



# KNOCK ON WOOD

**Michael Gebicki** is full of praise for the timber architecture of New Zealand's main cities

**W**HEN the time came for him to build a house on the heights of Auckland's Parnell district, the reverend Vicesimus Lush chose kauri for its construction. Well, he would, wouldn't he? It was 1863 and kauri was cheap, abundant and easily worked. Whether you were a tenant farmer or a knighted nob, kauri was the wood for you. At exactly the time that Lush was building his simple cottage, bishop George Selwyn was using the same timber to build Bishopscourt, his own substantial house, library and chapel, just up the road.

The kauri, *Agathis australis*, is a native conifer, and the single most astonishing feature of the country's northern forests. It can live for 1000 years and grow to a height of 50m with a girth of 10m. The wood is durable, straight and evenly grained. Ever obliging, the kauri sheds its lower branches as it grows, and its timber is typically free of knots. As well as making up the skeleton and skin of a house, kauri is just as suitable for joinery or shipbuilding.

Nineteenth-century houses from Sydney to San Francisco had kauri floorboards. Maori built war canoes from it, and from the 1820s, the Royal Navy used it for spars. It was perfectly suited to a frontier society. Anyone handy with a hammer and saw could build a kauri house, yet in more skilled hands the timber could be moulded to suit the architectural fetishes of the Victorian era. With kauri, NZ's first European settlers created a home-hewn, vernacular architecture and created some remarkable buildings.

Finally, a kauri house is less prone to earthquake damage than bricks and mortar, which is something to bear in mind when building in the Shaky Isles.

Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch make a virtue of pleasantness: they are wonderful places to live and if you are spending any time at all in NZ, they are itinerary inevitables. But for an urban theme with a difference, timber architecture does nicely. Timber churches and villas are usually located in these cities' most likeable districts.

Lush's **Ewelme Cottage** remains to this day a neat house in a tidy garden at 14 Ayr St, just off Parnell's main thoroughfare, Parnell Road. Lush's descendants occupied Ewelme Cottage until 1968 and the interior is still filled with their furnishings, carpets, curtains and books, some of which date back to Lush's time. The cottage is open for viewing under the auspices of NZ's Historic Places Trust.

Back in Parnell Road, **Old St Mary's Church** is one of the most remarkable of all kauri buildings. At more than 50m long, this is touted

as the largest wooden gothic church in the world. Its architect, Benjamin Mountfort, had intended a stone church but when that material proved too expensive, he turned to kauri, and the timber adapted happily to the soaring gothic dimensions, gables, lancet windows and all.

Impressive as the exterior may be, it's the interior that warms the heart with its tobacco-coloured panelling and exultant nave, amplifying the simplicity of the gothic style, exactly as Selwyn, its forceful and energetic progenitor, had intended.

In 1982, the whole church was jacked up, set on a bed of steel girders, put on rollers and hauled across to the other side of Parnell Road.

New Zealanders are adept at this style of relocation, although it's more often houses than churches. To avoid road congestion, this usually happens at night; rounding a bend in the road and finding yourself faced with an oncoming bungalow is one of the country's nocturnal surprises.

Now, take yourself back to the ground floor of the city for a ferry ride across Waitemata Harbour. On the north side of the waterway, the suburb of Devonport has some outstanding examples of late-Victorian kauri villas. A number have become B & Bs, and if you're looking for somewhere to stay, this harbourfront village with its holiday airs, cafes and beaches is a good bet. From the Devonport wharf, cross Marine Square and turn right into King Edward Parade.

Any of the side roads will take you across the peninsula towards Cheltenham Beach. If you need maps or advice, call at the Devonport Visitor Information Centre at 3 Victoria Rd, close to the ferry terminal.

Wellington has a timber treat in the form of the **Government Buildings**. Located at the northern end of Lambton Quay, this massive four-storey building in the Italian renaissance style might look like it's made from solid stone, yet rap it and it is plainly timber: a combination of kauri, rimu and matai. This is supposedly the world's second-largest timber building after the Todaiji Temple in Nara, Japan, although both claims are disputed.

Built in 1876, at a time when central government finally became an established fact, the building once housed most of the country's civil service, as well as meeting rooms for the NZ cabinet. Now part of the Government Buildings Historic Reserve, it underwent a massive restoration when the last civil servants moved out in 1990, and some of the interior is now open for public viewing.

It's worth a look at the historic displays inside, but the kauri panelling and joinery really make



this building sing.

At the intersection of Lambton Quay and Thorndon Quay, **Old St Paul's** is another splendid example of the gothic revival style in timber. Even the roof trusses are works of craftsmanship that transcend their mundane function. The church uses a variety of native timbers: totara, matai and rimu as well as kauri. Built in 1866, the church is considered the supreme accomplishment of its architect, the reverend Frederick Thatcher, who we have already met as the designer of Bishops Court.

Wellington ices the kauri cake with **Antrim House**, a glorious mansion in the florid Edwardian Italianate style. Constructed of kauri and totara at 63 Boulcott St, the very heart of the city, the house was built in 1904-5 for Robert Hannah, an Irish bootmaker who shod most of NZ.

The interior is wonderfully crafted, but Antrim House is the headquarters of NZ's Historic Places Trust and public access is generally limited to the hallway and Hannah Room.

Although Christchurch was shaped in stone, it has a superb timber church in **St Michael and All Angels** at 84 Oxford Terrace. Built entirely from native matai timber, the late-Victorian gothic church incorporates elements of French as well as English medieval styles. The miracle is inside,

where the intricate framework required to support the massive structure is a model of economy and elegance.

Finally, a modest but satisfying Christchurch timber mansion. At 16 Kahu Rd, **Riccarton House**, about 3.5km from the city centre, was the home of the Deans, the first European family to settle on the Canterbury Plains. Although it was built piecemeal over almost half a century, the final addition in 1900 was designed by the England Brothers, prominent architects who stamped it with its final, faintly patrician character. The wood-panelled entrance hall is impressive, although it is oak on the walls, not a native timber.

Surrounding the house, Riccarton Bush is the only surviving stand of kahikatea floodplain forest that remains in Christchurch. The Dean family had the foresight to preserve this 6.5ha forest in its original state, and ultimately to bequeath it to the protection of the city of Christchurch. Take a guided walk through the bush, admire the butterflies, listen to the birds and see what totara, matai, kowhai and hinau look like before steel bites into their heartwood.

[www.historic.org.nz](http://www.historic.org.nz)

## WOODEN IT BE NICE

MOLLIES is a boutique hotel in the Auckland waterside suburb of St Mary's Bay, which is run like an old-style boarding house, but with none of the crimes of food or fashion that such a tag may imply. Mollies' owners, Frances Wilson and Stephen Fitzgerald, have a background in opera and theatre, and their two-storey, timber Victorian-era villa is the perfect setting to entertain like-minded guests in 12 luxury suites filled with eclectic antiques.

Otahuna Lodge, pictured, at Tai Tapu, 20 minutes by road from Christchurch, has had ownership dramas since it hit *Conde Nast Traveler's* 2004 Hot Hotels list but all is well once more. The white-painted, Queen Anne-style timber mansion had been a fixture on the Canterbury scene since 1895, when it was built for pioneer parliamentarian and horticulturalist Heaton Rhodes, who had the 12ha of sprawling gardens laid out in a mix of New Zealand natives and the classic herbaceous borders and clumped daffodils so loved by British



colonialists. Otahuna is now a charming three storey country house hotel with seven suites, kauri wood panelling and doors, colourful leadlight and extensive carving.

Susan Kurosawa

### Checklist

Mollies and Otahuna Lodge are members of Kiwi Collection: [www.kiwicollection.com](http://www.kiwicollection.com).

[www.mollies.co.nz](http://www.mollies.co.nz)

[www.otahuna.co.nz](http://www.otahuna.co.nz)



**Weekend Australian**  
Saturday 10/3/2007  
Page: 5  
Section: Travel  
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Brief: KIWICOLLEC  
Page 3 of 3



**With the grain:** Clockwise from above, the remarkable Old St Mary's Church; a kauri tree in the Waitakere Ranges; Ewelme Cottage