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# PEOPLE'S PASTS: REFLECTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY AND HISTORIC HERITAGE IN NEW ZEALAND

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## Introduction

The axiom that people confer value on heritage implies that any management strategy defers to the values attributed to historic heritage by the community. This paper discusses concepts of social value and the pivotal role of the community. It is argued that a conceptual and practical framework, within which locally significant heritage and community participation in its recognition, evaluation and assessment occupies a primary position, is essential for sustainable heritage management practice. But to what extent does such a framework exist in New Zealand?

This paper questions the degree to which the community<sup>1</sup> is actively engaged in the selection and assessment of historic heritage in New Zealand and proposes that the community be more meaningfully integrated into contemporary heritage management practice. Paying attention to these factors will ultimately benefit the heritage sector and the communities on behalf of whom it is managed.

Heritage is ascribed value by social process; its worth is thus a reflection of the present, as it mirrors contemporary values and ideologies. All communities retain significant associations with their heritage – people value the past and cherish its traces, tangible and intangible, important and mundane. Heritage is thus meaningful to those it benefits, both present and future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> In this discussion, a broad definition of community is proposed, inclusive of Maori and all cultural groups in Aotearoa.

The preservation of social value implies a continuation of the ongoing relationship between people and the place that creates that value. People make choices about heritage, a statement which, by implication, results in an assessment of heritage value affirming an item's worth and desirability. Emphasising the relationship between the place and the community *ipso facto* necessitates a discussion of how community views of this relationship are recognised and managed.

The unique composition of peoples and communities that shape the multicultural nature of society in New Zealand presents significant challenges in the search for an impartial and cognisant understanding of 'community' in relation to historic heritage. The fact that "the heritage sector has been slow to embrace the concept of pluralism" is an unfortunate reality (Trapeznik 2000: 15).

This paper reflects on degrees of inclusiveness in the heritage sector in relation to the community and its participation. It focuses on the key issues of locally significant heritage, its selection, evaluation and assessment by and for the community using evidence drawn from professional heritage practitioners, non-professionals and local body policy. It examines the dichotomy between the ideal of comprehensive community engagement and the reality today.

## **The situation**

The evidence on which this paper is based was obtained from three sources of information. A survey of the heritage sector in New Zealand targeted heritage practitioners (a questionnaire was sent out to 104 professionals in 2002 and a panel workshop of 65 attendees held in Auckland in 2004) and members of the public with knowledge of historic heritage (here termed 'non-professionals', results obtained from a questionnaire of 141 participants in 2004). Four comparable surveys have been carried out in the last six years (Warren & Ashton 2000; Walter 2002; Statistics New Zealand & Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2003; Marsh 2004). Secondly, evidence was derived from a conference held in 2004 focussing on assessment issues. Finally, a review of local authority assessment procedures (47 of a total of 86 territorial authorities were reviewed and five regional councils) considered the recognition of locally significant heritage and extent of community participation. This review added to previous surveys of local authority assessment process (Neave 1981; Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment 1996; Woodward 1996; McClean 2002). In sum, the outcomes, which are discussed here, highlight the discrepancy between the ideal of a community-derived and community-driven strategy, and the system existing at present.

### *Non-professional opinion*

Non-professionals show intimate knowledge of, and a passionate engagement in, the historic heritage of New Zealand. They have a highly developed awareness of the multiple facets of heritage, display common sense attitudes signifying an understanding of heritage issues grounded in an uncomfortable reality and first-hand experience of the challenges, rather than an idealised view of the past based on a transferred British ancestry.

Their opinions confirm that historic heritage contributes to cultural life and has both a personal and contemporary relevance. It is highly regarded and, while historic buildings feature prominently in people's minds as embodying the traditional face of New Zealand heritage, locally significant sites and oral history also occupy a conspicuous place. Local places make heritage meaningful to local people, for it is the heritage on people's doorsteps which has the potential to inspire, engage emotions and stimulate energies. Locally significant heritage helps define and foster a sense of community, permanency and belonging, as one respondent said, "heritage gives a sense of permanency, stability and pride in one's community." Historic heritage is thus all things to many people. It is subjective and speaks to the emotions; it helps explain the past, define the present and qualifies the future; it enriches both personal and national identity. People value it highly and are prepared to pay to protect and conserve it. Indeed, it may well be that globalisation and the ensuing feelings of rapid change and instability may be responsible for causing people to seek permanency nearer home in their own neighbourhood.

The diversity and locality of historic heritage is keenly appreciated. People value the past, in their street and in their neighbourhood, for many reasons: because it enriches the environment, enhances quality of life and can enlighten and inform as a key to the past and a resource for future generations. Heritage owes much of its significance to public perception – people's personal beliefs and values matter; indeed, it atrophies in the absence of public support (Lowenthal 2000). "Currently it seems too easy for people to ignore historic places particularly when local housing is concerned. The penalties are not adequate" is one comment.

Local heritage is highly valued – rated a close third in a survey of opinion after historic buildings and archaeological sites. People value the humble features that are frequently overlooked in a perceived emphasis on places of national importance. Local heritage embodies local values as demonstrated by the creation of the 'Treasury' archive centre at Thames and the proposed history of Waitakere City, Auckland, a community initiative drawn from a collation of local histories. Personal narratives articulate the social aspect of historic heritage and it has a spatial dimension extending beyond individual

sites and buildings, to encompass the totality of the historic environment. Non-professionals, indicative of the local community of interest, thus desire to be fully engaged in the evaluation and assessment of historic heritage.

### *Professional opinion*

Heritage professionals also acknowledge the significance of local heritage. They consider it important to have regard to places of regional and local significance through an assessment strategy that honours local as well as national and international values. Local authorities, they suggest, need to support and encourage community action using local people and local knowledge and, in the words of one practitioner, “link with community plans, district and regional plans to integrate with other environmental and wider social, economic issues.”

With regard to assessment, some practitioners recommend statutory valuation criteria that would be applicable to all agencies (both national and local) involved in the assessment of historic heritage. However, most appear to favour a system weighted to reflect differing local values at community level, yet without compromising national standards – as one expert comments, “consistent national criteria for assessment but with flexibility to incorporate local context, significance or importance.” Indeed, considerable concern is expressed for the dangers of an overly prescriptive process and that it may appear dogmatic at local level. Any system needs to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate regional and local differences. One suggestion is for guidelines rather than statutory standards, as national standards can limit innovation and often lead to wrong results. “Applying uniform set standards is a good theoretical goal – however, it can be limiting when allowing for local concerns: what is locally significant may not rate very high on a national standard.” Another expert comments:

A nationally significant list is straightforward. But I am not sure whether it is necessary or desirable to have a single system for regional or local heritage. The system will depend on what the local community values most, and also the ‘maturity’ of the community’s appreciation of heritage and input from the local community. In the transition to valuing and protecting historic heritage, an emphasis in the earlier stages on aesthetics and streetscape ... may be more important, since at first this may be what the community most easily understands and appreciates ... For a local /regional evaluation I think a guideline would be good, where the TLA could take what was useful out of it but adapting it for their local needs.

Professionals confirm a feeling of general willingness among communities to work with heritage agencies, noting the success of local initiatives

and community projects building on the strengths of smaller groups. There is a need for the empowerment of smaller groups and the introduction of a more holistic approach as embodied in the concept 'a sense of place.' The idea of community culture mapping incorporated into Long Term Community Council Plans (LTCCPs) is also suggested.

Negative comment focuses on the disconnection of the heritage process from the community. Inconsistencies are apparent between community and professional perceptions of significance. On the one hand, communities feel that heritage agencies are not sufficiently representative of their wishes while representatives from heritage agencies comment on the lack of support among local communities. The tendency for heritage of local significance to be overridden by large infrastructure projects and the lack of local heritage studies by councils is also referred to.

There is comment on the disparate extent to which heritage is valued/ understood/ accessible to the community:

Community input gives a sense of ownership and pride ... most people in NZ are proud of their heritage but frequently lack the expertise to identify it. Once it is identified, they value it.

Other remarks reflect on the lack of heritage consciousness in communities and note the dearth of public education about the benefits of retaining heritage. Public participation in the evaluation process is often minimal because "a dangerous majority of the public don't care." Communities often lack a wider knowledge of heritage issues: "This can lead to a place being under-valued in its regional or national context; or particular aspects of value to a limited group being over-valued." As one respondent comments:

It is important to be aware of the potential of historic heritage and the views of an informed public. Too often, the system makes assumptions about the extent of what's important, thus imposing limitations on the potential suite of historic heritage resources. (This is a default position, largely due to a lack of public knowledge and appreciation).

Indeed, in practice, it is noted that the views of local interest groups may not be representative of the whole community but merely represent those of a more organised and vocal minority.

Professionals feel that the voice of the community must be affirmed and the prominence of locally significant heritage elevated, for "heritage gives the community a sense of pride and identity." Greater engagement and consultation with the local community and tangata whenua are noted as a priority. A 'bottom up' approach starting with community initiatives is suggested with the aim of being as inclusive and comprehensive as possible. A clearly articu-

lated trend is the requirement to empower the community and encourage a sense of ownership and engagement in the heritage process.

### *Local authority process*

The quality of procedures at local authority level appears variable from proactive authorities, in particular, the better-resourced city and certain regional councils, with heritage strategies firmly in place, to authorities paying little regard to locally significant heritage or inviting community participation. Some schedules allow local authorities, who have devised their own methodologies, to assess a wider range of historic heritage and thus give more weight to locally significant heritage.

In contrast, other local authorities have minimal or no listing of their own locally significant heritage. As one professional comments: “Local authority registers have the potential to be far more comprehensive at a local level than the Historic Places Register, but through lack of funding, skills or caring, they do not always take advantage of this capacity.”

One professional explains the methodology in place within their local authority that encourages both community and professional collaboration:

Our current register is not representative of the development of the area. To reassess our heritage, we will rely on a set of accepted consistent criteria as the base line and reference – these will draw from the Trust criteria and the Burra Charter. We will then look at introducing a set of themes that cover development / settlement areas ... this will form our framework. On top of that we will approach the community for input into places they consider significant. These will be fitted into the framework. Professionals will be asked to complete the assessments.

Overall, professionals acknowledge the need to place greater emphasis on the expression of community values and the empowerment of community groups via the district planning process.

### *Community engagement*

Participation is the key. Assessment is a collective process, inclusive of all stakeholders, which works in tandem with, rather than is controlled by, professional opinion and judgement. It is vital to encourage collaborative assessments by diverse individuals and stakeholder groups to ensure a variety of knowledge and experience among members of an assessment panel. Community opinion inclusive of tangata whenua should be sought wherever and whenever possible to ensure the final decision is representative, authoritative and reflects stakeholder interests. A broadly-based consultative process, combining both professional and community interests and involvement,

is clearly preferred by professionals, although with the proviso that raising community awareness and consciousness of heritage values is a key role of the professionals:

This process should be led by professionals with an understanding that the intrinsic values of heritage are often not recognised by current community or research interests.

Professionals are best able to assess the likely value of heritage over the long term and help educate the community into recognising new values.

The consensus appears to favour a professional, multidisciplinary assessment for places of national significance with appropriate stakeholder input, while places of regional and local significance are assessed by the community with appropriate expert advice. To what extent is this model practised in reality?

Any individual, group or organisation in New Zealand may democratically nominate a heritage place, although the perception remains one of professional assessment, largely to the exclusion of community preference. The success of initiatives such as the Trusts's Rangitikei-Ruapehu (New Zealand Historic Places Trust 2003) and Hawke's Bay (New Zealand Historic Places Trust 2004) pilot projects highlights a potentially greater role for the community and tangata whenua in the identification of places that have heritage value for communities, their nomination, their assessment and overall decision-making.

There is considerably less support for the options of having the assessment process led either exclusively by professionals or by the community. On this point, opinions are starkly polarised:

There is a view (amongst some professionals) that local community or 'grass roots' knowledge is trivial, anecdotal and best ignored in preference to published academic and scientific-based evidence.

On the other hand, another candidly remarks that some cultural groups view 'professional' assessment and evaluation as "arbitrary and white middle class conservative."

There is a strongly articulated wish by both experts and non-experts to engage the community in the heritage management process to a far greater extent than exists at present. The trend towards more significant and meaningful forms of community involvement, with the heritage professional increasingly acting in an advisory and facilitative capacity, is clear. Although professional and non-professional attitudes towards heritage values may differ, such differences are more a matter of degree than direction. Heritage managers must actively manage what the wider community values and encourage community consultation and involvement.



## Conclusions

People identify strongly with places that tell the story of their lives, both past and present, for it is said that we need to know where we came from to understand where we are going. The identification and assessment of local historic heritage in a credible manner is key to its acceptance and celebration by stakeholders. Heritage imparts a sense of pride and identity to communities who esteem places of local significance. This is less a simplistic view of heritage than a return to genuine values unaffected by academic debate or political compromise.

The recognition and appreciation of historic heritage in New Zealand is alive and well, and there is a patent desire for community involvement in its identification, selection and assessment. The success of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust pilot projects attests to this and indicates the potential for further initiatives of this nature.

However, there are questions over the degree of genuine community participation in the heritage process and the extent to which the system is a true expression of community values. The evidence suggests that community participation is variable due to the lack of any consistent strategy regarding responsibility for nomination, evaluation or assessment on the one hand, and the relative input from experts and the community to determine heritage of national, regional and local significance on the other. Clear guidelines are needed and particularly so for local authorities. A greater degree of inclusiveness will overcome present community feelings of disempowerment and exclusion.

Historical process is moving towards vesting more authority for managing heritage in local authorities. Some good practice by regional authorities and the better-resourced city councils is apparent in New Zealand, however, there are major variations and inconsistencies in local authority procedures which hamper their ability to promote historic heritage to the communities they serve. Current strategies do not appear to promote effective involvement with communities. Local authorities presently lack the means to recognise and competently fulfil their heritage responsibilities under the Resource Management Act 1991 (and its 2003 amendments) – a significant challenge in terms of the progressive devolution of responsibility to local authorities in the present political climate. Overall, the capacity of local authorities to effectively manage their responsibilities, particularly with regard to locally significant heritage and community participation in its selection and assessment, is debateable.

Conventional approaches to historic heritage tend to focus on heritage symbolic of entire communities and emphasise national or civic histories.

While this may be appropriate for certain sectors of the population such as mobile urban residents, it tends to ignore the sectional interests of a modern pluralist and multicultural society. It is argued that historical thought in New Zealand has focussed more on process and protection than the significance of historic heritage in people's experience and daily lives. The current focus on fabric and use value, on iconic sites and places, while visually appealing in their splendid familiarity, affords a less-than-adequate recognition of the concept of social significance and the importance of community values. It is suggested that the importance of the social and cultural context of historic heritage be accorded greater distinction than the value of a place and its fabric as occurs at present. Local ownership of historic heritage must be encouraged and community preference receive the prominence it deserves in decision-making. The recognition of such wider, publicly-identified values, which harmonise more with living traditions, may also provide a means of *rapprochement* between Maori and non-Maori ideologies.

Heritage has the potential to add a cultural dimension to the conservation debate. Population trends are having a perceptible impact on the cultural make-up of New Zealand. The increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of the country, particularly in terms of Asian and Pacific peoples, will inevitably impact on the way historic heritage is perceived and valued by these groups, together with a desire that heritage indicative of their cultures be acknowledged and celebrated. It is proposed that heritage be defined in a manner more responsive to the values held by all communities in New Zealand today, in ways fully representative of the diversity of New Zealand's rich and unique heritage environment.

Historic heritage must be viewed as a collective responsibility wherein the recognition of all values in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner is ensured and the collective wisdom of all communities is engaged. It is salutary to recall that it is people whose appreciation confers value on historic heritage – theirs must be the voice that determines what is regarded as significant. Their choices must therefore be considered paramount in this dialogue. The worth of heritage, exclusively determined in the past by experts on behalf of society, is increasingly recognised as a quality to be determined collectively, through the participation of all who treasure it.

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