

# PORTAL TO THE PAST

Chequered with Victorian buildings and a rich history of Maori, an old neighbourhood in Auckland called Ponsonby reveals its forgotten past from behind elite streets and reinvented lifestyle. Malavika Bhattacharya maps the scene.



The giant containers at Silo Park in Wynyard Quarter that were earlier used to hold cement, now watch over the city as it comes together to host more than 50 events annually. *Opposite:* A look into the past—Auckland's Maori Gate at the Viaduct Harbour has a native style timber arch.

HOWAS SZTANIEK / GETTY IMAGES

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# A CORNER OF A VICTORIAN-STYLE BUILDING POKES OUT OF THE GRASS AT AUCKLAND'S WESTERN PARK.

On a visible column are printed the words BIRDS USED TO SIT HERE, AND WATCH PEOPLE FAR BELOW. It looks ominous, as if the building had tipped over and the earth had opened to swallow it whole, leaving but one corner visible. This is Kiwi sculptor John Radford's three-part creation spread across Western Park called the 'Tip'—an homage to the city's lost architectural heritage. Back in the 1980s, many characteristic buildings in Auckland were demolished to make way for more modern offices or shopping complexes, and their architectural remnants dumped here. The demolition and dumping formed the basis for Radford's work, and the name 'Tip' a deliberate play on words: what's visible is the tip of a building, and also, 'tip' refers to a rubbish dump in Kiwi slang. "A layered and chequered history of Auckland lies beneath the surface," says Neala Glass, an Auckland artist who runs the Black Door Gallery in Parnell.

Neala is leading me through Ponsonby Road on an art tour through the elite inner city suburb that's lined with Victorian-style buildings. Today, the trendy precinct is known for its posh fashion boutiques, high-end dining establishments, bars, and nightlife. But Ponsonby is also a cultural hub, with galleries, street art, and a multi-faceted history.

On the surface, the neighbourhood is swish, but Ponsonby's history, just like the Tip, is layered. Before the European settlers arrived, this area was frequented by Maori. They'd gather leaves from Western Park to make mats, and visit nearby fishing and trading ports for livelihood. Afterwards, the area was transformed to a typical colonial neighbourhood with villas and churches. With the successive downturn, suburbs such as Ponsonby fell into disrepair, a forsaken area with abandoned villas. Rents plummeted, and the locality became a working class neighbourhood.

Pacific Islanders had been migrating to New Zealand since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but they began to arrive in larger numbers after World War II. From the 1950s to the seventies, the migration intensified, changing and defining New Zealand's ethnic fabric to include a large Polynesian community. In the fifties, the first of these Polynesian communities settled in the inner-city suburbs, including Ponsonby. Drawn by low rents and a multi-ethnic culture, immigrants established themselves in the neighbourhood. So before the seventies, this was a cultural melting pot with Pacific islanders, Maori, and even Indian and Chinese migrant labour together making up the population. "The neighbourhood had a distinctly

*Opposite, clockwise:* John Radford's artworks at Western Park have become landmarks in Ponsonby; St Kevins Arcade on Karangahape Road is a melting pot of culture with small authentic local brands selling a variety of things; the colourful ATM machine in the neighbourhood draws a lot of attention.

bohemian vibe and became a hub for art, music, and culture," Neala tells me.

The Dawn Raid in the mid-seventies changed that. In an effort to target illegal immigrants and overstayers, the police raided homes within the community. Pacific Islanders were specially targeted, and the distinct, easy vibe of Ponsonby disappeared. What followed was the gentrification of the area as late in the nineties, where it transformed from a diverse, culturally vibrant neighbourhood, to a posh locality with new, expensive property.

I walk past a beautiful red brick building located at 1, Ponsonby Road. The iconic address used to be a police station, but now, it's Studio One Toi Tū. 'Toi' in Maori translates to 'art' and this space houses galleries and artist studios offering courses in various creative pursuits like art, jewellery-making, perfumery, and cinematography. The outside wall features a stunning blue mural depicting humans, a dog, a pig, and a bird. "This is Elliot Francis James' trademark style", Neala tells me. The prolific Kiwi street artist is a part of the TMD crew ([tmdcrew.com](http://tmdcrew.com)), a popular graffiti and street art group in Auckland. I come across another intricate piece, a 30-metre long wall

## ARTS FESTIVAL



Visual art, poetry, and performance art come together at **The Auckland Arts Festival** ([aucklandfestival.co.nz](http://aucklandfestival.co.nz)) between **March 8 and 26, 2017**. Artists from around the world come to Auckland to participate at the events.



GUIZIOU FRANCK/HEMIS.FR/ALAMY, OPPOSITE: CLOCKWISE: RAFAEL BEN-ARI/ALAMY, AUCKLAND COUNCIL; CHRIS HOWARTH/NEW ZEALAND/ALAMY



Sofia Minson is a well-known artist in New Zealand. Here she creates a mural of Maori Tiki Taane outside downtown's ferry terminal.



## KHARTOUM PLACE

A little art precinct lies between Kitchener Street (where the Auckland Art Gallery is located) and Lorne Street, on a lower level. It's called **Khartoum Place**, a quaint section with murals on tiled walls, many little galleries, a jewellery and a bookstore. People sit at outdoor cafes, sipping coffee amidst all this art. Khartoum Place is best known for its large mural commemorating the women's suffrage movement. The Suffrage Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a battle for women's voting rights—a right that was finally won in 1893.

art by Cinzah, an artist often credited with bringing street art to Auckland. Intricate and elaborate, the murals are real works of art, not at all like the irreverent graffiti common at street corners. Both these pieces, and many in the area, were created as part of the All Fresco festival. The public art festival takes place around Karangahape Road, popularly known as K' Road, and celebrates the creative spirit of the precinct.

At the corner on Ponsonby and K' Road is a series of wall art that stands out with its messages against the use of nuclear weapons: 'No Nukes is good nukes'; 'Nuclear Free Aotearoa'. Created by VAANA (Visual Artists Against Nuclear Arms), this is an Auckland-based artist's collective that formed in 1984 to promote peace and anti-nuclear sentiment. This particular work was created in a three part series through 1985, 2006, and 2009 to protest the controversial French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

K'Road is Auckland's most storied stretch with a rollercoaster history. Initially a trendy retail enclave, it transformed to a degenerate neighbourhood, followed by a creative renaissance and a subsequent revival as a lively, culture-filled quarter. "In the early 1900s, K'Road was a major retail area, with sophisticated European-style department stores, the equivalent of what Queen Street is today," Neala says. With the construction of the motorway in the 1960s, the area fell into stagnation. "It threw the street into a funk", she tells me. K'Road became better known as a red light area and emerged as one of Auckland's most notorious precincts in those times.

Walking through the stretch now, it seems that what was once an ethnically diverse area with colourful clothing and local food stalls, has evolved into a chic neighbourhood with cafes and trendy stores. The architecture, however, retains an old world charm. Over 83 per cent of the buildings on the main road are pre World War II, and luckily, haven't been remodelled. One such is Rendell's Department Store that maintains its

brick façade, Victorian style windows and many embellishments. The store is long gone, and behind the colonial frontage now are stand-alone shops and cheap housing for students. Alongside the heritage architecture stand contemporary buildings; most notably the Ironbank, an award-winning structure built to look like stacked shipping containers.

Street art along K' Road is mostly concealed in the by-lanes off the main stretch. I wander into an alley behind Samoa House in the suburb of Newton, where I come across a large portrait-style mural by Misha Uteev, aka Wert 159, created for the All Fresco festival. Across the road on Pitt Street, next to the Methodist Church is artist Owen Dippy's portrait of a Madonna. Behind the Ironbank building, artist Benjamin Work's distinct red and black Tongan inspired murals stand out on the wall of the Lim Chhour Centre. St Kevin's Arcade is a hub for alternative stores and quirky fashion. The back staircase that leads into Myers Park is splattered with art.

I cut across the sculpture-filled Myers Park—an imported marble statue of Moses from Rome, the Chinese rams from Guanzhou—to end up, eventually, at the Waharoa in Aotea Square. The wood and copper representation of a traditional Maori Gate is the work of Maori sculptor Selwyn Muru. The large arch is studded with symbols of the indigenous people—musical instruments, birds, animals, stars.

The art-filled by-lanes with murals highlighting Maori and Polynesian influences, sculptures and architecture that document the histories of these precincts, all hold keys to the city's diverse heritage. But beyond Ponsonby and K' Road, art need not be so hard to find and decode. The Auckland Art Gallery is a good place to start. One work here in particular holds my interest, the portraits of Maori chieftains with tattoos on their faces that signify aristocratic standing.

Art and architecture in Auckland weave together an intricate tapestry of the city's stories—a fabric where the historical, the ethnically varied, and the cultural facets of its past are brought to life, and preserved in the present. ■

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