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Community embrace

While the school at which fallen soldiers once studied as children has gone, a memorial to their sacrifices lives on

On the corner of Dunedin’s High and Alva Streets, old meets new in a striking way: the city’s High Street School War Memorial and Gates, an important symbol of New Zealand’s history, stands proudly in front of the Toiora High Street Cohousing Project – Dunedin’s first cohousing scheme and an innovative style

of modern living that is likely to become more common in the decades to come.

The memorial, a Category 2 historic place, was built in 1926 to honour the primary school’s former pupils and teachers who had died in World War I. The arch was constructed by monumental mason HS Bingham & Co, while the wrought-iron gates and the fence that surrounded the school site were built by notable ironfounder J & W Faulkner & Sons.

The arch uprights feature two leaded marble tablets inscribed with 56 names (Otago and Southland lost many young men involved in front-line fighting at Gallipoli, Messines and Passchendaele). An inscription on the arch itself reads ‘The Empire’s Call 1914-1918’.

According to Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga’s listing information, the memorial was erected as an emblem of loss, sacrifice and nationhood, and its historical significance lies in it being “both uniquely local and an intrinsic part of a national story”.



It is unique in its use of Oamaru stone thought to have been salvaged from deconstructed New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition buildings, local because it was commissioned by local individuals and specifically honours those connected to High Street School, and part of a national collective of more than 500 public memorials to soldiers of the Great War.

The location of the memorial is also significant: it replaced the school's main gates, making it accessible to grieving relatives and the public and also providing a daily reminder to pupils of the sacrifices of former students. Many of the children who passed under the memorial arch would later lose their lives in World War II; in 1950 a third marble tablet was added to honour them.

High Street School closed in 2011, but in 2013 a heritage covenant was placed on the war memorial, as well as the school's gates and parts of its fence, to ensure their preservation. When the site was chosen as the location for Toiora, Tim Ross, Director

of architectural practice Archtype, was aware of its significance to the community.

"We saw the memorial arch, gates and fence as immensely important and something that provided a sense of heritage and history to the site," he says.

The Toiora project, which officially opened in 2021, consists of 21 energy-efficient passive townhouses (the first in New Zealand), along with a range of shared facilities – some of which are housed in a converted High Street School building – including living and dining spaces, guest rooms, meeting rooms, workshops, a laundry, a sauna and green spaces.

Tim, who co-founded the project and lives in one of the townhouses he designed, says the cohousing community put a huge amount of work into restoring the memorial, while also carefully modifying the fence and adding new gates to allow people to access their homes.

"I worked closely with local metalworker Frank Scurr, who had extensive knowledge of the different types of steel and cast-iron and how to work with them. Through him, I got an excellent idea of the history of the fence and how it was made."

The school gates and fence panels were sent offsite to be sandblasted (to remove the peeling lead paint) and repainted with epoxy enamel before being reinstated by the cohousing group.

"The residents at Toiora worked very hard to get the fence finished."

Toiora also engaged Dunedin stonemason Marcus Wainwright to clean the arch and treat it for mould, and replace some of the lead lettering that had been damaged or lost over time.

Sarah Gallagher, Acting Area Manager Otago Southland for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, says that despite the loss of the primary school, the new cohousing development is a welcome addition to the neighbourhood.

"We have retained an important record of the school site through restoring the decorative fencing and war memorial, which are very significant to the wider community. At the same time, this new community is growing up within that space and providing a multi-generational facility. People had to buy in to the cohousing concept, so they invested in developing and being part of this new way of living, while being reminded of the school's ties to the past."

Due to the design of the project, the memorial gates no longer serve as the main entrance to the site, but the cohousing group came together to ensure they were repurposed in a meaningful way.

"We've created a peace garden directly behind the war memorial and adjacent fence, and once it has grown it will frame the structure beautifully," says Tim.

"It's a common space that everyone in the Toiora community can enjoy, and it also gives the gates and memorial arch a continued sense of purpose." ^H

[heritage.org.nz/list-details/9645/High%20Street%20School%20\(Former\)%20War%20Memorial%20and%20Gates#details](https://heritage.org.nz/list-details/9645/High%20Street%20School%20(Former)%20War%20Memorial%20and%20Gates#details)