



# Far North District Council

## RUSSELL DESIGN GUIDELINES

### The History of Russell

The town of Russell, exists in the general location of Kororareka, a Maori kainga located near the beach to which Tupi guided the ship *City of Edinburgh* for repairs in 1810. Following this, increasing contact with European visitors saw a change in the character of the settlement. By the late 1830s the town had some 300 European residents, not to mention visitors from the dozens of ships at anchor. The only buildings remaining from the pre-1845 period are Christ Church (1835), now substantially altered, and Pompallier (1841-2).

A variety of buildings exist from later periods. A notable example from the later nineteenth century is the former Customhouse (1870), now the Russell Police Station. Other smaller buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century include cottages and villas as well as a few bungalows, some built originally as holiday homes.



*Houses in the 'Californian bungalow' style near Pompallier.*

### The Role of the Guidelines

Development in Russell (including new buildings and additions and alterations) is subject to the provisions of the Far North District Plan. As a 'non-statutory' document, this design guideline sits outside the District Plan, but provides further information to assist in the protection of the historic character of Russell. It is necessary to refer to the provisions of the District Plan to ascertain requirements for resource consents, issues to be addressed and assessment criteria for applications.

### The Far North District Plan

The District Plan identifies a number of specific buildings and sites which have particular heritage value and are accordingly scheduled for protection in Appendix 4 of the District Plan. Development proposals that affect these properties are subject to the rules in Part 11 of the District Plan.

Within Russell, the District Plan identifies three 'Heritage Precincts'. This brochure describes the historic character of each of the heritage precincts in Russell in some detail, which elaborates on the material provided in the District Plan.

Other planning matters also apply in Russell. It is therefore necessary to refer to the District Plan to ascertain the full range of resource management issues and rules that apply, or to discuss these matters with a Council planner.

### Archaeology

Any site within Russell has the potential to yield archaeological remains or evidence, of either Maori or European origin, even though little or nothing of interest may be visible on the surface of the ground.

The *Historic Places Act 1993* protects all archaeological remains associated with human activity prior to 1900. The provisions of this Act apply irrespective of the status of any activity under the District Plan (and the *Resource Management Act 1991*).

Even if a resource consent has been granted for a particular activity, it may still be necessary to obtain an Authority to Modify an Archaeological Site under the *Historic Places Act 1993*. For this reason, it is advisable that prior to any disturbance of the ground in Russell, contact is made with the Northland Area Office of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust; Ph: 09 407 4443.

### The NZ Historic Places Trust

In addition to its regulatory role in archaeology, the NZ Historic Places Trust is an affected party to resource consent applications in Russell and in respect of any building listed in Appendix 4. In consideration of specific development proposals, the Trust is happy to provide advice.

## The Strand Heritage Precinct

As a maritime service centre, early Russell naturally developed close to the edge of the harbour. This gave the earliest businesses ready access to the water and provided convenient amenity to the many visitors arriving by sea. This was accompanied by residential development close to the waterfront and a hinterland of small farm holdings and other dwellings. The core of the new community was thus concentrated in the area contained by The Strand and York Street. The defining physical quality of the precinct derives from the close alignment of the Strand and its adjacent buildings to the water.

Part of the modern commercial centre remains within The Strand Precinct, and is centred on Cass Street, which functions as a sort of town square (once known as Sydney square). The success of this as a public space is certainly due to its location, but is also due to its alignment with the wharf, which is the point of entry for water-based transport to and from Russell.

The physical shape and character of the precinct has evolved over time, and a great many building types are now represented here, including some of the oldest buildings in Russell. The general scale of building is two-storeys, but with many single storey residential buildings, mainly at the north end. These buildings are typically small and modest examples of their style and type, whether single storey or two storey.

The character of this part of Russell has always been mixed. This defining attribute is equally the case today, where the variety of building styles and their relationship to The Strand sets a pattern of scale and proximity which is quite different from the rest of the town. In addition, The Strand Precinct includes 7 buildings specifically identified in the District Plan (more than half the total for the town). One of these buildings, known as Pompallier is of national heritage significance and defines the southern end of the precinct.

## Wellington Street Heritage Precinct

The Wellington Street Heritage Precinct is a small part of Russell immediately to the north of the Strand Precinct and is centred on the intersection of York and Wellington Streets. The landscape rises from the beach to the lower slopes of Maiki hill and is characterised by a generally low intensity of residential-scale development with generous amount of open space between houses. Mature trees are another important ingredient of this landscape.

The range of dwellings is quite varied, with predominantly nineteenth century houses ranging from quite small cottages to large villas, one of which is a scheduled historic building. Houses are generally oriented to the street, thus reinforcing the street alignment.

The importance of this precinct derives from the way in which it supports the Strand precinct and maintains consistency of character and scale along the waterfront. The precinct is also important for defining consistency of character and scale of development further along Wellington Street and into York Street.

## Christ Church Heritage Precinct

The Christ Church Precinct has particular importance for its location at the entrance to central Russell, where Matauwhi Road meets Robertson Street. Christ Church is an historic building of national significance which lies at the southern end of the commercial centre. Standing within its graveyard, the church dominates a larger open area to the north with older residential buildings on rising ground to the south and east.

While many of these houses are from a much later period of development than the church, they are important nonetheless, for maintaining a complementary scale to the key heritage building and for defining the established residential character and built landscape of older Russell. It will be important to retain this character, to ensure that development within the precinct is appropriate in scale and location.

## Additions and alterations

It is not hard to add to old houses or to make internal changes which will make them more agreeable to live in, and which allow them to reflect changing life styles. Modernisation of *amenities* is not, however, the same thing as modernising the *appearance* of the house.

A key objective in refurbishing an older house is to retain the original character of the exterior while making necessary changes. It is important to be clear about the correct *style* of a house and to recognise that there are important differences between each style.

There are 3 quite simple guidelines which are worth following:

- Keep the original street front intact
- Retain original features
- Don't break the roof line

If a larger house is needed, consider adding another building block to the existing - perhaps a lean-to or a repeat of the original house form. These additions should not dominate the original house. It is sensible to match existing construction materials to enable a sympathetic addition to be made, but it should always be apparent where the original house ends and the new begins.

### New buildings

There is no contradiction between preserving historic character and new development. It is the nature of towns to continue to grow and it is important that each period of development should be of its own time - so copying old styles is usually not the best solution.

It is equally important that new development in areas of established character should "fit in" to the existing setting, and should not dominate its surroundings - either through appearance or through difference in scale of development. For this reason, new construction in each precinct may require different solutions.

It is important to understand the existing pattern of development - how buildings relate to the street and to the landscape, the spaces between buildings and the positions of buildings on their plots. Attention to these details will ensure a better fit in the wider context.

The single most important quality in a new design will be scale and successful new design will respond to its context by striving to preserve the general scale of existing development, or the scale of the nearest buildings.

A second important consideration is form - the overall shape and arrangement of the building. Clear simple forms are most likely to be successful, but moderate use of features such as verandahs is a sound way of creating additional accommodation. It is not necessary to mimic existing houses, but roof pitches similar to those on adjacent buildings will help new houses fit in. Once scale and form have been addressed, attention to materials and details will ensure a successful outcome.

### Other Aspects of Character

While this guideline has focussed on built form as an aspect of historic character and appropriate responses in terms of development, historic character can be compromised by other changes.

### Landscaping

The landscaping chosen should be appropriate to the context. Locally sourced native plants, or others that are in accordance with established plantings should be preferred over visually dramatic 'architectural' plants such as exotic palms or aloes.



*A simple addition to a cottage, in traditional manner.*



*A new house sharing its site with an early bach (in the foreground). The new house is designed to avoid a harsh contrast with either the existing bach on the site or the land-form on which it is sited.*



*A contemporary house (below and to the left of the Norfolk Island Pine tree) using traditional forms, unobtrusively located in a landscaped setting. Its location below the horizon, and the presence of vegetation assists it to fit within its particular context on a sloping site.*

## Signage

While sensitively designed, generally small-scaled signage can be used to identify and promote commercial activities without adversely affecting historic character, the same can not be said for all types of signage. In general, the scale of signage should be in keeping with the scale of the building on the site and should not dominate that building or others in the vicinity. Fluorescent colours should be avoided and bright colours used sparingly and with caution, particularly on or close to scheduled sites. Visual impact should be gained by the use of interesting and finely crafted signs.



*The character of the Strand derives not only from its buildings, but its landscaped setting proximity to the water and the virtual absence of obtrusive signage.*

## Paving and Kerbing

Whether in the public realm or on private property, paving should be chosen to blend with the natural environment. Tar seal, which weathers to a soft grey, or other paving which reflects the brown coloured beach shingle, should be preferred over concrete, which can create glare and when used on longer ascending driveways, can create an appearance of 'scarring' the natural landscape.

Without limiting the need to dispose of storm-water in accordance with good engineering practice, kerbing and channelling should only be used where absolutely necessary. This avoids a harsh and strongly urban appearance being imposed on a town which has grown 'organically' with limited infrastructure, to attain an informal and relaxed character.

## Summary

The character of Russell can be retained by following a few simple principles. These can be summarised as follows:

- New buildings should be a genuine response to the character of their context.
- New buildings and additions to buildings should use simple forms and be designed to maintain the traditional small 'scale', aggregating forms where necessary.
- Buildings should use sloping roofs, traditional materials, and simple traditional detailing, and generally minimal ornamentation.
- Generous, appropriately landscaped yards should be maintained to complement the subject building and its context.
- Large-scale signage should be avoided
- Infrastructure in the public realm such as roading and drainage should use 'green' solutions that avoid extensive paving or kerbing.

*(Text and images by Salmond Reed Architects Ltd.)*

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