In 2010 and 2011, the Canterbury region suffered a series of deadly earthquakes, which left Christchurch’s central city severely damaged. The New Zealand Government established the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) in March 2011 lead recovery for the region. An early priority for the organisation was to cordon off, stabilise and demolish unsafe buildings.

CERA’s approach to heritage buildings

In the aftermath of the earthquakes, the task of demolishing dangerous heritage buildings was urgent. Civil Defence recruited Warwick Isaacs and Baden Ewart to manage demolitions, and they carried this responsibility forward when CERA was established. They were very aware that decisions to demolish heritage structures must be made within a lawful framework. There were three main tools to this framework:

1. Under the relevant District Plan, a scheduled heritage building needed to go through a lengthy Resource Management Act process before demolition. To expedite this process the Minister for Canterbury Earthquake Recovery amended the District Plan heritage provisions, by way of the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan, which included classifying works to heritage buildings in the central city as permitted activities. This was temporary as once the Christchurch Replacement District Plan provisions succeeded the Recovery Plan, works to heritage buildings would likely once again require approvals.
The Recovery Plan was prepared under the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act 2011 (CER Act). The purposes of the CER Act included ‘to provide a focused, timely and expedited recovery’.

2. On 27 June 2011 by Order-in-Council gazetted under the CER Act, the Minister amended and streamlined the processes for obtaining heritage approvals from an independent Government body, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, (formerly the Historic Places Trust).

3. Section 38 of the CER Act empowered CERA’s Chief Executive to commission works to any building (including demolition). Section 38 did not override requirements for resource consents or building consents. Section 27 of the CER Act was used in July 2011 to make amendments to the Christchurch City Plan and Banks Peninsula District Plan to permit works taking place under a Section 38 notice and remove the requirement for resource consent.

4. The CERA General Manager of Operations always paid due attention to the relevant District Plan in his use of Section 38 powers (under delegation from the Chief Executive).

CERA took a pragmatic attitude towards unsafe heritage buildings; many heritage buildings were older, less well built and more damaged than their equivalent modern structures and needed immediate attention. The focus was on reducing the central city red zone cordon, removing hazards, and speeding up the central city’s recovery and rebuild.
Taking heritage values into account

CERA assessed all damaged heritage buildings, considering the relevant legislation and in consultation with Heritage New Zealand and Christchurch City Council. Almost invariably the heritage staff recommended propping or other treatment while comprehensive repair strategies were reviewed.

However, it was not practical to stabilise or barricade all heritage buildings in the hope that they could be repaired in the future. Putting significantly damaged heritage buildings on hold placed an unreasonable financial burden on property owners, particularly when there was no real prospect that it would be economically feasible to repair them: "the signals were that there’s not much money and there were also very strong signals coming from Government that recovery cannot be impeded by agonising over issues like heritage" (Jason Dowse, Principal Advisor, Policy, CERA). Without enough funding from owners, insurers, the Crown or Council, it was usually impossible to afford ‘make-safe’ solutions.

With a number of heritage buildings, CERA’s Operations Team made a concerted effort to consider options for repair. For example, signing the Section 38 for Cranmer Courts was delayed into early 2012. The order for demolition was issued only after it proved impossible to find a way to keep the complex. “There was some interest initially from a hotel chain to repair the building – buy it and turn it into a hotel; that fell over. Another six or eight months went by, the people who needed to get their money out couldn’t get on with their lives and another potential purchaser fell over as well because the fact of the matter was the building was so badly damaged that it was just uneconomic to repair. Eventually, I issued a Section 38 notice for its demolition" (Baden Ewart, General Manager of Operations, CERA).

Reasons for demolition of heritage buildings

It’s important to understand why many of Christchurch’s heritage buildings had to be demolished. The CERA Operations Team’s advice was a response to a specific social and economic context. Many heritage buildings were significantly underinsured, and unreinforced. Older structures were badly damaged by the earthquakes of 22 February and 13 June 2011. Insurance pay-outs fell far short of the amount needed for repairs. Before the earthquakes, information was lacking on cost-effective engineering techniques to tie back and strengthen heritage buildings, and adequate enforcement of suitable standards was similarly scarce.
Relatively few unreinforced brick masonry buildings had been strengthened, which meant repairs and future strengthening would be costly.

Some issues also made it more difficult to advocate effectively for keeping heritage buildings. Heritage agencies had no official role in the Civil Defence emergency legislation and no lead heritage agency was appointed. The Christchurch City Council Schedule of heritage buildings was not always consistent with the Heritage New Zealand List so there was no agreed list of Christchurch’s most significant heritage buildings. In the first year after the earthquakes in particular, public opposition to demolitions was muted, possibly because people were shell-shocked and dealing with their own property and insurance issues. Over time however, public campaigns developed for saving specific buildings such as Cranmer Courts and the Christ Church Cathedral.

The role of heritage building owners

The building owner had the greatest influence on whether a building survived or was demolished. “We learnt over time … that if an owner didn’t want to keep the building, we were on a hiding to nowhere. The biggest driver to the retention of heritage was the owner’s willingness to do so” (Dave Margetts, Conservation Architect, Heritage New Zealand). Both before and after the earthquakes, funding or financial assistance was limited for heritage building owners to make safe, strengthen or repair their buildings. “Some buildings were potentially not severely dangerous but there was no economic possibility of returning them to use … Some of it could’ve been saved if money was available, but there wasn’t enough money” (Jason Dowse, Principal Advisor, Policy, CERA). Owners usually only took on the considerable financial burden of repair and restoration when they valued their heritage building’s contribution to Christchurch’s social and cultural history.

CERA and heritage stakeholders

Heritage New Zealand provided CERA’s Operations Team with reports on every heritage building considered for a Section 38 order. It gave information and advice on make-safe technologies, keeping heritage fabric, and repair methods. While it usually advocated for keeping heritage buildings, it accepted that this would not be the usual outcome. Heritage New Zealand also administers archaeology authorities under its Act, ensuring that pre-1900 buildings are recorded before they are demolished. Under that provision, it could have declined archaeological authorities, preventing some of the demolitions under Section 38. However, the organisation almost always chose not to use the archaeology process to contradict CERA’s demolition decisions: “CERA had already decided a building had to come down for recovery reasons and we weren’t going to get in the way of that. In terms of archaeology, we could have used that to retain buildings, but there was a political risk to that” (Dave Margetts, Conservation Architect, Heritage New Zealand).
Heritage and the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Strategy

In 2012, the Recovery Strategy for Greater Christchurch (prepared under Sections 11-15 of the CER Act) came into force and from its inception all Resource Management Act planning documents had to be interpreted consistently with it. Part 15 of the Recovery Strategy focused on cultural recovery and included the goal of restoring historic buildings, where feasible, for the benefit of the community.

The Ministry for Culture and Heritage was appointed the lead agency and compiled the Heritage Buildings and Cultural Places Recovery Programme (‘programme’). The final programme was published in November 2014 and formalised the consultation between the Christchurch Central Development Unit (CCDU) and the heritage authorities. The programme laid out a framework for collaborative discussion between CERA, Heritage New Zealand and the Christchurch City Council, identified major achievements to date, and set out eight heritage recovery programmes. But its late publication and lack of accompanying funding or statutory powers meant it had little actual impact on decisions to demolish or partly demolish heritage buildings.

From late 2012, CERA chaired a Heritage Buildings and Operations Group as a forum for their partners involved with heritage issues. The three major partners were Heritage New Zealand, Christchurch City Council and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. The group’s purpose was not to change the approach to heritage demolitions, but to improve information sharing and provide an opportunity for ‘free and frank’ discussions. The group created a ‘single source of truth’ database on heritage buildings and provided useful advice on later Section 38 decisions.

Could more heritage buildings have been kept?

Not all of the heritage buildings demolished in Christchurch were beyond repair. Many could have been made safe for future repair and strengthening. In other post-earthquake zones such as L’Aquila, Italy, heritage buildings have been stabilised, and will be restored in coming decades. While this approach holds back social and economic recovery, it will keep the heritage character of the town largely intact.

Members of the public, media and heritage profession have questioned why so many of Christchurch’s heritage buildings had to go: “I understand that human life is obviously incredibly important and valuable. But a building can last for 700 years and there’s a value in that as well, in how it contributes to our culture and our society. Making those decisions, they shouldn’t just be rushed through for the sake of getting the city open. I understand how important that is too, but look at what we’ve lost and what we’ll never, ever get back” (Katharine Watson, Director, Underground Overground Archaeology).

CERA’s Operations Team were aware of these concerns: “We were roundly and soundly criticised – and I understand why – for demolishing heritage buildings” (Greg Wilson, Manager, Significant Buildings Unit, CERA). CERA knew that their decisions might one day be subject to an enquiry and must be beyond reproach. From the very beginning, all Section 38 decisions, including those for heritage buildings, were based on
engineering advice with regard to public safety. They were carefully documented, and made in accordance with legal requirements.

Difficult decisions: what to do with heritage buildings after earthquakes

There are no easy solutions when making decisions around damaged but repairable heritage buildings after an earthquake. Should economic drivers for recovery and rebuild take priority over cultural values? Is short-term progress preferable to the loss of a city’s heritage buildings and streetscapes? Are owners’ preferences for demolition more important than public support of heritage? How is heritage defined and by whom? Decision makers’ answers to these questions largely determine outcomes. A few approaches, however, will increase the chances of survival for heritage buildings, regardless of the political and economic environment.

Prevention is the best cure for avoiding demolitions of heritage buildings in future post-quake zones. The Christchurch experience has improved research into engineering technologies for strengthening methods. In May 2015, the Government announced a revised policy for earthquake prone buildings in preparation for the Building (Earthquake-prone Buildings) Amendment Bill 2013. This strengthening work will improve future outcomes for heritage buildings.

Another suggestion is to include strategic long-term thinking about heritage buildings in the response phase. Making heritage issues part of the Civil Defence framework will contribute to this aim. “When you’re dealing with families who’ve had loss, wounding, you’re not thinking that one day we’ll grieve deeply for a building that’s not there anymore. But it’s important to have a team focus on creating a co-ordinated approach to heritage and culture, thinking long term right from the beginning. In any first response centre, there needs to be a heritage and arts/cultural desk and team with first response engineers attached” (Huia Lambie, Manager, Cultural Wellbeing, CERA).

Finally, as CERA’s Operations Team discovered, taking a case-by-case approach to heritage demolitions allows for a more nuanced and consultative decision-making process.