

Alice Krebs Lodge

The Big Story of a Little Building

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Introduction

A couple of months ago, after yet another enlightening training session, I was talking to Brenda Cheyne, a friend of mine from the Aikido club where we have been training for the last 10 years, about her gardening work. She used to run her own gardening business and lives on a steep section at the top of View Road in Houghton Bay where she still puts her gardening skills to a good use replanting native species. Brenda is 60 years old and a long time resident in Wellington. She has the kind of knowledge about our city that most people don't because she looks at it from a couple of different heights – she is of a rather diminutive stature and lives high up on a steep hill, and a different angle – she lives close to nature embracing it in her daily life through her gardening work, diet and system of beliefs as well as through her new career in hypnotherapy.

Brenda mentioned that she was doing a lot of work around a small lodge build in 1985 which is situated in the bush a short walk up the hill from her house in View Road. At around this time I was on a lookout for an interesting building to write about for this assignment. I asked Brenda to tell me a little more about the lodge. Brenda has been the caretaker for the lodge for well over 10 years and has both great memories and even some written records of its history.

With Brenda's help, I set about gathering more information about the lodge. A site visit followed shortly after. I was taken with the rugged coastal beauty of place and the story behind it. For such a small, reasonably recent and unremarkable in appearance building its story is steeped in emotion, passion and dedication which runs all the way back to the early decades of the 20th century, spans continents and has strong links to the World War II era Nazi Germany (there are always Nazi villains in any good story).

In this essay I would like to present the story of the Alice Krebs Lodge, build through the efforts of the View Road Park Project Society and its fervent founder and champion of all environmental and peaceful causes, Kae Miller.

The Society was established by Kae Miller in 1981 with the aim to found parks and promote conservation and peace. The View Road Park is a peace and conservation park which also encompasses various Maori customs and values. Alice Krebs Lodge, the caretaking lodge at the park, was designed as a whare wananga, a school of sacred learning, a workshop, a retreat for those seeking quiet contemplation and a meeting centre for the Society as well as a "memorial for Departed Spirits" (Miller), commemorating Kae's sister Mary and honouring Alice Krebs who had a substantial influence on Kae's life.

The Site

Alice Krebs lodge is situated on a 1 hectare lot at 113 View Road straddling the ridge between Houghton Bay and Waitaha Cove of Lyall Bay. The land¹ is a part of a 9.3 hectare land parcel (Figure 1) leased to the View Road Park Project Inc. by the Wellington City Council in November 1981. The purpose of the lease was for the Society to create and maintain a public park, beautifying the site as a community service and as a recreation area. The Society also wanted to build a lodge in the park which would serve, among other uses such as a workshop for the practice of cottage-type industry crafts, as a residence for the park's caretaker.



Figure 1: initial area of the land leased to the View Road Park Project marked in red

The terms of the lease were for 10 years, with a renewal option for 10 years, at a peppercorn rental of 10 cents for the first 2 years and thereafter at Council's discretion. Rates were also waived for the first two years (Wellington City Council).

In February 1983 a bush fire burnt 5.4 hectares of scrubland on the site. In response to concern for fire protection the Society prepared a comprehensive proposal for fire protection on the site. The report was presented to the Council in the hope that the Council would assist in the implementation of the proposal,

¹ The land occupies portions of Certificates of Title E3/1157, 505/194, 556/285 and 137/296

as the Society did not have the required resources to carry out the work itself. An agreement was reached between the Society and the Department of Parks and Recreation that the Department would take over the administration of the bulk of the site. At that point the Department took over the management of 8.3 hectares of the park designating the area for recreation and open space purposes. The Council re-leased the remaining 1 hectare back to the Society on the same basic terms and conditions as the original lease. This development freed the Society to concentrate its resources and therefore more rapidly further its aims of conservation, promotion of self-sufficient life style and provision of open space for the enjoyment of all Wellingtonians and their visitors(Director of Parks & Recreation).

At the time when the park was established the site was mostly overgrown by gorse. One of the tenets of the Society is to promote conservation and actively participate in regeneration of lost green spaces. The site is now covered with well re-established native bush and other plants. The trees planted over 20 years ago are quite large and provide a bit of shelter from the weather.

The Building

Alice Krebs Lodge (Figure 2) is a simple, one bedroom, timber frame building located just below the ridge line of the eastern face of the 1 hectare section leased to the View Road Park Project Society by the Wellington City Council.



Figure 2: main entrance to the lodge

The lodge's hilltop position (Figure 3), close to the Arthur's Nose aeronautical ground hazard beacon, affords it an intimate view south-east towards the entrance to Wellington Harbour (Figure 4) and east over Lyall Bay, towards the airport (Figure 5).



Figure 3: aerial location of the lodge



Figure 4: view from outside towards the harbour entrance

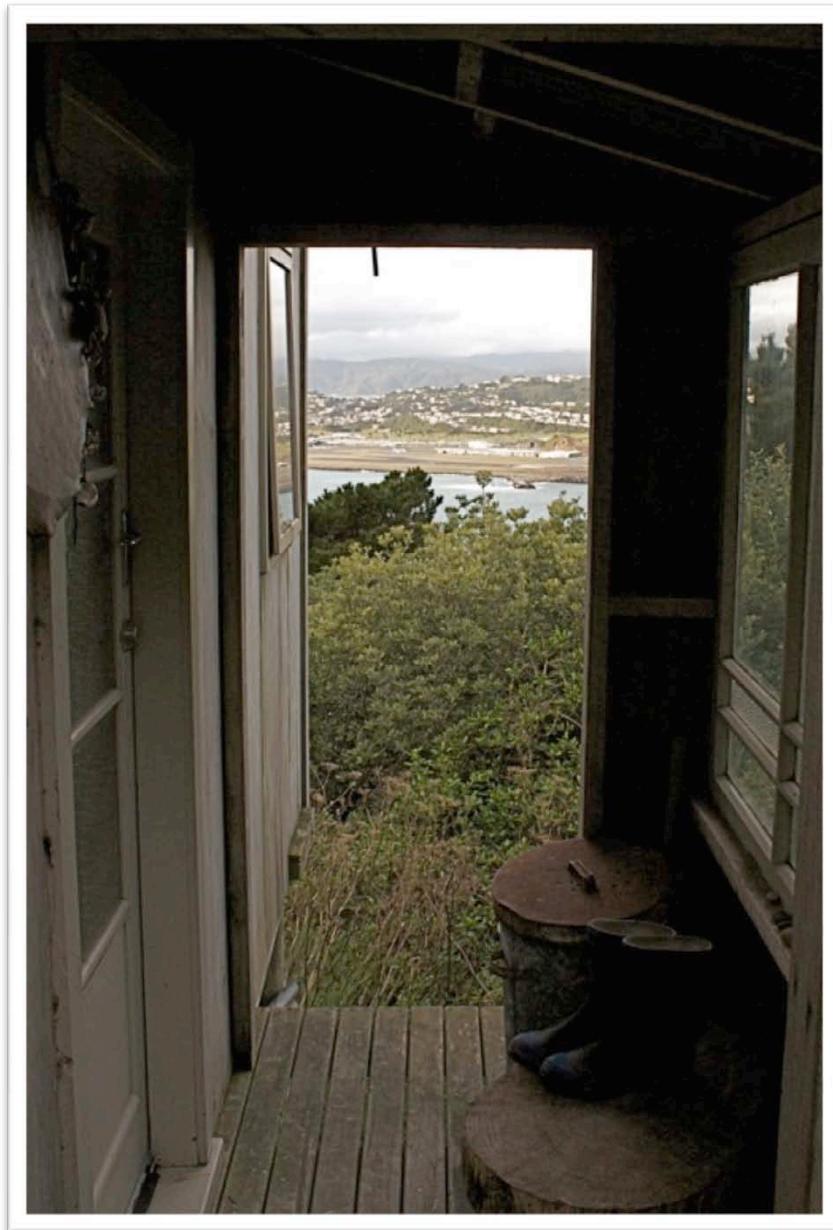


Figure 5: view from the porch towards Lyayll Bay and the airport

The construction of the 30m² lodge was completed in June 1985. It was built in the tradition of the kiwi bach or a DOC mountain hut – its construction and facilities are simple but solid, utilitarian yet comfortable.

Timber is the main structural material used in the construction and fit out of the lodge. Due to the steep nature of the site the building is completely supported by timber piles (Figure 6). The piles, over 2 meters at their highest, lift the building off the ground allowing vegetation to continue thriving; a characteristic important to the conservationist philosophy of the Society.



Figure 6: timber supports for the building structure

Exterior of the lodge is clad in batten joined plywood sheets with a natural finish allowed to weather, making the building blend well into its bushy surroundings (Figure 7).

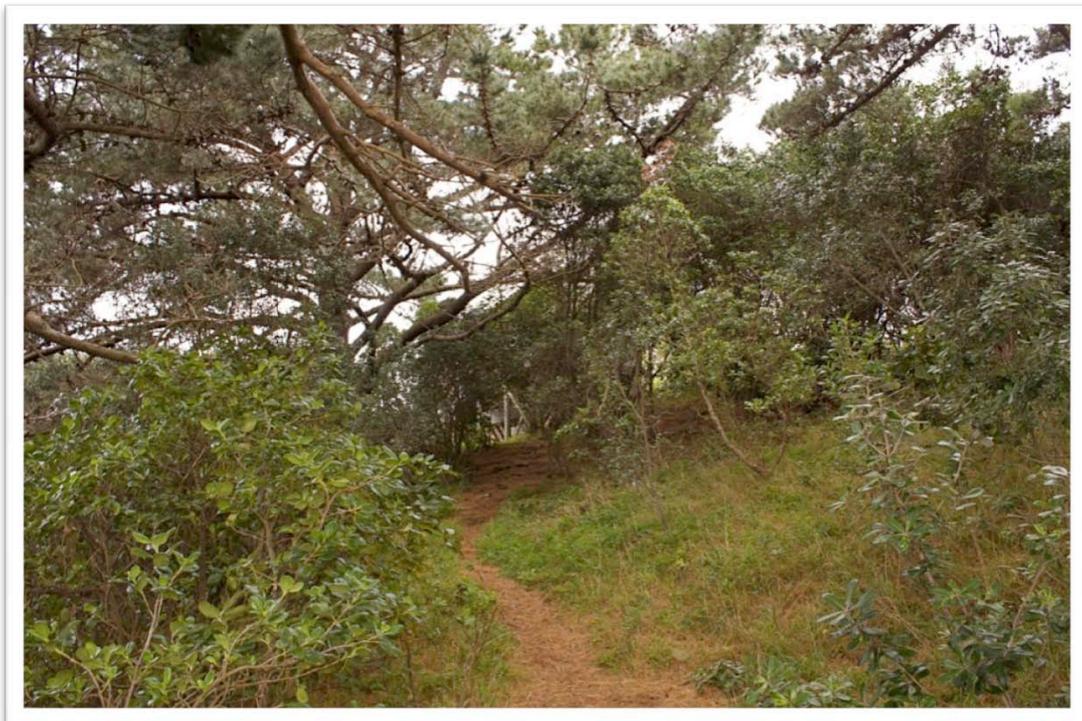


Figure 7: view from the bottom of the path leading from current caretaker's residence at 111 View Road to the lodge - the lodge blends perfectly into its natural surroundings

The roof is covered with galvanised corrugated steel sheets. The lodge has electricity, mains water and its sewage is connected to the main sewage line on View Road (via a sewage pipe on the neighbouring property). Heating is provided through a single wood burner which is more than sufficient for such a small dwelling. The wood burner is equipped with a “wetback” system which helps with water heating.

The interior of the lodge is finished in timber-derived panels covering the gable ceiling and the floor (polyurethane finished chip board) while the walls are covered with standard gypsum boards. In the last year the lodge has been damaged by flooding and its interior is still undergoing repairs and renovation.

Internal space is taken up mostly by two main rooms: a living area (Figure 8) and a bedroom (Figure 9). Other amenities include a simple bathroom with a toilet and simple cooking facilities in an alcove of the main living area.

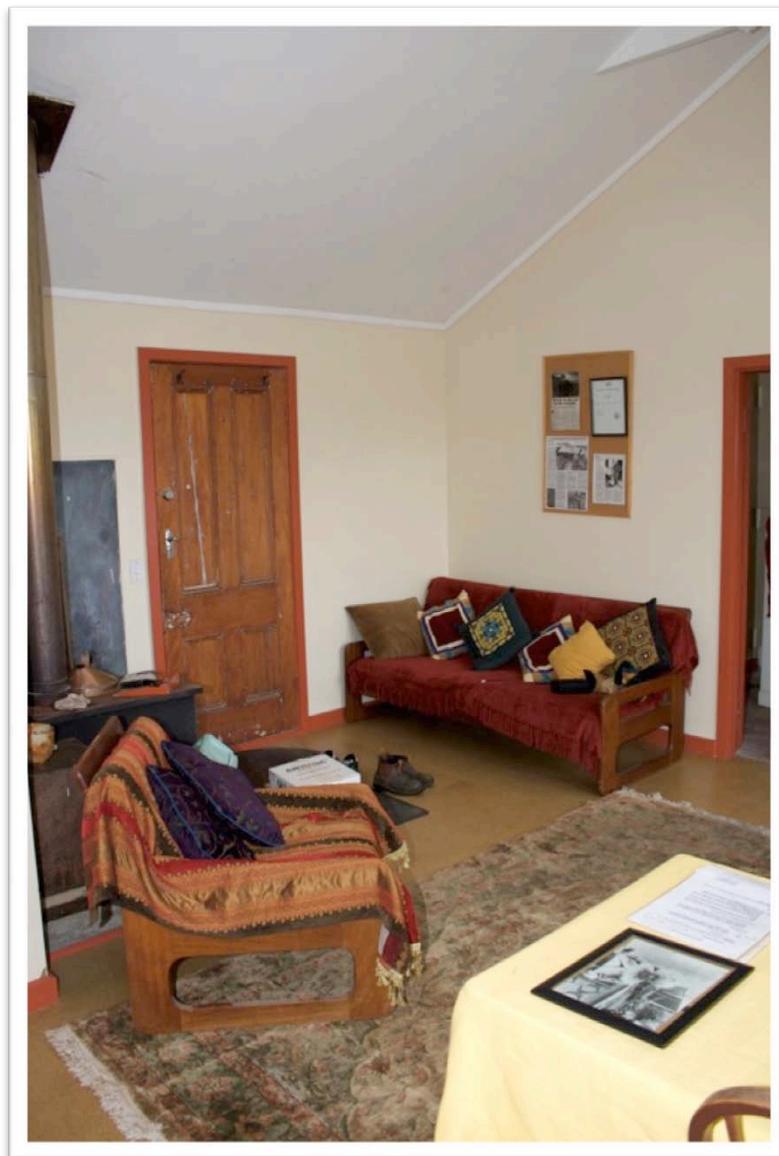


Figure 8: main living area

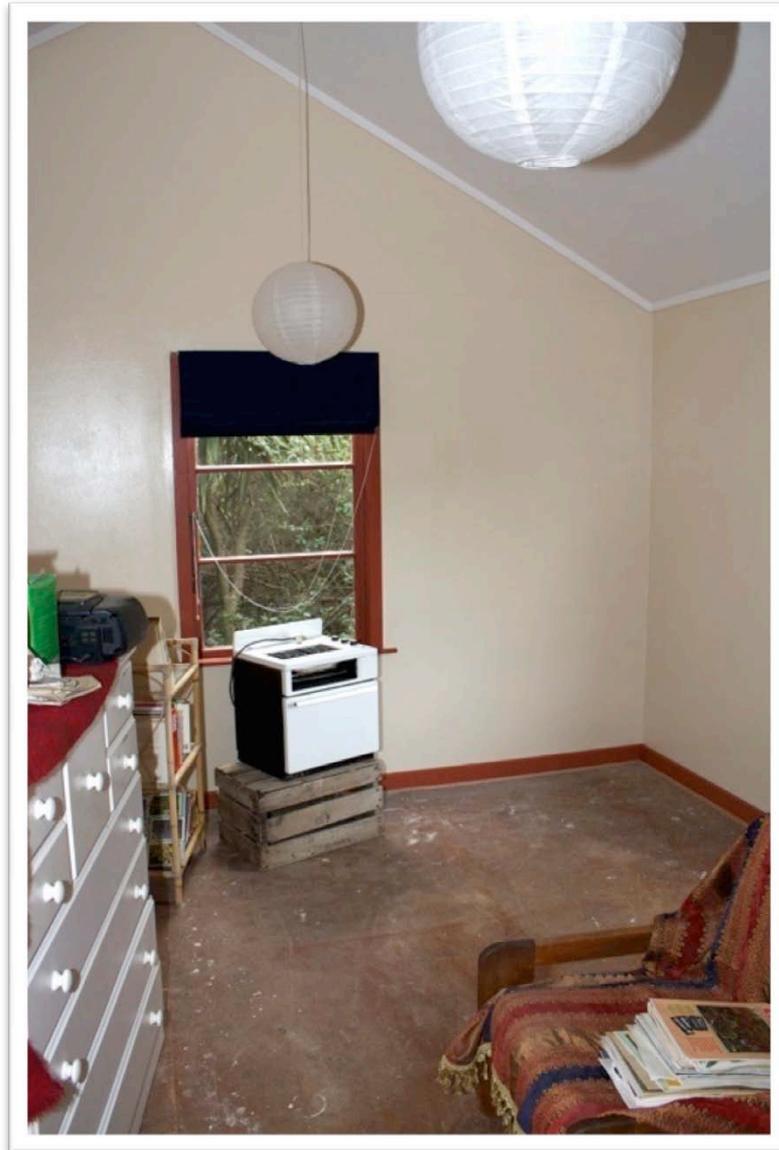


Figure 9: the bedroom shortly after recent renovation

The furnishings are in keeping with the rest of the building and the simplicity of life promoted by the Society. All items are well looked after and give off a welcoming warmth. The walls are decorated with photographs and newspaper clippings documenting the work of Kae Miller and the Society.

During its life time the lodge has been used as a part-time residence for the park's caretakers, a retreat space for quiet contemplation or spiritual practice or a refuge for persons battling with mental health issues. In the words of the founder, "The lodge is a place where we learn to understand, forgive and find forgiveness and share the holy light. It is a habitation and memorial for departed spirits." (Brief History and day to day activities of Alice Krebs lodge and the park)

In keeping with Kae's principles visitors and residents are asked to follow some basic rules while staying at the lodge. No sugar, white flour, meat or bought fish should be consumed on the premises. No tea, coffee, alcohol or other drugs

should be taken at the lodge. Periods of silence should be observed in the morning and again in the evening.

The Story

In my opinion, buildings don't make history, people do. Buildings stand as monuments to or artefacts of human occupation and activity within a given space and time. The Alice Krebs Lodge is but a small building, well hidden in the bush of Wellington's hills, but it is much more than a basic hut. It is a memorial erected by and dedicated to some very special people whose past existence gives meaning to the lodge. The presence of the lodge, in turn encourages new generations to follow the ideas and principles which it embodies.

Kae Miller (Figure 10) was born Katrine Fearnon Hursthouse on the 30th of December 1910 in Wellington. She had a younger sister, Mary, with whom she was very close. Kae attended Marsden School for Girls and then accompanied her mother overseas. She attended boarding school in Hertfordshire, England. She returned to Wellington in the late 1920's and studied botany and zoology at Victoria University. Later she graduated with an MSc from Massey University.



Figure 10: Kae Miller, aged 74, outside the Alice Krebs Lodge shortly after its opening²

² scan of the original photograph taken for the article by Sarah Wilson, "Promise of peace," The Evening Post 9 November 1985.

She was briefly married in her 20s to a Presbyterian minister, Lex Miller. Their marriage did not last long as Kae fought with bouts of depression. One of their last trips together was a journey to California in the late 1930s where Kae met a company of German dissidents who were resisting Hitler's rise to power (Dashfield).

In 1939, Kae, her sister Mary and their cousin Richard while on a trip in Germany met a Jewish German woman who was to have a great influence on Kae's life – Alice Krebs. They stayed with Frau Krebs in Erzgebirge on the Czech frontier while, as Kae put it in her own words, "Hitler and Chamberlain were hobnobbing nearby!" (Miller). Frau Krebs, a vegetarian and an advocate for healthy living and natural foods, took them all on many walks to gather raw food and showed them how to prepare it. In early 1939, only a few months before World War II started, Kae returned to England where she joined an Anglican Quaker mission



Figure 11: Alice Krebs aged 101, 31 December 1978³

that helped Jews leave Germany. Frau Krebs (Figure 11), a true patriot, remained in her beloved Germany throughout the war during which time she spent 2 years in a concentration camp in Theresienstadt. Neither of them ever expected that their paths would cross again, this time in post-war London.

In 1942 Kae returned to New Zealand to appease her mother who was suggesting that she too would like to participate in the war effort and was

³ scan of a photograph currently displayed in the lodge

making ready to travel to England. Kae stayed for 5 years at which time she returned to England where she worked at various children's homes. She made contact with Frau Krebs' nephew and to her total surprise and delight she discovered that Frau Krebs has survived the war and indeed lived in the same street in London.

In the early 1970s, already back in New Zealand for some time, Kae became interested in environmental issues after a friend asked her to join the Action for the Environment group. Kae admits in her interview with Linda Donaldson that she was confused as to what the issue was about. In her mind the environment was to do with botany and ecology and she was not sure why those sciences needed an action group. Within a short time she came to understand a great deal about the environment and the issues connected to conservation and protection and her conclusion was that "it's so essential to look after the environment otherwise we cease to exist as a race" (Donaldson).

While furthering her interests in environmental causes her attention was directed towards the wasteful and inefficient nature of rubbish tips where a lot of items and materials which could be recycled were simply discarded and left to decay. Being a woman of action she decided to start her own recycling park and so the first Alice Krebs Lodge was built at the Porirua tip in 1977. The lodge was constructed mostly from salvaged materials such as wooden car crates. Kae, by this time having made the headlines as the "tip lady", moved into the lodge to work at the recycling park and to protect it from vandals. She stayed there until 1979 when she was driven out by the Porirua City Council.

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s Kae also attempted to build a co-operative housing complex consisting of 5 houses to be put on 5 acres of land which she owned on the slopes of Mt. Kau Kau above Simla Crescent, Khandallah. Her lifelong interests in mental health and first-hand experience with mental illness fuelled, in part, the motivation behind this development. She had suffered from depression herself and confessed that her "father was terribly, appallingly, depressed" (Donaldson) and so one suggested use for the Simla Crescent housing project was as a refuge and a drop-in place for those suffering from mental illness. This was not very well received by the neighbourhood's residents (Khandallah fears mentally ill for Simla Cres).

The Simla Crescent development could have been one of New Zealand's early environmentally friendly, sustainable, eco-housing development but she was not able to obtain the necessary permits. After many attempts and appeals her proposal was finally turned down by the council in 1988 and in the interest of conservation the native bush land was re-zoned as open space preventing any further development.

She also owned a number of other properties around New Zealand: a property in York Bay near Eastbourne inherited from her mother, another in Christchurch and one in North Terrace, Kelburn where she lived with her daughter. The Kelburn property was eventually sold as a housing co-operative and the bulk of the proceeds were used to set up the Box Trust for Mental Health.

In 1980 The Box Trust lent most of the money for the View Road Park Project and the View Road Park Society was incorporated marking the beginning of a new venture for Kae Miller and her like-minded friends. The aim of the Society was to found parks and promote conservation and peace. The establishment of the View Road park and the construction of the lodge are a testament to Kae Miller's perseverance and integrity.

The "tip lady", died aged 83 on the 19th of June 1994. Her funeral was held at St Peter's Church, Willis Street, on June 23rd 1994. Today, the Alice Krebs Lodge stands surrounded by tall native bush and trees, a monument to and an artefact of one passionate human's ceaseless activity through time.

About the Sources

This essay is based on the limited information which I was able to compile from a mixed stack of old newspaper clippings, View Road Park Project newsletters, various letters written by Kae Miller and other documents kindly lent to me by the current caretaker of the lodge, Brenda Cheyne. Many of the newspaper clippings did not have the name of the newspaper or the date of publication.

Kae Miller is survived by her daughter, Felicity. Unfortunately, despite my attempts, I was unable to personally get in touch with her.

The helpful staff at the Wellington City Council and the Wellington City Archives were unable to locate any information relevant to the lodge.

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