

<b>Project</b>	6322 Trafalgar House, Nelson
<b>Discipline</b>	Historic Environment
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### Trafalgar House, Nelson: Façade Statement

This technical note provides a heritage assessment of the suggestion that redevelopment of Trafalgar House could proceed by retaining only its Market Street façade (“facadism”). It sets out why such an approach is not supported from a conservation perspective and would conflict with national policy, accepted heritage practice, and the building’s recognised significance as a non-designated heritage asset.

Façade-only retention would not be an appropriate or well-regarded conservation approach for Trafalgar House. It would result in the near-total loss of the asset’s historic fabric, plan form, internal spatial character, and group value, retaining only a two-dimensional architectural shell. This would amount to significant harm to a non-designated heritage asset and is inconsistent with established principles of good conservation practice. Retention and sensitive/selective demolition or adaptation of the whole building provides a more heritage-led, policy-compliant, and contextually appropriate solution. Retention of a single principal elevation would not meaningfully conserve the building’s significance, nor would it maintain its contribution to the civic character of the town centre.

While the Market Street frontage is the richest and most architecturally elaborate elevation, the building’s value does not lie in this elevation alone<sup>1</sup>. Its significance is also expressed through its surviving internal spatial organisation, including the two original staircases, which are among the best-preserved historic features remaining – see Figure 1. These staircases provide an important sense of the building’s former institutional character and help to articulate its original plan form. Their removal would eliminate one of the last meaningful components of the interior that still reflects the building’s historic function.

The facadism approach would also result in the loss of the Ellen Street elevation, which, although plainer than Market Street, still forms a coherent and well-composed secondary frontage within the civic streetscape. Its survival helps to maintain the building’s massing, depth and three-dimensional architectural presence within the block. Demolishing this secondary elevation, would diminish the

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<sup>1</sup> Burrows, R. (2022) *Assessment of Heritage Impact: Trafalgar House, Nelson*. Lanpro.

building's contribution to the Edwardian civic grouping that defines the centre of Nelson. The unified massing and strong urban form provided by Trafalgar House would be replaced by a hollowed-out shell, eroding the character and integrity of the wider group of public buildings.

More broadly, façade retention is not regarded as good conservation practice because it strips a building of the elements that make it architecturally and historically legible. Trafalgar House retains, despite its condition issues, a recognisable plan form with large open rooms reflective of its former use. The removal of the internal structures entirely would erase evidence of its historic function and sever the relationship between the external architecture and the spaces it was designed to serve. Solely retaining the main façade risks creating a “decorative mask” rather than a coherent building – undermining authenticity and integrity<sup>2</sup>. Conservation and heritage are not just about visual appearance, but about protecting values: historical, cultural, social, material, and communal. Façade retention may preserve the “look” but loses many of the other dimensions of what gives a heritage building its significance<sup>3</sup>. Historic England guidance similarly cautions against facadism, noting that preserving a building's external envelope alone rarely values that give the asset its significance

Moreover, technically, façade retention can be complex, risky, and expensive – requiring temporary structural propping, careful monitoring, and detailed connection between old and new fabric. Mismanagement can lead to loss of original material, structural failure, and a façade that stands as a hollow shell or even becomes structurally compromised<sup>4</sup>. The costs associated with retaining only the façade of Trafalgar House would be substantially higher than those of a conventional re-fit and partial demolition. This approach would not only require complex structural support, careful integration of new and historic fabric, and extensive specialist workmanship, but also carry increased risk of unforeseen complications during construction. Taken together, these factors render façade retention economically and practically unviable, effectively ruling it out as a feasible option for this project.

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<sup>2</sup> Highfield, D. (1991). *The Construction of New Buildings Behind Historic Facades*. CRC Press: London.;  
Kyriazi, E. (2019) 'Facadism, Building Renovation and the Boundaries of Authenticity', *Aesthetic Investigations*.

<sup>3</sup> McClland, A. (2013). *The Destruction of Architectural Heritage: An Explanatory Framework*. AESOP-ASCP Joint Congress Paper.; Bargery, R. (2005). *The Ethics of Facadism: Pragmatism versus Idealism*. The Building Conservation Directory.

<sup>4</sup> Highfield, D. (1991). *The Construction of New Buildings Behind Historic Facades*. CRC Press: London;  
Lazarus, D, Bussel, M and Ross, P. (2003) *Retention of Masonry Facades – Best Practice Guide (C579)*. CIRIA



**Figure 1: Significance Plan**