

13

A participatory approach to the assessment of built heritage: an example from Wellington, Aotearoa/ New Zealand

By MICHAEL HARTFIELD and SARA KINDON

Introduction

There is considerable interest in built heritage in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Territorial local authorities (TLAs) are using the past to enhance urban renewal, which helps to promote community identity and to retain, restore, and inject pride. But what we see of heritage, the way it has been identified and the way we use it is, to a considerable extent, contrived. What do we protect? Who decides what is worth keeping? Who is it meant for?

When built heritage is presented, choices are inevitably made about what ought to be included and protected. At present, these choices are made by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (Trust) and TLAs, which use official criteria to select 'appropriate' buildings for heritage status and protection. The criteria and process of selection tend to reflect 'white, middle-class, literate value-making assumptions about what people want and should know about the past' (Fowler, 1992:91). Not surprisingly, heritage buildings tend to be those considered significant to the country's ethnic majority rather than significant to indigenous Maori or other minority ethnic groups.

Given the recent increasing use of participatory and deliberative processes within the 'North', which seek to challenge and rearrange the boundaries between 'expertise' and 'experience' (see *PLA Notes* 38, 2000; Gaventa, 1993 in Cornwall

and Gaventa, 2001), we felt that it was important to extend the application of such processes into the arena of heritage assessment. This article discusses a pilot exercise in participatory heritage assessment carried out in 2000 in Newtown, the most ethnically diverse suburb of New Zealand's capital city, Wellington. The approach and process we discuss below aimed to challenge the current criteria and processes associated with built heritage selection and to provide an alternative, which was more inclusive of different ethnic and cultural groups' relationships to the past¹. As far as we are aware, such an application of participatory learning and action (PLA) has not been attempted here or elsewhere. It provides an innovative approach within an arena of increasing importance to local community identity and economic development worldwide.

Context

Newtown stretches along a shallow valley to the south of Wellington's central business district. Original inhabitants of Wellington harbour, Ngai Tara, settled many of the surrounding hills but the physical layout of the suburb actually began with the arrival of immigrant ships from England in 1840.

¹ The work was undertaken for the research component of Michael's Masters of Development Studies degree at Victoria University of Wellington and built upon his professional expertise as a heritage planner.

'What we see of heritage, the way it has been identified and the way we use it is, to a considerable extent, contrived. What do we protect? Who decides what is worth keeping? Who is it meant for?'

Since the 1950s, the ethnic make-up of the suburb has changed considerably to include a large number of migrants from various Pacific Nations, China, India, mainland Europe, and Africa. In 1996, the suburb's population was comprised of 53% European, 13% Maori, 15% Pacific Island, and 14% Chinese or Indian making it considerably more diverse than the rest of the city and New Zealand as a whole.

The Wellington City Council (WCC) has identified and protected 16 buildings in the suburb. Most of these are also listed by the Trust. Most date from the turn of the last century, are Victorian or Edwardian in architectural style, and are either public buildings or churches, commercial buildings in or adjacent to the main retail street, or large villas owned by relatively affluent residents.

Current heritage assessment process

There are two layers of official protection available in New Zealand. One is via the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Act (1993), in which certain buildings are registered as having heritage significance. The other is by means of the Resource Management Act (1991) under which TLAs are charged with the responsibility of identifying and protecting sites and buildings via their respective district plans.

What usually happens is that a group of 'experts', often architects or historians, are invited by a TLA to identify buildings in an area. These buildings are evaluated against a set of criteria, which might include: architecture, age, rarity, and association with a particular person or event. These criteria are reasonably standard and are employed, with some variation, by most TLAs. There is an opportunity to record anecdotal accounts, but these are not always obvious from the information cards produced by the Trust (Kernohan, pers.comm. 2000).

A list of buildings is then included in a District Plan and the public is invited to comment. Adding or removing an item becomes a statutory procedure requiring submissions and a hearing. The process is reasonably time-consuming and can be expensive. It also tends to favour participation by people who are fluent in English, familiar with statutory processes, knowledgeable about architecture, confident, articulate, and actively

interested and committed to aspects of the built environment. While these processes promote participation in theory, in practice the concerns and interests of diverse ethnic and cultural minority groups are rarely recognised or incorporated.

Alternative participatory assessment process

A more participatory approach was adopted, which sought the active involvement of a wide range of people from Newtown's diverse population. Contact was made through letters, phone calls, and personal contacts with members of various cultural, church, and residents' groups as a way of involving Chinese, Indian, Polish, Moslem, Samoan, and other Pacific Nations peoples, alongside an already active group of mainly *Pakeha* residents within the Newtown Residents Association². Indigenous Maori residents were not directly approached to participate in this work as in 1994, the WCC had developed a detailed and innovative citywide inventory of sites of significance to Maori. A number of these are in Newtown.

A number of meetings were held with particular cultural or ethnic groups and an open public meeting was organised by the Newtown Residents' Association. In addition, smaller meetings were held with local commercial property owners and architects living in the suburb, and individual informal interviews were undertaken. In total, 130 residents were involved in some aspect of the process.

Participatory exercises were adapted to each situation and generally took the following form:

- introductions;
- a slide show presentation outlining the goals and objectives of the project; a summary of the intended outcome; a précis of the way in which heritage is currently selected and managed; a brief history of Newtown; and, photographs of currently listed heritage buildings;
- a facilitated discussion about the existing WCC heritage criteria;
- the sharing of oral histories associated with particular buildings and sites (some listed, others not) and their representation and classification on a map of the suburb;
- a decision-making process about which sites to recommend for formal heritage listing and ones which should be included in more 'informal' cultural maps;
- wrap up and discussion of ownership of information and the next stage of the process; and,
- refreshments (either *in situ* or at a local pub or cafe).

In many instances, participants offered their private collec-

² *Pakeha* is the Maori term given to New Zealanders who are of (Western) European descent. It is in common usage within public and media discourse, but is also a contested term because of its association with colonisation.

Photo 1: Former hotel – listed by the WCC and the Trust



Photo 2: New layers of heritage based on the participatory exercises



tions of photographs, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia to facilitate the creation of an alternative layer of understanding about heritage within Newtown.

Outcomes of the approach

Residents involved in the participatory exercise within the public meetings tended to focus on buildings that had personal or family connections and associated oral histories, or larger buildings that identified their cultural community within the wider landscape. The commercial property owners emphasised the link between the restoration and listing of heritage buildings and economic development in the area noting how the recent restoration of a prominent landmark had stimulated investment and gentrification elsewhere (see Photo 1). One of them was particularly keen to see a row of commercial properties he owned heritage-listed for their streetscape value (see Photo 2). Over coffee in another cafe, several locally-based architects provided the widest range of

possible additional sites including a number of newer buildings which, from their perspectives, represented New Zealand design innovations, as well as older buildings of cultural significance to Polish, Samoan, and Maori communities.

While most participants endorsed the current heritage criteria and buildings listed by the Trust and WCC, a number also acknowledged that the lists represented only a smattering of what could potentially be considered. As a result, several buildings were identified as being worthy of listing, including three churches, a group of wooden shops dating from the early 1900s, and a multi-storey housing estate designed in the 1970s (see Photo 3). It was also interesting to note the similarities and the differences in the criteria used by the WCC and the local community when evaluating currently listed buildings. For example, the WCC register identified a terrace of wooden shops as having ‘architectural’ (classified as ‘simplified Italianate’) value with a high level of ‘authenticity’ (that it ‘retains a moderate-high level of authen-

Photo 3: Chinese Baptist Church – proposed by its congregation for listing



ticity in materiality, craftsmanship, and setting'). There is no mention of the buildings 'cultural' or 'emotional' significance to the local community (for example, according to one participant, they provided cheap residential accommodation on the first floor for workers at the nearby brickworks and space on the ground floor for an array of small commercial enterprises)³.

Running parallel to this more formal process, was a strong desire by residents to have an alternative means of recording and displaying their heritage information that would be accessible to their communities and perhaps influence Council heritage policy in future years. Participants accepted that not all buildings of significance to them personally or collectively may be worthy of formal listing at present, but wanted them, and their cultural presence in the landscape, acknowledged in some way.

Residents recommended the production of a series of informal cultural maps that could represent the diversity of Newtown's histories and the installation of plaques that could convey information about particular buildings or sites of former buildings. Both were seen as tangible and relatively inexpensive ways in which their understandings of heritage could be represented and acknowledged appropriately by local authorities in conjunction with more formal heritage assessment procedures.

A number of participants also felt that the Trust and WCC needed to consult more widely when carrying out assessment procedures and that using participatory exercises like this one were useful in getting residents involved so that their knowledge was better respected and reflected in listings. In particular they felt that the participatory assessment process would help 'experts' to move away from an emphasis on architecture and European history and accordingly make fewer assumptions as to the sorts of buildings selected, and result in more culturally diverse and representative built heritage listings.

Reflections on the approach: positive outcomes and lessons learned

Positive outcomes

The whole process of participatory appraisal, including the interviews, took about 30 hours, involved 130 people from a range of ethnic and cultural groups, allowed people of different backgrounds and attitudes to discover common concerns, and generated a considerable amount of information about sites and buildings in Newtown. In particular, the public meetings were successful at generating discussions about the suburb's history and the personal and collective histories and stories associated with particular places. The informal gathering in the pub following one public meeting went extremely well, as participants were relaxed and there was time to talk in more detail.

The informal interviews were productive. In some respects, they were more focused and detailed than the public meetings as they usually involved residents with a particular passion for the topic. This said, the two smaller meetings with the architects and commercial property owners were particularly successful, probably because the participants were more homogenous, had high levels of education, and were directly involved with and concerned for the suburb.

The suggested listings and the cultural maps produced have generated considerable interest in the process. To date, information from the project has been shared via informal meetings with the WCC and Trust. A workshop for heritage

³ Heritage Buildings Inventory (1994) Wellington City Council.

specialists, TLA, and Trust staff has been planned, and the project has been presented at two conferences on community development, at a number of seminars, and to several Newtown groups.

From a practical perspective, information from the exercise has been included in a recently published trail of sites of significance to Wellington's minority groups. Also, one of the buildings identified by many of the participants as being of particular heritage significance to the area (due to its design, age, size, and location) is under threat of demolition. It is not currently listed by the WCC or Trust. Information taken directly from this exercise has been presented at separate hearings to the WCC and Trust, recommending that the building be listed. Meetings have taken place with the building's owner and alternatives to demolition have been developed.

At the time of writing, however, the owner is still intent on demolition. Options, including referring the decision to demolish to the Environment Court, are being considered. If there is a court hearing, then information gathered from this exercise will, with the agreement of participants, be presented as evidence.

A summary of the outcomes

- a greater awareness for participants of existing heritage buildings listed in Newtown;
- the sharing of stories and recognition of common concerns across different groups;
- the exposure of a hitherto unrecorded and largely unrecognised layer of local knowledge and information – confirmation that not all heritage is what can be seen or touched (European model);
- the generation of a series of 'informal' cultural maps representing sites and buildings identified by participants;
- the nomination of a number of buildings represented on the cultural maps for official protection to the Trust and WCC; and,
- a proposal that plaques be installed to mark the sites of former buildings which had significant heritage value.

Lessons learnt

- Making contacts from all ethnic and cultural groups was difficult. Face-to-face contact worked best, but required quite a considerable investment of time.
- Participants tended to be those residents with an explicit interest in heritage and motivation to attend meetings. Working through already established church and cultural groups (for speed of access) inevitably excluded other members of their wider communities and taking maps out

onto the street or near supermarkets might have resulted in the involvement of a wider range of residents.

- The short-term nature of the exercise meant that a vast source of information remained untapped. It might have been better to spend more time with fewer groups.
- There has not been an opportunity to monitor how effective the exercises were for participants, although feedback was sought at the end of each meeting and this was generally positive. On two occasions, participants commented that they could have made a more informed contribution if they had been better prepared, and more aware of the intended outcomes of the process.

Despite these limitations, from our experience and the comments of most participants, the process indicated that participatory appraisal exercises are valuable ways of enabling people who would not normally be involved in heritage procedures to be heard, respected, and taken seriously, and for generating alternative information for consideration within formal heritage management procedures. The approach has been favourably received by both the Trust and the WCC.

Conclusions and recommendations

Through the application of a participatory approach, the role of an outside expert such as a heritage planner changes from being someone who controls the process, to one in which the person becomes more a facilitator and resource for community-based decisions. This approach can complement local or national statutory and regulatory procedures as it emphasises greater consultation and community involvement.

As our work was a pilot, we would like to offer some recommendations for other practitioners, heritage 'experts' and local government authorities to consider regarding the development and implementation of participatory heritage assessment. These include:

- developing a core of facilitators who specialise in participatory approaches and who can carry out exercises like the one outlined above with specific community groups;
- expanding the range of groups involved to include specific communities of interest such as young people: establishing face-to-face contact with such groups is critical;
- facilitating a discussion of outcomes with group representatives and a heritage specialist, who could act as a resource person for them; and,
- supporting residents to establish projects to manage their own built heritage (e.g. through the installation of signs and guided walking trails) and to make submissions to TLAs and the Trust based on their own research and recommendations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Hartfield, Council for International Development, P.O. Box 12 470, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Tel: +(64) 4 472 6375; Email: cid@clear.net.nz

Sara Kindon, Institute of Geography, Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 600, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Tel: +(64) 4 463 6194; Email: sara.kindon@vuw.ac.nz

NOTES

Michael Hartfield was the former heritage advisor to Wellington City Council and currently works for an organisation that represents 50 New Zealand-based NGOs involved with international development.

Sara Kindon teaches as a Senior Lecturer in the programmes of Human Geography and Development Studies at Victoria University of Wellington and has been working with PLA methodologies over the last ten years. She is currently involved in a participatory video project with a Maori tribe in the central North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

REFERENCES

- Cornwall, A. and Gaventa, J. (2001) Bridging the Gap: citizenship, participation and accountability, *PLA Notes*, 40, pp32–35.
- Flower, C. Mincher, P. and S. Rimkus (2000) Overview – participatory processes in the North, *PLA Notes*, 38, pp14–18.
- Fowler, P. (1992) *The Past in Contemporary Society – Then, Now*. Routledge, London.
- Gaventa, J. (1993) The powerful and the powerless and the experts: knowledge struggles in an information age. In Park, P. Hall, B. and T. Jackson (eds) *Participatory Research in North America*. Bergin and Hadley, Amherst, MA.
- Hartfield, M. (2000) *But Whose Heritage is it Anyway?* Unpublished Masters of Development Studies Thesis, Institute of Geography, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
- Kernohan, D. (2000) Personal Communication.