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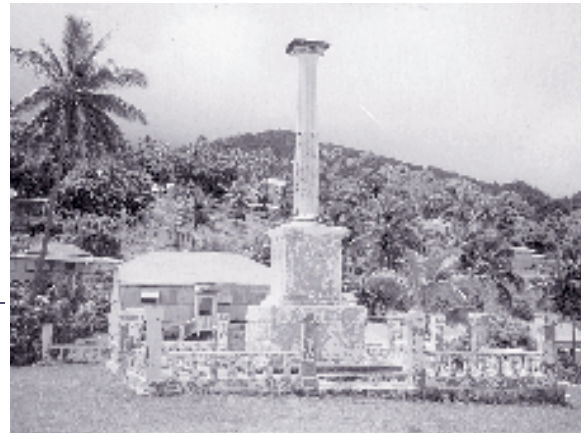
## Learning from Levuka, Fiji— Preservation in the First Colonial Capital

*World War I  
Monument, Levuka,  
Fiji.*

Preservation standards such as the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards* or Australia's Burra Charter are thought by many in Europe and the U.S. to be universal in their application. But in some instances this notion is often strained when financial and other considerations insist upon the retention of what might be considered a "vernacular environment." Although preservationists in westernized countries may rally to save threatened landmarks, public support is less forthcoming in places where change comes more slowly. Such is the case in Levuka, Fiji.

*Photos by the  
author.*

Levuka was the original British capital of Fiji until the late-19th century when Suva became the new government seat. Levuka's almost austere European architecture has survived natural disasters as well as economic, socio-cultural, and political upheavals. Simple verandahed wood structures, coral stone churches, and masonry



subsidies, and dependency on a one-source industrial base caused a shift to economic diversification. Without additional sources of income, it was realized that Levuka's economic future was questionable. At the same time, the town's infrastructure, including many historic buildings, continued to deteriorate.

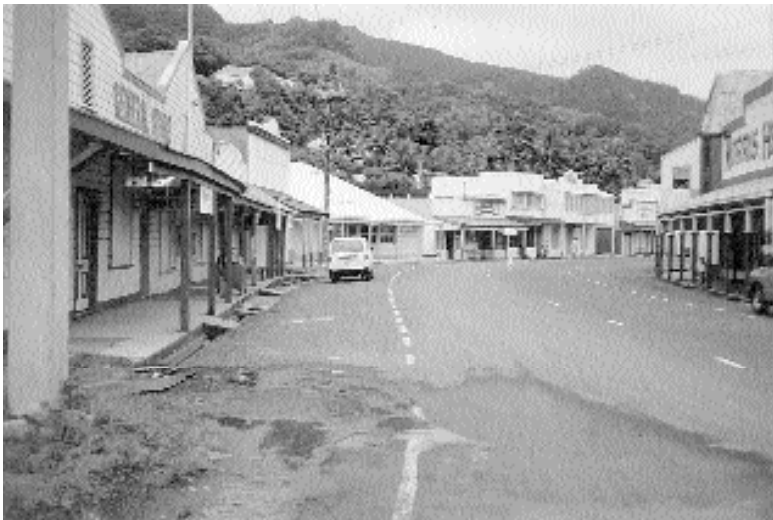
The provincial Fiji government recognized the need for an alternative industrial base on Ovalau, where Levuka is located. Lacking the alluring beach environments of west Fiji, private interest in Levuka was unlikely. What some realized was that what Levuka did possess, although tattered, was a late-19th-century seaport and significant associations with Fiji's national history.

Levuka received regional and international attention following a 1980s report by the Pacific Area (now Pacific Asia) Travel Association (PATA). This report recognized the town's potential as a prime visitor destination—one that could provide a visitor experience different from that in existing resorts. The report, *Levuka and Ovalau, Tourism Development through Community Restoration*, was important in establishing clear recommendations for Levuka's "integrated conservation and tourist promotion initiatives."

The report's recommendations included the following:

- restoration of Levuka's many existing buildings and the development of guidelines for new construction in the historic town;
- promotion of the program to national organizations in order to encourage Fiji-wide support for and identification with the project; and
- creation of a support network of local Levuka authorities and private interests to facilitate implementation of the restoration project.

Shortly afterward, the Town and Country Planning Department of Fiji established general provisions for Levuka, which were in many ways at odds with the PATA recommendations. Although these provisions included extensive regulatory



*Beach Street,  
Levuka, Fiji.*

civic buildings recall an often benign British colonial presence and provide a "time capsule" glimpse of a late-19th-century Pacific seaport.

Levuka's European exodus began in the mid-20th century, as a result immediately of the decline of copra and other commodities. More Europeans left after independence from Britain in 1970 and again after the *coup d'état* of 1987.

By the 1980s, Levuka had become economically dependent on its government-owned tuna factory. Possible depletion of fish, elimination of



Jewish gravestone, Draiba Cemetery, Levuka, Fiji.

controls, most requirements were more generic, rather than specific to Levuka. After adoption, some issues, such as density, setbacks, and parking requirements, were contested by residents who felt Levuka-specific needs were not addressed.

Following the government's planning efforts, an updated *Heritage Conservation Study* was completed in 1994 by the Australian team of HJM Consultants Pty, Ltd. and Timothy Hubbard Pty, Ltd. Unlike previous, more generalized tourism studies, this report made more tailored recommendations for Levuka

and stressed implementation of revitalization techniques, such as tax abatements, prohibitions on demolition, land reclamation, and other revisions.

Significantly, the study also emphasized the importance of Levuka's European presence for the Republic of Fiji and the South Pacific region. It noted that Levuka was:

- the seat of Fiji's first capital from the early 1860s;
- the focus of most British, Australian, and German, and much American commercial activity in the South Pacific, until the early 1880s;
- the site of the Cession of Fiji to the British Crown in 1872;
- important for the range of its building types and architectural styles;
- one of the best examples of settlement, reflective of European colonization in the South Pacific.

Recommendations included (1) retention of inter-cultural relationship — the urban forms and expressions of the layers of successive development through the post-World War II period; and (2) retention of key buildings reflective of the introduction of European administration and social development, education, and religion; these include sites

such as Levuka School, St John's Church, Sacred Heart, the Wesleyan Chapel, the Masonic Temple, Town Hall, and the Levuka Hospital.

Developing national and international appeal for heritage preservation necessitates defusing public fears and anxieties, especially when the architectural stock has less nostalgic appeal to the new population. In Fiji, most of the old British and Australian settlers are gone. New part-Europeans, Fijians, Hindu and Muslim Indians, and Chinese inhabitants of different economic strata have now replaced the remnants of Anglo-Saxon colonialism.

Buildings that survive a town's economic decline are often ignored for decades until their potential for heritage development is realized. As revitalization begins, benefits to the community must be justified. Citizen concerns will inevitably arise over individual rights, acquisition of derelict parcels, property taxes, and various ownership issues. Luckily for Levuka, the mayor, who works on an unpaid basis, has provided generous support of preservation efforts.

Preservation in Levuka, as in other developing areas, can be achieved if outside objectives are compatible with community directions. Often the issue is a fiscal one. Financial incentives are fundamental in order to encourage preservation. Heritage tourism is one such motivating factor, although there is still fear among many that such tourism will ruin Levuka. This should not happen if preservation goals and activities are consistent with the town's objectives.

Actions needed to promote preservation in developing South Pacific towns such as Levuka can be summarized as follows:

**Securing government and private organizational support.** Official recognition of Levuka as a Heritage Town has been critical for securing financial support from sources in and outside Fiji. Financial commitments from government and businesses are required if major heritage revitalization is expected beyond low-budget cosmetic improvements. Levuka must have the infrastructure to provide visitor-friendly accommodations and improve deteriorating facilities.

**Enforcing special regulations for Levuka.** Even with official historic town designation, special planning requirements and heritage controls must be understood clearly. This must be generated by the



Ovalau Club (oldest surviving private club) in Levuka, Fiji.

government planning agency, with support from preservation advocates.

**Achieving Non-European involvement for European preservation.** “Foreign” processes and methodologies are challenging in a place like Levuka. Although it is European in origin, there are major differences between it and Western

Typical residential vernacular. Levuka, Fiji.



towns. Some residents want the town to remain “as is” and are less prone to applaud increasing land values and visitor influx. Perhaps more complicated is the indigenous Fijian village view that preservation has little affect on their lives.

**Establishing workable tools.** Public cooperation requires design decisions based on clear precedence. Examples can help owners understand what is required. Building restorations, construction techniques, material maintenance, “Main Street” approaches, and other efforts must relate to Fiji-based examples. Lack of money and the resulting compromised design solutions are a major problem.

**Using volunteers and recruiting individuals.** Fiji’s nationalism and return to village dependency have ensured a strong cultural identity for Fijians. The essential framework for heritage development now comes mainly from the outside,

through volunteers from abroad and within Fiji. In the future, a proposed Heritage Training Centre in Levuka will provide a range of preservation-related opportunities. Efforts to establish such a center have already begun.



Levuka Public, oldest public school in Levuka, Fiji.

Historic communities such as Levuka have seen many individuals with good intentions come and go. Essentially, success must come from the residents themselves. Still, the current momentum for preservation in Levuka depends on long-term involvement and funding from the Fiji government. Outside foreign assistance, including technical expertise, is short-term in character and fluctuates with the Fijians’ evolving political expectations. Fiji’s lead in South Pacific heritage town development is in jeopardy as financial resources and governmental interest diminishes.

Unlike tourist destinations elsewhere, far less financial support will flow into Levuka to warrant fears of gentrification. With no beaches or land available for major resorts, Levuka’s heritage remains the territory of adventurous visitors.

Revitalization through heritage preservation is Levuka’s South Seas experiment. Western formulas, however, are wisely under scrutiny. Levuka’s rough charm as a “living community” can easily erode. Training local residents to understand the governmental town scheme, engage in hospitality services, and preserve the town’s heritage is critical. Academic approaches to preservation without economic backing will meet with bitter resistance.

Nevertheless, what is occurring in Levuka is promising. In this new post-colonial period, Levuka’s innocence will rapidly end as it addresses economic survival, consumerism, and contact with international visitors. If the preservation framework is successful, the town will have its own tools to make decisions for its future. As Mayor George Gibson has stated, “Levuka is a living town struggling with lots of negative obstructionists, but preservation will prevail.”

South Pacific preservation is not just about pretty buildings and pristine symbols of the elite. Instead, it is about vernacular settings of the countless, unnamed individuals who now inhabit places like Levuka. Levuka’s heritage development in an age dedicated to a new economic necessity, environmental order, and indigenous awareness will test our ideas as practiced in the West.

#### **Suggested Reading**

Levuka and Ovalau, *Tourism Development through Community Restoration*, Pacific Area Travel Association.

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Photos by the author.