New Zealand
Architecture Awards
2026

Guidance — Kaitiakitanga, Protection of Papatūānuku & Ecological Systems

Overview

This document provides guidance on how to frame written responses to sustainability-related questions in the 2026 New Zealand Architecture Awards. It is not a how-to document; instead, the intent is to provide context behind these questions in order to allow entrants to craft strong responses.

Questions in this section seek to understand positive contributions to living systems: considering the historical ecologies of a landscape, restorative biodiversity, connections with wider ecological networks, and overall sensitivity to their context.

Questions are framed to identify projects that demonstrate leadership in protecting and enhancing Papatūānuku and consider ecological responses from site planning and material choices to long-term landscape and water strategies. Kaitiakitanga calls on architects to recognise that the built environment is inseparable from ecological systems.

As pressure to intensify housing and infrastructure continues to grow, Aotearoa New Zealand faces unprecedented biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and increasing stress on freshwater resources. These challenges demand a fundamental shift in how architecture responds to land, water, and living systems. Ecological threats are not isolated from the building industry and its cumulative effects.

Aotearoa has one of the highest proportions of threatened species globally, with habitat destruction and pollution continuing to drive significant declines in indigenous flora and fauna. Building developments have contributed to these impacts, frequently overturning complex ecologies through land clearance, soil disturbance, altered hydrology, and fragmentation of ecological networks.

Sustainable development should aim to improve biodiversity compared to its state before development. This includes restoring biodiversity, strengthening green infrastructure, protecting and reconnecting habitats, and enabling landscapes to function as living systems that support both people and nature.

Below are principles, design tools, site management strategies and reuse strategies that you may wish to consider in your responses to demonstrate how sustainability aspects have been considered in your project.

Key Design Principles

The key design principles aim to reduce development on environmentally sensitive sites, make the best use of previously inhabited sites, protect existing wildlife, and make it ecologically richer.

- Leave a site in better ‘regenerative’ ecological condition than before development.
- Prioritise Building Site re-use and use of Brownfield sites.
- Carry out sustainable remediation of site pollution.
- Retain existing natural features.
- Incorporate green and/or blue infrastructure (green roofs, vertical greening, pocket parks, green corridors).
- Create habitats that enhance biodiversity, providing habitats for local wildlife.
- Create ‘Māhanga Kai’ rich landscapes, including food and natural resources.
- Zero local pollution from the development.

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Design Tools

Ecological Surveys

Projects should respond to site ecologies, protect existing natural assets, and offset unavoidable impacts through biodiversity enhancement, biophilic design, indigenous planting, habitat creation, and long-term stewardship beyond project completion.

a. Consultation with a local ecologist early in the design process.
b. Conducting historical analysis of a site's bio-history and engaging with indigenous knowledge.
c. Learning relative proximity and **connection to significant landscape entities such as rivers**

Habitats

Architects can reduce impacts by minimising footprints, using low-carbon materials, retaining topsoil, enhancing habitats, applying water-sensitive and light-sensitive design, and preventing pollution.

a. Thinking beyond 50 years, understanding complex ecosystems develop over time.
b. Diverse planting supporting a range of native species lifecycles.
c. Connecting/creating **green wildlife corridors**
d. Responsible material choices which are safe for native fauna

Site management

Effective water management supports resilience, biodiversity, and Kaitiakitanga. Architects should treat water as a taonga by minimising potable water use, applying water-sensitive design techniques, enabling reuse, and reducing stormwater runoff to protect ecosystems.

a. Enhancing permeable, absorbent surfaces and how **we can make our cities more resilient to climate change by making them more absorbent**.
b. Calculating and creating hydrological neutral sites.
c. Retaining (not detaining) water on site through the following water saving and reuse strategies:
    - Water efficient/Low-flow fixtures
    - Rainwater harvesting
    - Greywater systems
    - Blackwater systems
    - Closed-loop systems
    - Nature-based solutions treating stormwater on-site.
d. **Reducing the impact of urban heat islands**
e. Reducing sediment and pollutants runoff.
f. Where relevant, establishing/protecting stream riparian zones.

Learn more on **How to design alongside water in a changing climate**.

Reuse strategies

Architects can significantly reduce impacts on the environment by reusing existing building fabric and structures. Adaptive reuse may include the reuse of materials, facilities, and infrastructure, the retention of existing trees, and reducing the extent of soil excavation. These approaches limit disruption to ecologies within the site and those that resources are drawn from, while also retaining the cultural and environmental value embedded in place.