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INTERROGATING A BUILDING

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The following paper arose out of the PDC workshop held at Highwic and Howick in Auckland on 19-20 May, see Notes and News this issue.

This discussion considers how interrogating a building can yield information about past life ways that are not available from conventional archaeological and documentary sources, while a research strategy can target the direction of the study. The process is illustrated by a few recent examples of buildings archaeology from the Auckland area.

The purpose of ‘buildings archaeology’, as defined by Richard Morris, is to contribute to an understanding of the past. He termed such investigations as archaeological because of:

the presence of an analytical, research dimension, concerned with questions derived from, and contributing to, wider issues, which may be social, technological, iconographic, economic ... (Morris 1994: 18).

The importance of formulating a research question when investigating buildings is given in a New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT) discussion paper:

‘Cost-effective’ archaeology depends on investigation projects having a sound research base... When linked to research aims, worthwhile investigations can be carried out in manner that ensures the project adds to the knowledge base and thus has benefits for the wider community (NZHPT 2007:5).

Another important reason is that we all have questions in our heads when interrogating a site, whether consciously or not. The important thing is to make sure that the questions, and the resulting methodologies, are appropriate to the material and the archaeological values of the site in question; and also that they are explicitly stated to make the approach transparent to others.

Research questions

So what type of questions can buildings archaeology address? Charles Orser (2004) argues that historic archaeology¹ should be about the study of the poor, linking poverty and race, and the development of the modern world – in particular the variation in which it occurred between the different colonised nations.

Others suggest that historic archaeology should be about identity. John Hartigan identified three “critical registers of social identity: race, class, and gender (2005: 9). Ian Smith elaborated, stating that identity can be framed according to ethnicity, wealth, occupation, geography, rural vs urban, mainstream vs margin: these can be fluid and cross-cutting categories (2004: 260-1). Archaeological focus of identity is often concerned at the scale of the individual, but this is created or maintained at other levels too, including the household, community and nation (Campbell and Furey 2013:125). As Anton Plischke phrased it, “houses make a framework for richer and fuller living” which goes far beyond the concept that a house is merely a shelter. Every country has its “own taste and thoughts, expressed in part by the kinds of houses people” live in (2005:129).

Research questions developed for discussion by the NZHPT in 2007, are largely based on pre-European Maori archaeology, however, some could equally provide questions for buildings archaeology. Seven themes were identified:

- improvement and innovation in methodology;
- constructing regional histories;
- understanding early settlement;
- people and the environment;
- sense of place;
- the archaeology of identity; and
- archaeology and New Zealand today.

The most current work, *Finding our Recent Past: Historical Archaeology in New Zealand* (Campbell et al. (eds) 2013), investigated a range of themes:

- cultural interaction
- early settlers
- household archaeology
- identity
- interconnectedness with other parts of the world

¹ For ease of discussion here, I am assuming that buildings archaeology is a subset of historic archaeology; the latter incorporating sub-surface investigation as well as above-ground structures.

- changes in industrial technology
- impact of missionaries on Maori society, and
- globalisation in New Zealand, and
- New Zealand’s distinctive archaeological record.

Research frameworks can be formulated to enable individual investigations “contribute towards broader comparative views” of community histories (Smith 2004: 260). Thus at a higher level, New Zealand historic and buildings archaeology can contribute to comparative discussions on colonisation, imperialism, cultural contact, urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation, especially in relation to other English-speaking countries (Lawrence 2013: 213).

However, one of the strengths of historic archaeology “is a focus on the particular, the fine-grained detail of common lives rather than grand narratives” (Campbell and Furey 2013:123).

More particularly, local research questions are built on what we *do* know and what we *know* we don’t know. As work in any discipline progresses – arguably modern buildings archaeology began in New Zealand the 1970s, so it is relatively recent – the dimension of what is possible becomes more apparent. These questions are also very much linked to feedback mechanisms or ‘tacking’ between hypotheses and evidence (Wylie 1989), where new findings generate new questions, sometimes modifying or adding to the initial questions which directed the investigations.

Going about it

As Smith observed, most, “excavated materials are items deliberately or accidentally discarded, but reflective of the intricate patterns of behaviour” (2004: 260). In contrast, buildings are the manifestations of behaviour, not merely reflections, and therefore have more to tell us about individuals, families and society than in-ground evidence alone. In a house, the size, shape, decoration, content and purpose of each room, together with changes over time is an indicator of the needs and social mores of the inhabitants. In addition, as Richard Morris states:

Standing buildings differ from flattened ones insofar as many of the questions that one might ask about a structure that has disappeared can be answered on sight, before work even starts (1994: 18).

Buildings are essentially about space – their form and function; and therefore the inter-relationship between spaces and their environment or surroundings define the architecture. These spaces can also be modified over time.

In addition to informing about the social aspects of a building, buildings archaeology can also contribute information about technological aspects, such as change in methods, materials and sources over time and thus, by extension, trade, economics and adaptation.

One of the advantages with buildings is that they are data-rich; there is so much that can be measured, tested, examined, stripped back. Because of this factor, the research strategy needs to be carefully developed prior to any destructive works.

Consequently, the initial evaluation of a building, or ‘parsing’, is fundamental in assessing what questions a structure can address, and how these might be prioritised through the application of a research strategy. Based on the archaeological significance and values of the buildings, the different and most appropriate levels of recording can be chosen. One of the important goals of recording should always be to gather enough information to create an archive about the building which can be used by archaeologists and researchers in the future.

Four levels of archaeological buildings recording involving drawn recording, photography and sampling have been proposed by the NZHPT in their guideline series (NZHPT 2006)². They are graded as comprehensive, extensive, selective or limited levels of recording. Different levels of recording may be appropriate for different parts of the structure depending on its significance and archaeological values.

The drawn recording of buildings can be carried out through direct or indirect methods. Direct recording involves the physical measurement of elements of a building or structure, by hand-drawn plans and elevations, or those produced using a Total Station. Indirect recording methods, such as rectified photography, photogrammetry and 3D laser scanning, involve the capture of information which can be used to produce drawings off-site. Additional information can be found in English Heritage’s *Understanding Historic Buildings* (2006), and ICOMOS New Zealand (2010)

Recent examples

There have been several recent studies of rural homesteads in Auckland and near Thames – the Scott and Westney houses in Mangere (Campbell and Furey 2007, 2013); the Field Cottage/Ockleston House in Hobsonville (Foster and Felgate 2011); and Devcich Farm in Kauaeranga (Jones 2012).

The research questions have included, examining:

- changing social and family dynamics;

² This guideline is currently being revised and updated.

- understanding settler/migrant societies, especially variation between different ethnic and religious groups;
- augmenting biographical records;
- contrasting domestic (female) with agricultural (male) space;
- contrasting public with private space; and
- tracing changing economic patterns.

These studies used a combination of historical records, phasing of the building construction, dendrochronology and in-ground archaeological deposits, all of which enabled the reading in a more nuanced way than for either source alone (Campbell and Furey 2013: 141).

The nearby Scott and Westney houses contained in-ground and structural evidence, and the phasing of the buildings allowed a separation of assemblages beneath them, which together with historical records resulted in several insights into the families' lives (Campbell and Furey 2013). The identity of both families as British immigrants was evident in their choice of ceramics in particular, but this was mediated by their religions: the Westneys were Methodists while the Scotts were Presbyterians. The relatively simple lifestyle of these subsistence farmers was evident in the lack of personal ornaments and tobacco pipes, though alcohol was consumed by the younger Westney and Scott males (when they were bachelors). On two occasions, when the Westney males married it seems that their new wives rejected the previous mistress's table settings. This may have been due to changing social networks and the necessity for being respectable with an up-to-date table setting. The important registers of identity in these analyses were found to be age/life cycle and marital status.

The Field Cottage was notable for its use of newspaper for wall linings and less dense timber of lower grade for ceiling joists and wall and ceiling linings (Foster and Felgate 2011). This parsimony may have been due to poverty or as an outward sign of Methodist frugality, as George Field was a lay-preacher. Despite this, there was a variation between the public parts of the house, which was better finished than the private parts. This might have reflected his need to express his position in class-conscious Victorian society.

This humble cottage was later extended on three occasions by the Ockleston family, the last of which showed no sign of economising. In this last phase "considerable attention was paid to appearance and style of the more public rooms ... in keeping with the position of James as a factory manager" (Foster and Felgate 2011: 101). No in-ground material was associated with this building, so that the interpretation was based on the analysis of the building itself and historical records.

Jones (2012) documents the Devcich family's retention of identification with their homeland, which was evident in their arrangement of the farmstead and the frequent use of stone revetted terracing. However, that identity was mediated by their early experience in New Zealand – exemplified by their use of local materials such as timber and corrugated iron (rather than stone) and the construction of a pole-framed building (possibly influenced by local Maori). Some aspects of identity appear to have affinities with other immigrant Dalmatian families such as winemaking, mixed farming and family-based production.

These studies of timber buildings in the Auckland region have shown three repeated patterns of behaviour, including:

- use of locally-sourced materials;
- extensive modification over short timeframes;
- reuse of materials.

Similar, or contrasting, trends may be prevalent in other regions and with other building materials, but as yet insufficient study has taken place to determine this.

Conclusion

Buildings archaeology is a relatively recent sub-discipline whose ideas are still developing. Due to this, there is great potential in relation to the specific questions that can be asked of New Zealand buildings. As can be seen in the examples above, the results can yield significant information about a variety of issues, including our sense of place, and social, religious and cultural identity. In particular, with additional historical records, buildings archaeology can provide information at the level of the individual and household.

The examples given here show a clear link between the research questions, the type of recording undertaken and the findings.

Archaeologists are well aware that not all is known about the historic period and that the use of buildings archaeology provides an additional source of information. As with in-ground archaeology the effort is repaid by a better understanding of New Zealand history.

On-going discussion of the methods and aims of buildings archaeology and how evaluation, assessment and recording are linked to a research framework becomes more urgent as half the consultancy projects carried out by NZ consultants are concerned with historic archaeology (Watson 2012): many of these projects will have contained related buildings or structures.

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