

# A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO THE ASSESSMENT OF BUILT HERITAGE

## An Example from Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand

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### **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 to indigenous Maori or other minority ethnic groups.

Herbert Gans, the American urban sociologist and critic, wrote an article for the New York Times in 1975 in which he attacked the New York Landmarks Commission, the US equivalent of the Trust, for what he called the rewriting of New York's architectural history. He was concerned that the only buildings the Commission tended to 'designate were the stately mansions of the rich and buildings designed by famous architects' and that the

Commission 'mainly preserves the elite portion of the architectural past'

More recently, Delores Hayden an American geographer, has explored the way in which certain communities are excluded from participating in the urban environment. 'Three quarters of the current population' of Los Angeles, she states, must 'live with someone else's choices about the city's history' (Hayden 1997:86).

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), my supervisor, Sara Kindon, and I felt that it would be appropriate to extend the application of such processes into the arena of heritage assessment.

The subsequent research was a pilot exercise in participatory heritage assessment carried out in 2000 in Newtown, the most ethnically diverse suburb of Wellington. The approach and process taken aimed to challenge the current criteria and processes associated with built heritage selection and to provide an alternative, that was more inclusive of different ethnic and cultural groups' relationships to the past. As far as Sara and I are aware, such an application of participatory learning appraisal (PLA) has not been attempted here or elsewhere. The research provides an alternative approach within an arena of increasing importance to local community identity and economic development.

### **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.

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, of which most 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 either currently or formerly 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.

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 in this exercise 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 Association.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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*

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 which ones to be included in more 'informal' cultural maps;
- wrap up and discussion of ownership of information and the next stage of the process;
- refreshments (either in situ or at a local pub or cafe).

In many instances, participants offered their private collections 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. One of them was particularly keen to see a row of commercial properties he owned listed for their streetscape value.

Over coffee, 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 supported and 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 by a majority of participants as being worthy of listing.

Running parallel to this more formal process, there 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 also went 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 specialists, TLA and Trust staff has been planned, the project has been presented at a conference on community development, at a number of seminars and to several Newtown groups.

From a practical perspective, 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.

A summary of the outcomes is:

- 1 A greater awareness for participants of existing heritage buildings listed in Newtown.
- 2 The sharing of stories and recognition of common concerns across different groups.
- 3 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).
- 4 The generation of a series of 'informal' cultural maps representing sites and buildings identified by participants.
- 5 The nomination of a number of buildings represented on the cultural maps for official protection to the Trust and WCC.
- 6 a proposal that plaques be installed to mark the sites of former buildings which had significant heritage value.

#### *Lessons Learned*

- 1 Making contacts from all ethnic and cultural groups was difficult. Face-to-face contact worked best, but required time.
- 2 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.
- 3 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.

- 4 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 the comments of many 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 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 the work was a pilot, we would like to offer some recommendations for other practitioners, heritage specialists and local government authorities to consider regarding the development and implementation of a participatory approach to heritage assessment. These include:

- 1 Developing a core of facilitators who specialise in participatory approaches and who can carry out exercises like the one outlined here with specific community groups.
- 2 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.
- 3 Facilitating a discussion of outcomes with group representatives and a

heritage specialist, who could act as a resource person for them.

- 4 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 the HPT and TLAs based on their own research and recommendations.

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