



# Mt VICTORIA

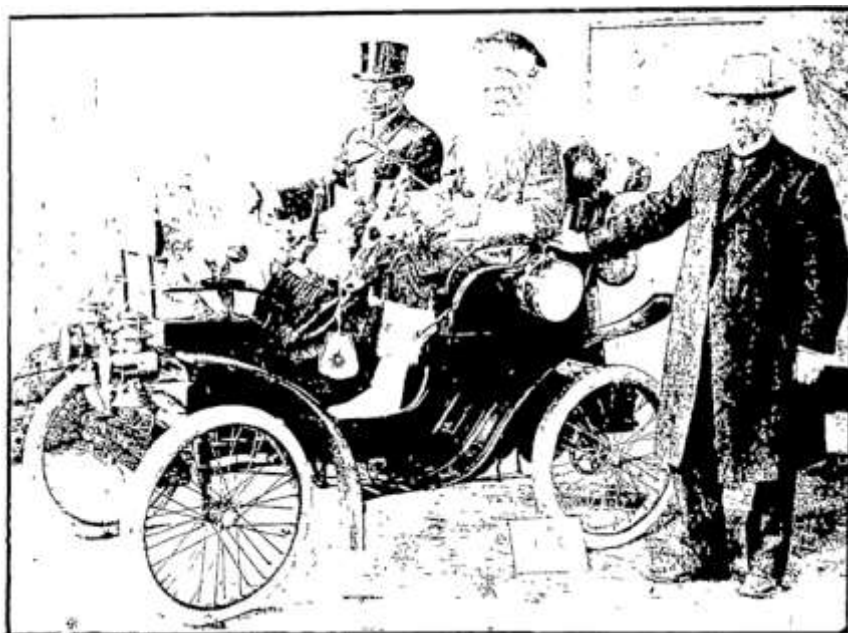
## Historical Society News

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FATHER CHRISTMAS ARRIVES AT THE "ECONOMIC".

### **Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays from Mt Victoria Historical Society Committee**

The image above is from the Free Lance, 26 December 1903. It has a particular connection with Mt Victoria. 145 Brougham Street (still there) was built for Harry Kersley, of George & Kersley, drapers. Their Wellington store, 'the Economic' appears to have been the first to 'parade' a Father Christmas.

### **AGM**

At the AGM in September, the following committee was elected: Jo Newman (Convenor), Jane O'Loughlin, Alan Olliver, Rosemary Bromley. You can find our annual report on our website if you weren't there and are interested in what we did in 2020-21. Our guest speaker at the meeting was Ben Schrader and we thank him for allowing us to reproduce his talk here, for those who missed it. It's an important contribution to current debates around Planning for Growth in Wellington.

### **Guided walk:**

#### **Working Class Early Mt Victoria**

Our two walks offered as part of Heritage week were a great success.

Historic Places Wellington and Walk Wellington Guides have both asked us to run them again early next year for their groups.



### **Draft District Plan Submission**

You can find the MVHS submission on our website if you would like to read it. We know a lot of members have put considerable effort into their own submissions and thank you all for the time and thought you have given this important issue.

# Why Old Places Matter

By Dr Ben Schrader

(With a selection of slides from his talk)

Over the last 24 months Wellington's built heritage has come under a sustained attack that's surprised and troubled many of us. Heritage has become an emblem and scapegoat for range of city ills: unaffordable housing, restrictive and officious planning practices, poor health among renters, generational warfare, Nimbyism, colonialism, and more.

A catch-cry of built heritage critics is that its people, not buildings, that make cities what they are. This infers that a city's urban identity and sense of place arises from the people who live there and has nothing to do with its physical form. This would mean that people would still flock to places like Cuba Street even if it was made up of modern mirror glass tower blocks, rather than the whimsical, hotch-potch of different-aged structures that characterise it now.

We only have to look at the lifelessness of northern Lambton Quay in the weekend to know such a scenario is unlikely. It's more true to say that both people and buildings make cities what they are. The diverse built environments of cities, and the different ways people engage with it, is what provides urban identities and a unique sense of place. As the urban guru Jan Gehl puts it: 'First we shape the cities – then they shape us.'

It's therefore worth reminding ourselves why built heritage is important. To do this I'm drawing heavily on the work of the American heritage practitioner Thompson Mayes and his compatriot the architectural historian Max Page. In his book *Why Old Places Matter* (2019) Mayes identified 14 reasons as to why old places are important in community life. I'm going to consider six of these: continuity, memory, identity, beauty, history and architecture.

## 1) Continuity

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

This is obvious here in places like Mt Victoria where we have cottages dating from the 1870s; villas from the 1890s; 1930s Art Deco apartment buildings + 1950s Modernist ones. There are 19<sup>th</sup> century workshops and 20<sup>th</sup> century factories adaptively reused as apartments. There are also many townhouses dating from the 1970s up to the present. In other words, the passage of time is manifest in Mt Vic's streetscapes.

## Continuity

'Architecture enables us to see and understand the slow process of history and to participate in time cycles that surpass the scope of an individual life.'

(Juhani Pallasmaa)



## 2) Memory

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

A personal example is the Embassy Theatre. Often when I go there, I recall earlier visits as a child or seeing Wellington film festival films there during the 1990s. This is both an individual and collective memory – in being shared by other film goers.

Memories are often contested. The history of old places may be viewed differently over time and reinterpreted as our conceptions of what is important changes. A good illustration of this is the colonial villas debate. For some they are tangible links to settler endeavours to create a prosperous city; for others they are painful reminders of the impact of colonialism on the region's mana whenua. The fact these arguments occur underscore the importance of place. Despite conflicting points of view, the place itself transcends specific interpretations.

### Memory

'Old buildings are like  
memories you can touch'  
(Mary DeNadai)



## 3) Identity

Similarly, old places are important in the construction of individual and collective identities. As the influential geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains:

*What can the past mean to us? People look back for various reasons but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. ... the passion for preservation arises out of the need to for tangible objects that can support a sense of identity.*

In terms of my own sense of identity, I often reference my childhood experiences of going to places like the Embassy, to explain why I still like film going. For me its not only about the film, it's also about the place I'm watching it in.

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

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



#### 4) Beauty

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

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

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

#### 5) History

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

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

I remember as a history student learning about the 1913 Waterfront strike. I studied a photo showing strikers gathering outside Queens Wharf with the Harbour Board office building in the background – now the Wellington Museum. When I walk past the building, I sometimes imagine the events that took place there. Without the building I doubt I'd have the same reaction.

#### 6) Architecture

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

As Pallasma points out: 'the significance of architecture is not in its form, but in the capacity to reveal deeper layers of existence.' This is to say that it allows us to better understand the people who made the places and their value systems, sometimes through the symbolic and historic meanings that the places reveal. This is obviously much harder to do when the place no longer exists.

#### Conclusion

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

It should now be evident that its buildings, as well as people, which make cities what they are. Cities are not made by people alone.



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#### Error correction – Monastery sale

Our understanding that St Gerard's monastery was to be sold, reported in the last newsletter, was incorrect. We apologise for the error, which we advised members of by email immediately, and include it here again for the formal record.