

Precincts: Churches and Historic Buildings

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News of a proposed relocation of a small church from its existing site in Collingwood Street, Nelson, a site that holds a very large and beautiful lime tree that is labeled and listed on the local District Plan Heritage Tree List, raised a question in my mind. Can a church and its site be separated and yet retain the significance of their shared past?



Former church and precincts, including lime tree, in Collingwood Street, Nelson.

In this particular case, the church and churchyard had been sold by the church fathers owing to a dwindling congregation. The current owners are selling the site where the church stands to a developer for an apartment building, but they are reported as saying that “they have retained ownership of the church to avoid it being demolished and intend to relocate it to a yet to be determined site” (*The Leader*, Nelson, 5 June, 2003, p.1). This is a fine sentiment. But where is the historic meaning of the church and the churchyard where the tree stands? The historic composition and

memories of this union and what it represents will be lost to past worshippers and the general public. Moreover, overseas experience shows that as pressure for open space retention comes from growing populations in towns and cities, churches and churchyards with their headstones and trees have become valuable open spaces.

purposes represent living memorials to local events, and are important church landmarks.

Church precincts have become places of tranquility and passive recreation in the lives of many citizens. An example of this in New Zealand is Bolton Street Memorial Park in Wellington. Motorway access into central Wellington required that



Bolton Street Memorial Park, Wellington, complete with relocated chapel and sexton's house, new development and trees.

The term precinct is defined in dictionaries as a space, especially an enclosed space, around a building or other object. The boundaries of a precinct delineate and gird it and all it contains from the outside world. Churchyards, then, are precincts, and together with their churches preserve memories strongly associated with human events in local history, such as births, marriages, wars and deaths. Deaths have been marked primarily by the erection of headstones and tree planting. Trees planted amongst the headstones for commemorative



St Michael's Anglican Church, Waimea West, Nelson.

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the church mortuary chapel and sexton's cottage be moved. Local sensitivity to this need was respected by the Highways Authority of the time. The chapel and headstones were stored off-site, and 3,000 graves were exhumed and reburied together adjacent to the motorway. Most of the mature trees within the old churchyard were saved.

Before restoration of the chapel and headstones could take place, an office block development and car park were proposed on an adjacent site. A financial deal was struck between Wellington City Council and the Friends of Bolton Street Memorial Park, with the developers to assist in the restoration of the chapel and graveyard. The developers needed a large car park, which it was agreed would be sited underground beneath the old graveyard site. The restored chapel and headstones were to be replaced over the underground car park. The chapel fabric was restored, the headstones were repaired, and the trees saved. Historical records set the alignment of the chapel together with the headstones amongst the memorial trees.

All parties were gratified by an intelligent and practical solution in a modern city with the need for open space. This park amongst headstones and trees gives immense pleasure to office workers and others at lunchtime, and for those needing jogging space. The chapel and graveyard are used for weddings and funerals, as the venue retains historic integrity and is loved as a landmark in the City of Wellington's heritage.



Deans Cottage, Riccarton Bush, Christchurch.

While adjustments on site had to be made, the churchyard precinct retained its integrity by not being separated from its traditional artifacts of trees and headstones.

Other precincts, not necessarily attached to churches, e.g. Deans Cottage in Riccarton Bush, are equally important. And rural sites, such as Wakefield's St. Johns Church and St. Michael's Church, Waimea West, also need to be aware of their precinct value. In time, these rural districts may become heavily populated and church precincts will need to be protected to keep their commemorative union with headstones and trees. Such a union if preserved for the future will be a reference point for future generations to benefit and enjoy.

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