

## IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A HISTORIC SETTING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY METROPOLIS? —ST JOHN’S HERITAGE AREA, A CASE STUDY

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### Introduction

In 1998 when my husband and I were visiting family in Greece we were having dinner one night and the topic of museums came up. We had, the previous day, been to the National Archaeological Museum in Athens and were comparing its vast and ancient collection, most of which was still displayed in glass boxes with small typed labels, with the new, interactive collection based approach being developed by the Museum of New Zealand - Te Papa Tongarewa which was then under construction. When I told one of my cousin’s about the estimated cost of the new museum, nearly half a billion US dollars, he turned to me and said “Do you have such a thing as history in your country?” He could not comprehend that a country as young as New Zealand could have amassed a collection of artefacts and the stories that go with them when it had only been occupied for 700 years and that they could warrant such a large amount of money being spent on displaying and interpreting them.

It is difficult to explain to someone from a place where archaeologists are searching for the first human occupation sites that there is indeed such a thing as history in a country that has been occupied for merely 700 years. Human history and the places, artefacts and stories that make up that history do not have to belong to a prehistoric or historic past that is remote and distant and unobtainable. In a country as young as New Zealand, its history can be considered contemporary. Many of the places, stories and artefacts are contained within the memories of those still living. While only odd remnants of the places that the first settlers built remain, there are also extant buildings and places that each subsequent generation has created or adapted. Together these places provide important links to the past which can still, for many, be easily identified, located or recalled. They can be both familiar and at the same time remote. They provide us with our sense of place however transitory that may be.

What is left has survived the economic booms and busts of the last 150 years. To some extent, our maturity as a nation is reflected in what we have managed to hold on to. But those places that we value and have kept are invariably isolated in ever-changing landscapes that metamorphose to accommodate the growing needs of an expanding and demanding population. In our scramble to save the few buildings that we have, we have failed to recognise the need to protect the context around them.

The history of such a young country is also dynamic. This is nowhere more evident than in downtown Wellington, New Zealand which has changed dramatically since the first settlers arrived in 1840 (see Figure 1 *Water colour by Christopher Aubrey is a panorama of Wellington in 1889 from the Brooklyn hills showing the spires of St John’s and St Peter’s in the distance ATL C-030-025*). It has been transformed from a semi-rural English village idyll comprising a collection of small wooden commercial, residential and ecclesiastical buildings scattered around the shores of the harbour and set amidst the remains of Maori gardens and cleared forest remnants, to a city dominated by concrete and glass edifices that tower above the remnant spires of the 19th century. The fields and dirt tracks replaced with buildings and tarsealed roads and pavements.

While the historical setting of both the original Maori inhabitants and the early European settlers has been annihilated the geographical setting has remained the same, a regular grid laid over an irregular topography.<sup>1</sup> The physical and natural remnants of what remains have been almost completely reconstructed, reconfigured and relocated over the intervening years transformed to accommodate the needs and demands of an expanding population within an area that is delineated by hills and a harbour.

*The ICOMOS New Zealand Charter For The Conservation Of Places Of Cultural Heritage Value (ICOMOS NZ Charter)* has identified as one of its general

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bosselmann, Urbanism Down Under Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, August 2005

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principles that *'the historical setting of a place should be conserved with the place itself. If the historical setting no longer exists, construction of a setting based on physical and documentary evidence should be the aim. The extent of the appropriate setting may be affected by constraints other than heritage value.'*<sup>2</sup>

This paper considers the relevance of this principle in the 21st century urban environment. In particular it discusses whether there is such a thing as a historic setting – how do we define it, and once defined can it be protected or enhanced. St John's Heritage Area in downtown Wellington, New Zealand is used as a case study to illustrate the relevance of this principle in the 21st century urban environment.

### **Defining a historic setting in urban Wellington**

The ICOMOS NZ Charter refers to the historical setting of a place but provides no definition of historical setting. There is also no definition of historical setting in the Historic Places Act 1993 or the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). These two Acts are the main pieces of legislation that provide for the identification and protection of New Zealand's built heritage. The importance of the setting or surroundings of a historic place however is identified in the RMA particularly in terms of section s6(f) which, in its definition of historic heritage includes *(iv) surroundings associated with the natural and physical resources*. No definition of surroundings is provided although the importance of protecting the surroundings of a heritage place have been highlighted in a recent decision in the Environment Court in New Zealand which found that *there is a clear presumption in the RMA that the surroundings of a historic place are important qualities that should be recognised and provided for. (Oriental Parade (Clyde Quay) Planning Society v Wellington City Council Decision No. W63/2005)*.

There is no definition of historic setting provided in the Wellington City Council District Plan 2000 which is a statutory document prepared in accordance with the RMA 1991 to manage land use and development in the city. The District Plan includes policies and rules which determine how heritage places should be protected from inappropriate subdivision, development and use. The rules generally

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<sup>2</sup> The ICOMOS Charter was adopted by the New Zealand National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites in 1993 and is a general reference for conservation of the historic heritage by most local authorities in New Zealand.

only apply to the exterior of a listed building and do not provide any protection for the immediate setting or curtilage. However, the authenticity of the setting of a place is a major determinant of significance used in assessing the heritage value of a place when it is considered for listing in the District Plan as a heritage item. When modifications to a listed building are being considered the rules state that the design of the building in the context of its setting should be respected.<sup>3</sup>

It would seem therefore that there has been an oversight in New Zealand's legislative framework and the ICOMOS NZ Charter to come up with a clear definition for historic setting.

Both the use of the word historic and setting can have different meanings and interpretations. For instance, the terms setting, curtilage and surroundings are often used to refer to the area around, or, on which a heritage item is located. For the purposes of this paper I have looked at the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition of setting, the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning Heritage Curtilages Guidelines (1996) definition of heritage curtilage and The New Zealand Policy for Government Department's Management of Historic Heritage 2004 definition of curtilage in order to try and come up with a definition of historic setting for a heritage item or items within an urban environment

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines *setting as: the position or manner in which a thing is set; the immediate surroundings (of a house etc); the surroundings of any object regarded as its framework; the environment of a thing.*

The term curtilage is a term that is used more frequently when talking about the historic setting of a place. For instance, in New Zealand, the Policy for Government Department's Management of Historic Heritage 2004, defines curtilage as *'the geographical area that provides the immediate physical context for a heritage place'*.<sup>4</sup> In Australia, the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, New South Wales defines heritage curtilage as *'an area of land (including land covered by water) surrounding an item or area of heritage significance which is essential for*

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<sup>3</sup> 20.1.1.3 Contextual Values or Levels of Significance, Wellington City District Plan 2000

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Policy for Government Department's Management of Historic Heritage 2004, [www.mch.govt.nz](http://www.mch.govt.nz)

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*retaining and interpreting its heritage significance. It can apply to either: land which is integral to the heritage significance of items of the built heritage; or a precinct which includes buildings, works, relics, trees or places and their setting*.<sup>5</sup>

The Department of Urban Affairs and Planning Heritage Curtilages Guidelines (1996) (HCG) identify four types of heritage curtilages: Type 1 - the Lot Boundary Heritage Curtilage, Type 2 - the Reduced Heritage Curtilage, Type 3 - the Expanded Heritage Curtilage and Type 4 - the Composite Heritage Curtilage.

The definitions of setting given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary have some correlation with three of the types of heritage curtilages identified in the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning Heritage Curtilages Guidelines (1996) (HCG). These include: the Lot Boundary Heritage Curtilage which comprises all those items within the legal lot boundary including any significant heritage item or items; the Expanded Heritage Curtilage which is an area generally greater than the immediate legal boundary which '*depending on the topography may be required to protect the landscape setting or visual catchment of a heritage item*'<sup>6</sup>; and a Composite Heritage Curtilage which applies to a village, suburban precinct or larger area where there is a collection of heritage places that are of a distinct character and sameness and where the curtilage extends over a number of lot boundaries.

These definitions of curtilage are helpful particularly for areas identified by their legal boundaries as seen in the definition of the Lot Boundary or Composite Curtilages. However, they do imply a sense of enclosure, whether physically or metaphorically, based on legal boundaries. The definition for Expanded Heritage Curtilage provides a means for looking at a historic setting in a wider environment, where issues of views to and from a place become important in identifying a historic setting. For instance the HCG states that in defining an expanded heritage curtilage it is important to identify the prominent observation points from which the heritage item or items can be viewed, interpreted and appreciated. The HCG also suggests other factors that should be considered such whether a buffer area may be required between the curtilage and any adjoining land, and the visual and historical relationship between the item and

its environs.<sup>7</sup> However, a setting, if we consider the dictionary definition is not just about visual and spatial relationships it is also about the social and physical context.

Just as the term setting can have different meanings so to can the terms heritage, historic and historical. As Ann Falkner (1977) in her book *Without Our Past? A Handbook for the Preservation of Canada's Architectural Heritage*, has pointed out, these terms are often used interchangeably and thereby lose their precise meanings. Heritage, Falkner states, refers simply to something inherited from our cultural past; no judgement of good or bad is made. Historic on the other hand, not only refers to an inheritance from the past but also carries a definite connotation of value or importance or fame. The third term, historical, has a much broader meaning, referring merely to something which has its origins in the past.<sup>8</sup>

Using the terms historical or heritage in conjunction with setting may be too broad if we accept Falkner's definition as they could be applied to the whole of any given item or area in relation to a place which has its origins in the past but that does not have any specific value. On the other hand combining the term historic with setting can, if we accept Falkner's definition of historic, imply that we have identified something that is important from the past that has survived and that we value and the area around it that we wish to protect.

A 'historic setting' therefore can be defined as: *the geographical area that continues to provide the historic, social, physical and visual context for an item or items that we value. The extent of that area may be defined by the legal boundary, the immediate surroundings or the wider environment.*

The *legal boundary* comprises all those items within the legal lot boundary including any significant heritage item or items and the manner in which those items are placed in the area in relation to each other. It is more site specific and inwardly focused. Features to take into account within a legal boundary include the design and layout of a heritage item or items including any elements such as driveways, plants, visual axes and fencing, and the way in which the site

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, *Heritage Curtilages*, Heritage Office, New South Wales 1996

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p. 7

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*. p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Falkner, Ann. (1977) *Without Our past?: A Handbook for the Preservation of Canada's Architectural Heritage*. Ottawa: University of Toronto Press.

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has developed over time to provide for changing uses associated with the history of the place.<sup>9</sup>

The *immediate surroundings* comprise the area around the legal boundary that contributes to an appreciation of the item or items. Features to take into account within the immediate surroundings include roads, buildings, and other physical or natural features which help to provide a visual link both from the site and to the site and to connect the heritage item or items to its immediate surroundings. In essence the immediate surroundings could be construed of as the local neighbourhood.

The *wider environment* comprises the broader historical and visual catchment in which the place is located. In a town or city the wider environment can be quite extensive depending on the importance and location of the heritage item or items.

As a city grows the relationship of an item to the wider environment generally diminishes. The historic setting reduces to that of the immediate surroundings or in many instances the area contained within the legal boundary. The historic setting becomes more inwardly focussed as development encroaches on its doorstep. The changing nature of the historic setting over time can be seen in the St John's Heritage Area.

### **The history of St John's Church Heritage Area**

St John's Heritage Area is on an elevated corner site bounded by three roads, Willis Street, Dixon Street and MacDonald Crescent in Wellington's central business district. The fourth side of the block is bounded by office buildings of approximately 10 storeys. The site is 2902 square metres. The area comprises four buildings, St John's Church (1885), Spinks Cottage (c.1860), Troup House (1993) and the St John's Conference Centre (1994). There is a carparking building under Troup House. As well as the buildings the site features several large pohutukawa (trees) along the Willis Street frontage, a reinforced concrete retaining wall with old, decorative iron fence, sealed driveways and parking spaces, an internal open courtyard and a small cottage garden outside Spinks Cottage. The buildings provide for a range of church-related activities and some of the facilities are also hired out for commercial and community use.

St John's Church and Spinks Cottage are registered as Category I historic places under the Historic Places Act 1993 because of their special and outstanding historical and cultural heritage significance and value. The registration of these places under the Historic Places Act does not provide any specific protection for these places. Statutory protection is provided through the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). The overall site and buildings are listed in the Wellington City Council District Plan (District Plan) as a heritage area. St John's Church and Spinks Cottage are also listed individually in the District Plan as heritage buildings. The District Plan is a statutory document that is prepared in accordance with the RMA and provides, amongst other matters, for policies and rules pertaining to additions, alterations and demolition of the buildings or site which may affect the heritage values of the place.

The present St John's is the third church to occupy the site since 1856, so it continues a tradition of over 140 years of Presbyterian worship. The adjacent Spinks Cottage has been part of the church complex since 1884. The area has historical and spiritual significance, both for the many notable local and national figures that have been parishioners of St Johns and also for the members of the wider community that continue to use the church, its facilities and services. Spiritually and architecturally the church and complex is an integral part of Wellington's history.

It is possible to distinguish three periods in the history of St John's Church Heritage Area. By looking at each of these periods we can determine the historic setting of the church in 2005.

#### **1850 – 1884**

The land was originally purchased by Wellington's Free Church of Scotland from the absentee owner Rev. Charles Abbotson in 1854. It is part of section 168, Town of Wellington, one of the original town acres surveyed in 1840. The other and larger half of section 168 was purchased at the same time by William Spinks, whose cottage became an integral part of the church site from 1885.

The first church on the site, seating 200 parishioners, opened in 1856. Burgess (2004) has described this original church as a small Gothic shed with diminutive spire and buttresses, and a gabled side entrance porch which fronted

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ix Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, *Heritage Curtilages*, Heritage office, New South Wales 1996

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Willis St<sup>10</sup>. A few years later a Sunday School hall was built at the rear of the church alongside Dixon Street. The original church was enlarged twice - in 1866 and 1871- but by 1874 it proved too small for the expanding congregation and it was demolished. A second, larger church designed by Thomas Turnbull, was built on the site in 1875. Nine years later the church and hall were both burnt down.

Spinks Cottage was constructed sometime between 1858 and 1863. The cottage had a large front yard on to Willis Street. Evans (1975) has described the cottage as a substantial two-storeyed building, well built from wood with a steeply pitched iron roof and gabled window.<sup>11</sup> The Spinks family used the cottage as a home and a school for some years. Shortly before his death in 1884 William Spinks sold the cottage to the church.

A photograph taken in 1858 from the Dixon/Willis Street intersection shows the church with a one-storey wooden gabled roofed hall behind, on a slightly raised corner site with grass in the front and surrounded by a picket fence (*see Figure 2 St John's Church 1858 ATL 15771-F-50342-1/2*). The area immediately surrounding the church included the two roads and footpaths, gas lamps and housing immediately to the north and on the southern side of Willis Street. The hills immediately to the west were still being farmed at this time. A sketch in 1863 taken from further away shows Spinks Cottage to the left of the first St John's Church set in almost a small semi-rural village environment with other cottages, the original St Peter's Church and views down to the harbour (*see Figure 5 Water colour Willis Street by W.H. Holmes, 1863 ATL B-121-015*).

During this period the church, hall and cottage have a clear presence beyond the legal boundaries of each site and the immediate surroundings. They are clearly part of the wider environment which, during this period covered most of what is known as the Te Aro basin.

### 1885-1980

Following the fire in 1884 a new church was constructed in 1885. Due to the sloping site and larger size of the new church it was repositioned on the site so that the front of the church faced Dixon Street. This required more land and so Spinks Cottage was purchased and moved further back on

the site to allow for the larger church. The cottage was then used as a residence for the church caretaker until 1966 when it was renovated for use as a student hostel, an overflow from Troup House.<sup>12</sup>

St John's Church is a fine Gothic church constructed mainly in kauri, a celebrated New Zealand timber. It is one of three great timber churches in Wellington designed by Thomas Turnbull. Cochran (2001) considers that the main spire is possibly the finest in Wellington. It is composed of three tapering tiers, with each tier marked out by exquisite timber detailing and a small, hipped roof. A secondary spire on the west of the church repeats some of the detail, though not the height, of the main spire.<sup>13</sup> The interior departs from the more traditional Gothic style, with the use of Classical detailing such as triangular pediments over the doors. The general plan form itself departs from Gothic principles and clearly reflects non-conformist influences in its design<sup>14</sup>

The church has had few alterations since it was built. A second entrance was built c.1904 and in 1920 and 1922 memorial windows were built in the southern and northern ends. In 1953 a memorial centennial porch was added and in 1965 a stained glass window was added to the vestibule. In 1994 the Mackay Chapel was added on the west end and features stained glass windows that were originally part of the Aitken family parish church in Lochend in Scotland, which was demolished in 1985.

Between 1885 and 1980 a number of new buildings were added to the site. These included the Young Men's' Bible Class Hall in 1896 on the Dixon street frontage, a Sunday School Building on the MacDonald Street frontage in 1902, and Troup House Flat in 1954 at the rear of the site. None of these buildings remains in 2005.

During this period Spinks Cottage and its land were purchased and in 1901 the land abutting MacDonald Crescent was acquired to enable the construction of the Sunday School building. The land was later amalgamated into one title. A photograph in 1940 shows the 1885 Turnbull design church on its elevated corner site with reinforced concrete retaining wall, iron fence and mature ti (cabbage) trees planted along the Willis Street frontage (*see Figure 3 St John's from Willis/Dixon St corner c. 1940 ATL*

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<sup>9</sup> Burgess, Graeme. Spinks Cottage Dixon Street, Wellington, Conservation Plan 2004: Burgess and Treep Architects

<sup>10</sup> Evans M.E. 1975, *St John's Church, Willis St, Wellington* for Records and Classification Committee, NZHPT p.2

<sup>11</sup> Burgess *ibid.* p. 19

<sup>12</sup> Cochran, Chris. *St John's Church, Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory 2001 – Non Residential Buildings*

<sup>13</sup> Fearnley, Charles. In *St John's Church, Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory 2001 – Non Residential Buildings*

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*Ref 15771-F-36459-1/2 PA Coll – 4118 Gordon Burt Collection*). The wooden, two-storeyed Bible Class Hall and Sunday School Building are behind. Heading south down Willis Street there were more houses with some trees. Power poles and streetlights clutter the view of the church and cars have replaced horse and traps.

A photograph taken in 1942 from a similar position as in Figure 5 shows that the area south of the church was predominantly residential (see Figure 6 *View from the intersection of Ghuznee and Willis Streets looking north along Willis Street, toward St John's Presbyterian Church (on the left) and Dixon Street Flats (centre), ATL ¼ - 000821*). The larger St Peter's Church is still on the Ghuznee /Willis Street corner. The setting of St John's is now influenced by the large Dixon Street Flats. It is interesting to note that the caption for this photograph reads: "The dignity of the new flats is a pleasant contrast to the cramped untidiness of the setting". This perhaps indicates the preference of the photographer, John Pascoe, for the imposing height and clean lines of this modern accommodation block. Apart from the Dixon Street flats most of the commercial development in the city was constrained to the northern side of Dixon Street and down Willis Street to Manners Street. Because of the sloping nature of the land north from the Dixon Street intersection, the impact of the larger commercial buildings did not start encroaching on the wider setting of St John's until the 1980s.

### 1981-2003

By the late 1970s the Board of Managers of the church concerned at the increasing costs of maintaining an ageing group of 19th and early 20th century wooden structures and a declining congregation undertook a review of its assets. The first building to be reviewed was Spinks Cottage and a number of options were considered including whether to 'restore, demolish or resite the cottage'.<sup>15</sup> At the time there was a growing awareness in the community of the historical and architectural significance of simple wooden buildings from the early period of European settlement. With financial help from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and support from the community the church was persuaded to keep Spinks Cottage, but in order to develop the rest of the site the cottage needed to be relocated a second time. In 1982 it was moved to the Dixon Street frontage and restored with the assistance of the NZHPT. The hall was demolished to make room for it. Parts of the

hall were salvaged and incorporated in a new hall at the rear of the cottage. At that time the hall was not deemed to be worthy of retention partly due to the substantial repair work that was required. The cottage was subsequently classified (now registered) by the NZHPT as a historic place.

Within four years of moving the cottage the church was again facing financial problems which it attributed to the ongoing maintenance costs for its wooden buildings. At that time the Wellington City Council District Scheme provided for the transfer of development rights (TDRs) relative to the plot ratio allowed under zoning criteria. The Council saw TDRs as one way to encourage the retention and upkeep of heritage sites in the city by providing incentives for owners while continuing to encourage development in the city. Later that year St John's sold the rights to part of the airspace that was over the two heritage buildings on the site – St John's Church and Spinks Cottage to a development company for \$7 million. This money was then used to establish a permanent fund for the maintenance of the church and cottage and used to redevelop the remainder of the site. (The flipside of this incentive scheme was that it did not transfer across to the new District Plan when it became operative in 2000. The development rights that were transferred were nullified and the owners of the properties that entered into these agreements are now able to fully develop the sites that were supposedly protected.)

In 1988 the church drew up a major development plan for the remainder of the site. Between 1992 and 1994 four buildings on the site were demolished. These were the old Sunday School Hall which fronted MacDonald Crescent, the 1896 Bible Class Hall, the Troup House Flat (1954) and the reconstructed church hall. In their place a new four storey concrete, steel and timber office building (Troup House) was built along the MacDonald Crescent frontage, a new conference centre (or church hall), gymnasium, committee rooms and commercial building with carparking on the ground floor were built along the southern boundary. The latter incorporates some features salvaged from some of the earlier buildings on the site. In 1994 the Mackay Chapel was built on the western end of the church.

Spinks Cottage had a disabled access ramp added and in 2000 further work was undertaken to the cottage including a new window to provide for upgraded office spaces.

In 2000, by the time the work was completed, the whole site including all the new buildings plus the 1885 church and the relocated Spinks Cottage were listed in the Wellington

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<sup>14</sup> Burgess *ibid.* p. 15

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City District Plan as a heritage area. The listing took into account the architectural, spiritual and historical significance and landmark values of the church and the historical and social significance of Spinks Cottage including the community's fight to save and subsequently restore it. An attempt was made to design the remaining buildings to be compatible with the design of the two historic buildings and their design and placement on the site establishes a clear spatial relationship between the new and the old.

The legal boundaries of the church remained the same during this period but the site itself underwent dynamic change. All the buildings save one were either demolished, reconstructed, reconfigured or relocated and new ones built. However, the church, on its elevated corner site, retained its dominant position, the new or relocated buildings being carefully placed so as not to compete with it. This is particularly the case when the site is viewed from the Dixon / Willis Street intersection. The church tower and spire soar overhead. The eastern wall is obscured by mature pohutukawa which must have been planted after 1940. (see Figure 4 View of St John's Church from Dixon/Willis Street Corner 2005). Spinks Cottage, although on a new site, retains its east orientation and is sited at ground level with a small garden in the front. This aspect acknowledges the role it played as both a home and caretaker's cottage for its first 100 years. The photograph also shows the influence of the immediate surroundings, in particular the tall commercial office buildings on the southern boundary. Streetlights and power lines are still part of the streetscape.

The wider environment during this period was also totally transformed. The views of the church from the Ghuznee/Willis Street intersection have been more or less obscured (see Figure 7 View of St John's Church from Ghuznee/Willis Street Corner 2005). Apart from St Peter's, which is still in the same position, high-rise commercial buildings now line either side of Willis St down to Manners Street and beyond. Dixon Street is also dominated by high-rise buildings except for the south-western side going up the Dixon Street Steps. Here late 19th and early 20th century wooden villas still tumble down the cliff and provide an important visual and historical connection to the 1885 church and earlier cottage.

### **The historic setting of the St John's Church Heritage Area in 2005**

The geographical area in which St John's Heritage Area is located has almost completely changed since the first church

was built on the site in 1856. However, the relationship of the buildings on the site to each other and the retention of the position of St John's on its elevated site is an integral part of the urban landscape. As development continues the remains of the late 19th century townscape, in particular the houses up the Dixon Street steps, have taken on a greater historic significance as they provide an increasingly valuable visual and historic link to the past. There is however a synergy in the design of the 1990's buildings on the church site and those of its immediate neighbours. Over time these high rise buildings may be seen to contribute to the historic setting of the church in the 21st century.

St John's Church Heritage Area is still part of the wider environment, but this visual and social relationship has diminished over time along with its congregation. Where once the spire was a dominant form in the Wellington landscape, it is now barely visible, obscured by office towers and apartment buildings marching southwards through the city. This perhaps reflects the changing role of the church in modern society. Just as traditional churches have diminished in societal influence, so has their dominance on the landscape.

Today most of what is left is the area constrained to the legal boundary and the immediate surrounds. This is illustrated in the photographs (see Figures 4 and 7). The extent of each area is depicted in Diagram 1 where Area A represents the legal boundary, Area B represents the immediate surrounds and Area C represents the wider environment. The lines around each area are fairly arbitrary and have been based loosely on the historical evolution of the city that has influenced the historic setting of the heritage area.

The historic setting of the St John's Heritage Area therefore can be seen as the area defined by the legal boundary and the immediate surroundings. The immediate surroundings largely fall within Area B in Diagram 1 and include Dixon Street - from Percival Street down the Dixon Street Steps to the Vivian Street intersection and the buildings on either side of the road; MacDonald Crescent - from the intersection with Dixon Street to the end of the grassed area above the motorway in a line with Percival Street, and in a south/north direction from the Ghuznee Street intersection to 154 Willis Street. The extent of this area has been selected because it includes the late 19th century dwellings on Dixon Street and allows for the retention of existing visual links or the potential to recreate visual links if the sites around the heritage area are redeveloped in the future. Recreating a visual connection

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for instance between St Peter's Church on the corner of Ghuznee and Willis Streets could be achieved by limited setbacks on the Willis Street frontages even if the height goes beyond the permitted limits. Similarly, setbacks on the northern end of Willis Street and around lower Dixon Street where the permitted height limit is 83 metres could enable better visual connections between the church and its immediate surrounds without necessarily constraining development. Maintaining a social connection is dependent on the role of the church in the community in the future.

### **Conserving the historic setting of the St John's Heritage Area in the 21st century**

As has been illustrated above the historic setting of the St John's Heritage Area has undergone major changes in its 150 years. Further changes will no doubt occur. The District Plan provides for buildings ranging from 43 to 85 metres as of right within both the legal boundary (43 metres) as well as the immediate surroundings of the heritage area. Few of the existing office buildings are currently at their maximum height. Buildings could easily go much higher than this as the District Plan does not prohibit any activity where any adverse effects of a development can be mitigated. As there is currently no provision for protecting historic settings in the District Plan there is limited scope to consider any adverse effects on the historic setting except if the heritage rules are triggered.

There are design guides which provide guidance to those wishing to undertake new building development or to refurbish existing buildings within the central city area. However, the design guides do not impose rules on development. They merely aim to identify the significant existing features of the central city and suggest ways in which new development can contribute positively to the area. St John's Heritage Area is not identified as significant features therefore there are no particular design controls for this site. There is scope, however, within the District Plan to provide site specific design controls and these have been used to protect the setting of another church, Old St Paul's. There, rules providing for setbacks on adjacent properties have been put in place to protect the church's historic setting.

Similarly the St John's Heritage Area is not identified as a significant viewshaft worthy of protection. Other rules in the plan requiring verandahs and permitting signs and utility

structures also enable further encroachments onto the historic setting.

Perhaps the most significant changes to the historic setting in the future will come from development within the site itself. For instance a new proposal - to redevelop Spinks Cottage - is a case in point. In 2004 the Boys and Girls Institute (BGI) proposed major changes to Spinks Cottage. The Boys and Girls Institute was originally established in 1883 to develop the youth in the community. It remains closely associated with the Presbyterian Church.

The proposal includes raising the cottage approximately three metres and constructing a new basement that will be used as a youth café by the church and for the wider community. The cottage garden in the front of the building will be demolished, the two chimneys removed and reinstated from the new elevated first floor level and the forecourt and side yard will be redeveloped for youth activities. The upper levels of the cottage will be used for offices or accommodation.

When the cottage was relocated in 1982 there was an attempt to create a setting within the site consistent with the small-scale domestic nature of the cottage. A small garden with a picket fence was constructed at the front of the cottage and in 1994 a new inner courtyard was developed which also helped retain the relationship of the cottage with the other buildings on the site. Not only will the new proposal radically alter the historic form and character of the cottage, it will change the relationship it has with the church and the other buildings on the site. The cottage will no longer be the primary feature of views from the inner courtyard.

Although it has been moved twice, the cottage has always been positioned to the rear of the church with a small garden in the front which has helped retain some semblance of its original setting and use. Its relationship with its immediate surroundings will also be changed, as the new ground floor café will be clearly visible from both the Dixon Street/Willis Street corner. The cottage in its new, elevated position will also be clearly visible when viewed from the Dixon Street steps.

### **Conclusion**

St John's Church is a landmark building in Wellington, both literally, for its prominence on an elevated site on the corner of Willis and Dixon Streets, and for the quality of its 19th century architecture. Spinks Cottage is an extremely



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rare example of a colonial cottage in central Wellington which gives it significant historic value. While there have been major changes on the site over the years the position of St John's Church on its corner site, the positioning of Spinks Cottage on the Dixon Street frontage and the design of the 1994 buildings have helped retain a sense of authenticity in the historic setting of the St John's Heritage Area.

Changes to the District Plan which include recognising the historic significance and landmark qualities of the heritage area in policies, rules and design guides provide opportunities for enhancing the historic setting in the future particularly through re-establishing visual connections to the site itself. However, if the church wishes to continue to undertake changes to the site itself there may be little reason to try and protect what remains of the historic setting.

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### Abstract

The ICOMOS New Zealand Charter For The Conservation Of Places Of Cultural Heritage Value has identified as one of its general principles that 'the historical setting of a place should be conserved with the place itself. If the historical setting no longer exists, construction of a setting based on physical and documentary evidence should be the aim...' <sup>16</sup>

This paper considers the relevance of this principle in the 21st century urban environment. Downtown Wellington, New Zealand has changed dramatically in the last 150 years. Transformed from small wooden commercial, residential and ecclesiastical buildings scattered around the shores of the harbour set amidst the remains of Maori gardens and cleared forest remnants the semi-rural English village idyll is now dominated by concrete and glass edifices that tower above the remnant spires of the 19th century. The fields and dirt tracks replaced with steel and polystyrene structures and tarsealed motorways and pavements.

The historic setting of both the original Maori inhabitants and the early European settlers has been annihilated. The remnants of what remains have been reconstructed, reconfigured and relocated over the intervening years to accommodate the needs and demands of an expanding population. This is clearly evident in the buildings and surroundings that comprise the Presbyterian parish of St John's in central Wellington, listed as a heritage area in the Wellington City District Plan. When a new youth café is proposed for the oldest building on the site it raises the question of what is the historic setting and can it be conserved while meeting the needs and demands of a new generation?

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<sup>16</sup> The ICOMOS Charter was adopted by the New Zealand National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites in 1993 and is a general reference for conservation of the historic heritage by most local authorities in New Zealand.

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## IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A HISTORIC SETTING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY METROPOLIS? —ST JOHN’S HERITAGE AREA , A CASE STUDY

*Fill Barbaral / New Zealand*  
Heritage Policy Advisor Welling City Council

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Fig 1 Water colour by Christopher Aubrey is a anorama of Wellington in 1889 from Brooklyn hills showing the spires of St John's and St Peter's in the distance ATL C-030-025



Fig 2 St John's Church corner of Dixon and Willis Street 1858, ATL 15771-F-50342-1/2



Fig 3 St John's from Willis/Dixon St corner c. 1940 ATL Ref 15771-F-36459-1/2 PA Coll – 4118 Gordon Burt Collection



Fig 4 View of St John's Church from Dixon/Willis Street Corner 2005

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Fig 5 Water colour Willis Street by W.H. Holmes, ATL B-121-015



Fig 6 View from the intersection of Ghuznee and Willis Streets looking north along Willis Street, toward St John's Presbyterian Church (on the left) and Dixon Street Flats (centre) 1942, ATL ¼ - 000821



Fig 7 View of St John's Church from Ghuznee/Willis Streets Corner 2005



Fig 8 Diagram showing the historic setting of St John's Church Heritage Area  
A = the legal boundary, B = the immediate surroundings C = the wider environment