

# history in three dimensions



## Although he's renowned as one of New Zealand's top heritage architects, in many ways Ian Bowman considers himself first and foremost an historian.

It's just that, for him, history comes alive in the structures people have built, much more than through books or old newspapers.

"A building is an experience in three dimensions," he says. "I think that tells you a whole lot more than a book."

Building conservation is a relatively new field, especially in New Zealand. Ian was the first New Zealander to complete a postgraduate qualification in this field of specialisation. In his architectural practice, based in Wellington and Nelson, he has worked on projects as diverse as the conservation of historical homes, bridges and railway carriages, and the restoration of the St James theatre in Wellington. Ian is also a lecturer at Victoria University's school of architecture, and recently lent his expertise to Resene in helping develop the re-released Resene Heritage colour chart.

"Buildings are absolutely fascinating things," he says. "Architecture reflects who we are, our culture, our ethics, our knowledge. Retaining the best of that is essential. We have to know where we've come from to know where we are and where we're going."

In New Zealand, we've only been building an architectural history for a very short time, compared with many parts of the world. Ian has lived in Venice, and worked in Australia and England. He says the architectural history in Venice is amazing, but there's something about New Zealand's relatively young architecture that really connects with him.

"We do need a lot longer to develop a unique feel and a unique style of architecture," Ian says. "What we do have is something that responds to the newness and rawness of this place. There is something changing, something vibrant and alive here that I enjoy. I wouldn't like to live permanently anywhere else."

In Nelson, he's building a new office, in a concrete-block house designed by his father, also an architect, in 1952.

"Some of the drivers behind the design are what I have learned from where I work in Wellington," he says.

These include an emphasis on connection with the outdoors, as well as ample light. Clerestory windows and steel French doors let in the sunlight and open the office up to the deck and the gardens beyond, where nikau palms and tree ferns create the atmosphere of a native forest. His Wellington office is a low-ceilinged space, so Ian has chosen loftier ceilings in the Nelson design.

To personalise the spaces he lives in, Ian uses colour, paintings, furnishings and rugs, or pieces of his children's artwork. Prints of Palladian villas grace his walls, reflecting his interest in history. He and his wife, Erin Beatson, have also inherited a collection of 18th century books that belonged to Erin's great-great-grandfather, who was also an architect. They've had the books repaired and preserved by a conservator so that Ian can use them in his office.

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"They identify what I do," he says.

Indeed, these preserved historical books, a living and usable experience of history, are a perfect metaphor for Ian's work. He says that, for him, each project begins with asking why a structure is the way it is, what history it has had, and what influences shaped it. With that knowledge of history, he and his clients can make informed decisions about preserving heritage value and creating spaces that are appropriate for the needs of their contemporary owners. **H**

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