

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Shutterstock/Emagnetic

Moving towns: 4 stories of communities facing relocation show the complex realities of managed retreat

Published: May 7, 2025 6.35am NZST

Stacy Vallis

Lecturer in Architecture and Emerging Technologies, Auckland University of Technology

Andrew Burgess

Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Auckland University of Technology

Ann Morrison

Associate Professor in Interactive Design, Auckland University of Technology

Imelda Piri

Lecturer in Built Environments Engineering, Auckland University of Technology

Priscila Besen

Lecturer in Sustainable Architecture, Auckland University of Technology

With large parts of New Zealand having recently been pummelled by ex-tropical Cyclone Tam and ongoing bouts of heavy rain, it is important to remember that natural hazards have long shaped our cities.

Two townships in particular – Westport and Kumeū – have featured in national stories about floods since the 19th century.

They are now among a growing number of places where flooding infrastructure is losing effectiveness and drastic actions have to be considered, including managed retreat.

This raises understandable concerns about anticipated drops in land value and loss of social connection to a place. But managed or planned retreat is not a new concept nationally or globally. International examples can serve as useful references.

These stories from four communities in three countries show how connection to culture and place can be either challenged or sustained when relocation becomes necessary.

Tallangatta, Australia: six decades later

Back in 1956, the Australian township of Tallangatta in north-eastern Victoria was forced to move eight kilometres west because of the expansion of the Hume Weir.

Originally, “old” Tallangatta was located at the meeting point of the Mitta Mitta River and the Tallangatta Creek. But this was subsumed by a significant water-storage facility, the Hume Dam (Lake Hume).

During periods of low water levels, it is still possible to view the remains of the old town from a lookout.

About a hundred houses and a few shops were relocated, including some Victorian buildings. Residents said there was no cost to the relocation, with relocated houses repainted and given modern plumbing facilities that did not previously exist.

New public and commercial buildings were designed in the modernist architectural style of the era, and in 2016 Tallangatta was acknowledged as a “notable town” by the National Trust of Victoria.

The blend of Victorian and mid-century modernist buildings characterises the new township and represents different eras in its history, including the physical and social upheaval of relocation.

But while it can be possible to physically move timber buildings to a new site, characteristics such as original township layout and social connection to the surrounding landscape can be lost.



Mining for iron ore has led to land subsidence, forcing the relocation of the Swedish town of Kiruna. Imgur, CC BY-SA

Kiruna, Sweden: cultural history, industrial growth

Sweden's northernmost town of Kiruna faces a similar situation due to land subsidence caused by a huge iron ore mine. Its 18,000 inhabitants now have to move about three kilometres east.

The town's rich cultural heritage includes a long Indigenous Sami history and a long period of industrial growth driven by the mine which saw it given national heritage recognition in the 1980s.

The relocation process has not been without its challenges. One big question was how many historic buildings to move to help retain authentic connections to place.

It was proposed that new building design would use the aesthetic qualities of the historic buildings. And there was discussion about either creating an "old town" within the site, or dispersing relocated buildings around the town.

Eventually, local representatives and the mining company (which funded the relocation) decided about 50 of the oldest buildings would be relocated while the remainder would be demolished.

Demolition has now taken place, along with construction of a new town hall to replace its predecessor, a heritage-listed building dating to 1964.

Such decisions call for careful balancing of the impacts on local Indigenous cultural heritage, the economic role the mine has played in the town's expansion, and its contribution to iron production in Europe in general.

 Westport's clock tower and council chambers

Westport council chambers: floods in July 2021 damaged more than 500 houses. Shutterstock/Lakeview Images

Parallel narratives: Westport and Kumeū

Climate change is making floods more intense and frequent. New Zealand's South Island town of Westport is a 19th-century coal mining and trading settlement that experienced severe flooding in July 2021 and again in February 2022.

Although these floods were no larger than ones recorded in the past, their impact on homes and infrastructure was significantly greater due to Westport's expansion over the years. The July 2021 flood damaged more than 500 houses, resulting in a NZ\$54 million flood protection plan.

In 2023, the Buller District Council initiated a master plan to guide Westport's future growth and development. It focuses on the controlled expansion of the township to higher ground on government-owned Pāmu farmland one kilometre southwest of Westport.

The council endorsed Westport's master plan in March this year, but some residents are still apprehensive about the changes.

In the North Island, the township of Kumeū is close to Auckland, the country's biggest city, but still reflects its farming history. Following recent floods, as well as several major floods since 1926, Auckland Council and local leaders joined forces to devise a plan to improve the town's resilience.

While the prospect of managed retreat has been raised, proactive river maintenance seems the preferred option, including regular debris clearance by local contractors to optimise storm water drainage.

Managed retreat presents opportunities for improvement to Kumeū's infrastructure. But the long-established cultural relationships between people and landscapes in Aotearoa New Zealand also need to inform inclusive decisions about major relocations.

Connection to heritage rests on relationships with place and setting. These can include buildings, landscapes and views, as well as the historical and cultural values associated with a given site.