Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects

Submission

5th February 2026
New Zealand Foreign Affairs & Trade Manatū Aorere

Green Economic Partnership Agreement (GEPA)

Submitter: Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA)

Introduction
This submission is made on behalf of Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA), the professional body representing more than 4,000 architects, graduates, students, and affiliated professionals across Aotearoa.

The NZIA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Green Economic Partnership Agreement (GEPA). The built environment contributes to 39% of global emissions and 20% of New Zealand's national emissions when operational and embodied carbon are combined, making decarbonisation of building design, materials, and processes essential to achieving our net-zero commitments under the Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Act 2019.

GEPA's framework for trade in environmental goods and services, construction technologies and building materials directly intersects with our sector's capacity to deliver a low-carbon built environment. The architectural profession provides design leadership in most large-scale, above-ground construction projects by generating the form, structure, and fabric along with the specification of materials of our built environment. Design decisions are at the heart of achieving low -carbon and low impact environmental outcomes.

This submission focuses on collaboration, shared learning, professional exchange, and locally grown and produced low-carbon building products. GEPA is a platform to grow high-value services and verified low carbon products over time. Whilst New Zealand currently trades minimally with the two proposed GEPA partners - Chile and Singapore - in building products, there is strong interest in positioning our architectural skills, knowledge, innovation, and values for greater international engagement.

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Executive Summary

Architecture is a high-value professional service export. GEPA can help unlock that export potential by reducing friction for cross-border practice and recognising trusted standards that allow low-carbon design, specification, and delivery to translate across markets.

GEPA presents significant economic opportunities through:

- Export of New Zealand's specialised expertise in mass timber, seismic design, energy efficient design, prefabricated building solutions, Indigenous design practices, and specialist Living Building Challenge and Green Star buildings.
- Reduced trade barriers for sustainable materials including locally grown cross-laminated timber, bio-based materials (wool, hemp), and low-carbon concrete, steel and aluminium alternatives.
- Access to international green finance mechanisms for decarbonised construction projects.

Current barriers:

- Lack of international recognition for New Zealand's green building certifications and innovative products creates re-certification requirements.
- Regulatory fragmentation complicates cross-border architectural practice and limits market access.
- Limited awareness internationally of New Zealand's leadership capabilities in sustainable construction.

Complementing Existing Frameworks:

- Operationalise commitments under Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity, CPTPP, and ACCTS through practical trade mechanisms.
- Position GEPA as responsive framework that keeps pace with sector innovation.

Māori Interests and Perspectives:

- Recognise mātauranga Māori principles as delivering environmental performance alongside cultural and social outcomes. Dedicated consultation with Māori design practitioners, iwi authorities, and cultural experts to ensure reflection of indigenous interests.
- Support Indigenous design knowledge exchange between the three countries.

Recommended GEPA Mechanisms:

- Establish mutual recognition agreements for building and product certifications (EPDs, ecolabels, timber chain-of-custody, key building rating tools).
- A professional mobility pathway: recognition of architectural qualifications and competencies, especially with Chile.
- Harmonise measurement methodologies for embodied carbon and whole-of-life performance.
- Create digital verification systems reducing compliance costs and enabling credibility across borders.

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- Support knowledge exchange platforms showcasing New Zealand's architectural innovation, including consideration of a GEPA-supported demonstration / pilot programme (joint projects, research partnerships, procurement pilots).

1. Key Economic Opportunities, Challenges, and Guiding Principles

New Zealand's architectural and construction sectors present significant economic opportunities under GEPA, particularly through exporting specialised services in mass timber design, Living Building Challenge and Green Star certifications, indigenous design, seismic design, and energy efficiency practices. GEPA can reduce trade barriers for sustainable materials including locally grown mass timber, bio-based products such as insulation made from hemp and wool, wool derivatives, low-carbon concrete, lower carbon aluminium, and soon, lower carbon steel for cladding and prefabricated construction, whilst facilitating access to green finance mechanisms such as green bonds and public-private partnerships.

This positions New Zealand firms competitively as global markets increasingly demand verified environmental performance. However, substantial barriers exist: New Zealand's green building certifications and innovative products lack international recognition limiting market access. Limited domestic manufacturing capacity for certain low-carbon materials increases import dependence, whilst insufficient international recognition constrains export potential for locally manufactured sustainable products. Regulatory fragmentation across markets further complicates compliance for internationally operating architects.

2. Barriers to Accessing International Markets

New Zealand's architecture and construction sectors face barriers under existing trade frameworks. Green building certifications and ecolabels developed domestically lack automatic recognition in partner markets, necessitating re-certification and compliance verification processes.

While Singapore and New Zealand have established mutual recognition of architectural qualifications and registration under the APEC Architect framework, there remains opportunity to build upon this existing connection to strengthen professional mobility and collaborative practice. Chile currently lacks such a pathway, and along with other international markets, may remain insufficiently aware of New Zealand's leadership in mass timber construction, seismic design, Living Building Challenge and Green Star Buildings, and indigenous design frameworks. Establishing recognition agreements and raising awareness of New Zealand's expertise would facilitate both market access and knowledge exchange.

Innovative bio-based materials may encounter complicated approval processes in foreign markets due to unfamiliar standards and testing regimes. Future barriers compound these challenges: as

environmental standards and demands increase globally, fragmented approaches risk creating new technical barriers to trade, and without internationally recognised frameworks, New Zealand projects may struggle to access offshore green finance despite strong sustainability credentials.

GEPA can address these barriers through targeted solutions: establishing mutual recognition agreements for green building certifications to reduce duplication and administrative burden; creating pathways for professional mobility and service delivery across partner countries; supporting knowledge exchange platforms that showcase New Zealand's architectural innovation and best practices; and developing streamlined approval processes for low-carbon building materials, thereby enabling New Zealand's sustainable design and construction expertise to achieve its full export potential.

3. Environmental and Climate Standards and Certifications

GEPA should prioritise mutual recognition of New Zealand's key certifications to enable seamless market access across partner countries. Building certifications include Homestar, Passivhaus, Green Star Buildings, Living Building Challenge, and NABERSNZ. Material certifications requiring recognition include Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) for embodied carbon disclosure, Eco Choice Aotearoa ecolabel, FSC and PEFC for timber products, and Cradle to Cradle Certified for circular materials. Professional standards encompass New Zealand Registered Architects Board (NZRAB) qualifications and climate-responsive design practice standards.

To promote alignment and coherence, GEPA should:

- Establish equivalency frameworks enabling automatic recognition across partner countries, eliminating multiple assessments;
- Harmonise measurement methodologies for embodied carbon, operational energy, and whole-of-life environmental performance ensuring comparable claims;
- Support capacity building so certification bodies in partner countries can understand and assess New Zealand standards;
- Create digital verification systems providing cross-border credibility, reducing compliance costs and time; and
- Align with international frameworks such as GlobalABC and World Green Building Council standards whilst respecting local context.

This approach would differentiate independently verified New Zealand products and services from competitors that rely on self-declared environmental claims, establishing them as preferred choices in international markets.

4. Cross-Border Collaboration on Research, Education, and Innovation Opportunities

New Zealand has demonstrated world leadership in low-carbon, culturally sensitive design through three fully certified Living Building Challenge buildings - Ngā Mokopuna[1], Te Kura Whare[2], and Pā Reo[3] - generating strong international interest in regenerative and mātauranga Māori indigenous design approaches. In addition, the recently completed Air New Zealand Hangar 4[4] at Auckland Airport has the largest single-span timber arch in the Southern Hemisphere, demonstrating leadership in the architectural sector.

In addition, New Zealand's seismic expertise positions our architects and engineers as ideal partners for Chile. Both nations face significant earthquake risk, and New Zealand has developed innovative solutions integrating seismic resilience with low-carbon materials, particularly engineered timber structures. Our universities conduct internationally influential seismic research, while architects deliver buildings that perform under extreme conditions minimising use of high-embodied carbon materials like concrete and steel. This combination of seismic knowledge and sustainable innovation directly addresses Chile's dual need for earthquake-resilient and climate-responsive construction.

GEPA can position New Zealand architects as contributors to global innovation by supporting joint research programmes across partner countries focused on low-carbon material innovation, whole-of-life carbon assessment methodologies, and digital tools for embodied carbon quantification, whilst facilitating exchanges of students, researchers, and practitioners to accelerate knowledge transfer.

GEPA should create funding mechanisms for pilot projects showcasing cross-border application of green building technologies, establish innovation hubs connecting architectural firms, material and product manufacturers, and researchers from partner countries, and support commercialisation of New Zealand innovations through trade facilitation and market access.

Skills development priorities include developing recognised sustainable building skills frameworks enabling workforce mobility across GEPA countries, supporting professional development

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[1] Ngā Mokopuna at Victoria University of Wellington is a three-storey, mass timber, marae-based “living building” that serves as the teaching hub for Te Herenga Waka, combining mātauranga Māori with sustainable design for future generations.

[2] Te Kura Whare by Jasmax is a Living Building-certified headquarters and meeting place for Ngāi Tūhoe that combines sustainable design with cultural identity and connection to the land.

[3] Pā Reo at Te Wānanga o Raukawa in Ōtaki is a cluster of timber academic buildings set within restored dunes and wetlands, designed under the Living Building Challenge to embody kaitiakitanga, mātauranga Māori and low-carbon campus living.

[4] Hangar 4 for Air New Zealand is the Southern Hemisphere's largest single-span timber arch aircraft hangar, a 15,000m² sustainable maintenance facility at Auckland Airport to service widebody and narrowbody jets simultaneously while targeting a 6 Green Star rating.

programmes in low-carbon design and circular economy principles, and creating mentorship networks between established and emerging professionals across borders.

GEPA's mandate for cross-border collaboration provides a unique platform for New Zealand's architectural sector to both contribute to and learn from international best practice, translating demonstrated leadership into economic opportunity.

5. Complementing Existing Environmental Treaties and Trade Agreements

GEPA can operationalise commitments under existing frameworks through specific trade provisions for sustainable construction. Under the Paris Agreement, GEPA can translate climate commitments into actionable measures accelerating built environment decarbonisation, support the Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction through facilitated trade in low-carbon materials and products, and services, and enable architectural contributions to Nationally Determined Contributions through export of low carbon and energy efficient design expertise.

GEPA can support the Convention on Biological Diversity by promoting locally grown, rapidly renewable, bio-based building materials (timber, wool, hemp, harekeke etc.), recognising regenerative design approaches, and supporting indigenous knowledge systems and values into building design.

GEPA should build on the CPTPP[5] environmental chapter with sector-specific provisions for sustainable construction, extend professional services commitments to include green building expertise and certification, and harmonise technical standards for environmental goods to reduce trade barriers.

GEPA could complement ACCTS[6] commitments between NZ, Iceland, Switzerland, and Costa Rica by expanding commitments to Singapore and Chile, promoting low-carbon construction alternatives, expanding collaboration to include building materials and products, and strengthening eco-labelling provisions to encompass building products and architectural services.

This approach ensures GEPA operationalises existing climate and environmental commitments through practical trade mechanisms directly benefiting New Zealand's architecture and construction.

[5] *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership*
[6] *Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability*

6. Reflecting Māori Interests and Perspectives in Sustainable Architecture

Māori perspectives on sustainability extend beyond carbon accounting to encompass holistic relationships with the natural environment, intergenerational responsibility, and place-based design responses, offering internationally relevant climate solutions.

GEPA can recognise core cultural design principles including kaitiakitanga (guardianship and stewardship), whakapapa (architecture responding to context and cultural narratives), manaakitanga (nurturing wellbeing and community), and taiao (recognising environment as ancestor rather than resource). These principles deliver environmental performance whilst strengthening cultural and social outcomes.

Many New Zealand architectural firms utilise Māori-led design practices: collaborative design processes with mana whenua; long-term value creation focused on intergenerational benefit; and cultural impact assessment frameworks. These approaches align closely with GEPA's sustainability objectives.

Projects such as Ngā Mokopuna at Victoria University of Wellington and the New Zealand Archives[7] demonstrate how mātauranga Māori and world-leading mass timber design integrate into contemporary architecture whilst delivering exceptional environmental performance. These exemplify internationally relevant climate solutions combined with cultural significance. GEPA can support international understanding through certification recognising Māori sustainability practices; inclusion of mātauranga Māori principles in green building standard frameworks; and indigenous design knowledge exchange between New Zealand, Chile, and Singapore.

GEPA negotiations should include dedicated consultation with Māori design practitioners, iwi authorities, and cultural sustainability experts to ensure genuine reflection of Māori interests and support the further development of the economy. This could include the development of an indigenous design knowledge exchange stream.

Conclusion

The New Zealand Institute of Architects supports GEPA as a framework to position our architectural sector as international leaders in low-carbon, seismic and indigenous design, facilitate access to low-carbon materials and products whilst creating export opportunities for our expertise, reduce

[7] Te Rua Archives New Zealand building in Wellington features an innovative mass timber structural system, and purpose-built climate-controlled facilities designed to preserve the nation's documentary heritage.

administrative barriers through mutual recognition of certifications and professional standards, and elevate mātauranga Māori as internationally recognised solutions.

GEPA's value extends beyond product trade to encompass knowledge exchange and professional collaboration. As a living agreement, GEPA can incorporate emerging practices (mass timber construction, embodied carbon accounting, circular design principles, and biodiversity) as they mature, positioning itself as the operational framework that turns high-level environmental commitments into practical market access.

The NZIA welcomes ongoing engagement and can provide further detailed input on specific technical provisions as negotiations progress.