

'Pause and think' about buildings

New Plymouth is wiping out its history

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The demolition of New Plymouth's Plunket Rooms is raising issues about how we value and list old buildings, says a local heritage group.

Heritage Taranaki is calling for more debate and sensitivity about the destruction of old structures and buildings, saying some are vanishing without public awareness.

Foodstuffs Wellington, the co-operative which runs New World supermarkets, bought the Plunket building last year and said it planned to bulldoze it to make way for carparks. In 2010 the property had a QV capital value of \$615,000.

Recently, in a written response to questions from the *Midweek*, it said Foodstuffs was assessing whether the building would be demolished or moved offsite for use by another party.

"Until we have determined the best course of action we are unable to comment further," it said.

The building on Courtenay St was completed in 1950 as a memorial to Plunket founder Sir Truby King and designed by renowned Taranaki architect Thomas Bates. Sir Truby was a son of notable settler Thomas King, whose for-



Demolished: This two-storey timber and roughcast building on Robe St was pulled down on February 9 to make way for the new police station. It was built in the 1920s as a private home for the Hooper family and designed by Frank Messenger, who played a part in alterations to the White Hart hotel.

Photo: SUPPLIED

mer property now forms Brooklands Park.

Kinsley Sampson, Heritage Taranaki chairman, says the Plunket Rooms may not be particularly old. "But in 40 years' time it will be 100 years old. The community needs to pause and think before demolishing interesting buildings... we believe there has to be a check, a discussion and more community input."

The Plunket building isn't the only significant building to vanish. A two-storey timber and roughcast building on Robe St was pulled down on February 9 to make way for the new police station. It was built in the 1920s as a

private home for the Hooper family and designed by Frank Messenger, who played a part in alterations to the White Hart hotel.

The destruction of earthquake damaged historic buildings in Christchurch isn't prompting more debate in Taranaki; rather the passage of time means more structures are being lost, says Mr Sampson.

"I don't think there's been any change but you only have to look throughout New Plymouth at buildings demolished over the last 20 to 30 years to notice there's been an awful lot lost."

He says balancing community

interests with the right of the individual property is an issue.

"If it's no longer suitable for Plunket, has the community the right to say you can't do this? It's a very interesting question to debate." A high level of heritage protection on a building can impinge on the rights of the property owner liable for added costs, he points out.

Ivan Bruce, a New Plymouth archaeologist and Heritage Taranaki committee member, says it might be time to re-examine our heritage inventory. While the Plunket Rooms might not be architecturally unique, as time goes by its status will change. "If we eat away at them all, eventually you don't have any left."

The Plunket building is not listed as a Category A, B or C heritage building with the New Plymouth District Council, and because of that there's no statutory requirement for anybody to look after it. He's calling for a digital inventory of other old buildings - those that fall outside those category listings - to be kept in a central location.

"At the very least we need that because we will have a thorough digital record of them... and it enables us to keep a track of what we are losing and see over the last 20 or 30 years how might the town have changed."

■ Heritage Taranaki is a new group, recently formalised as an incorporated society. It replaces the local branch of the Historic Places Trust, which was disbanded under nationwide restructuring last year.

Plunket Rooms' pedigree

A two-storey stucco centre was to grace Courtenay St - instead a single level got the nod.

This detail is revealed in a 1949 newspaper report about the New Plymouth Plunket Rooms.

The article reports the expected completion date as January 1950.

"The building will be extremely modern and includes a few novel features. The maximum light and sun will be trapped through the many windows and a graded ramp will give mother's an easy approach," it also says.

The building made the news many years later in 1997 when it closed temporarily because of a shortfall in Government funding. A \$250,000 sponsorship package from local businesses helped it reopen six months later. The deal was for three years and in 2001 there were more reports the family centre - as it became known - would close again or be open only part of the week.