Heritage Preservation, Conservation and/or Restoration: Old Government Buildings in the 1990s

Tasmin Falconer, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

ABSTRACT: In the 1990s, a $25 million project under the management of the Department of Conservation restored the "largest wooden office building in the Southern Hemisphere," converting it into the home of the Victoria University of Wellington School of Law. The restoration project took roughly the same length of time as the original construction. This paper will present the 1990s work on Old Government Buildings as a case study of heritage practice in the 1990s. We will discuss aspects such as the retention of the heritage lift, the reinstatement of "chimneys" using 1990s construction techniques, use of native timbers, and the decisions made on replication, restoration and strengthening that may or may not be made differently today.

Old Government Buildings up to the 1990s

In early 1875, tenders were called for construction of the new Central Government Offices designed by William Clayton, Colonial Architect.[1] Famously designed to give the appearance of stone, but to be constructed out of timber, they were built to house much (but not all) of the public service.[2] The first department moved in only 14 months later, with the building fully occupied by the end of 1876.[3] The final cost of construction was well over budget at a cost of £39,703.[4]

The buildings quickly became known as the Government Buildings, housing a large portion of not only the public service, but also ministerial offices and the Cabinet Room. Over time, government departments waxed and waned with changes in structures and size, so that by the late 1980s the only government department remaining in the building was the Education Department,[5] with other government departments occupying a range of Crown and non-Crown-owned properties around Wellington.

Although there was a range of work done over time, by the 1970s there was a need for more significant work and the Cabinet Works Committee approved the preservation and refurbishment of Government Buildings in 1976, "with a view to another 100 years use."[6] Some work was done following the Cabinet decision, including "one of the biggest repiling jobs on a timber structure anywhere in the world,"[7] but as the building remained occupied the envisaged 100-year restoration was not completed, and neither were the new foundations adequately tied to the superstructure.[8]

By 1990 the need for work on the buildings had become significant with guttering and downpipe problems, some windows broken and/or boarded up, uneven floors and stairs with missing balusters and broken treads among other issues. The Conservation Plan summarised the condition by stating that "now that the buildings are not occupied it is likely that it will deteriorate more quickly."[9]

Context

When the Conservation Plan for Government Buildings was commissioned in 1991, the framework that heritage projects operated

[1] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 25.
[2] McLean letter to Kelly. 24 July 1995.
[3] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 25.
[4] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 25.
[5] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 52.
[6] Cabinet Works Committee minutes 19 November 1976 quoted, Bowman *Government Buildings* p 41.
[7] McEldowney "Big renovation job" p 17.
[8] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 43.
[9] Bowman *Government Buildings* pp 179-180.

under was quite different from today. The Historic Places Act dated from 1980, the Resource Management Act was brand new, and the Health & Safety in Employment Act was a year away. The Historic Places Trust was a very small organisation with active branch committees but very few staff, and although the Public Works Department no longer existed, the Conservation Plan work was contracted to an organisation called "Works Consultancy Services."

Commentary on Fire Safety in the Conservation Plan illustrates some of the changes that were under way:

> The buildings are currently owned by the Crown and, with certain exceptions, are therefore not bound to comply with current building by-laws. … This situation is likely to change in 1992 when the Building Act is expected to come into force. It is expected that Crown owned buildings will be required to comply, however, the exact requirements for compliance under the new Act are not certain.[10]

Despite the constraints in government budgets following the 1987 stockmarket crash, "in 1992 the biggest heritage building conservation project undertaken in New Zealand began when work commenced on strengthening and refurbishing Parliament House and the Parliamentary Library." The project, which was completed in 1995 ended up costing approximately $175 million.[11] The Department of Conservation was also managing restoration and strengthening at Turnbull House at the same time.[12]

Planning for the project

The Department of Conservation was given responsibility for the management of the Government Buildings and the oversight of the restoration project.[13] One of the first tangible steps appears to have been the commission of the Conservation Plan in 1991.

The scope of work was comprehensive, including foundation work, structural strengthening, plaster work, extensive joinery restoration and upgrading of services. Most of the contemporary documentation describes the work as being guided by the Conservation Plan, which identified 1907 as the appropriate cut-off date for restoration. The principal architect for the project was Works Consultancy Services, Woods Consultancy Services were the project managers, Howard Tanner and Associates were the conservation consultants, and the building was handed over to contractors McKee Fehl Constructors Ltd in mid-1994.[14]

Case Studies

In order to illustrate the heritage practices in the Government Buildings project, this paper focuses on the approach to four building elements. With respect to each of these, we focus on the Conservation Plan as guidance, the comprehensive construction documentation, and some archival records to illustrate the aspirations, reality and review of the practice.

One of the key resources for the following case studies is the documentation project completed by Michael Kelly and Tony Kellaway, supported by Rod Cook (conservation consultant). It was "Michael Kelly's job to record the conservation processes being used, perhaps so another generation of restorers in 100 years know how the buildings were cared for in 1994/95."[15]

[10] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 184.

[11] "Doing up the House" np.

[12] Department of Conservation "Department of Conservation" p 1.

[13] Department of Conservation "Preserving the past" p 1.

[14] Department of Conservation "Preserving the past" p 1.

[15] Department of Conservation "Restoration work gathers pace" p 2.

Case Study 1: Chimneys

The first case study considers the chimneys and how they illustrate the continuity of dilemmas in heritage decision-making.

The Government Buildings were constructed with open fires as the means of heating, with 126 fireplaces, utilising 22 chimneys.[16] Each chimney had a varied number of flues, including 68 that "were not used for smoke extraction … and were instead employed as ventilation ducts."[17]

Even before the building was built, the timber construction brought concern about fire,[18] and this ongoing concern drove both the original design and modifications over time. The first chimneys were demolished in 1895,[19] and the building converted from open fire heating to a coal fired hot water radiator system, meaning the flues were redundant by 1926.[20] Following damage in the 1929 Murchison earthquake, in February of 1930, a report was written recommending the removal of all chimneys in the buildings. The removal of chimneys down to third floor level was actioned promptly following the 1931 Napier Earthquake.[21]

Figure 1: General view of chimneys on south wing roof during installation. Photograph 140795-165-22 "Conservation Record Form no. 145/2/2 Fireplaces/chimneys (20 October 1995)" File No. 13002-232 Ba Vol.1i, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

The 1992 Conservation Plan recommended reinstatement of the chimneys, recommending that those that remained to the level of the third-floor ceiling should be reinstated in plastered brick, with the remainder being reinstated using lightweight construction. On the interior, "chimney breasts could be

[16] Kelly "Government Buildings (Former)" np.
[17] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 145"
[18] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 23.
[19] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 145"
[20] Pace "Condition Report" p 4.
[21] PW 24/392 part 2 quoted, Bowman *Government Buildings* p 35.

reinstated in timber framing and plaster lining."[22]

In documenting the 1990s work, Michael Kelly noted that the

> chimney stacks capped the building in a most conspicuous fashion. There were 22 stacks at the time the building was built and from any angle they were a very prominent feature. Their final removal in 1931 irrevocably altered the dynamics of the building's appearance.[23]

Even at the time, "Public Works architects and engineers debated about reinstating dummy chimneys to maintain a stylistic continuity."[24] This discussion re-emerged in the 1990s, and it was noted that the conservation would ensure that:

> Chimney stacks will also be returned to the building and to the exact place they once occupied. These will also be mock structures – timber framed and clad in plywood, building paper and polystyrene and covered in metal reinforced cement plaster – and will simulate the original stacks. [25]

As hindsight has made clear, this emblematic 1990s construction method has not proved to match the aspiration that they "must ensure minimum 100 year life, and adequate waterproofing."[26] Even during the construction project, a photograph shows "Rod Cook, conservation architect, photographing [a] crack in [a] newly installed chimney."[27]

There was some contemporary criticism of the chimneys, with a well-known heritage expert stating that:

> [p]erhaps the most controversial work has been the fitting of the replica chimneys. I shall leave the matters of materials etc to the conservation architects to debate. However, it could also be argued that the use of such fake gewgaws is entirely in keeping with the history and style of a wooden building designed to resemble one made from a stone![28]

It was also noted that the

> reinstatement of the chimneys will not match the appearance of the building in 1907. There were no chimneys in the eastern portion of the building by then.[29]

However, it is also important to note that not all the chimneys are actually mock structures, as several of them do provide ventilation to the building via ducts,[30] something that was recommended by the Conservation Plan[31] and has historical continuity with the original construction.

Twenty-five years later, the discussion on the value of the chimneys as mock structures has re-emerged, as Heritage New Zealand plans for roof remedial work.[32] The chimney structures appear to be associated with leaks,[33] and the open tops of the chimneys that are associated with ventilation bring water into a tray system in the centre of the building, bringing a risk of overflow into ducting and other services.[34] The debate continues about the value of replica chimneys to satisfy aesthetic values, while their maintenance compromises functional values and their presence complicates the understanding of the changing services in the building.

[22] Bowman *Government Buildings* pp 209-210.
[23] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 145"
[24] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 70"
[25] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 145"
[26] Howard Tanner & Associates Pty Ltd "Government Buildings, Wellington"
[27] Photograph 170895-170-12 in [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 150"
[28] McLean, letter to Kelly. 24 July 1995.
[29] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 70"
[30] photograph 140795-165-11 in [Kelly] "Conservation Record Form no. 145/2/1"
[31] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 228.
[32] Pace "Condition Report" p 1.
[33] Eremenyi *Using Laser Scanners & Drones* pp 27-32.
[34] Pace "Condition Report" p 10.

Case Study 2: Structural strengthening

The second case study considers structural strengthening and how significant changes in engineering knowledge have influenced thinking with respect to heritage buildings.

Following the 1976 Cabinet decision to refurbish the building, some work was completed in the 1980s, notably on the foundations and subfloor framing. The Conservation Plan notes that the upgrading work was

> essentially completed to good engineering standards ... [but] the buildings' superstructure currently is not adequately connected to this foundation system so it is unable to resist lateral loads from a strong earthquake.[35]

With this in mind it is perhaps surprising that the Conservation Plan states that a guiding principle should be "the retention of structural integrity."[36]

Although the Conservation Plan noted that there was "no regulatory requirement for strengthening,"[37] it is clear that some structural work was considered critical. The substantial discussion on strengthening

Figure 2: Architraves produced from recycled kauri. Photograph 030495-128-03 "Conservation Record Form no. 200-60-c Timber: Running of joinery (10 May 1995)" File No. 13002-232 Ba Vol.1j, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

included in the Conservation Plan drew on international advice in suggesting that seismic strengthening should be designed on the basis of a 100-year return period earthquake. Further, it also suggested that:

> interventions that can be undertaken in stages … and that can be repeated, reinforced, or reversed as necessary, are preferable to those that are irreversible, "once and for all," and call for a complete advance commitment to a single course of action.[38]

The idea of iterative intervention rather than full protection by strengthening beyond code minima seems on the face of it to be very different to the approach of base isolation taken at the Parliamentary Library at the same time. This approach is one that would be

[35] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 43.
[36] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 227.
[37] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 194.
[38] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 177.

much less palatable in the 2020s, given the potential for cumulative impact on the heritage values from an iterative approach.

However, the restoration project did incorporate an interesting example of structural strengthening that was designed to be reversible. As the project had a long-term tenant in mind, it was known that libraries would be incorporated in the building. The locations for the libraries were chosen to ensure that the larger spaces they required could be incorporated with the minimum intervention. The significant weight of the library books meant that additional strengthening was required. This was designed specifically to bear the weight and to allow removal if the usage of the building changed and the weight demands were therefore reduced.[39]

Case Study 3: Timber

The third case study looks at decision-making around the extent of reconstruction and restoration, by focusing on the timberwork.

One of the features of the 1990s restoration work was the timber work. As one would expect from a building at times known as the "Wooden Government Buildings," "timber is the pre-eminent building material ... the vast majority of the building is timber in one form or another."[40]

The Conservation Plan recommended restoration of missing elements from the 1876-1907 period including, in the interior, "missing cornices, picture rails, architraves, skirtings, dados, dado rails, glazing to doors, doors and window and door hardware."[41] There is no specific discussion regarding the use of particular timber species, especially where they might have become rare in the intervening years, but a general principle of using similar materials. The restoration project used demolition timber where original material could not be kept or new components were required. The Department of Conservation update newsletter explained that:

> Kauri timber is not in plentiful supply and the Woods Consulting Group, who are managing the restoration work on behalf of the Department of Conservation, has been obliged to scour the country seeking out good quality demolition timber that can be cut, machined and dressed to replace damaged or lost areas of flooring and joinery.
>
> By the end of the job much of the interior kauri timber will have come from the old Whangarei Post Office and Whangarei Hotel, the Devonport naval base, the Westfield freezing works in Auckland, the Gisborne freezing works, the Forbury Park trotting grandstand in Dunedin and the DIC department store in Dunedin. … The Department of Conservation has been keen not to require any further reduction of our precious stands of kauri forest.[42]

By the conclusion of the project, blades had been specially made to create the required joinery profiles,[43] and up to 600 cubic metres of kauri[44] had been used, at a cost of over $1 million.[45] This material alone represented approximately 5% of the total cost of construction.

The quantity of kauri used in the project is a telling indication of the amount of new work that the restoration project included. For instance, "only 40% of the dado panelling is original and ... not all of that material has necessarily been returned to the original

[39] Redmond *Government Buildings* 30min 10s

[40] [Kelly] "Base Information Record Form no. 200"

[41] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 228.

[42] Department of Conservation "Kauri recycled for building" p 3.

[43] [Kelly] "Conservation Record Form no. 200-50."

[44] Powell "Restored Elegance" p 48.

[45] "Government Buildings Project Manager's Report."

locations"[46] and

> the extent of disassembly evident in the treatment of joinery … and the frequent reassigning of material to different locations on the building, have irrevocably changed the as-built and the as-found workmanship.[47]

One conservation expert commented that it "seemed to me that there is such extensive reconstruction – much of it warranted by code requirements – that the project overall cannot be regarded as a conservation work."[48]

Case Study 4: Māori perspectives

The final case study focuses on the element of the restoration project that reflected Māori perspectives on the building and its history. It is a case study of absence.

In 1873, the Colonial Architect invited tenders for reclaiming just over two acres of land from Te Whanganui a Tara to create the site for the building.[49] This area of the foreshore was where a number of significant streams (including Pipitea, Waipiro and Kumutoto) reached the harbour.[50]

As the offices for much of the apparatus of central government, including departments such as Lands and Survey, Education and Public Works,[51] the building was the site of decision-making for Crown-Māori relations for more than 110 years. It also, for a time, was the home of the Treaty of Waitangi, which Dr Thomas Hocken found in the basement in 1908.[52]

The Conservation Plan recommended that the building be interpreted, to include "the physical, social and political history and associations of the building and site."[53] In the history section it notes that one of the original tenants of the building was the Native Department, and it also initially housed offices for the Native Minister, the Commissioner of Native Lands and the Native Lands Judges.[54] The plan also notes significant legislation, such as the Native Reserves Act 1882, but nowhere does it even mention the significance of this work for Māori, let alone describe Māori perspectives, or key Māori staff who worked there. For instance, while Sir Āpirana Ngata was Minister of Native Affairs from 1928-34, his department was housed in the Government Buildings. There is also no acknowledgement of mana whenua, or the history of the harbour on which the building stands.

Likewise, the interpretive plan for the public displays includes mentions of Native/Māori Affairs but nothing about Māori perspectives or mana whenua custodianship and history.[55]

Conclusions

The Government Buildings project in 1990-95 was a massive and comprehensive restoration project, taking as long to complete as the original construction of the building. It was largely guided by a comprehensive Conservation Plan, which drew on international guidance. The conservation, restoration and preservation decisions represented in the project exhibit both continuity with conservation practice today, and some significant shifts.

[46] McLean. letter to Mansfield, 5 September 1995.
[47] [Confidential] letter to Kelly. 24 July 1995.
[48] Salmond. fax to Kelly, 1 September 1995. These comments were given in a discussion regarding whether the Government Buildings could meet the standard to be proposed as a World Heritage Site, though this subject alone was not the decisive impediment to a proposal.
[49] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 20.
[50] Andersen "Courses of the Wellington streams" np.
[51] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 51.
[52] *The Journey of the Treaty* p 10.
[53] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 233.
[54] Bowman *Government Buildings* p 51.
[55] Conservation Design Centre "Government Buildings Report: Scope of Works"

Two of the case studies included here represent a sense of continuity. The decision to "restore" the chimney forms to the building represents continuity not just with heritage practice today, but with consideration of the same aesthetic values a century ago. The extent of timber restoration in the building and the use of reclamation kauri timber on a massive scale is in some sense continuity with the massive use of kauri in the original construction, while at the same time pointing to the extent of contemporary demolitions in the 1990s, and the increased awareness of scarcity of native timber since the 1990s.

The other two case studies point to changing knowledge and approaches in heritage projects. The structural strengthening of the building appears to have been approached in a much more minimal and iterative way, with the 100-year risk a relatively low aspiration for the longevity of the building. This case study highlights how the development of earthquake engineering has influenced heritage practice in the years since the 1990s. The final case study highlights the absence of Te Ao Māori from the heritage thinking of the time, something that still has a long way to go to be a core part of New Zealand's heritage practice, but has had some change in the intervening years.

It is a hopeful thing to see both continuity and change in heritage practice over the last 25 years. We have both held on to heritage values and adapted to new understandings.

REFERENCES

Andersen, Johannes Carl "Courses of the Wellington streams, plates 3 and 4" [ms map]. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Ref: MapColl-832.4799cdc/A/ca.1940/Acc.3783-84.

Bowman, Ian *Government Buildings Conservation Plan For the Department of Conservation* Works and Development Services Corporation (NZ) Ltd, February 1992.

[Confidential] letter to Michael Kelly, Department of Conservation, 24 July, 1995. File No. 12009-079 v 7, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Conservation Design Centre "Government Buildings Report: Scope of Works Indicative Estimates" 3 March 1995, Department of Conservation. File No. 13002-232G Vol.1e, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Department of Conservation "Department of Conservation: Conserving our heritage" *Government Buildings Update* (December 1994) 2:1

Department of Conservation "Kauri recycled for building" *Government Buildings Update* (July 1995) 4:3

Department of Conservation "Preserving the past by giving it a future" *Government Buildings Update* (August 1994) 1:1

Department of Conservation "Restoration work gathers pace" *Government Buildings Update* (August 1994) 1:2

"Doing up the House" *New Zealand History* (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 16 July 2014) https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/parliament-buildings/doing-up

Eremenyi, Tatiana *Using Laser Scanners & Drones to Document Heritage Buildings: Old Government Building* Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington and Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 2020.

"Government Buildings Project Manager's Report to 24 November 1995" Project Control Group Meeting No. 29, 30 November 1995, File No. 12009-079 v 10, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Howard Tanner & Associates Pty Ltd "Government Buildings, Wellington, Conservation and Heritage Review and Policies" Revised August 1993. File No. 12009-079 v 7, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

The Journey of the Treaty Wellington: The Treaty of Waitangi Information Programme, State Services Commission, 2005.

[Kelly, Michael] "Base Information Record Form no. 70 Roof (10 May 1995)" *Government Buildings Conservation Record 1994 - 96* File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1f, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

[Kelly, Michael] "Base Information Record Form no. 145 Chimneys/fireplaces (20 October 1995)" *Government Buildings Conservation Record 1994 - 96* File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1i, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

[Kelly, Michael] "Base Information Record Form no. 150 Miscellaneous (1 March 1996)" *Government Buildings Conservation Record 1994 - 96* File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1i, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

[Kelly, Michael] "Base Information Record Form no. 200 Timber (17 May 1995)" *Government Buildings Conservation Record 1994 - 96* File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1j, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

[Kelly, Michael] "Conservation Record Form no. 145/2/1 Fireplaces/chimneys (25 July 1995)" *Government Buildings Conservation Record 1994 - 96* File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1i, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

[Kelly, Michael] "Conservation Record Form no. 200-50 Timber: Moulding/replica joinery (10 May 1995)" *Government Buildings*

Conservation Record File No. 13002-232 Ba v 1j, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Kelly, Michael "Government Buildings (Former)" Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 25th October 2001, https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/37

McEldowney, Lance "Big renovation job underway on historic Government Building in Wellington" *New Zealand Engineering* (August 1983) 38(7):17-21.

McLean, Gavin, letter to Bill Mansfield "World Heritage Site Status, Government Buildings" Department of Conservation, 5 September, 1995. File No. 12009-079 v 10, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

McLean, Gavin, letter to Michael Kelly, Department of Conservation, 24 July, 1995. File No. 12009-079 v 7, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Pace, Ronald "Condition Report Old Government Buildings" July 2020. File No. 13002-232B, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.

Powell, Mary "Restored Elegance" *BUILD* (December 1996):48-49.

Redmond, K.J. [producer/director] *Government Buildings: The restoration period 1994-1996* [DVD] Kenzo & Associates Ltd for Department of Conservation, 2011.

Salmond, Jeremy. fax to Michael Kelly, Department of Conservation, 1 September, 1995. File No. 12009-079 v 10, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, Wellington.