

{HERITAGE}

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# COOLANGATTA GOLD

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Last December, Coolangatta, a much-admired arts-and-crafts house in Remuera, was demolished to the chagrin of neighbours and heritage campaigners. Simon Farrell-Green finds that — despite reforms by Dick Hubbard's council — Coolangatta won't be the last to go.

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**SIMON FARRELL-GREEN IS A METRO SENIOR WRITER. HIS LAST STORY WAS ABOUT FUTURE AUCKLAND. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON YOUNG**



**K**INGSVIEW IS A TALL, white, 1980s apartment block on Remuera Rd with one large apartment on each floor and very nice views. A little after 8.30am, December 9 last year, as the building's occupants were sitting down to breakfast and the morning's *Herald*, trucks rolled up the driveway of the gracious house next door, known as Coolangatta, and two orange diggers were unloaded.

As neighbours watched, the diggers took to the 95-year-old house, pulling down walls and taking off the roof, exposing rooms beneath with furniture and books still in them. From several storeys up, the place looked like a dolls' house being opened up.

According to one report, the house came down in 18 minutes, leaving a pile of bricks, slate and splintered wood behind. A plume of dust rushed down the valley. "It looked like we'd been flour-bombed," says one neighbour. Then, the demolition workers spent a couple of weeks picking through the rubble, looking for slate tiles, bits of usable timber and bricks.

Residents of Remuera were outraged. It turned out that the house had never been protected under the city's heritage rules, although many in the area assumed it had. Worse, six months before, in May, the council had considered scheduling the property —

assessments by the heritage department indicated it was worth a "B" registration — but, because the property was on the market, had decided to let it go. It then voted to keep the decision secret.

Margaret Coutts, the 95-year-old former owner of the property, who bought it in the 1950s with her late husband Morton, was interviewed by the *Herald* a few days later, and was said to be upset at its demolition. "It was our home, and our children grew up there," she said. "It's all sad, and you do get churned up and so on, which one can't help doing. But what can one do, when you're getting old and so on?"

"I have no control over the laws of the land," she continued. "I can't tell the new owners what to do. We did exactly what we wanted when we bought it." In fact, whether Mrs Coutts was as removed from the demolition as she suggested is thrown into doubt by documents seen by *Metro*. (More on this later.)

Kingsview now looks down on to an empty site. The footprint of the house is clearly outlined in the grass; the driveway runs down to an empty lot. Digger marks can be made out faintly on the grass where a flight of basalt stairs was pulled out. The pedestrian gate has an abandoned rubbish bin and mouldering copies of circulars have piled up in the letter box.

**COOLANGATTA WAS DESIGNED** by the arts-and-crafts architect Noel Bamford. You may not know many of his other houses, which are often fine brick piles

down long driveways in Auckland's better-off suburbs. Photos show Bamford as a small, neat man with an impressive forehead and a splendidly bald pate. On his return from London in 1906 (he worked under the famed architect Edward Lutyens), he established a firm with the architect Hector Pierce.

Later he worked for W. H. Gummer where, according to *The History of New Zealand Architecture*, "despite great ability as a draughtsman he was found to be unreliable, sleeping in his office and continually missing appointments."

He designed Coolangatta for Alfred Foster and his wife Jessie in 1912 and the house was built in 1913 or 1914 for £1000. Foster was a surveyor; his wife was from Queensland, near Coolangatta. Presumably, says their grand-daughter Elizabeth Macky, that's where the money to build it came from. "The whole family had a huge amount of land, but I think that got drunk away, frittered away," she says. "Lots of alcohol and fast — well, slow — horses, and it disappeared."

The 1890s in Auckland had seen very little building: a recession slowed the speculators and the merchants, but when the economy improved in the 1900s a new generation of wealthy traders began to build large houses in Auckland's leafier suburbs. Many were taken with the arts-and-crafts style.

From the street, Coolangatta looked every bit like an English manor: a sweeping driveway — originally paved with crushed shell — led to the front door.



COOLANGATTA

REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM AUCKLAND ARCHITECTURE — A PERSONAL VIEW BY SAIT AKKIRMAN.

Inside, a long, wide gallery led to formal rooms that overlooked the back garden: a “smoking room” — presumably for the gents to retire to with brandy and cigars after dinner — a dining room and a sitting room on the ground floor. There was a maids’ wing, with its own bathroom, and upstairs, four bedrooms, a sewing room and a bathroom.

Out the back, though, a nascent New Zealand-ness emerged: a long, narrow veranda ran along the back of the house and ran out to a garden; the top floor had a view of the harbour and Rangitoto.

Bamford had an eye for detail. The original specification for the house instructed that all door frames were to be cemented in. The floors were made from matai, the outside doors and windows totara, the doorframes kauri, the woodwork on the balcony jarrah, “tinted plum colour”. The living rooms were panelled with “especially picked clean, bright heart of rimu”; the architraves, skirting boards, staircases and doors the same. He even specified what sort of sandpaper was to be used. “It was a beautiful home,” says Macky, who lived there as a child for two years while her father and mother were in London during World War Two. “Granny used to have little parties from time to time. It was a really happy life.”

In the early 1950s, the house was sold to beer magnate Morton Coutts and his wife Margaret. Morton Coutts’ grandfather came to New Zealand in 1867 and ran a brewery in Clyde. Gradually, the family moved north; the family owned the Main Trunk Brewery in Taihape and in the late 1920s the family moved to Auckland to start the Waitemata Brewery in Otahuhu. Eventually, they went into business with entrepreneur Sir Henry Kelliher and floated a public company, Dominion Breweries Ltd, which eventually became part of DB Breweries.

But Morton Coutts’ real flair was technological: he was the first person to broadcast television signals in New Zealand and the first to send short-wave radio signals to Britain. In 1956, he revolutionised beer-making by creating a process called continuous fermentation. He believed in the health-giving properties of barley, which he drank almost every day of his life. It was clearly a good idea: he worked until he was 89, carried on patenting inventions through his nineties and died, aged 100, in 2004.

**T**HE COUTTS WERE somewhat reclusive. Despite the grand house, they rarely entertained. Although the house was regarded as architecturally important — *The History of New Zealand Architecture* includes a decent photograph and devotes a paragraph to it — few historians ever set foot inside. The house was one of the first in Auckland to have a burglar alarm, reportedly because Morton Coutts was afraid of being kidnapped. (In its early days it used to go off at 5am every morning: a trip wire along the driveway was often set off by a flock of birds.)



ELIZABETH MACKY (LEFT) AND DAUGHTER REBECCA OUTSIDE 464 REMUERA RD, WHERE COOLANGATTA STOOD.

{ Coolangatta looked every bit like an English manor: a sweeping driveway led to the front door. Inside, a long, wide gallery led to formal rooms that overlooked the back garden. }

When Morton died, Margaret stayed on in the house, but eventually moved into a retirement home. In 2004, the house was put on the market, listed with Paul Barnao of Barfoot and Thompson in Remuera. “A picture paints a thousand words!” one glossy advertisement, accompanied with large, English-y pictures, reads. “The double-brick, slate-roofed Coolangatta has only had two owners since its completion in 1911 and you too will fall in love with this most admired home.”

Almost as an aside, it mentioned the reason the house was expected to reach a high price: the place

was zoned Residential 7, which allows for intense development, with one dwelling for every 200 square metres. It is the most intense zone in the city, applied to chunks of Auckland in the 1970s in already built-up areas. In a sense, that zoning set the stage for what happened 30 years later.

You have a disjunct, says Rebecca Macky, a resource management consultant and the great-grand-daughter of the original owners, “a zoning which is completely incompatible with the heritage values of the property.”

“THERE’S A COMMON perception that Auckland



GEORGE FARRANT.

“Uniquely, I think, Auckland has never lost one of its scheduled properties,” says the council’s heritage manager George Farrant.

lost all its heritage in the 1980s boom,” says George Farrant, heritage manager at the Auckland City Council. “Urban legend tends to build these things. In fact, we lost the Salvation Army Citadel, Her Majesty’s Theatre and Brown’s Mill. Three catalytic buildings that caused such a stir as to bring the council down on its haunches over heritage.” After that, the council began, slowly, to develop a heritage department, firstly as part of the planning division, and then as a stand-alone entity with urban design. In the early 1990s, Farrant and others realised there was too much work to do and not enough staff — at that point, they had only four staff — and so urban design was ditched, where it languished until a couple of years ago.

Farrant and his team have refined a points-based heritage assessment system against which buildings

are assessed: it’s based on a similar system in Canada, and includes the condition of the building, who built it, who lived there and how aesthetically pleasing it is.

If a building scores above 50, it’s considered a “B”, if above 75, it’s an “A”. The department then puts the building or site forward for “scheduling” in the District Plan, which means that demolition is basically illegal. The point of the whole thing is that rather than just insisting it’s heritage, you quantify it. “It’s pretty bloody-minded,” he says.

The council has so far listed about 4200 sites in Auckland — not just buildings, but volcanic cones, pa sites, archaeological sites, even significant ecologies — which is a remarkable achievement. “Uniquely, I think, Auckland has never lost one of its scheduled properties,” Farrant says. He uses words like “robust”

and “rigorous” and “defensible” to describe his system. Their rankings are often conservative, and they only mark, he says, according to what they know, not what they suspect. Confusingly, buildings will slide up and down the scale as new information comes to hand. “That’s the beauty of the system,” insists Farrant. “It’s transparent.”

But it’s what’s not on the list that is the problem: there have been several high-profile debates over heritage in recent years and there’s a sense in which policies like these are judged by their failures, not their achievements. “The irritation to us is that it’s less than the tip of the iceberg,” says Farrant.

Or is it? When Dick Hubbard swept into the Auckland City mayoralty in 2004, it was on a tide of disgruntlement with what many saw as the failure of the council to make Auckland look, well, nice. Hubbard promised to improve what he saw as the council’s inadequate procedures and policies around heritage.

The next year, the council levied a targeted rate of 9.7 per cent: of that \$200,000 went to identify and research heritage sites in the city. The council ran a campaign urging Aucklanders to do in their favourite building. The response appeared incredible: 11,000 submissions came in but 10,000 turned out to be spurious, randomly generated addresses designed to scupper the process. Of that, Farrant and his team whittled it down to 700, a list of sites which they are now researching; 80 have been protected so far.

Coolangatta was on that list. At the end of 2004 Kathryn Carter — a Parnell architect and member of the Hobson Community Board — put the house forward for heritage assessment. Nothing happened, despite the fact the house was on the market.

In March 2006 council officers and Environment and Heritage Committee chairwoman Christine Caughey became aware that the house was on the market. The department commissioned research on the house. Caughey took the mayor, Dick Hubbard, to see the house and press upon him its importance. He agreed.

In early April, the house was assessed as being worthy of 58 points and the council wrote to Mrs Coutts to inform her. On April 10, Mrs Coutts, through her son-in-law David Boswell, a partner at Bell Gully, applied for a certificate of compliance to demolish the house. Remember, in the Residential 7 zone, demolition of existing buildings is what’s known as a permitted activity: Coutts didn’t need a resource consent to demolish, but merely needed to seek confirmation of that right. On May 3, the council granted consent. (*Metro* contacted both Mrs Coutts and David Boswell repeatedly for comment, but they declined.)

At the same time, the Coutts family — through Boswell — opposed the scheduling, and queried the accuracy of the information: the house was reassessed as a 54 by Farrant after he reviewed, as is customary, the owner’s response and the council’s research.

The day after consent was issued, the council’s Environment, Heritage and Urban Form Committee met to consider scheduling the house. So, as one arm of the council was signing off on the house’s demolition, another was considering its historical merit.

A council report for that meeting notes that Boswell had requested all information relating to the council's investigation of the site and had "also requested complete confidentiality. Bell Gully indicated the owners' strong opposition to the scheduling proposal on the grounds of substantial financial loss." The report noted that scheduling Coolangatta would cost around \$50,000, and could escalate to \$100,000 if the owners appealed through the Environment Court.

Regardless, the committee voted to schedule the house and referred it to the Planning and Regulatory Committee, which would put in place the formal notification of the house's scheduling. That committee also voted to schedule the house, but, unusually, decided to send it to the main council for a final decision as the financial implications were potentially large.

On May 25, the main council considered the scheduling. In a report to the council, city services manager John Duthie recommended that the council not protect the house because of the consequences: a legal opinion by the council's solicitors noted that if it scheduled the house, the Environment Court could require the council to purchase the property, protect it and then resell. The difference between the value of the site as a development option or as a protected building, according to a council-commissioned valuation, was about \$2 million.

Hubbard voted to save it, as did several members of City Vision and Christine Caughey. "I put a lot of thought into my own position," Hubbard says now. "Two million was getting close to my level of discomfort. But I thought in this case there was a bit of a precedent and a message to send that we were serious about heritage."

Much of Citizens and Ratepayers Now, and Deputy Mayor Bruce Hucker voted against it because "the legitimate expectations of the owner were being affected": the zoning conferred rights, which the council was considering taking away.

Then, the council voted to keep the vote confidential. "It was a judgment about the public interest," says Hucker now. The council didn't want the issue to become a political football in the Hobson ward, which would undermine their other heritage efforts. "We tried, really, to limit the damage to the council

in the process."

But, er, didn't you realise that fight would break out when the house was demolished anyway? "Sure. Sure" he says. "Judgments were made in a dynamic situation."

Many have criticised this, not least because it seemed cowardly. Klaus Heyman, a German who spends a few months a year in New Zealand, last year bought Elmstone, a historic house next to Coolangatta. Had he known, he would have bought Coolangatta and covenanted it himself before selling it on.

"There are people who may have been prepared to bridge that gap," says Peter Macky, who is Heyman's lawyer. "No one was given the opportunity to look at other options to bridge that gap by the process and by the secrecy."

**I****N OCTOBER, MRS COUTTS** agreed to sell the house for \$5.6 million to Remuera 464 Ltd, whose directors are Geoff Smith, of Parnell, and Maurizio Cozzolino, an Italian developer who, with his brother Paolo, owns the upmarket bathroom company Spazio Casa.

The Cozzolinos used to live in Kingsview, the apartment block next door to Coolangatta; Maurizio lived on the ninth floor and Paolo on the 11th. Both brothers gutted their apartments and residents got sniffy when they damaged the lifts carting building materials in and out. Maurizio redecorated his apartment with dark wood and leather — and, presumably, a marvellous bathroom — and sold it; Paolo sold his as a shell shortly afterward. Both made a hefty profit.

In mid-November, Mrs Coutts gave Remuera 464's Geoff Smith authority to apply for demolition consents in her name. Smith engaged Nikau Contractors, the demolition company, and then applied for demolition consent, which was granted on November 29. On December 9, the same day Coolangatta was demolished, Coutts and Remuera 464 Ltd signed the transfer documents. Settlement would have followed within a week. *Metro* has not been able to confirm whether a cleared site was a condition of the sale, but the timing of the demolition and the transfer of the title suggest it might have been.





HERITAGE CONSULTANT ALLAN MATSON, IN FRONT OF THE JEAN BATTEN BUILDING.

{ But here's the rub: none of the changes that have been made in recent years would have saved Coolangatta. }

The experience has left the Macky family deeply angry. The two families had remained reasonably close over the years; they attended each other's birthday parties and weddings.

At his mother's house for dinner one night in late September or early October, Peter Macky rang David and Susan Boswell — Susan is Margaret Coutts' daughter — to ask if he and his family could go through the house before it changed hands. Susan Boswell said it was under offer, and that she'd need to check with her mother but that yes, they could. Macky asked what was going to happen to Coolangatta and Boswell replied that the prospective owners wanted to extend the house because it was too small, but that resource consent was taking a while.

Macky rang again in mid-November to ask for access and she again said yes. "There was no suggestion the house was going to be demolished," says Macky, who never did go through the place.

After the house was demolished, Macky rang again and Susan Boswell said it was "terribly difficult. The house had been on the market for two years; the family would have liked to have sold it as a family home."

"WE'VE SAVED THE Jean Batten building," says Mayor Dick Hubbard firmly when I go to see him. Whether you agree with him depends on your definition of "saved": right now, the art deco building is gutted, its period floors, staircases and fittings removed and its façade held up by an independent steel skeleton while they slip a modern office building behind it.

When it's finished, around 2009, it will have a series of shops open to the street at ground level; the floors above will connect with the new building in giant floorplates that stretch from Jean Batten Place to Queen St.

When I suggest it's façadism, he gets up from his chair, walks to the window of the mayoral suite and looks down at what's left of the Queen's Head hotel, pasted on the front of the blue-tinted glass of a 1980s office tower. "Bloody crap down here," he says. "I look at that every day. That's a most shocking example. That's pure façadism."

Regardless, many see the gutting of Jean Batten — and the demolition or threatening of other significant buildings, including Coolangatta — as the failure of a council that has staked its claim on issues of urban design and heritage. "It's an embarrassing loss," says Adam Wild, conservation architect and partner in

COOLANGATTA'S  
END WAS SWIFT:

18 minutes by  
some estimates.



Archifact, about Jean Batten. "People deserve to hang their heads in shame, I really believe that. The compromise is a loss for all sides, it is everything the council says it isn't. It is a shameful piece of façadism."

Under Mayor Dick Hubbard and councillor Christine Caughey, the council has made some commendable moves, mainly by making changes to the District Plan. Plan-change 163, brought in a couple of years ago, requires owners of pre-1940s houses to get a resource consent to demolish in so-called "character" zones, and to get that consent you have to prove the house needs to be demolished. Plan Change 5 is introducing the same idea to the CBD.

Now, the council has set about protecting particular zones in the CBD, like the marvellous collection of warehouses at the bottom of Anzac Ave; it's also considering the old Canvas City building, the Prince of Wales hotel and the former Yates buildings on Albert St under one plan change.

But here's the rub: none of the changes that have been made in recent years would have saved Coolangatta. At the core of the problem is that many heritage buildings sit in areas or zones which encourage redevelopment and where, essentially, the council cannot turn down applications. "Now that would be all right if they had done what they said they were going to do in the District Plan and that was to systematically recognise and protect heritage," says architectural heritage consultant Allan Matson. "But that hasn't been done..."

The heritage department was under-resourced for many years, so buildings have simply gone unnoticed. When they do come to score them, they only have a limited amount of time. Yet, the system uses an absolute pass or fail system, which implies that the researcher is in possession of all the facts.

"I don't see the rigour behind the criteria that are used for evaluation," says Wild. "I know that they're not able to give more than a few hours to assessing any individual place. That's the first limitation that needs to be acknowledged..."

The major problem, essentially, lies not in nice, character streets in Herne Bay or Remuera. The problem is in the CBD, in industrial areas and in areas zoned for high-density residential development. There are untold buildings in those zones that we may continue to lose. Then, there's a stoush, and people call on the council to "do" something.

"We know that we're pushing up hill at that point,"

says Farrant. "We will go on finding buildings like that. We are still facing a huge problem, and that's endemic in the fact that they were zoned high density before heritage came along as a discipline."

*Metro*: That's pretty galling.

"It is galling," he replies. "I suppose an analogy is every now and then someone dies on an operating table. Yes, had something been known about their condition a bit earlier they would have been probably saved. It's part of the process."

But, say heritage critics, the council is risk-averse. It has several tools available to it. One legal opinion for the council, obtained by *Metro*, shows that the council could, in fact, require heritage assessments with every application to demolish. After that, the council is enabled, under the Auckland Regional Policy Statement put out by the Auckland Regional Council, to issue heritage orders or to schedule. In the case of Coolangatta, and other buildings, they choose not to: consistently, the council claims that it would have to compensate owners. Matson rejects this. "It's completely 100 per cent wrong."

Rather, resource management experts spoken to for this story say that the owner would have to show that they could not make reasonable use of the site. The definition of "reasonable use" has never been defined in court, and nor has compensation, which could include rates holidays, transferable development rights or bonus floor space. "There is no doubt that the council has all the tools it needs to stop demolition of important buildings," one resource management expert told me. "It's not toothless, just spineless."

Not good enough, says environmental lawyer Richard Brabant. "The current approach of the council is far too one-dimensional," he says. The council relies solely on zoning and the district plan as a control mechanism. "What we've got to do is move beyond that and produce incentives and opportunities and bonuses."

Then, there's the "1940" rule, which is seen by many as arbitrary. At the end of 2005, two 1960s houses designed by former members of the important New Zealand architecture firm The Group went on the market, one in Epsom, one in Glendowie. Both were largely original and regarded by architects as important. The one in Epsom was demolished; the other was bought by an aficionado and retained. "It would take us years and years to identify every important place," says Wild.

"Time changes our measure of what's significant,

because we're changing all the time. What's important to us in 100 years may mean that a building we wouldn't regard at the moment is of significance. It's important that it has that flexibility about it."

Brabant, Matson and Wild all want to see the council change the way it looks at heritage. They want to see heritage provisions that would make heritage buildings valuable and encourage owners to adapt, not demolish. Wild wonders if we shouldn't shift from an assumption of demolition to an assumption of conservation.

Overseas, cities provide rates relief, and they will waive development contributions in cases where developers conserve a heritage building where they otherwise could simply pull it down. They grant transferable development rights to compensate for the loss of storeys. (Farrant's team is looking into this.)

In the end, says Matson, it comes down to a lack of thought. If the council is going to restrict property rights with heritage provisions, he argues, then it has to come up with ways to compensate.

"I think all the duties and legal obligations exist to recognise and protect heritage," he says. "It's endemic at the bureaucratic top of the council that they have this myopic view that private property rights will not even be challenged. But they won't wield those sticks because they're not prepared to offer the carrots."

**PLANS FOR THE SITE** at 464 Remuera Rd can only be described as unimaginative, featuring two blocks of neo-classical apartments rearing away from Elmstone to fit with the height-to-boundary levels.

Earlier this year, it appeared the property, as a blank site with plans, was on the market, but the company is now planning to go ahead with the development. A valuation on the property shows the development has a market value of \$33 million; the penthouse on the top floor of the sea-side block is valued at \$5 million.

But Coolangatta is by no means the last to go. There will be buildings that we admire that won't be scheduled, because they're either in the "wrong" zone or there aren't enough hard facts to be found.

"So be it," says George Farrant of his system. "We've nailed our principles to the mast. It's through those processes that you get good outcomes, not bloody-mindedness."

He mentions another demolition and admits the council missed it. "It has happened, and it will happen again. Auckland is big enough that we will never get to the bottom of the list. That's real life." •

