in a particular idiom deemed appropriate to whatever ‘historic’ image has been selected. The vocabulary of heritage has become very standardized. This is especially the case where tourism is at the heart of the strategy. There is also a growing tendency to seek to reinforce the historic character of a district by moving in buildings from other districts which are not candidates for ‘historic’ status. This tends to compromise the integrity of the ‘historic district’ itself, and the risk is run that all non-‘historic’ districts will then be regarded as fair game for developers and others. Every place, every district has a history, and historians would surely prefer that ‘heritage’ not be confined to a few special and protected places with the history of the rest and of the people who lived in them consigned to oblivion. Historians emphasize change and discontinuities as much as continuities. Preservationist practice, by contrast, has attached weight to such characteristics as homogeneity, coherence, and uniformity. In cities, for instance, the streetscapes, precincts and districts that are most likely to receive preservationist attention are those that are perceived to have some sort of overall character or identity. Design guides which aim at perpetuating and entrenching this characteristic are developed. Coherent ‘character’ is not, however, a typical feature of urban settings in New Zealand. That is why, when it occurs, it is appreciated and people want to save and protect districts which possess it. These districts appeal as a contrast and rebuke to the way most cities have developed. The messiness, confusion, and diversity that characterize most urban scenes are historic, indeed may be more so than the

45 At Petone, for example, the Grand National Hotel, which had been located at a site on the Western Hutt Road for 120 years, has been moved to a new site in the heart of the Jackson Street area where a vigorous Main Street programme is in operation. The dilemma was that had it not been moved demolition was its almost certain fate.
locations normally deemed worthy of preservation as ‘historic’, if what one is looking for is the representative and typical. But they do not usually belong in the scenarios of historic preservation.

There is a tendency towards theming even in the classifications of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Since 1980 the Trust has had the power to classify areas that are considered to have historical value as ‘historic areas’. The 1993 Historic Places Act defined an ‘historic area’ as an area of land that contains an inter-related group of historic places and forms part of the historical and cultural heritage of New Zealand. A theme approach is coming out in the types of district and collections of structures that are being classified and protected in this way. For example, there are several complexes of structures focused on a structure described as a ‘cottage’. There are substantial sentimental connotations attached to ‘cottages’, going back to the Arcadian publicity that lured settlers to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. Distinctive types of housing development feature prominently. Examples include ‘colonial cottages’; railway houses (Ngaior, Wellington; Frankton Junction); state housing (Patrick Street, Petone; Savage Crescent, Palmerston North); houses belonging to the same family (Masterton). City streetscapes possessing uniformity of style and development also appeal: Quay Street, Auckland; New Regent Street, Christchurch. There are several sets of houses associated with one developer or architect. Here too homogeneity is a major and clearly admired characteristic. The historian will ask what is going to be done about the preservation of districts, streetscapes and landscapes which do not possess this characteristic to a marked degree and yet have a history.

In this article, I have identified three stages of history which are represented in the finished product of historic preservation, a structure that has been ‘preserved’ in accordance with established ‘historic’ or ‘heritage’ criteria. These are: the ‘original’ history that is now considered ‘significant’ and worth reminding people of in this form, the period of the building’s history after that time of primary significance, and the stage at which intervention occurred in the name of historic preservation. We have seen that this third phase is very strongly influenced by characteristics of the history of our own times, for example in New Zealand the drastic downsizing and consolidation of state services and the public reaction to this. These have affected both the type of structure that has appeared to be in most urgent need of preservation and the priorities that the public wish to see attached to the spending of the funds they provide for preservation. Also of significance are the formats and strategies for preservation which happen to be favoured at the time.

A fundamental difference between the historic preservationist and the historian has been that, whereas preservationism has tended to remove, or at least suppress, evidence of the second and third phases and produce an artefact which will as closely as possible convey an illusion of the restoration of the first, the original, ‘significant’ history, the historian is interested in all the phases and their interconnections and is likely to be critical of the tendency in preservationism to remove the non-‘significant’ history. There is a great deal of history that is not represented in historic preservation — because structures which could represent
it no longer exist, because it is the kind of history that cannot satisfactorily be represented through the media and formats of historic preservation, or because of traditional biases and distortions in the interpretation of ‘historical significance’.46

The core business of preservation is, of course, with what has survived. However, the gap between what exists and what has gone is increasingly being bridged by such devices as heritage trails, markers, and photographs which draw attention to what has been lost and what landscapes and streetscapes used to look like. This is where historians have a significant contribution to make. Their researches can help to promote understanding of the now vanished or altered contexts and thus strengthen an environmental and holistic approach to historic preservation. This is necessary as survivals become fragments isolated in alien settings and vulnerable to becoming scenery in the sorts of post-modernist tableaux which M. Christine Boyer has described as increasingly characterizing preservation in the cities of the United States.47 Post-modernism pastiches features of heritage architecture to the point where the special character of genuinely ‘historical’ structures becomes very hard to discern. Heritage buildings are restored to contribute to modern streetscapes and desired urban images. Their original contexts and purposes are often gone. The story which they are asked to tell often has very little historical content or depth. Their historic significance is not at all apparent unless their preservation is accompanied by interpretative strategies which keep alive their connections with their pasts. As much as anything, these should have to do with the ‘power of place’ to evoke memory. As Dolores Hayden has shown, achieving this demands strategies and techniques which range well beyond the traditional preoccupations of preservationism with architecture and individual structures.48 Historians have traditionally sought to find out about and understand the past through a vast range of sources which too seldom have included the sorts of material evidence with which preservationists principally concern themselves.49 The gulf that has existed between the two spheres of interest in history can and should be bridged. While historians should be making much greater use of the evidence that preservationists exert so much effort and skill in preserving, preservationists need to enlist the aid of historians to combat those tendencies that are placing the history that is in historic preservation in grave danger of being submerged and lost.

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46 See the comment on the ‘selective nature of assessments of historical significance’ in historic preservation in Alan Mayne, 'The City as Artifact', p.159.