

SITE SPECIFIC

On the heritage and potential of domestic art destinations



Rita Angus Cottage, Wellington, 2019. View of the balcony including reproduction of photograph by Marti Friedlander, 1969. Image by Sebastian Clarke

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HOMES ARE ESSENTIALLY revealing, they illuminate our priorities and tastes. And in encountering the homes of artists we are allowed to see those priorities, those tastes, as they saw them. But there is something more than simple curiosity on the line in such encounters. The opportunity exists for a eureka moment, for a unique perspective catalysed by connecting an artist's imaginative output with their place in the world. I'm keenly interested in the intersections between the visual arts

and the built environment. Of the latter, this interest extends to the established practices of elevating vernacular buildings and sites to ‘historic places’. I’ve previously written about house museums—historic places with rooms presented like static installations—across Aotearoa, and the diverse curatorial tactics employed in their presentation and preservation. Recently, two more sites associated with artists were recognised by Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga as historic places: the [former house and garden of Bill Sutton](#), and the [former studio of Ralph Hotere](#). These recent listings got me thinking about the specific process of transformation from artist’s place to historic place. To me, these are unique opportunities full of possibility, but they are equally vulnerable to risks. It’s a process that can honour and enhance the memory of a site’s occupants, or shift a place from a centre of creative activity to a space of quiet memorial—draining away whatever it was that made the site special in the first place. Part quest for best-practice, and part open letter to anyone who may ever contemplate preserving the home or studio of one of the country’s artists, this text explores domestic art destinations and the never-ending task of shaping and securing their future.

Not only can heritage recognition be hard fought for, it is often where the hardest work begins—and does not relent. In October 2022, it was [revealed that the McCahon Trust had been declined funding from Creative New Zealand](#) for its well-established artist residency programme. The trust, who manage [Colin McCahon’s former home in Titirangi](#), has relied on Creative New Zealand’s regular funding to sustain their residency. For many, the news was shocking. McCahon House began as a small cottage on the site that housed the artist and his family for the best part of the 1950s. McCahon himself completed both practical and artistic interventions on the house, and his time living within the kauri forests of the Waitakere Ranges had a profound and defining impact on his practice as a painter. To honour this legacy, the McCahon House Trust was established in 1998 ‘to recognise the life and art of Colin McCahon through a residency of international standing and to preserve the McCahon House as a place for the public to visit’. The residency itself takes place in a purpose-built house and studio on the site. It would not be contentious to say, that as far as our domestic art destinations are concerned, McCahon House is the benchmark against which all other places can be measured.

The offering here has always been solid. However, since beginning as Director in 2017, Viv Stone has been consistently expanding the potential that a single artist house museum can offer its contemporary art community. In addition to the residency programme, recent years have seen McCahon House host countless events at the cottage, sponsor research projects, broker international relationships, participate in art fairs, and deliver a major centenary programme. For all the diversity across these endeavours, what they share is a sense of reciprocity. Stone speaks about her interest in redeploying McCahon’s legacy in ways that can advance contemporary practice and create platforms and opportunities that benefit creative people. It’s of significant concern that a domestic art destination of McCahon House’s calibre remains in a position where it must repeatedly justify and defend the value it has to offer. It is a

reminder, and a warning, to any organisation with aspirations of developing a heritage-art offering of the centrality of making the economics work.



McCahon House, Auckland. Image courtesy of McCahon House Trust

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DRIVING CREEK IS AN example of a unique approach to this central dilemma. Its story begins in 1973, when Barry Brickell acquired 22-hectares of mostly bare farmland just outside the town of Coromandel—an area rich in terracotta clay. Eager, ambitious, and utterly devoted to pottery, Brickell’s aim was to establish a ceramics co-operative. Soon, a large pottery studio, kitchen, and a bunk room were finished—all built by Brickell, fellow potters, and neighbours who provided extra pairs of hands in exchange for pots and beers. Collaboration and resourcefulness are imbued in the

very architecture of Driving Creek. New Zealand's first wood-fired kiln, built by Brickell, was made using offcuts from the local sawmill and bricks from a demolished Coromandel hotel chimney. Ingeniously, Brickell built a railway as a means of transporting clay from the earth to the studio.

From the 1970s onwards, Driving Creek evolved organically under the infectious charisma of Brickell and, interestingly, became a sought-after destination for two mostly unrelated audiences. As was Brickell's original intent, Driving Creek established itself as a mecca for generations of potters from Aotearoa and beyond, to converge, pot, and give back to the story of Driving Creek. What is more surprising is that the railway flourished as a tourist attraction of national interest. In 1990, [Driving Creek Railway](#) (by then a much-expanded railway journey through regenerating native forests) became an official tourism operation. It's this tourist attraction, a somewhat unexpected cultural output of the Driving Creek story, that now generates income to support the revitalised residency programme at Driving Creek, which from 2019 has enabled artists to work from Brickell's historic home and studio. It's a positive model, but you can't really plan for something like Barry Brickell's railway. Is it actually possible to design sustainability in future domestic art destinations without sacrificing the integrity of their offerings?



Driving Creek Pottery, Coromandel, 2019. Image by Samuel Hartnett

NOT YET REALISED, [Bill Sutton's house and garden in Ōtautahi](#) might be a useful case study in just this. Sutton's modernist 1963 home and studio is located along the corridor of the Ōtākaro Avon River. Designed by the artist's friend and University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts colleague, Tom Taylor, the house is situated around a verdant garden of mature trees. Taylor's creation proved to suit Sutton so well that its design remained largely unaltered throughout the artist's life. After his death in 2000, the house was sold to Neil Roberts—at that time senior curator at the Christchurch Art Gallery—who was proactive in having the Christchurch City Council recognise the heritage values of the property. The house was damaged during the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010-11. However, thanks to solid foundations, it survived in reasonable condition. Incredibly, Sutton's is the only heritage home still standing within the Residential Red Zone.

In the years following, meetings between central government, the council, and the local arts community determined that the house should be restored and adapted into a public amenity. Multiple options were considered, including a standard art residency. What would eventually be supported by the Government was a more ambitious alternative, including the development of a house museum, community venue, residency, and community park. It's a laudable plan, structured with a clear goal of making each component financially sustainable. The Trust charged with managing Sutton's place have done some careful mathematics to ensure that they can offer their residency and venues below market rent, while still recouping sufficient income to keep the property as a going concern. One particularly nice element is the proposed use of Sutton's studio as a community venue for hire—a fittingly flexible function for a space that gave shelter to the artist's own creative practice. The proposed park, adjacent to the property, is intended for public involvement in art and craft related outdoor activities—installations, markets, and beyond. The robust planning in place for Sutton's house and garden serves as a reminder that heritage destinations can and should be multi-faceted, but more than this, should offer something of use to their immediate neighbourhood and think of themselves as off-peak community assets. The reality is that that most people that make the effort to visit a house museum will proceed to tick it off their mental list and never return. That is undeniable, but heritage is an endurance race, and requires the people that look after a site to cultivate a healthy community invested in its future.



Bill Sutton Heritage House and Garden. Image courtesy of Sutton Heritage House and Garden Charitable Trust

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IN CONTRAST TO the expansive approach at Sutton, is the strategically slim model at the [Rita Angus Cottage](#). Angus loved her 1870s timber-framed cottage in Thorndon, Wellington. Moving north from Christchurch at age 47, she made Wellington her home from 1955 until her death in 1970. Being from an affluent family, Angus would have been able to afford a larger home, but the modesty of her Sydney Street West cottage, which she named Fernbank Studio, resonated with her own humble sensibility. It was close to the city where she could walk to galleries, but a winding pathway and sprawling garden afforded her welcome degrees of privacy and seclusion. Marti Friedlander visited Fernbank Studio in 1969 and took distinctive images of Angus there, which wonderfully captured the way that her few rooms, sparsely furnished, served as a perfect haven.

Following Angus' death, there was concern that the artist's cottage would be lost. A number of her contemporaries: Michael Smither, Juliet Peter, Colin McCahon, John Drawbridge, and Toss Wollaston, wrote in support of its preservation. Drawbridge suggested the house be used as a museum of modern New Zealand painting, while McCahon encouraged people to think about other activities on the property beyond preserving the cottage, noting that 'you must look well ahead when the bulk of the houses finally do decay and fall down ... more than Rita's cottage, I remember the magnolia tree... it's a better memorial than the cottage. I envisage, finally, a park—a nice place for the bees from the beehive to collect some real honey.'¹

Today, Fernbank Studio is still standing, and doing better than the magnolia tree. It is recognised as an important heritage place within Wellington, primarily for its association to Rita Angus rather than its 1870s construction. Since the 1980s, it has hosted artist residencies with a range of different institutional partners. Between residencies, the cottage is rented out privately as an ongoing source of income for conserving the building. It remains very much a house, and very much not a museum. Yet, there is enduring public interest in visiting Angus' cottage. The property opens its gate on select days each year, and can host visits by appointment. However, the constraint of having tenants living at Fernbank Studio has presented an unusual opportunity. Instead of opening up the cottage, visitors are welcome to wander through Rita's garden, sit, and sketch what they see. It's a necessary and pragmatic means of challenging what a heritage experience can be—allowing visitors to do what Rita did, activating the garden once again as a source of cultural production. The appeal of a visit is not to see the old cottage, but to see what Rita saw: her flowers, the view of Thorndon, and the magnolia. Rita Angus was a private person, and so it is quite appropriate to not allow visitors to treat her cottage as an open home. Neighbour and friend of Angus, Frederick Page, once reflected about Fernbank Studio: 'There was a touch of magic about it, mystery even, as though one day you could go and it wouldn't be there'.²

¹ Letter from Colin McCahon to Gillian McGregor, 10 August 1974

² Communication from Frederick Page to the Thorndon Trust, n.d.



Rita Angus Cottage, Wellington, 2022. Image by Sebastian Clarke

THE CASE OF the Rita Angus Cottage, while innovative, does raise questions about whether other approaches could deliver a more accessible offering to audiences, and do greater justice to the artist's legacy. In saying that, I appreciate it for its authenticity and lack of pretention. One of the strongest allures of intimate destinations is the ever-endearing revelation of personality. Large, metropolitan museums can feel authoritarian and sanitised of individual idiosyncrasy. Domestic-scaled sites should avoid this, yet some do not, and so perpetuate the perception of house museums as passive destinations, indifferent to their contemporary contexts. I've visited two such places in 2022. First is [the replica of Gottfried Lindauer's 1890s studio](#) which was erected in 2001 in the central North Island town of Woodville. The replica recognises Lindauer's association with Woodville: the place where he lived, raised his family, and painted his seminal portraits. The replica sits on the main street and is filled with reproductions of the artist's work. This salon-hang belies the way in which the original studio served the artist—as a space of work rather than one of presentation. There is little else within the quiet replica that imparts any understanding of the relationship between Lindauer and his studio.

But I'd be remiss to not acknowledge that despite its uncomplicated—and at times unhelpful—proposition, it does stand as a tangible yet modest means of respecting Lindauer's local history here.

Less straightforward than Woodville, is the question of [Ravenscar](#), a purpose-built art gallery in Christchurch that self-identifies as a house museum. Susan and Jim Wakefield, a tax specialist and accountant/businessman respectively, built an impressive collection of art and furniture in their retirement and intended to bequeath it, along with their suburban mansion, to the public to be preserved as a house museum. The home was irreversibly damaged in the Christchurch earthquakes, but the couple remained committed to their vision for a house museum. Ravenscar opened in 2021, on a site adjacent Canterbury Museum, who also manage the facility on behalf of a governing trust. It is a well-intentioned challenge, architecturally and curatorially, for a new structure and its interiors to channel the memory of another place. Instead of a like-for-like reconstruction of the damaged house, Ravenscar's architecture is both brutally modern and anti-domestic. I am grateful for its provocative design, but it is difficult to reconcile the institutional feel of the gallery with the re-staged domestic interiors from the Wakefield's house. Notwithstanding the lack of patina—that glorious layer of visible time—Ravenscar is certainly curious. However, with its permanent exhibitions, limited public programme, and considerable entry fee, I do hope it can be sustainable both in terms of economics and creative output. Knowing there are existing house museums (within Christchurch alone) that could so productively benefit from private philanthropy, the establishment of a new, ersatz house museum seems at best audacious, and at worst hubristic and irresponsible.

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AOTEAROA IS NOT alone in the constant fight to protect and prove the importance of domestic art destinations. The [successful campaign in 2020](#) to secure public ownership of Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage is worth celebrating, but other places have less certain futures. The Merz Barn is a site in the English Lake District devoted to German modernist Kurt Schwitters and his final sculptural work—a barn built in 1947. The site's custodians [have recently put it up for sale](#) after failing nine times over the last decade to obtain any public funding to support ongoing maintenance of the site. And the case of the Merz Barn is hardly an isolated incident. But despite my abiding propensity for the parochial, there is plenty of good practice also worth highlighting at heritage art destinations overseas—and not simply for strong economics. I think of [Charleston](#) in East Sussex, the colourful gathering place of Vanessa

Bell, Duncan Grant, and the Bloomsbury group. What Charleston does so well is actively and proudly seek out ways to bring the voices, ideas, and rituals of its historicised inhabitants to the fore.

Charleston is currently hosting an exhibition of recently discovered erotic drawings by Grant, and has enlisted a range of contemporary queer artists to respond with their own very explicit work. So often historic places can feel conservative in more ways than one, and commissioning projects as Charleston does is a welcome tonic.



Ngan House interior, 2017. Image by Annie Lee

WHAT I HAVE TRIED to assert throughout this text is that guardians of significant artist spaces should challenge themselves to think about their enterprise with originality. And I want to conclude with what might be the most original approach of all, courtesy of maverick maker Guy Ngan. Ngan lived in Stokes Valley for over 70 years, and over his adult life never stopped crafting his modernist sanctuary there. It evolved as his family and art practice did, and sheltered both. If there was ever a place that served as an embodied biography for its artistic maker, it is this. The unconventional home included multiple studios, a dark room, bespoke shelving for Ngan's many collections, and a substantial garden boasting koi ponds and bamboo cultivations. It was no wonder that in 2011, Hutt City Council recommended the house be added to its schedule of local historic places. However, Ngan was firm in his opposition against any heritage listing. He not only wanted to maintain the ever-in-

progress nature of his home, he wanted to see it remain used as such. Ngan understood that architecture, principally, must serve a purpose and be adaptable to the needs of its inhabitants. Following Ngan's death in 2017, the home was sold, and now shelters another young family. No museum, no charitable trust, no fundraising campaign. Instead, a special house continues to do what it does best—be a home.

Unsurprisingly, I'm always on the hunt for great domestic sites to visit, and many of the best I've been lucky enough to encounter have belonged to art makers and creative people. I think of Bruce and Estelle Martin's peerlessly elegant pavilion [home outside of Hastings](#), of Ann Shelton's [modernist Wellington house](#) which she has so meticulously curated and recorded through her photography practice, and of Ross Mitchell-Anyon's place along the Whanganui Awa which endures as a meaningful self-portrait for the late potter. I also think ahead. There are new places in development that I am eternally curious about and already stir my thinking about what they will reveal about how artists live with their work. Isobel Thom's ambitious hand-built dwelling in West Auckland, which has [been the subject of her recent exhibitions](#), comes to mind. I could go on, but the point is that domestic art destinations will continue to sit at this curious intersection of art and heritage in Aotearoa. And they will continue to struggle against headwinds—the capricious nature of funding chief among them. But as long as we hold true to the principles and values which have informed the use and preservation of the best of these sites, and continue to adapt and invent new ways of generating sustainability and self-sufficiency, the future of these places can only be one of continuing criticality, quality, and generative creativity.

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