

# Heritage buildings and community sense of place

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## ABSTRACT

New Zealand is a nation that has a significant amount of built heritage, of which there are several internationally recognised landmarks, including the Christchurch Cathedral, the Church of the Good Shepherd, and the Chateau Tongariro. These structures contribute to establishing a sense of place within a community as landmarks, gathering places, and keepers of memories and personal sentiments. Unfortunately, due to New Zealand's recent and historic seismic activity, these landmarks, commonly constructed as unreinforced concrete or masonry, are susceptible to severe damage from earthquake-induced ground shaking. For this reason, the New Zealand government introduced the Building (Earthquake-prone Buildings) Amendment Act 2016, which presented stricter seismic strengthening regulations for vulnerable buildings (earthquake-prone buildings) to ensure better life safety outcomes for such structures. The associated costs and challenges of retrofitting heritage buildings have put many of these structures at risk of abandonment or demolition, taking their embodied heritage value with them. This research uses survey data to establish how heritage buildings develop a sense of place within a community and how the public's perception can implicate preserving heritage buildings. Survey results indicated that people value these structures in their communities. Further, personal connections to heritage buildings or knowledge of the historical context improve the desire to preserve and restore these structures.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Heritage plays a significant role in weaving the very essence of culture and fosters a sense of belonging, community, and place (Li 2010). Although New Zealand's heritage may not span as long a history as some European, Asian, or African nations, it is by no means lacking in cultural richness (Smith 2012). Much of this cultural richness is embodied within the heritage building stock. Unfortunately, many of these heritage buildings do not meet the seismic regulations imposed after the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010-2012, and risk being demolished if not adequately strengthened (Tong et al., 2022). Specifically, the Building Amendment Act 2016 designates all unreinforced masonry buildings, of which many heritage buildings are, as 'potentially earthquake-prone buildings' (NZSEE, 2006). This could result in a large-scale loss of New Zealand's built heritage. The costly nature of seismic retrofits has left numerous buildings across the country

vulnerable to demolition, leaving their fate at the mercy of stakeholders who must decide whether these structures will endure physically or exist only in the cherished memories of those connected to them (Aigwi et al., 2020).

The loss of these buildings could have significant unmeasured consequences on local communities. Heritage buildings are often landmarks within a community or visual reminders of the local or national history. As such, heritage buildings contribute to a community's sense of place. A sense of place is formed based on an individual's attachment, rootedness, and community interaction (Hay 1998). Further, a sense of place contributes to the feeling of ownership and can be fostered through childhood memories (Hashemnezhad et al. 2013). Shamai (1991) describes variations in the sense of place as an evolution of three phases, belonging, attachment, and commitment, along a seven-step scale. Step 0 is not having a sense of place. The first phase, belonging, encompasses Steps 1 (knowledge) and 2 (belonging). The attachment phase covers Step 3 (attachment) and Step 4 (identifying with goals), while Step 5 (involvement) and Step 6 (sacrifice) cover the commitment phase (Shamai 1991). Heritage buildings can help establish a sense of place through acting as conduits for forming attachments, increased involvement, and initiating sacrifice to a location.

This study is part of a larger study investigating restoration decisions for earthquake-prone seismic buildings. This paper covers the results of a community-based survey aimed at identifying the role heritage buildings play in community identity and community member's perspectives on the preservation of heritage buildings. The survey was conducted to determine the value of heritage buildings in light of many of these structures being classified as earthquake-prone. Mixed quantitative and qualitative survey data investigate community connections and attitudes towards preservation.

## **2 METHODS**

### **2.1 Survey development and distribution**

A survey was developed for distribution to the general public to obtain viewpoints on heritage buildings and their relation to a community's sense of place. The reason for distributing the survey to the general public instead of focusing on opinions solely from financial stakeholders and government councils stems from the definition of heritage; “the evidence of the past, such as historical sites, buildings and the unspoilt natural environment, considered collectively as the inheritance of present-day society” (Collins Dictionary n.d.). Without a society being willing to inherit heritage, there is no heritage. The survey seeks to highlight the general public's perception of heritage buildings and their connections to these structures.

#### **2.1.1 Question development**

The survey was developed using Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2023) to enable easy distribution and analysis of the data. The survey consisted of nine questions and was a mix of multi-choice Likert-scale and multichoice with justification questions. Multi-choice questions were selected due to the ease of completing the study and quantitative results for analysis. To provide a richer data context, some of the multi-choice questions required participants to justify their responses. This provides qualitative data to enhance the quantitative results, allowing participants to expand on their choices and provide more meaningful insights than available through a purely quantitative analysis. The survey was estimated to take five to ten minutes, depending on the length of open-ended responses. No demographical or geographical information was collected. This study received ethics approval from the University of Waikato HECS Ethics Committee (HREC(HECS)2023#42).

### 2.1.2 Survey questions

The survey questions are as follows:

1. How interested are you in the preservation of heritage?
2. How much do you know about the local history/heritage of your home town?
3. Would you like to learn more about the history/heritage of your home town?
4. Do you feel that the heritage buildings within towns are an important part of the town's identity?
5. Do you feel that heritage buildings that need (potentially costly) seismic retrofits should be preserved or should they be torn down to be replaced with newer buildings?
6. Do you feel that you would be more inclined to opt for the preservation of heritage buildings if you had some sort of connection with such a building or knew more about its story? If so, why?
7. If councils were trying to preserve heritage while also increasing heritage awareness within their district, which of the following do you feel would be the most effective? (choices included 1. Increasing funding for heritage building restoration and assisting with seismic retrofits, 2. Increasing public awareness for the heritage of structures through the addition of information signs/boards outside heritage buildings, 3. Running campaigns in schools to educate on the history of local buildings, 4. Other)
8. Suppose there was an earthquake in Hamilton and some heritage buildings were damaged but repairable (at an expensive cost). Would you rather the building be demolished, or the building be repaired and strengthened? State your reasons as to why.
9. Is there any particular building that you hold a particular appreciation for (not limited to Hamilton, but can be anywhere). If so, why do you have a special connection to such a building?

The last two questions focused on Hamilton, New Zealand, as this was the focal point for the survey distribution. As the survey had a wider reach than just Hamilton, the city name would be removed for future studies, and the participants would be asked about their local community.

### 2.1.3 Participant recruitment

The survey was distributed through a variety of different methods to attempt to attract a wide and varied participant base in attempts to get impartial and unbiased opinions. The survey was posted on the University of Engineering announcement hub, Instagram stories (multiple accounts), LinkedIn (multiple accounts), Posters around the University of Waikato campus, Public Libraries (Hamilton and Wellington), and through word of mouth. The survey was open between 17 July and 2 October 2023 and had 66 completed responses. Demographical information about participants was not collected.

### 2.1.4 Analysis methods

The data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Quantitative analysis was used for the initial analysis of the survey questions using the data from the multiple-choice questions. These questions were looked at individually and comparatively to identify statistically significant relationships between question answers. Statistical correlations were determined using Chi-squared tests.

Qualitative data was collected from the written responses substantiating survey questions six through nine. This data was analysed using a thematic analysis following the six steps given by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps for the thematic analysis are: 1. Familiarise self with data, 2. Generate initial codes, 3. Search for themes, 4. Review themes, 5. Define and name themes, 6. Produce the report.

### 3 SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Quantitative Data

Some of the results from the quantitative analysis are given here. Based on the survey, survey participants had positive attitudes towards preserving heritage buildings. The majority of respondents, 74%, stated that heritage buildings should be preserved if they have historical value or importance to the community. An additional 11% of respondents stated that heritage buildings should be preserved regardless of their heritage value. Only 11% responded that the buildings should be torn down if they had no heritage value. None of the participants thought that heritage buildings should be torn down regardless of their heritage value, while the remaining 4% selected an alternative solution.

When asked about how councils can try to increase heritage awareness within their districts, respondents heavily favoured outreach activities, with 53% in favour of adding information and signboards to the outside of heritage buildings to facilitate knowledge transfer of the historical and heritage context for the building. Some participants, 26%, believed that increased council funding for heritage buildings would help increase heritage building awareness.

As visualised in Figure 1, most participants somewhat or strongly agreed that heritage buildings contribute to the town's identity. None of the participants disagreed that heritage buildings were linked to town identity. When comparing the interest in heritage building preservation to the importance of heritage buildings on town identity, participants who were more interested in heritage preservation also felt that heritage buildings were more important to the town's identity. Those with only slight or moderate interest in heritage preservation were more likely to only somewhat agree that heritage buildings were important to a town's identity.

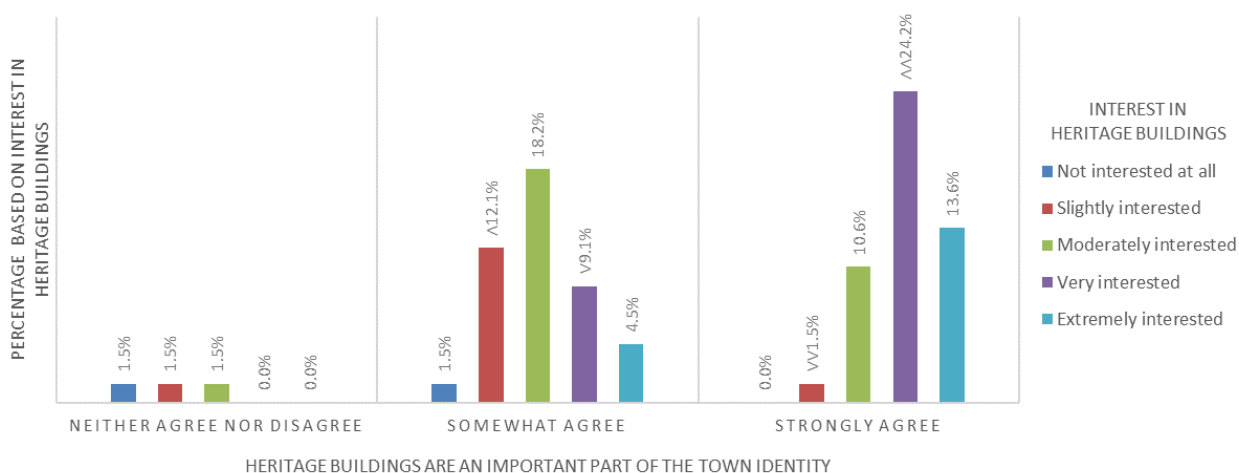


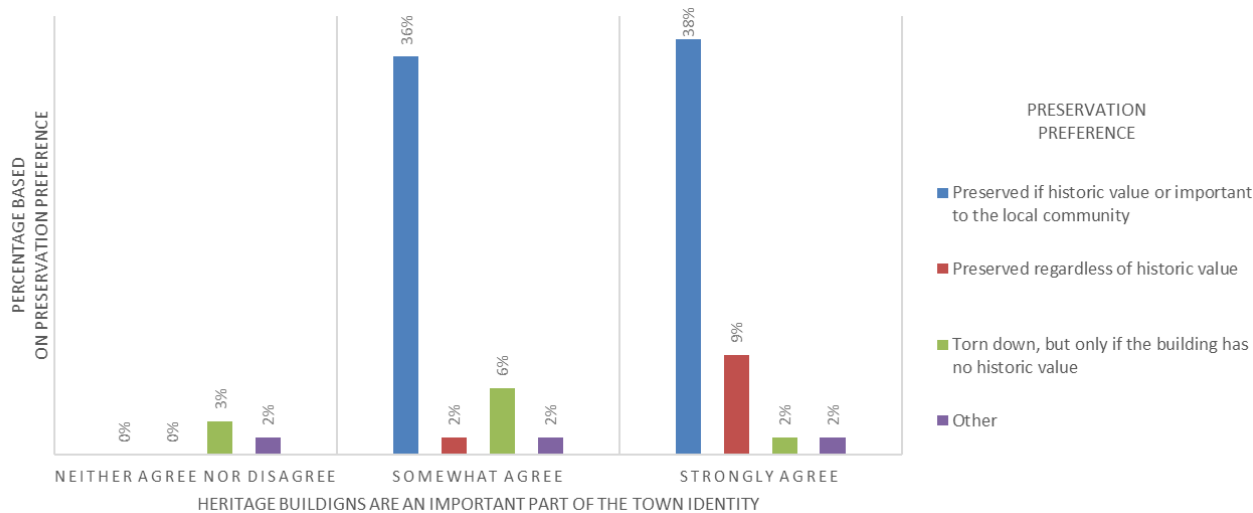
Figure 1 Cross-correlation between participants comparing their interest in heritage buildings preservation (Q1) to the importance of heritage buildings to the town identity (Q4). > and >> indicate where results have clear, statistically significant results.

This relationship extends to how participants considered the need for costly retrofitting and preservation of heritage buildings in relation to how they view heritage buildings fit into a town's identity. Using a Chi-squared test with a P-value of 0.000946 and an effective size of 0.414, it was found that there is a strong statistically significant relationship between these responses. Most of the participants viewed that heritage buildings should be preserved if they have historical or other importance to a local community, as seen in Figure 2. These participants were also more likely to somewhat or strongly agree that these structures contributed to the town's identity. Those who strongly associated heritage buildings with a town's identity were statistically less likely to think these structures should be torn down or replaced by new buildings regardless of the historical value of

these structures. Conversely, those who thought heritage buildings only somewhat contribute to town identity were slightly more likely to favour demolition if there was no apparent historical value.

The relationship between heritage buildings and town identity had a limited correlation with preservation preferences, but learning about the structure's history correlates with preservation preferences. While most of the participants, 78%, believed they would be more inclined to support preserving heritage buildings if they knew more about the building's history, this is no strong correlation to agreeing that the buildings formed part of the town's identity. However, there is a relationship between preservation preferences and learning more about the structure's history. Fifty participants believed that they would be more inclined to support building preservation if they knew more about the building's history; of this group, 44 stated that buildings should be preserved regardless of their historical or local significance, while five favoured tearing down and replacing the building.

When presented with a scenario where an earthquake damaged a heritage building, participants had more varied opinions on the best course of action. While 47% agreed that the building should be repaired and strengthened, 42% stated that they could not immediately decide whether it should be demolished or restored. Many of these participants stated there was more nuance involved in the decision-making, such as the current and expected use of the building, the cost of repairs, the downtime required, the heritage value, the uniqueness of the building, the personal or community connections with the building, and the importance of the building to the town's identity.



*Figure 2 Cross-correlation between participants comparing the importance of heritage buildings to the town identity (Q4) to preferences for heritage retrofits (Q5).*

When comparing these responses to preservation preferences, there is a strong statistically significant relationship with repair decisions after the scenario event. Those who favoured preserving the building prior to an earthquake due to its historical or local importance strongly favoured repairing and strengthening the building, see Figure 3. Even many of those who selected 'other' stated in their response that repairs should be done if there is not significant damage and are not too costly or time-consuming.

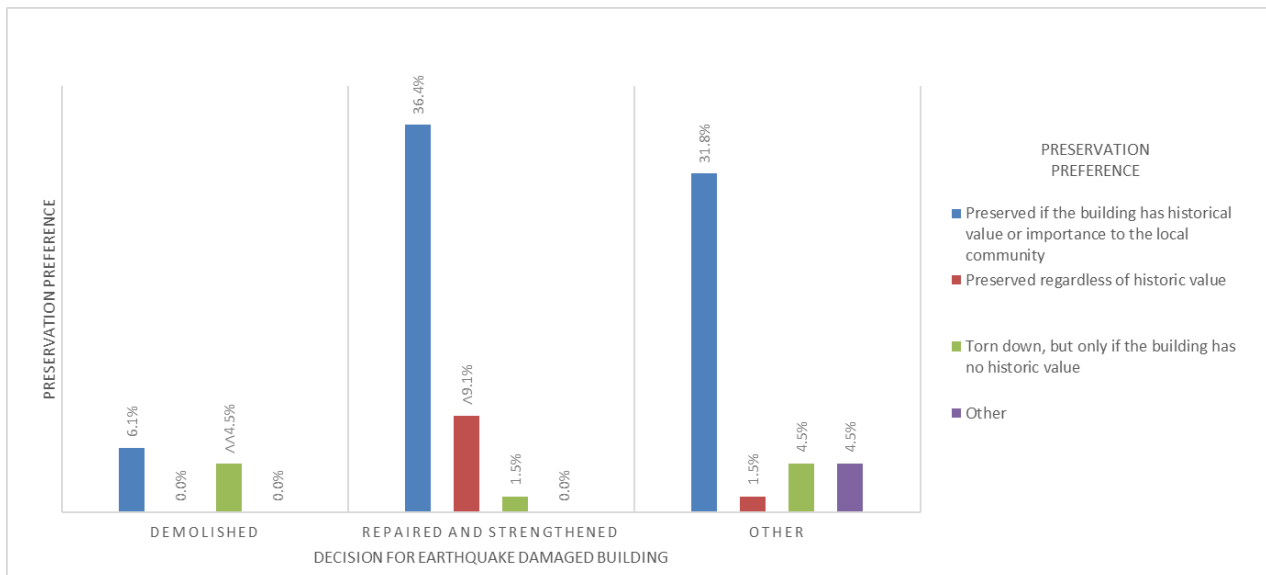


Figure 3 Cross-correlation between participants preservation preferences (Q5) to restoration decisions for an earthquake scenario (Q8).

### 3.2 Qualitative Data

The written responses to survey questions that required participants to justify their answers were analysed using thematic analysis. After an initial data review, codes were selected based on common words or phrases. Some of the initial codes included ‘history/historical knowledge’, ‘sense of place’, ‘connection’, ‘safety’, ‘preservation’, and ‘ownership’. After all the written statements were coded, the codes were used to identify overarching themes.

Two main themes were identified. The first theme is that heritage buildings instil a sense of place for community members to connect with their town or city. Heritage buildings are seen as embodiments of a town’s identity or culture and holders of communal memories. Through the link between heritage buildings and town identity, a sense of place is created for community members. This sense of place is fostered through personal and community connections to heritage buildings, knowledge of the building's role in the town's history, and perceived ownership or kinship with heritage buildings.

The second theme that emerged is that the preservation of heritage buildings is conditional on personal and community attitudes towards the buildings. Personal or community connections to heritage buildings increase the desire to protect or preserve the structures. However, cost and safety concerns can outweigh historical significance and personal connections to heritage buildings.

### 3.3 Do heritage buildings instil a sense of place?

A quantitative study of the survey results highlights the integral role that heritage buildings play in shaping the identity of a town or city, contributing significantly to the establishment of a distinct sense of place. As stated by one respondent, “Stories and context build connections. The more heritage there is in a place, the more deeply layered the story of a place.” While another wrote, “I think it is important to preserve them as it gives the history...it also shows the personality of the town.” These sentiments underscore the idea that learning about the heritage and history of these structures goes beyond individual attachment; it becomes a shared narrative that enriches the entire community's connection to its surroundings. These ideas indicate the forming of belonging (step 3 of sense of place, (Shamai 1991)) and attachments (step 4 of sense of place, (Shamai 1991)) with heritage buildings extending the wider community, fostering a sense of place.

Responses to the survey highlighted that acquiring knowledge about the heritage and history within these buildings, coupled with forming personal connections through a study of their history, deepens an individual's attachment. One participant stated that learning more about a building "Provid[es] context for people around historical connection and history to increase connection to a building and as sense of ownership of a building." Others stated that building connections to heritage buildings creates personal value, respect, and ownership. Understanding the historical significance makes the building a part of an individual's personal history, strengthening their bond, and fostering increased care through heritage ownership.

The survey further reveals that comprehending the historical significance of heritage buildings not only strengthens the individual's personal bond but transforms these structures, setting them apart from other buildings or mere collections of materials, into embodiments of personal and community values. As highlighted by participants, this transformation creates a unique identity for the community, where these buildings become more than physical structures; they become repositories of collective memories. As one respondent notes, "Our urban built heritage is a visual and tangible link to our past, by default we all have some form of connection to these buildings." Another stated that these buildings are "physical examples of history...you can see it right in front of you. If you know more about the building, then it can be fascinating." Further interaction with and use of the heritage buildings and knowledge of their history allows individuals to create their own connections and memories of the buildings, creating a "degree of nostalgia," as stated by another participant, increasing their design to preserve and protect them. These ideas are backed by the quantitative results that indicate that people are connected to buildings through learning their history. The building becomes a repository of stories, housing memories, and offering a tangible connection to history that can be both seen and experienced.

Expanding on the idea of ownership and connection to heritage structures, many of the survey participants wrote about special connections they have with particular heritage buildings. These sentiments often conveyed a sense of belonging and deep connection to the structures based on their family history, aesthetic appreciation or cultural significance, and personal memories. Several respondents directly tied heritage buildings to their families, the buildings are "connected to my hapu." Expanding on this idea, another respondent spoke of their ties to heritage buildings in similitude to their family, "I feel a connection to these buildings almost like they are a part of my greater whanau; my parents, grandparents and great grandparents all grew up in this town with these buildings present, hence the sense of family." Cultural significance and community identity were also mentioned, with many participants referencing iconic buildings such as the Auckland Museum, the Rotorua Museum, the Chateau Tongariro, and the Christchurch Cathedral. These comments were frequently paired with recognising these structures house historical value and how they are treated by the wider public. As stated by one participant, "Although they may not be up to modern design standards, many of New Zealand's old heritage buildings are tangible cultural and historical links to our forebears, and to the events and decisions that shaped our nation. Keeping these buildings is a social good." Further, these buildings can add to a person's "sense of personal identity if that building played a significant part in your life," as stated by another participant. Forging memories, interacting with these structures, and engaging with their history all enable one to build personal connections to the structures. These deep personal or generational connections to the buildings foster the development of a community sense of place.

Heritage buildings also contribute greatly to town or city identity. In the words of a participant, "Towns culture is somewhat connected to the buildings. Memories, etc., are built there. People like a mix of old and new buildings." This sentiment underscores the dynamic interplay between the physical structures, community memories, and the evolving cultural identity that collectively shape a vibrant and cohesive sense of place.

Establishing connections with heritage buildings should not be confined to individual experiences. It must extend to the collective memory of the wider community. A shared sense of ownership emerges then the community collectively engages with and values heritage buildings. While some respondents acknowledge

that not all heritage may be relevant to them, it could be relevant to others and should be preserved: “Regardless of if I individually feel connected to such a building or know its history, other people who feel connected or know the true history of the building should be enough to preserve it.” However, as it is important to create collective community memories of heritage structures to increase sentiment and a feeling of collective ownership. A lack of collective connections can lead to varying degrees of lasting heritage values. Others stated the challenges of lacking a community connection to these structures, “The people who don’t care about our heritage are always those with no connections. They trash the opinions of those of us with connections.” Connecting to heritage buildings helps establish a sense of place for community members. Broader community connections to these structures further strengthen the wider community's sense of place through shared memories and preservation.

### **3.4 Preservation of Heritage Buildings**

The survey results consistently underscore the significant influence of personal connections and knowledge of a building’s history on opinions surrounding heritage building restoration. Having a personal connection to a building or knowing the history of the structure increases the willingness to protect and preserve these buildings. Knowing the history of a building increases the respect for it. As stated by one, "because knowing the story behind a building creates more of a connection. If there is a story behind it, it's worth keeping as it is part of our history." This attitude is also reflected by another who states that “I would feel more strongly about preserving the heritage of something I am familiar with. I would feel an obligation to support and protect it, whereas without knowing, that sense isn't there, and I may be oblivious to its importance.” Others mentioned that learning the history or heritage of a building will increase how much they care about it, make it harder to neglect the building, and make them more biased towards the building’s preservation. These ideas are supported by the quantitative results that show that the majority of participants were more willing to support preservation if they knew the history or had personal connections to the buildings.

Further, creating connections and attachments to heritage buildings encourages people to be more involved in the decisions surrounding heritage building preservation. It gets people involved with a place and can instigate sacrifice for a place, the higher phases of Shamai’s sense of place scale (Shamai 1991). An authentic and deep connection to heritage buildings can foster a sense of place deep enough to cause changes in behaviours, not just attitudes.

Conversely, an absence of personal connections or historical awareness hinders heritage preservation. Many of the participants highlight that a lack of connections to a building diminishes the perceived value of the building, decreasing their interest in preserving the structure. As one participant notes, “I don’t know the history or heritage of many buildings so I am more inclined to choose options that would hinder the building's ability to stay.” This insight emphasises the awareness and historical understanding of the building’s significance increases the likelihood of supporting preservation initiatives, but a lack of understanding can hinder or prevent their preservation.

A broader community understanding and appreciation of a heritage building’s significance also improves the desire to support preservation. To be significant to a community, a structure needs to have a purpose, a historical narrative can help achieve this, “A historical narrative provided for a building gives it a purpose, a means for preservation and greater understanding and appreciation by the community.” This appreciation of heritage buildings by the community will lead to increased care. As one respondent wrote, “The key for people to care about something is understanding what that something is. Therefore, understanding the story and the cultural past should lead to more care.” These insights highlight that understanding historical significance may be a critical step in fostering positive attitudes towards restoration.

Regardless of personal sentiment or historical knowledge, survey participants also expressed that safety concerns and the challenges and cost of retrofitting heritage buildings to meet seismic strength requirements



may hinder the ability or even the desire to preserve heritage buildings. Balancing the preservation of heritage buildings with safety concerns is an important factor in determining a course of action. As one participant stated in response to the question ‘if knowing the story of a building will increase their interest in heritage buildings preservation’, “only if keeping that story was not a great cost to the environment or community. Sometimes stories of a collapse can be just as significant as when it was built.” This statement underscores the balance that must be maintained between the environmental and financial costs of restoration. Sometimes, these costs can be too high for a community to support and creating new stories around the loss of heritage structures may be more valuable to that community. Another participant stated, “if the building’s history serves important purposes to the community’s identity it should be preserved. But also if the building is simply unsafe then demolition is inevitable.” Buildings that form a part of a community’s identity are important, but their importance cannot be greater than the community's safety.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Heritage buildings are pivotal in fostering a sense of place within communities, as evidenced by how individuals form attachments, engage with, and make sacrifices to preserve this historic structure. As evidenced by the survey results, heritage buildings play a multifaceted role in shaping a distinct sense of place.

Heritage buildings serve as powerful anchors in establishing a sense of place, connecting individuals to their communities in various ways. One is through personal connections to these structures, often forged through family ties, cultural significance, or personal memories. These personal connections contribute to a community's emotional fabric, creating a sense of belonging and attachment. Heritage buildings also hold communal memories as tangible repositories of stories and local or national history. Preserving these structures allows communities to maintain meaningful links to their past, further enforcing a sense of belonging and attachment to a place.

Connecting with heritage buildings further deepens a sense of place, triggering changes in behaviour and potentially leading to actions to preserve and protect heritage structures. The survey responses emphasise that having personal and community connections with heritage structures influences opinions and nurtures positive attitudes for supporting heritage building preservation. Understanding and valuing heritage can intensify the desire to protect and sustain these historical landmarks, leading to a greater involvement with a place, or even a willingness to sacrifice for a place.

Associating heritage buildings with forming a community sense of place further extends to restoring heritage buildings damaged by earthquakes. Many are willing to support the restoration of damaged heritage buildings to preserve a community’s identity or history. However, this desire must be balanced with safety and cost considerations. Practical constraints and financial limitations must be considered in contrast to preserving the history and heritage nested within heritage buildings.

The survey findings underscore the intricate relationship between heritage buildings and the sense of place within communities. Personal connections, preservation efforts, and recognising these structures as custodians of communal memories collectively contribute to a vibrant and enduring sense of place. Heritage buildings are not merely relics of the past but living symbols that continue to shape a community's present and future identity. In this way, heritage buildings stand as sentinels of a community's sense of place, ensuring that the echoes of history resonate for generations to come.

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