

Research Paper (Peer-Reviewed)

Regenerating Small Settlements - One Small Pier at a Time

Hamish G. RENNIE

Sylvia NISSEN

Jess FARRAR

Kate ORANJE

Department of Environmental Management, Lincoln University, Lincoln, New Zealand

Abstract

Based on a study of three small piers on Banks Peninsula, New Zealand, this research describes the processes of their community-led restoration. The study is based on in-depth interviews with community members in Ōtoromiro/Governors Bay; Kaioruru/Church Bay in Whakaraupō/Lyttelton Harbour, and Takamatua in Akaroa Harbour (n=18). These projects saw the establishment of a new model for small settlement facility restoration and have spurred multiple longer-term legacies for communities. We identify three key relationships that contributed to the successful jetty restoration, involving the biophysical marine space, community and council. The regenerative processes are similar to but significantly differ from pier restoration occurring in comparable international cases.

Keywords: jetties, planning, Banks Peninsula, pier, earthquake, resilience, coastal, marine, harbour, environment, relationships.

1. Introduction

Human interactions with coastal environments are characterised by the dramatic change in medium, from land to sea, and the rhythms that characterise the dynamic flux of a tidally affected world. The sea provides a flat, but moving, surface for the transportation of goods and people; the land provides stability. The relationships that humans have formed with the sea vary with place, time and culture, but almost invariably the coast is both a meeting and a parting place.

Among the facilities that mediate these relationships are wharves and piers – stable places to tie up a boat, regardless of tide, and to embark, or disembark, people and cargo. Over time the original purpose of these piers can change and their use and the relationships they foster evolve, but, we suggest, the underlying stability of the structure remains core to its being. When the stability of such places is compromised or no longer exists, the nature of human relationships with marine environments may also change.

In this article we explore the community-led restoration of three small piers (or ‘jetties’ in local parlance) on Banks Peninsula, New Zealand: Ōtoromiro/Governors Bay and Kairuru/Church Bay in Whakaraupō/Lyttelton Harbour, and Takamatua in Akaroa Harbour. Through inadequate maintenance or seismic events, these jetties lost their core stability to the point that they were no longer able to serve their previous functions (Oranje et al., 2022). In this article, we identify the processes that initiated or led to the restoration of the jetties. Through this we identify key factors for achieving restoration of these structures and regenerative legacy benefits accruing to the communities involved.

2. Piers, Community and Restoration

There is surprisingly little research on the processes and relationships enabled by community-led restoration of piers. Most literature is of a technical nature addressing the engineering of the structures or their potential for revenue generating through tourism (e.g., Chapman et al., 2020). Indeed, piers are often associated with a particular type of seaside holiday and amusement-park-over-water experiences (Borsay & Walton, 2011). Much of this literature also relates to the heritage character of the piers (Bideau & Kilani, 2009; Chapman et al., 2021). Research in the United Kingdom, for example, has highlighted that the national level heritage values of the seaside have traditionally been focussed on the exceptional rather than the quotidian experiences of seaside holiday makers (Light & Chapman, 2022). Localised seaside heritage protection has depended on local plans recognising the heritage values of piers and integrating these into regeneration planning based on heritage tourism (Chapman et al., 2021).

In New Zealand, there is some recognition of the heritage value of jetties. The New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangī Kōrero includes several wharf or other coastal heritage facilities (e.g. Invercargill Port Wharf, Evans Bay Patent Slip and Rona Wharf). None of the Banks Peninsula jetties studied here are listed. However, each has been recognised in Canterbury’s *Regional Coastal Environment Plan 2005 (RCEP)* as holding heritage value. This plan provides planning provisions that enable restoration to proceed without needing resource consents.

In New Zealand, responsibility for the maintenance of piers and wharves depends on their role in contemporary transport networks. Those that are currently core to transportation are considered port facilities and their ownership and management responsibilities were devolved to port companies in the neoliberal zeitgeist of the 1990s. However, more ambiguous is responsibility for the many other piers and wharves that may once have been vital for transport but no longer fulfil a central function.

Maintenance and restoration of public facilities and environments by governing administrations is a standard expectation of many democratic communities. In New Zealand, under the Local Government Act 2002, councils are required to maintain council services including local road and transport networks. Planning for local transport networks is usually council led. Maintenance of public bus shelters and other similar facilities fall on the council too. Generally, the prioritisation and allocation of funds is through Long-Term Plans developed by the council and consulted on with the community every three years. These plans set the funding parameters for ten-year periods and provide the annual plan for the first year. The preparation of Annual Plans for the second and third year is undertaken through public engagement, but the expenditure must generally fall within the parameters set out in the Long-Term Plan.

For the jetties in Banks Peninsula, responsibility for their ongoing maintenance rested originally with Banks Peninsula District Council. However, when it suffered a major financial crisis, it was amalgamated with Christchurch City Council (CCC). Responsibility and ownership of the jetties then moved to the CCC. Maintenance of these jetties was not a stated priority of the city-oriented council as it had been for the previous council. Consequently, some jetties no longer exist other than as dilapidated posts; artefacts signalling past marine-connected transportation networks and providing structures for the curious and subjects for artists.

Some of the remaining jetties in Banks Peninsula suffered structural damage during the sequence of earthquakes that rocked the Canterbury area in the 2010-2012 period. The earthquakes destroyed or damaged much of the infrastructure of Christchurch, placing considerable pressure on the council. Resulting special legislation and regulations provided for community planning for regenerating the city. However, outlying settlements were not subject to these planning processes, leading some communities to develop their own approaches to promoting regeneration planning (Love & Vallance, 2013). Funding of individual structures and amenity facilities, however, remained the responsibility of local government.

Structural surveys of the jetties following the earthquakes resulted in many of them being closed as unsafe for public access. This article provides the story of community responses to this situation.

3. Methods

For this study we conducted 18 in-depth interviews: 8 from Governors Bay, 6 from Takamatua, 3 from Church Bay, and one interviewee who had more general knowledge of the area. Most of the participants we invited for an interview were directly involved with jetty restoration local to their area or were long-standing members of their community[1]. All interviews were held in person and recorded, except one which was conducted via email. Interviewees were asked a mixture of semi-structured questions relating to the marine environment, the community, the jetty, and the process of the restoration. Transcripts were analysed thematically.

In addition to interview data, we also drew on a range of documentary sources identified through searches on keywords and information obtained from interviewees. These included council planning documents and meeting agendas/minutes, books and blogs written on the jetties (especially Robertson, 2016), media articles that had been published about the jetties, and publicly available social media posts made by the Governors Bay Jetty Restoration Trust. These documents enabled triangulation of interview data with official records, helped clarify timelines and legal aspects and were in turn enhanced by the richness of interviewee recollections.

4. Community-led Jetty Restoration

In this section we present the background to, and the processes that initiated or led to the restoration of, three Banks Peninsula jetties: Kaioruru/Church Bay (Lyttelton Harbour), Takamatua (Akaroa Harbour) and Ōtoromiro/Governors Bay (Lyttelton Harbour).

4.1 Kaioruru/Church Bay Jetty

The Kaioruru/Church Bay jetty was built in 1907. Nestled in a secluded beach area in Lyttelton Harbour, opposite the port town of Lyttelton, its original purpose was to transport wool bales to Lyttelton and to enable local children to get to school (Robertson 2019). In 2011, a report on the condition of the jetty, found that it was in such dire condition that it was considered too unsafe to use (Fig. 1). Considering this, and the lack of available funds, the council made the decision not to finance the repair of the jetty.

Community Response

Members of the community came together and began negotiating with the council. After two years of negotiations, the council agreed with the community proposal to repair the jetty. The jetty was initially granted a coastal permit [2] to occupy the coastal marine area, but because the jetty was being restored with the same materials on the same footprint, the structural activity is classified as a permitted activity according to Rule 8.1 of the RCEP. A team was set up among the community consisting of a project manager, a building supervisor, and an engineer, which gave the council confidence to give the final go-ahead on the repairs.

[1] Detailed descriptions of the local communities can be found in Smith & Grimwood, 2018.

[2] Consent number CRC103484

In 2016, the restoration began through many community volunteer working bees held every second weekend. Three key people within the community facilitated the restoration by outlining the project requirements and subsequently organising volunteers to lend a helping hand. A CCC park ranger was also involved as safety officer and to provide much of the equipment and materials for the repairs.

The jetty was successfully restored in December 2016, made possible by around 50 volunteers contributing collectively over 1,000 hours of work. Due to this accomplishment, Church Bay was then considered a 'blueprint' for other jetty restoration projects around the Peninsula.



Figure 1 (Left): Kaioruru/Church Bay jetty 2007 – piles show degradation.

Figure 2 (Right): Takamatua jetty 2021 – with the gap between shore and sea to the right allowing alongshore vehicle movement (both photographs taken by co-author Rennie).

4.2 Takamatua Jetty

The Takamatua jetty (Fig 2) was constructed in 1910 mainly to facilitate the transport of cheese from the bay to Akaroa township by ferry. This jetty has a point of difference as it is built slightly out, and disconnected, from the land to allow homeowners who lived further around the bay headland to drive their tractors along the shore, between the jetty and the land, to access their property. The Takamatua Ratepayers Association have often carried out maintenance of the jetty, with the Banks Peninsula District Council commonly funding the materials used whilst the repairs would be performed by a member of the association.

The jetty had slowly degraded over time to the extent that further assistance from the CCC was sought, but this was not forthcoming. Following the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, a gate was erected by the council symbolising the closure of the jetty due to it being regarded as unsafe.

Community Response

Many members of the community came together to find a resolution as they did not want to see their jetty degrade further. In 2016 after arduous negotiations, the Takamatua Ratepayers Association got permission from CCC to carry out the jetty repairs. The agreement was that the CCC would pay for the materials required and the labour would be undertaken by members of the community and over-seen by a designated professional contractor. The same Park Ranger that was involved with the Church Bay jetty was also present as Council representative to lead the project. It started with a small group of people motivated to drive the repair project, but eventually, volunteer numbers grew. The jetty was successfully restored in March 2018 (Fig. 2).

4.3 Ōtoromiro/Governors Bay Jetty

Originally built in 1874, Governors Bay jetty was used in its early years for the transportation of produce. Due to the problematic mudflats of the harbour bed causing boats to become stuck, the jetty has been gradually extended over time to its current length of 300 metres (Robertson, 2016).

Following an engineer inspection in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes, the jetty was closed to the public in July 2011. Three years later, another inspection was conducted, and the jetty was deemed to be in “a poor state of repair” (OCEL Consultants, 2014). The total cost of the repairs was estimated at \$7.8 million. The financial strain on the council due to earthquake repairs, meant that in 2015 the council announced that it would not carry out the restoration (Fig. 3).

Community Response

The Governors Bay Jetty Restoration Trust was formed in 2015 with a mission to ‘save the jetty’. The Trust was assembled by community members from interdisciplinary backgrounds with the collective goal of restoring the jetty for less than the quoted costs. Trust members made submissions to the council for funding and proposals of partnership. The preferred and selected option was to transfer ownership of the jetty to the Trust for \$1 and then for the council to purchase it back for \$1 upon restoration completion. By the Trust receiving ownership of the jetty, restoration could be a community-led initiative. The community, through the Trust, became responsible for the entire project, including construction, fundraising, safety and compliance.



Figure 3: Governors Bay jetty 2021 – community response to closed jetty (photograph taken by co-author Rennie).

Regulation

Governors Bay jetty required a consent from the Canterbury Regional Council for its demolition and rebuild because its presence is a discretionary activity under Rule 8.2 of the Canterbury Regional Coastal Environment Plan (RCEP). The RCEP states that any structures pre-dating the 1900s cannot be demolished, removed or altered. Therefore, to gain consent, the piles and cross bracing of the old short jetty (approx. 20m) would be built over and preserved, then the rest of the new jetty would be built alongside the old one. Consent was granted in 2018 [3].

[3] Consent number CRC190764

Fundraising and support

Since its inception, the Trust developed various fundraising initiatives to raise money that would be matched dollar-for-dollar by the council, including music festivals, a charity golf day, fetes, art auctions, ‘merchandise’ (calendars, canvases and cards) and ‘sponsor a plank’ for \$500 activities.

There has also been a lot of pro-bono work done by local resident professionals, who helped with consent applications and surveying reports, as well as architectural design and marketing.

A significant discovery was the privately owned eucalyptus forest in Little River, which was planted one hundred years ago primarily for building and repairing jetties and other structures in the Banks Peninsula area. This discovery saved significant funds on wood that would have otherwise been imported. Tree felling started in late 2019, with subsequent working bees to cut, grade and stack planks of wood. The rebuild of the jetty was completed in 2023.

5. Factors Enabling Restoration

In this section, we discuss three important relationships identified from interviews that contributed to the successful jetty restoration: relationships with marine space, community, and council.

5.1 Relationships with marine space

The jetty restoration efforts in Banks Peninsula were underpinned by the value given by many community members to being able to connect with marine spaces. Although the jetties may have once fulfilled a transport function, they now provide a site of connection in many other ways. Interviewees often spoke of jetties as facilitating recreational activities such as fishing, walking along the jetty, jumping off it, and using them to launch a kayak or boat. Some utilise its access to nature to enhance their well-being and refer to it as the “Blue Hagley Park” [4]. In these ways, the jetty was noted to be a “place of connection” with others in the community and those from the wider area, who also found enjoyment in spending time on it.

Many interviewees were quick to emphasise that the jetties provided more than a recreational function: as one explained, “I don’t think you have to use something for it to be precious.” In particular, the jetty was noted to provide a distinct and accessible perspective of the marine environment. The view from the end of a jetty provided a perspective of the sea and land that would otherwise require access to a boat. Even if not physically used by some, the jetties were also still appreciated visually as part of the scenery and as a destination to reach when out walking.

The historical aspect of the jetties was also of significance to many people. Their presence incites queries about its history and purpose, and they are now ingrained in the landscape of the bays. Fond childhood memories and sentimental feelings are often associated with jetties; they became, as one put it, a “signature part of their lives”. Several interviewees expressed their delight in creating further memories with their children and grandchildren on the jetties. These multiple attachments helped to motivate the jetty restoration projects.

5.2 Relationships with community

While there may be many community members who did not want to see their respective jetties close and decay into the sea, it required a handful of individuals to put in time and energy to mobilise and coordinate the wider community to make restoration a reality. Interviewees often spoke highly of the passion, dedication, and perseverance of the Takamatua Ratepayers Association, Church Bay Neighbourhood Association and Governors Bay Jetty Restoration Trust members. They took on the responsibility of communicating with the council, mobilising their wider community, coordinating working bees and fundraising events, drafting designs, and “countless” other tasks.

[4] A drawing an analogy to the large, central park in Christchurch City to boost recognition of the potential of the marine area.

For all three jetty projects, interviewees emphasised the importance of utilising the range of relevant specific skills, and associated equipment, present within communities (e.g., engineers, lawyers, architects, contractors, builders and farmers) through to wider coordination and fundraising activities. While there was often difficulty getting the projects off the ground, the uptake from the general population to lend a hand wherever they could meant that final volunteer numbers were at times so high that they needed to be turned away from specific construction activities.

For many interviewees, the social interactions and getting to know more members in their communities was one of the most meaningful benefits of the jetty restorations. The inclusiveness of involvement was commented on by many interviewees, with people who could not necessarily contribute physically to repairs providing “a bounty” of morning teas and lunches. It was often mentioned how a jetty restoration had been instrumental in bringing together a range of people and improved community relationships beyond the courtesy ‘hello’ when passing each other. Having a “common goal” and “shared sense of achievement” enhanced community spirit.

5.3 Relationships with council

Through the jetty restoration projects of Church Bay and Takamatua, positive relationships developed between the CCC and community groups. However, at least initially there was some tension in these relationships. A typical procedure by the CCC would be to appoint external contractors or paid staff to the job, due to health and safety aspects. Therefore, community-led restoration efforts required “a leap of faith” by the Council.

To mitigate potential risks, the Council employee involved decided to act as a “buffer between ‘process’ and the outcome we all wanted”, with the added benefit of the volunteers’ “really good morning teas!” Many community members spoke enthusiastically of the importance of the direct and positive contribution of this Council employee in overseeing the projects and making the effort to work alongside the communities. A process was also developed that enabled suitably qualified volunteers to sign off engineer reports and processes and shared the liability between the two parties. The risks involved meant this concept particularly required that “leap of faith” by Council and it was carefully considered before they reached a decision.

Following the restorations, the community members involved spoke highly of their resulting relationship with the Council, with expressions like “amazing” and “couldn’t have been better”. From a Council perspective, the potential of these relationships was also recognised: “This project has proven that Council-community partnerships are an excellent way of enhancing community assets while building community spirit” (CCC, 2018).

At the time of the research, the Governors Bay jetty had yet to be rebuilt and consequently the same relationships had not had an opportunity to develop. The ongoing Council interactions and view on the relationship between Council and community varied between interviewees.

6. Legacies of the Jetty Restoration

In interviews, many interviewees talked about the tangible outcomes of the jetty restoration process. Across all three jetties, a significant legacy was the energising of small settlement communities through restoring the jetty restoration for future generations.

For Takamatua, the jetty restoration project has had significant follow-on effects. After the community saw what they could achieve when working together, they now have the “confidence” to take on other projects, including a partnership with Ngāi Tahu and the Department of Conservation to improve inaka breeding, one hundred mustelid traps that require monitoring, and further planting and building projects. This is seen as an advance on the pre-repair situation, with interviewees commenting that Robinsons Bay wharf repairs would not have occurred without the efforts of one particular Takamatua resident.

The Church Bay Neighbourhood Association reported that they usually have a willing volunteer base for community projects. They have also undertaken some other projects, including a new kayak rack and a seat at the land end of the jetty.

For Governors Bay, a significant event was the acquisition of the historical Lyttelton boathouse to be moved to the jetty's shore end, providing necessary storage for kayaks and dinghies and a meeting room to hold functions.

7. Discussions and Conclusions

In examining the community-led restoration of these three small piers, this article has identified some key relationships that facilitated the restoration efforts. The jetty restoration efforts were underpinned by the valued relationships many community members had with marine spaces through jetties. Community relationships and organising further enabled restorations, especially by utilising the range of skills present within communities. Through the projects, positive relationships also developed between the CCC and community groups.

Research in the United Kingdom provides some parallel experiences. Specifically, there has been a recent emergence of community-led restoration and community trusts to enable restoration of piers of a similar nature to the ones studied here (e.g., Light & Chapman, 2022). However, in New Zealand, jetty restoration appears to be taking a slightly different form. While their heritage status is acknowledged, it's their active role in everyday life and their visible presence that truly matter. Unlike the opposition to coastal beaches in certain areas of New Zealand (Page, 2008), opposition to these jetties is not a significant factor. This is partly because the jetties occupy the foreshore and seabed commons, not forming barriers on road reserves, and they are openly accessible to the public.

Jetties therefore appear to provide an important avenue for small settlement rejuvenation for coastal communities. In Banks Peninsula, the bonding opportunities and strengthened relationships with the CCC have provided a legacy of confidence and enhanced awareness of existing community resources. Moreover, their restoration is indicative of the ability of communities to actively challenge existing modes of local government operation and establish new regenerative models.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all participants who agreed to participate in this study by generously giving us their valuable time to sit down for an interview, as well as those who could not participate but still assisted us in other ways. The comments of the three anonymous reviewers and proof readers are also much appreciated. Funding support for this project was provided by Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities National Science Challenge through AgResearch. We particularly thank Dr Mike Mackay for initiating the project and for his ongoing support.

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