

TRANSLATION TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the
**Society of Architectural Historians,
Australia and New Zealand**
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Katrina Simon, "Dismembering - Remembering: Seeking Petre's Ruined Cathedral in its Family of Resemblances," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation*, edited by Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 827-838.

Published in

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

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Dismembering - Remembering: Seeking Petre's Ruined Cathedral in its Family of Resemblances

In June of 2012 the great green dome of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, sitting high above the city of Christchurch, NZ was carefully dismantled. It was taken apart following extensive damage from a series of earthquakes which felled the front towers, shattered much of the stonework and left the dome vulnerable to collapse. This once-beautiful neo-classical building is now a ruin, its future uncertain. Options that have been discussed include extensive repairs, modifying the remains or building on an adjacent site. Whatever action is finally taken, the architectural history of the building will be a significant factor in the re-establishment of a cathedral. Yet part of the building's important architectural legacy, its distinctive experiential quality, can now only be recalled by memory.

This paper includes a personal recollection of the cathedral based on the author's experience of singing in the choir of this building renowned for its beautiful acoustics. Beyond personal and collective memories of people associated with the cathedral either purposefully or incidentally, another repository of memory exists. The cathedral is part of an architectural lineage of church buildings, part of a family of resemblances, and most of these direct influences are in Paris. This paper gives an account of a pilgrimage taken to these French ancestors, of the experience of visiting these buildings and the perceived familiar resonances with the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament.

This process can be considered a kind of 'back translation', where a text is re-translated from the second language to see if the sense of the original has been preserved and aligned. The recounting of this series of encounters adds an important dimension to discussions about the possible future translation of the now-ruined cathedral into the future rebuilt city. It suggests a way that that the reconstruction might be influenced not only by the cathedral's formal architectural heritage, but also by its remarkable and evocative experiential heritage.

Tracing the Family of Resemblances: the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament

"Passing the Christchurch Cathedral in a bus one day in 1979 I caught a glimpse of it and thought I was experiencing an hallucination."¹

The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament is located in the plains city of Christchurch, New Zealand. It was designed by Francis Petre, a New Zealand-born architect who designed over seventy buildings for the Catholic Church throughout the South Island.² Consecrated in 1905, the Cathedral is regarded as one of his most significant projects, and is noted as one of the most distinguished neo-classical churches in the country.³

Christchurch was established as an Anglican colony⁴ and the physical fabric and land ownership of the city still reflects this origin, with the Anglican cathedral in the centre of the city grid. The Catholic Cathedral, by comparison, was built toward the edge of the colonial city grid plan, with railyards and gasworks nearby. Unlike many of the other typically dark grey volcanic stone buildings in the city, the Cathedral was built in an early form of reinforced concrete and clad in Oamaru stone, a light coloured limestone from approximately 300 kilometres south of the city.

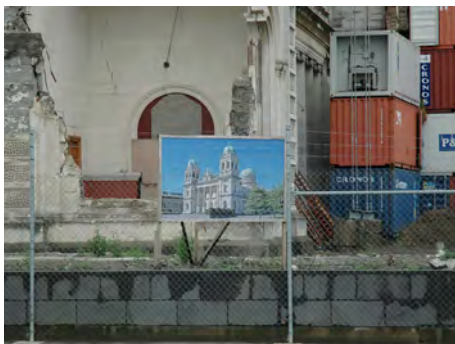


Fig. 1. Billboard installed in front of the now badly-damaged building showing a photograph of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament before the earthquake damage. Photograph by Katrina Simon, December 2013.

On completion, the front façade of the building presented a row of columns flanked by two matching towers, one of which was a bell tower. The columns were surmounted by a balustrade with a niche surmounted by a cross in the centre, giving the structure a sturdy squared appearance. Deep columned arcades ran down the sides of the building to the transepts. The dome sat high beyond

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- 1 P. Hamilton, "Francis Petre 1847 - 1918: An Investigation into New Zealand Architectural Biography Volume 1" (Unpublished MA Thesis, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1986), 2.
 - 2 Petre's body of work is documented in the two volumes of Hamilton's thesis. P. Hamilton, *Francis Petre*.
 - 3 Ian Lochhead, "Petre, Francis William," from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 7 Jan 2014. <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2p13/petre-francis-william>, 2. Also, John Stacpoole and Peter Beaven, *Architecture 1820-1970* (Wellington: Reed, 1972), 51.
 - 4 James Hight and Carl Rudolf Straubel, ed., *A History of Canterbury, Volume 1: To 1854* (Christchurch: Canterbury Centennial Association, Whitcombe and Tombs, 1957).

the transepts, on a sculpted base that contained the inner dome. A ring of tall windows encircled the upper dome structure, which was topped by a rounded copper dome roof and small cupola. In spite of its marginal location, the Cathedral was a significant feature in the city. Its unexpected and dramatic architectural form, its unusual white limestone cladding and its highly visible green oxidized copper dome all registered strongly against the cityscape and the wide open Canterbury sky.

The interior of the building was very generously proportioned and harmoniously organized. The nave was long and high, with wide lower columned arcades and equally wide columned upper galleries. Large windows ran along the outer walls at both levels, creating a wash of light throughout the layered volume of the building. At the end of the nave four massive piers defined the sanctuary and held up the colonnade of the inner dome. The interior of the cathedral was also lined with Oamaru stone, giving it a light, warm appearance.

In September of 2010 a large earthquake caused widespread damage to the city. The Cathedral suffered some structural damage, but was initially thought to be repairable. The following February brought a highly destructive aftershock, which was much closer to the city centre, much shallower and more violent than the original earthquake. This caused widespread damage, particularly to much of the central business district, and to residential lands, especially those near rivers and cliffs. Both of the city's cathedrals were suddenly devastated, with the Anglican Cathedral losing its highly recognizable tower, and the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament losing both of its front towers, and suffering major structural impairment to the rest of the building and most particularly the dome. The dome was at serious risk of collapse, and the whole dome structure was systematically removed in the middle of 2012, leaving the rear of the cathedral completely open to the elements.

I visited the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament on several occasions since the first earthquakes and most recently in December of 2013. The building cannot be entered, but only viewed from a distance. Seeing the building in this state, and looking at photographs and videos of the building being dismembered also feels like the experience of an hallucination.⁵ Initially the Cathedral could be seen in a state of chaos, surrounded by rubble and by other damaged buildings, and propped up by a series of stacked shipping containers for emergency support. Now that the fallen rubble and many of the containers have been cleared away, and the dangerous areas of the building have been propped up or removed, the building is now no longer just unstable, but is a ruin, strangely softened in its profile both from the front and the side. With the towers and the dome gone, it is almost hard to recognize the building without its former dramatic profile.

5 Catholic Diocese of Christchurch website, Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament Earthquake information: <http://www.chch.catholic.org.nz/?sid=2720>, accessed 19 February 2014; Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament Dome Removal, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kt_8_ZuyGc, accessed 19 February 2014.



Fig. 2: Façade of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, Christchurch after further work to stabilize the structure after the collapse of the front towers. Photograph by Katrina Simon, December 2013.

The status and future of the Cathedral is still under discussion by the Catholic Church authorities, and no decisions have yet been made public about its future. Options that have been mooted include rebuilding on the same or an adjacent site, potentially incorporating some of the surviving fabric of the building in some form. Discussions around the architectural significance of the cathedral can be supported by drawings and photographs from the church and city archives, and the documentation of the building's deconstruction. Yet the building's significance was not just its formal architectural quality, but also the unique experiential quality of the building, both as it was encountered from different parts of the city, and from within its interior.

Memory and Pilgrimage: A Journey Through Time and a Journey Through Place

This quality can no longer be experienced, as to encounter the building now is to encounter a battered fragment, still remarkable in its own way, but very different from the building that once stood. The experience of the building now only remains in memory. This includes the memories of people for whom it has been a regular place of worship for many years, and people for whom the cathedral has been a familiar urban landmark. The importance of memory and the act of remembering is the focus of this paper, offered in the hope that it may contribute to the debate about the future of the cathedral.

The act of remembering through recollecting, and 're-membering' through the gathering of dispersed fragments is explored in this paper in two parts. The first is a process of actively recalling my own experiences of the building as a member of the cathedral choir for a number of years, over thirty years ago. This account highlights the distinctive and durable memories of being in the cathedral both on Sunday mornings for the collective ritual of the sung mass, and also in the evenings for the choir practice in a small room in the north tower. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this recollection highlights the importance of the sound of the cathedral, but also its qualities of light, and the sense of adventure that we got as we navigated around its rich variety of spaces.

The second part recounts the experience of the cathedral in quite a different way. This was through another repository of memory, which is located in the buildings that are considered to be part of the architectural lineage of the cathedral. The distinctive architecture of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament has been identified with a variety of other buildings and building types as antecedents, both by way of documented architectural history and by popular association.⁶ Early Roman basilicas, Italian Renaissance churches, and French Classical architecture have all been identified with its lineage, as has the dome of St Paul's in London, though the most specific associations and influences are related to French classical church architecture.⁷

In a study of Petre's basilicas, Wynn-Williams has noted the development of architectural elements through several of his built and unbuilt works, and many of the possible and probable sources of inspiration.⁸ Three specific influences on the Cathedral she discusses are the French churches of Notre Dame de Boulogne-sur-Mer, located in a coastal city near Calais, the church of St Vincent de Paul and the church of Saint Sulpice, both in Paris. Other Parisian buildings associated with the Cathedral especially with the presence of the dome in the city are Le Panthéon, and the Dome Chapel containing the tomb of Napoléon at Les Invalides. The purpose of this paper is not to try to argue for the similarity or validity of these associations from a specifically architectural historical standpoint, but to use them as a recognized point of connection with the Cathedral, and to draw on this connection in order to try and re-encounter some aspects of the now-ruined building.

This process of remembering took the form of a pilgrimage to several of these churches, located in Paris, seeking a sense of recognition or experience that have now been lost in the cathedral. Many ancient pilgrimages involve walking from one relic to another - creating a sense of internal wholeness via a journey of fragments. When I went to visit these buildings I was curious to see if I had any sense of recognition, if there was a sense of familiarity, much as there might be visiting a distant relative of one's own family in another country. In each case on this architectural pilgrimage there was something in common, but how that commonality revealed itself was not always predictable, nor was it primarily physical in its manifestation.

Part of this quest was to ask myself what made the Cathedral so distinctive in my recollection - not simply in its formal architectural vocabulary but also in its disposition within the city, how it worked as an urban artifact or monument, and within the interior, what was its characteristic feel, or sense. This was not just a function of its physical features but also of how these interacted with ambient

6 George Bernard Shaw referred to Petre as the 'New Zealand Brunelleschi'. George Bernard Shaw, *What I Said in N.Z., The Newspaper utterances of Mr. George Bernard Shaw in New Zealand. March 15th to April 15th, 1934* (Wellington: The Commercial Print and Publishing Company of N.Z., 1934). Quoted in Hamilton, *Francis Petre*, 2.

7 Lochhead states that the Cathedral is "Based on nineteenth century French prototypes, notably J. I. Hittorf's St Vincent-de-Paul, Paris..." See Lochhead, "Petre, Francis William," 2. Wynn-Williams identifies the "major influence" ... (as) that of Roman Catholic Churches of eighteenth and nineteenth century France. Additional influences which can be traced are those of Classical Italian Architecture and Irish Catholic Architecture." D. Wynn-Williams, *The Basilicas of F.W. Petre* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Christchurch, University of Canterbury, 1982), 106. Stacpoole and Beaven, by contrast, state that the "splendid rear view... transports the onlooker direct to Rome." Stacpoole and Beaven, *Architecture 1820-1970*, 51.

8 Wynn-Williams, D. B. *The Basilicas of F.W. Petre*.

and artificial light, and also with the wonderfully reverberant soundworld of the Cathedral, both during the ritual of the sung mass, and when the cathedral was empty and still. The experiential relics I encountered on the pilgrimage were thus always related to my own memories, and they in turn were reinforced by the fragments that I encountered and seemed to recognize. So, now that the Cathedral was devastated, I was curious to see if there were any familiar elements to the other churches that could be considered as part of the family or resemblances, partly out of a desire to see something familiar and to remind myself of the building that was lost, and also to be able to think that it might not be entirely lost after all.

Part One: Remembering through Resonance

Some of my earliest memories of the Cathedral are of cycling through High Street, a diagonal that cuts through the city grid and, at a particular point where the diagonal met the orthogonal streets, suddenly seeing the majestic façade of the Cathedral. I could identify with the sense of surprise and intrigue mentioned by Shaw and Hamilton, as the scale and majesty of the façade was quite unlike anything else in the city. This vista was lost when the Christchurch Polytechnic built new facilities on its site that destroyed this powerful experience. The great green dome, however, was still visible from afar, riding the skyline in a way that dramatized the flatness of the city.

Beyond the more public experience of the building within the city, my personal knowledge of the Cathedral mainly draws on memories of being a member of the Cathedral Choir for a few years, during which time I visited the building on at least two occasions most weeks. The first was for an evening rehearsal in the choir room in the upper gallery of the North tower, and the second on Sunday for a further rehearsal in the choir room followed by the choral mass, for which the cathedral choir, and, on every fourth week, the cathedral orchestra, sat in the choir loft, beside the main organ at the west end of the Cathedral, itself a continuation of the gallery. During the evening rehearsal we would generally enter the building from the north side arcade, into the darkened, echoing building, then ascending a small wrought iron spiral stair to the upper gallery, and enter the small choir room, which was small and high, roughly cubic, with two high arched windows. Packed with chairs for the 35-40 members of the mixed voice choir, it was also inhabited by row upon row of pictures of pipe organs of Europe, giving the room an unusually crowded but lively character!

Frequently during the rehearsal break we would walk along the wide upper gallery toward the piers of the dome, one of which contained another spiral stair that was often unlocked. This allowed us to circle our way up to the inner dome colonnade, surmounted by an elaborate dome of pressed zinc tiles. From here we could look down directly on the sanctuary and the altar. Sometimes we were able to ascend up further above this level to the upper dome floor, from which we could look down through a small circular aperture to the sanctuary floor now far below, and also out to the city through the high many-paned windows that enclosed this space. The great chain holding the chandelier passed from the apex of the dome through the balustraded circular aperture, and down to hang over the altar.

During the choral mass the choir generally sang from choir loft in the upper gallery at the rear of the Cathedral, looking along the length of the nave to the sanctuary at the eastern end of the building. (By comparison the Anglican Cathedral had the choir singing in a traditional position in the 'choir' of the building and arranged in two halves, facing each other, singing antiphonally). This position high at the back of the Cathedral meant that the choir sang suspended halfway up in the volume of the nave, in a unique position to appreciate the spaciousness of the building. The generosity of the nave and of these wide window-lit galleries and arcades gave the interior of the Cathedral a sense of grandeur, and also of lightness. It also created a distinctive and highly resonant acoustic quality, which in my mind seemed to be intensified or echoed by the warm glow of the light on the columns, walls and arches. Both light and sound seemed to reverberate through the interior, creating a space that was animated even when still. It is this quality that came most frequently to mind as I pursued the Cathedral by walking through the other repository of its memory.

Part Two: Re-Membering through Walking

Having the opportunity to visit the architectural ancestors of the Cathedral in Paris, the decision to visit them was taken in the spirit of a pilgrimage, an ancient and widespread practice that has a particular resonance in Paris as a city with many pilgrimage sites and reliquaries. One of the oldest roads in the city now bears the name Rue St Jacques, indicating its link to the famous walking route to the supposed burial place of St James at Santiago da Compostela in northern Spain. The great cathedral of Notre Dame is structured as many great pilgrimage churches, with an ambulatory enabling hoards of the faithful, now largely replaced with tourists, to circulate through the church visiting many of its relics and treasures, while not disturbing the religious services being carried out in the nave and choir. Modern day visitors can visit the relics and tombs of many of Paris' early saints, the burial places of the fragmented mortal remains of many members of the royal families of France.

Pilgrimages involve a physical journey and a psychic or spiritual journey that effects an inner transformation. Many religions have pilgrimage as a significant element of a spiritually advanced life. Pilgrimage can also have a more secular connotation, and can involve the deliberate journey to sites of personal significance, such as the work of a particular artist or architect. While the intention may not be to create a transcendental transformation, it may still be a process of (self-) integration or putting (back) together of things fragmented or partly lost. While reading of the continued dismantling of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Christchurch, and of so much of the centre of the city, the idea of a pilgrimage to the ancestors of this much loved building seemed to be a way to recall and literally 're-member' it, constructing a new whole in the face of its currently dismembered state.

I was not able to visit all of these buildings during ritual celebrations, and some no longer hold them regularly. In all cases I paid particular attention to the way in which the building announced itself as I moved through the city, and also to the character of the interior. I was interested to see

if I could identify recognizable elements that affirmed the historical or popular association with the Cathedral, as well as its more experiential qualities of light, of sound, of spaciousness and mass that I had acquired through my personal experience. Did I feel as if I had met one of my building's relatives? If so, when and how did this happen? This short account recalls the experience of visiting four of these buildings in Paris.

The Panthéon: The Empty Centre and the Inhabited Crypt



Fig. 3. The Dome of the Panthéon as seen from Les Jardins du Luxembourg . Photo by author.

The Panthéon was originally built as a church dedicated to St Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris.⁹ Shortly after it was completed in 1777, its role as a religious building was overtaken by the French Revolution, after which it alternated between sacred and secular roles. In 1885 it was dedicated to honouring the memory and achievements of great men (and a very small number of women) of France. Now a place of cultural pilgrimage, it houses the remains of over 300 people who have been 'Pantheonised' and reinterred, mainly in the crypt of the building, often with a very elaborate public ritual, including a procession, lying in state and reburial.

When moving through the Left bank and neighbouring areas of the city the Panthéon's dome is, like that of the Cathedral, a dramatic feature of the cityscape. There are formal similarities between the two dome structures, although the Panthéon has a colonnade that supports the upper dome fenestration, unlike the massive stone haunches of the Cathedral. In the Panthéon the emphatically uplifted form of the dome also accentuates its primary position in the building, and now serves to emphasize its role as a public monument and giant mausoleum. The arches and dome above the four massive piers also recalls some of the formal arrangement of the Cathedral.

9 A. Lebeurre, *The Pantheon: Temple of the Nation* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, 2000).



Fig. 4. The interior of the Panthéon showing the great piers supporting the dome, from which is suspended the pendulum. Photo by author.

Yet to me the most striking and seemingly familiar aspect of the experience of visiting the Panthéon was the sense of animated stillness, encountered both in the main part of the building through the presence of the pendulum that has been hung to recreate the famous experiment by Foucault that demonstrates the turning of the Earth, and also in the crypt of the building, where the darker, more intimate spaces recall the many voids running through the massive stone piers of the Cathedral, threaded with spiral stairs.

Chapel of the Dome: Les Invalides

Another dome that registers dramatically in the city from far away is the dome at Les Invalides. This elegant gilded and elongated dome sits above a two tiered drum, pierced with a ring of high windows on each level. Topped with gilded cupola and spire, it marks the Chapel of the Dome, which is now the site of the Tomb of Napoleon I. The Chapel is part of the expansive stone edifice of Les Invalides, a hospital for wounded soldiers built at the end of the 17th century. Built at the rear of the hospital, its main entrance is from the south, on alignment with surrounding streets, and the dome sits immediately above the protruding narrow chapel façade, with stacked columns emphasizing the centrality of the space beyond. On entering the chapel, one is almost immediately enveloped by the painted and gilded dome interior. Directly beneath the centre of the dome is a circular void, and raised within this void is the sarcophagus of Napoleon I. Although the form and presence of the dome in the city has some similarities with the Cathedral, the interior is much more richly decorated and relentlessly centralized. Several smaller radiating chapels do have a similar sense of proportion and understated decoration.



Fig. 5. The interior of the Cathedral of Saint Louis des Invalides.
Photograph by Katrina Simon.

While the dome brought me to this Chapel as part of the pilgrimage, it was the adjoining Cathedral of Saint Louis des Invalides, almost hidden behind the Chapel of the Dome, that had an experiential quality more reminiscent of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, even though the formal arrangement of the interior is more massive and less articulated than the Basilica and the dome is not directly part of the space. The double height gallery created a sense of layered space, while the lightness and warmth of the limestone, lit from a row of windows above, and the ambient echoing sound, gently activated by a recording of Gregorian chant played through the speaker system, all created a familiar sense of resonance and repose.

The Church of St Vincent de Paul: The Elusive Ceiling

Although I was making my way purposefully towards this building, my encounter with it was one of surprise. Its colonnade portico suddenly appeared like a mirage at the end of a long narrow street heading gently uphill. Designed by Jacques-Ignace Hittorf, and completed in 1844, the church is entered by ascending a series of banks of steps that run along the front of the building, and then the shallow colonnade gives way to a long, high interior. There are several elements that are similar to the Cathedral, including the squared towered façade and a double gallery running the length of the nave.

Interestingly, while this church has been noted as a significant influence on the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, of all of the architectural relatives that I visited this one seemed the least familiar. My first reaction was to a feeling of compression rather than spaciousness – the gallery did not feel like an extension of the space but more like an addition to it. It felt somewhat claustrophobic and heavy, and relentlessly longitudinal, without the same sense of upward movement.

What did create a sense of recognition, however, was the uplifting effect of the beautifully decorated ceiling, made from ornate gilded painted panels, with wooden frames emphasising the length of the nave, and creating a counterpoint to the austerity of the stone columns. The Cathedral also had a ceiling, made of coffered zinc tiles, that seemed to have a similar fineness and complexity. It added to the golden aura of the building, and was part of the unique quality of light - a hovering luminous presence.

Saint Sulpice: Recognising A Familiar Face

Of all the churches I visited on this pilgrimage it was the Church of Saint Sulpice that seemed to most capture and convey a familiar experiential sense of the Cathedral, even though in many ways it had fewer formal characteristics in common, particularly in the vaulted interior, than some of the other churches of its architectural family. I had been looking in vain for this building but then came upon it almost by accident from behind, through the narrow twisting streets. There is no dome heralding the church, yet Saint Sulpice has a strong civic presence emphasized by its position on a large square, with a handsome squared façade, with a deep double height arcade, emphasized by its two non-identical towers.



Fig. 6. The facade of the church of Saint Sulpice showing its deep arcaded façade and non-matching towers. Photograph by Katrina Simon.

Encountering this façade I felt immediately as if I had suddenly reacquainted with an old dear friend. This sense was reinforced when I entered the church, where the generosity and serenity of the nave had a familiar sense of repose. This church is also home to a famed organ and has wonderful resonant acoustics. In some churches the sound of a distant closing door makes an empty space seem emptier. In others, such as the Cathedral and the Church of Saint Sulpice, the warmth and richness of the echo makes even an empty space seem full and alive. At this point in the pilgrimage I felt that I had encountered not only fragments of the Cathedral but a living relative.

Conclusion: Remembering the Cathedral

As with a recorded oral history or a memoir, there is value in the subjective account. The particular manner of my involvement with the Cathedral heightened my awareness of certain attributes of the building, as my primary encounter with the building was as a participant in a ritual for which the building had been designed and made an ambient encounter with the reverberant and lustrous effects of the building. Personal experience, filtered through an architectural training and academic framework can give an image, (or voice), to the particular qualities of this building that might otherwise not be evident from other forms of architectural documentation.

Walking through a European city as a process of remembering a ruined building in New Zealand can be thought of as a kind of 'back-translation' of a collection of architectural memory traces. Back-translation is a literary technique used where a translated written text is re-translated from the second language to see if the sense of the original has indeed been accurately preserved and rendered. The architectural pilgrimage thus explored the link between an architectural influence and its translation by working backwards to see if the 'sense' of the translated influence has been preserved. Yet, paradoxically, this process has been motivated by the loss of the already 'translated' building – I was searching for evidence or traces of the character of this translation in the experiences of the original. The evidence of the power of Petre's translation of the traditions of French Classical church architecture was as powerfully recalled by the ambient and ephemeral qualities of the architectural ancestors as in the formal physical traces.

The processes of remembering outlined in this paper do not claim the status of an objective architectural historical account of translation, or document the formal transmission of architectural typology or style. What they do is allow reflection on the manner in which familiarity can be identified, how it can be encountered in the experience of particular buildings, and what enables this familiarity and recognition to be sustained and apprehended. Visiting the ruined Cathedral, and seeing so many media images of its currently dismembered parts made me actively recall the experience of being in the expansive, reverberant space, and to deeply regret the loss of this elegant building. Visiting each of the distant relatives in turn was a pilgrimage of re-membering, a process of gathering together again, through a series of encounters mediated by curiosity and hope.