

# ***Transforming Historic Buildings into Museums: A Case Study of Wellington Museum***

**Zhiji Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Bachelor of Screen Arts, Massey University, Wellington, 6021, New Zealand*  
*a. zhiji.Wang.1@uni.massey.ac.nz*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** This study focused on historical preservation by using the Wellington Museum in Wellington as a case study and aimed to identify the building's historical, cultural, and architecture while also addressing safety concerns through a structural assessment. By doing so, the building was able to be transformed into a museum that retained its original features but also incorporated modern amenities and interactive exhibitions to enhance the visitor experience. To ensure the ongoing maintenance of the building, a curatorial plan was developed. This plan would guarantee that the building would be maintained in a way that was consistent with its historical, cultural, and architectural significance. Since it transformed into a museum, the Wellington Museum has become a valuable resource for the community, attracting thousands of visitors annually and generating revenue. The study concludes that the Wellington Museum is a great example of the benefits of preserving and utilizing historic buildings for public benefit. Additionally, the methodology used in this study could be applied to other historical buildings seeking to become museums. Overall, the study highlights the importance of historical preservation to protect cultural heritage and create economic and social benefits for local communities.

**Keywords:** museum study, exhibition, architecture, cultural heritage

## **1. Introduction**

The Wellington Museum, located in the heart of Wellington, New Zealand, is a popular tourist destination that attracts visitors from all over the world. The museum has a rich history dating back to 1892, when it was originally built as a bond store for the Wellington Harbour Board [1]. The building's history, architecture, and cultural significance make it a unique attraction for both locals and tourists [2].

In the 1980s, the building was scheduled for demolition, but it was saved by a group of concerned citizens who recognized its historical value [1]. The building was subsequently converted into a museum, and it has since become a symbol of the importance of preserving historic buildings for public use. The transformation of the bond store into a museum required extensive renovations and modifications to the building. The original structural elements were reinforced to meet safety standards, while new features such as exhibition spaces, information panels and interactive exhibits were added to enhance the museum experience. The transfer of usage also required careful consideration of the building's historical significance, with efforts made to preserve and showcase its original features, such as the high ceilings and large windows.

The decision to convert the Wellington Museum into a museum was complicated, but it proved to be a wise investment. The museum attracts thousands of visitors annually, generating revenue and stimulating the local economy. Furthermore, the preservation of the building's history and architecture ensures that future generations can appreciate and learn from this valuable piece of Wellington's cultural heritage.

This project serves as a reference for other historic buildings facing a similar fate. The successful conversion of the bond store into a museum demonstrates the benefits of preserving and utilizing historic buildings for public benefit. It also shows that with careful curatorial planning and consideration, historic buildings can be adapted to modern uses without sacrificing cultural value. The Wellington Museum is an example of the importance of preserving historic buildings for public use. Its transformation into a museum saved the building from destruction and created a valuable resource for the community.

This study focuses on the conversion of the Wellington Museum into a museum and the curatorial methodology used to preserve its historical, cultural, and architectural significance while addressing safety concerns. The research methods employed included a comprehensive analysis of the building's historical and cultural importance, a structural assessment, an exhibition analysis, and the development of a preservation plan to ensure ongoing maintenance. The curatorial plan was also analyzed to preserve the building's original features while incorporating modern amenities to enhance the visitor experience. The study highlights the significance of preserving and utilizing historic buildings for public benefit, as demonstrated by the Wellington Museum. The curatorial methodology used in this study could be applied to other historical buildings seeking to become museums. The research stresses the importance of preserving historic buildings for future generations while promoting tourism and economic growth. It underscores the necessity for careful planning and consideration when converting historic buildings into modern uses to maintain their cultural value. Overall, this study provides insights into the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings for public benefit.

## **2. Analysis of the Wellington Museum Building**

### **2.1. Historical Information**

The Wellington Museum, situated in the heart of Wellington, New Zealand, holds great historical significance for the city. Originally designed by Frederick de Jersey Clere (1856-1952) in 1892 as the Bond Store, it served as both a head office and a customs storage facility for imported goods. Moreover, it was a crucial power centre during the early stages of Wellington's history. By the 1970s, the Bond Store had transformed into a repository for maritime artefacts, specifically those related to the Port of Wellington and New Zealand's maritime past. Subsequently, the Wellington Maritime Museum was established in 1972, providing a home for the collection.

During the 1990s, Wellington underwent a cultural renaissance which contributed significantly to the city's development. This was primarily due to a period of peak cultural investment by the New Zealand government, which encouraged the growth of cultural activities and art projects. As a result, the city welcomed a plethora of talented artists, writers, and musicians who introduced innovative art forms and fresh ideas. Additionally, Wellington's increased cultural exchange resulted from globalization, international trade expansion, and rising immigration levels, transforming the city into a diverse and cosmopolitan metropolis. Economic prosperity also played a pivotal role in the city's cultural revival, allowing people more leisure time and financial resources to participate in various cultural activities.

Given the city's cultural renaissance, the Bond Store became an ideal location for a museum to showcase Wellington's history. After extensive restoration, conservation, and development, the

Wellington Museum opened on the site at the end of 1999, fulfilling the need for a cultural institution to tell the city's story [3].

## 2.2. Factors Suitable for Convention to a Museum

In terms of architectural style, the Second Empire style was selected by the architects, originating in France during Napoleon III's reign from 1852 to 1870. The style features a blend of eclectic and ornate design elements inspired by various historic buildings [4]. In New Zealand, the Second Empire style is often used in public buildings such as government offices, courthouses, railway stations, and large private residences, and is favoured by wealthy individuals and institutions for its grandeur and refinement. In addition, this style aligns with the Wellington Museum's aim to share Wellington's story and history with visitors, evoking a sense of grandeur that is in keeping with its positioning.

The Bond store's architectural features include a prominent mansard roof with a steep downward slope and a shallow upward slope, tall windows with arched thresholds and intricate decorative detailing, incorporation of classical elements to create symmetry and grandeur, an elaborate facade with intricate mouldings and decorative brackets, and ornamental balustrades and balconies that contribute to the building's grandeur. These architectural features have been preserved, giving the museum an impressive facade [3].

The building's architecture is well-suited for a museum. Its spacious interiors and high ceilings provide ample space for exhibitions and large windows that allow natural light to flood the space and create an open atmosphere. The building's location on Jervis Quay in Wellington's central business district, near other popular tourist attractions such as the Papa, the waterfront, and Beehive, has played an essential role in transforming into a museum. It is conveniently located near Wellington railway station, making it easily accessible for the public, with several nearby car parks providing convenient parking options for visitors. Additionally, the museum's location offers stunning views of Wellington Harbour and the surrounding hills, adding to its allure as a tourist attraction.

In conclusion, the architects of the Bond store museum in Wellington chose the Second Empire style of architecture, characterized by eclectic and ornate design elements. This style is commonly used in public buildings and large private residences in New Zealand due to its association with grandeur and refinement, aligning well with the museum's goal of sharing Wellington's history and story with visitors. The building's preserved architectural features, including its prominent mansard roof, tall windows, classical elements, and ornamental balustrades and balconies, give it an impressive facade that is well-suited for a museum. Its location in Wellington's central business district, close to popular tourist attractions, and its accessibility via the railway station and nearby car parks make it a convenient destination for visitors. Furthermore, the museum's stunning views of Wellington Harbour and the surrounding hills add to its appeal as a tourist attraction. Overall, the Bond store museum is a fine example of how architecture can be used to create a sense of grandeur and refinement while also serving a practical purpose.

## 2.3. Building Renovation Aspects

The conversion of the building into a museum in 1999 involved major architectural renovations to create a suitable exhibition space with public access. To achieve this, the interior layout of the bond house, which was initially an ample open space with high ceilings, large beams, and exposed brick walls, was redesigned. This involved adding stairs, lifts, and corridors to facilitate visitor navigation and enjoyment of the exhibits. The museum has also improved its lighting and ventilation systems to protect the exhibits and enhance the visitor experience. To make the museum accessible to all visitors, ramps, lifts, and accessible toilets were installed, and a tactile exhibition was created for visitors with visual impairments to experience the museum's collections through touch. To create a better flow of

visitors within the museum, new entry and exit points were installed, including a striking glass entrance on the waterfront side of the building, which offers a magnificent view of the harbour.

### 3. Curatorial Analysis Within the Wellington Museum

The Wellington Museum is a three-storey building that provides visitors with an immersive experience of Wellington's history and culture. The ground floor is dedicated to the city's maritime history and role in its development. It houses temporary exhibitions, events, a gift shop, and a café and showcases the history of Wellington's people and communities. The first floor displays Wellington's built environment, including its architecture, urban planning, and infrastructure. On the top floor, visitors can explore the history of the city's civic and political life, including its governance, democracy, and civic institutions. Each floor features a range of exhibits and interactive displays designed to engage visitors with the city's past.

In planning the exhibitions, the curators have capitalized on the original design elements of the building. They have retained the original wooden backdrops to preserve the building's industrial character. The exhibition space was arranged to take into account the size and shape of the building, with larger open areas used to display larger exhibits and smaller, more intimate spaces used for more focused exhibits. The original windows of the building were preserved, providing natural light for the exhibitions. The museum's climate control system was also installed to ensure that the temperature and humidity levels were carefully regulated to protect the artifacts. To enhance the visitor experience, the museum features a linear exhibition flow that reflects the city's maritime history and importance as a port city. The functional spaces are designed to be intuitive and easy to navigate, with clear signage and way-finding. The building's original purpose also influenced the decision to adopt this layout as a storage facility for goods transported by ships. As a result, visitors can easily and methodically move from one exhibit to another without feeling lost or overwhelmed.

The museum has also installed a series of display cabinets, including large glass cabinets for model ships and vehicles and smaller cabinets for more delicate items. The display cabinets protect and showcase the museum's collection of artefacts.

### 4. Implication for Historic Buildings

The Wellington Museum's renovation successfully transformed a historic warehouse into a modern and functional museum space while retaining its character and respecting its heritage. The building's historical significance, architectural features, location, and adaptive reuse make it an ideal museum space in Wellington, providing a unique and attractive showcase of the city's history and culture while preserving an essential part of its architectural heritage. In addition, the successful renovation of the Wellington Museum provides a replicable reference case for other historic buildings, with important aspects listed below.

First, it is crucial to consider the building itself and the guidelines for historic buildings in the area to preserve its historic character. For instance, to identify the building's historical significance. This includes understanding its architectural style, original purpose, and any notable events that took place in the building's history. In the Wellington Museum's case, the exterior of the building underwent high restoration. It is also important to ensure that the structure is stable and that any changes do not affect the building's integrity, particularly as curators may require specific safety measures that may not be typical for older buildings [5].

It is essential to assess the building's structural integrity to determine any safety concerns or necessary modifications required to adapt the building for public use. Furthermore, accessibility should be considered and made changes to ensure that the building is accessible to all individuals, such as the addition of stairs and lifts.

Second, the exhibition themes and design must adapt to the historic building. The building's historical features, such as ornamental details, decorative mouldings, and other architectural elements, should be preserved and showcased to the public. Since the exhibition is inside a historic building, suitable exhibition themes are historical relics, social history, ethnic folklore, and art museums [6]. While respecting the original design, the modern exhibition design creates space to express the building's unique cultural qualities and spirit of place. A modern approach emphasises the multi-sensory experience of the audience, focusing on their emotional and educational needs. It highlights the audience's sense of involvement in the display's content and focuses on the emotional experience of the exhibition space and atmosphere, presenting the historic building as a space that transcends its historicity based on the human experience. Digital display tools can be used to break through the limitations of traditional museums and fill gaps in physical displays.

However, the interior layout of historic buildings is more traditional, limiting the organization of space, which is more sequential and parallel. The prologue space serves as a gathering space for the flow of visitors, connecting the external space of the building with the exhibition space. The historical building, highlights the characteristics of the exhibition, emphasizing its historical value and allowing the thematic ideas of the entire exhibition to focus. In the basic exhibition space, it is necessary to reflect the curatorial character and represent the museum's image [7]. Museums in historic buildings need to pay more attention to the emphasis on historical remains, such as staircases and other specific designs, and the unity of the overall colour palette and design style. Modern amenities, such as accessible restrooms and elevators, should be incorporated into the museum without compromising the building's historical integrity. Thematic spaces are the medium through which the audience interprets the exhibition and determines the basic characteristics and messages of the museum's exhibition. In the public space of museums, the perfection of spatial functions and supporting service facilities is an important indicator of modern museums [8]. Still, in historic buildings, these facilities need to be streamlined and in keeping with the spatial structure of the historic building due to space limitations [9]. Various technologies enhance the exhibition's interest, viewability, and experience, focusing on interaction and communication between the audience and the exhibits, and the dialogue between people and the spatial environment, for example, the historic building [10]. A preservation plan should be developed to ensure the building's ongoing maintenance, including regular inspections, repairs, and upgrades.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, this paper analyses the conditions of suitability for renovation in the context of the history of the Wellington Museum and the renovation process and draws implications for the conservation and renovation of other historic buildings. The Wellington Museum is an excellent example of how architecture can create a sense of grandeur and refinement while serving a practical purpose. The significance of this article is to inform the conservation of other historic buildings and, at the same time, to provide an in-depth analysis of the conditions for the construction of museums.

However, limitations of the study include the absence of information on the visitors' perspective and their experience of the museum. Future research could explore how visitors perceive the building's architecture and how it contributes to their overall museum experience. Additionally, the study did not examine the museum's economic impact on the surrounding area nor explore the potential for further development of the museum's collections. Future research could investigate the potential of the Wellington Museum to expand its exhibitions and outreach efforts, such as creating partnerships with other cultural institutions and incorporating interactive exhibits. Additionally, the museum could better reflect the city's history and cultural identity by incorporating more diverse perspectives into its exhibits, including those of Māori and Pacific Islander communities. Lastly, the



research could explore the impact of the Wellington Museum on the city's tourism industry and the local community's perception of the museum.

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