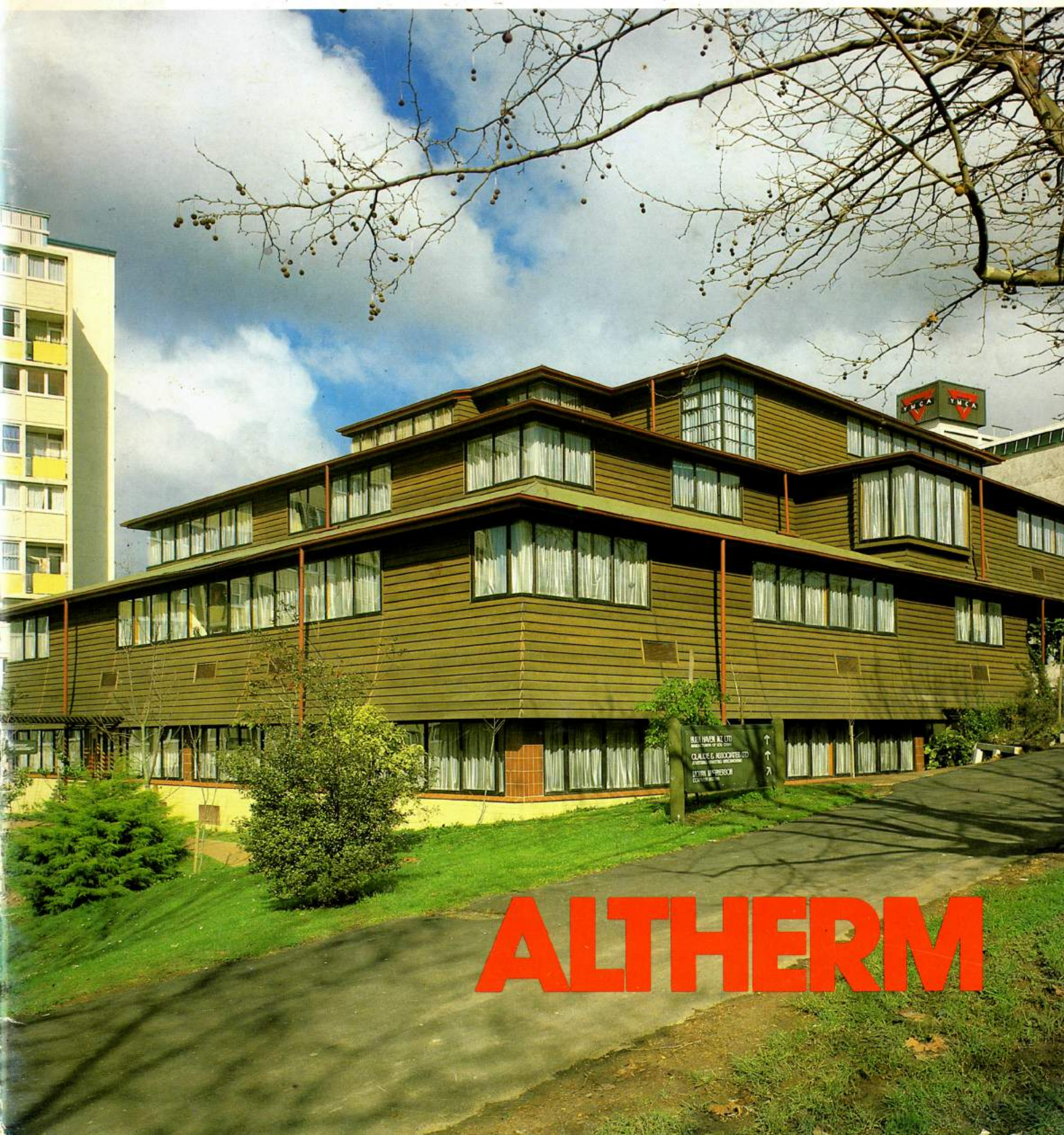


Victoria Street Destructor Site
Site visit to three country homes

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SAVING

Third year student at the Auckland School of Architecture, Graham Burgess, looks at the current situation and history of the old Destructor site in Victoria Street.

There is a need to establish which elements of the Destructor site are justifiable in terms of its old function (a Factory Monument) and in terms of its function to be. A conflict arises here from another direction — structural soundness — since the element which “speaks” loudest, the chimney, is the greatest structural problem, and the buildings of the Destructor, which have such a fine facade, are the next greatest structural

problem.

An urgency regarding this and other more notable “relics” pervades the air at present (compare the Customhouse situation). Being a large old building, industrially zoned, built of a fallable material, on a prime piece of real estate and on the whole unused and neglected, one is faced with quite a range of opposition; not the least being the problem of how to get the building itself functioning viably in the eyes of most interested parties and in the process surrounding the constructional problems.

There tends to be a readymade brief for most preservation jobs in New Zealand — “Yes, we will make a Cultural and Arts Centre”. This has led to a very limited interpretation of the word “culture”

— anything to do with yoga or macrame
— and also denies the previous existence of the building and is a very general statement of the needs in the community (I would not deny that very often the above decision is a good and valid one and a healthy contribution results from it. I merely question the “depth factor”).

The other fate old buildings may meet is to fall into the hands of the Historic Places Trust to be sucked back into its heyday, vacuum-packed, sealed and dated, never to be touched or lived in again.

The owner of the site is Auckland City Council (the buildings were once the Council's stables, workshops, depot and destructor). Within the organs of the Council the building is held at various

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levels of esteem:

- the planners want it kept
- the architects want a new building
- the engineers see it as structurally sound
- the traffic engineers see it as an obstacle to widening Victoria Street
- the building inspectors see it as a danger
- the health inspectors see it as a risk

The list could go on. In the face of this seemingly unlimited front the planners have pushed through a change in legislation giving the Council the right to negotiate with the developer as the client. A simpler manoeuvre would be required to change the town planning zoning to a special zone.

The primary objective of the ACC's brief is to preserve the block as a visual element. Another concern is that the

function of the building should go some way towards offsetting the cost of development and preferably be for community use. There is a general feeling in the Council encouraging the building up of residential areas in the inner city and a multifarious development would be encouraged. If possible the function of the buildings should also offset maintenance costs.

There are many models to build on. Here in Auckland the old Bayfield Primary School (now a Polynesian Community Centre), the Ponsonby Police Station (now Outreach Arts Centre) and on the commercial sphere the Parnell Village development (intent obvious, quality in many ways dubious), to name a few.

Overseas whole areas of cities once derelict have been revived; the Canning Factory and Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco, Granville Island in Vancouver where rusty old buildings with dirt floors remained rusty buildings with dirt floors.

Another approach has its peak in the Monument to the dead at Hiroshima (the

burnt out shell of a building with a heat-buckled steel dome now a tree-filled park) and the old Cathedral in Coventry, a bombed ruin left in that state. These two examples are, of course, powerful psychological statements born of disaster, however they set an unusual precedent. The ruins are left purposefully as a reminder and acquire a mystical quality, a timelessness which develops in any situation in which man's presence has been physically expressed and then abandoned to nature and time. There is subtlety in the level to which the abandonment is expressed (controlling the growth, for example) and in the nature of the place, its *genus locii*.

Obviously the Council Depot was never bombed and cannot stand as a symbol born of war but it does command a unique position in the bay and it has its monumentality and quality drawn from another age. There is potential there for a garden of walled enclosures enhancing the forms and textures of the buildings and for the creation of interplays of various levels. This approach would follow what has been termed the line of least resistance (the simplest means of achieving a desired result).

The original inhabitants, the Ngati Whataua, called the bay Waiatarau (loosely, the waters of a hundred sunrises). The European settlers of Auckland set the bay aside as the first industrial area (initially shipbuilding which still continues in the somewhat tenuously connected area beyond the reclaimed bay). It was renamed Freeman's Bay. A workers' suburb grew to support the factories.

Reclamation began early and, to come close to Whittaker's thesis, what was once a beautiful tidal bay became a shabby dump for refuse. The shoreline originally ran across the site concerned and, still visible in the rear vicinity are other demarcation lines; the cliffs into which the Gas Works are pushed and the cliffs above Fanshawe Street upon which the B. J. Ball building stands. A fairly massive feat of the imagination would be required to recall the bay as it was then, today. The tidal mud of the bay is now Victoria Park and the city side now houses the fishing wharves and the fish and produce markets. Ahead, where once was only sea and sky and a glimpse of scrub on the far shore, thrusts the fuel dock and depots and the boat building yards.

The growth of industry, the Destructor included, ate up much of the land and some of the early housing. By the post-war years (1945) industry had become the dominant use at the expense of residential quality. Fewer people owned their own homes in the area; the buildings declined and so did real estate values. This was the beginning of the Council's Brave New Housing policy — the town house. With its decay Freeman's Bay seemed the ideal locality for such an experiment. The council began to buy up

land and to develop.

As this policy moved through its early phases another significant situation arose. This was the Pacific migration of the early 1960's. Brought in as cheap labour, they found themselves cheap accommodation, generally in the inner city Western suburbs close to buses so they could go to work anywhere. As these people consolidated their community as in the islands the Council continued to buy up property and to displace the people who were generally not the owners. They were also displacing the very people who now gave that area its vitality and in effect replacing them with "young professionals" and "businesspeople".

By the early 1970's the Council began to see (possibly due to growth of strong pressure against the destruction of Freeman's Bay) that they were destroying an area with character and vitality and replacing it with something not necessarily better. The trend suddenly turned to one of renovation and consolidation, with the emphasis on home ownership as opposed to rented accommodation. Thus the same shift of social groupings goes on with a subtle twist.

The Ministry of Works has also done its best for Freeman's Bay. The motorway viaduct and the new motorway extensions successfully split the bay visually and also created a no-man's-land of fast cars and stranded factories between the residential area and the city. Victoria Street, College Hill and all the streets bounding the park are furiously busy, creating a void between the park and anything.

Freeman's Bay has suffered considerably. What was essentially a quiet pedestrian suburb has been decimated by redevelopment and cut off

by motorways. The links which should exist do not, for example, to get to the city is not a pleasant stroll, which in terms of distance it should be. One passes through a jungle of growling traffic and through areas left abandoned by strangulation (cars move so fast, traffic changes and population shifts have been so dramatic that businesses can no longer survive). Nevertheless, what remains of the old Freeman's Bay has a vitality that must not be neglected. Any move to bring back life into the dead areas around the lower edges is a positive step.

The Council Depot buildings stand in just such a place; on the dead side of the motorway and right beside Victoria Street facing the isolated park. Very little is there to entice people into the area; buildings in the vicinity are isolated and frequently abandoned. The mood is one of decay. Yet as a building and in its situation it holds tremendous potential: The chimney virtually centres the bay and provides a landmark. The buildings were built to be seen and admired (Victorians were proud of their factories) and it shows. As a large brick building it is a rarity today, providing an example of an almost forgotten form of construction; its richness in colour and texture and the practical lines that it takes up (the round windows, the arched lintels). It has been a place where men worked with horses (a completely different technology, one with thousands of years of history).

The resuscitation of these areas of decline is a means of uplifting the city as a whole and hopefully would provide further impetus by example. A sympathetic development of the Depot and Destructor would provide a stepping stone back towards the city and the park and create new relationships in a positive sense (interdependence) within the context of the whole bay.



The Victoria Street Destructor site.