

# Developing an urban design action plan for Auckland Council

Urban Design Forum

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# Introduction

The need to significantly improve the quality of the greater Auckland urban environment is uncontested. The challenge is putting in place the actions needed to deliver on the promise.

The introduction of the Auckland Council provides the opportunity to build on current initiatives to develop more sustainable , better quality urban environments and to enhance and extend these actions across the whole region.

Auckland Council will have to become a signatory to the New Zealand Urban Design Protocol. This will require that an urban design action plan be prepared. This action plan provides a means by which a step change in urban outcomes can be advanced.

Members of the Urban Design Forum (Auckland branch) met in May 2010 to discuss possible urban design actions. This is a summary of the discussion, with the intention that the proposals set out be further developed and discussed with the incoming council.

# Context

The required action plan will be developed at a time when the main strategic level plans and policies (spatial plan, unitary district plan, local area plans) are being formulated. These plans will provide the long term strategy to lift urban performance.

These plans are likely to take 3 to 5 years to become operational. A much greater level of urban design input will be needed for them, and also for the formulation and assessment of developments.

These plans and strategies will have to be based on an overarching vision for the whole Auckland region. They will have to promote urban quality in a consistent way, that integrates transport, land use planning, infrastructure, built form and open space design, heritage and landscape/ecology

Improving urban quality in peripheral areas will require a focus on both shaping the inputs into urban change decisions (resource price signals that better reflect consequences), as well as managing the outputs (subdivision and development proposals).

# Context

A major strategic issue for the Council will be the implementation of these new plans. There will need to be processes and capability to deliver on quality urban environments across all geographic areas and all development scales.

An important task for the Urban Design Action Plan will therefore be to build the capacity needed to implement more sophisticated plans and policies. This capacity building needs to be done during the preparation phase of the new plans so that the tools and skills are in place to implement them.

During this time it is also likely that the city will experience a development upswing (after the recent recession). The outcomes of this development phase will have an important bearing on whether the community feel that the new council is a positive move. This development will proceed under current plans and policies. Making the most of this development will be critical.

# Action Plan

Important actions (from both a short term and long term perspective ) should cover:

- High-level endorsement of urban design
- Adding value in resource consent preparation and assessment processes
- Strengthening urban design in decision making processes
- Extending major project reviews
- Continually learning - monitoring / review of outcomes.

# Political leadership

Councils have made most progress on urban design when they have had strong leadership on the need for better design (for example Auckland City's Mayoral Taskforce on Urban Design; Waitakere City's Eco-city agenda, Hamilton's City Focus strategy).

The Urban Design Protocol requires that an urban design champion be appointed. A politician (or politicians) must be in this role to ensure profile and accountability, but council officers can also be appointed to bring a different perspective to the role.

Developing and promoting urban design needs to be a core function of a council committee.

# Political leadership

There is a risk of the spatial plan being cast in the role of a universal solution to all of Auckland's issues, and in the process becoming a wordy policy document that has as little impact as many such well-meaning efforts in the past.

While the spatial plan will need to respond to the evolving economic strategy, social strategy, and many others, it should focus on the “spatial.” It should for the first time give us a three-dimensional physical picture of what an Auckland of two million people might look like – its centres, suburbs, urban edges, open spaces and transport networks.

Political leadership will need to be supported by appropriate leadership from urban environment professionals. Forums need to be established to help create the opportunity for this leadership to emerge.

# Resource consent processing and assessment

Efficiencies will be sought through the one council structure, in terms of reduced costs, timelines and less form filling. At the same time, expectations of improved standards of urban design will have to be mediated by the current planning frameworks in place.

Experience indicates that good development control outcomes require:

- Early discussion and engagement between council and developers and their consultants
- Co-ordination of the many inputs required (land use, transport, infrastructure)
- Skilled staff having the capability to undertake the integrated trade-offs required to make a development “work”.

# Resource consent processing and assessment

Impediments to this are:

- Cost recovery model for staff time. This reduces the incentive for development proponents to seek early input and for staff to engage in a dialogue-based process
- Time-based monitoring of processes, not outcome-based.
- Resource-by-resource assessment of applications, particularly across the main divisions of the council (land use, environmental, transport, infrastructure)
- Loss of skilled staff through the change process and a feeling of reduced relevance / importance.

Potential opportunities of a larger organisation are:

- In-house expertise, training, support
- Improved career structure
- Larger funding base

# Resource consent processing and assessment

Actions needed to address these impediments are:

- A funding model that recognizes that development control cannot be a 100% cost-recovery model.
- Processes that emphasis early, integrated engagement
- New monitoring tools that emphasise effectiveness of development control processes as being based on outcomes, not time
- A significant capacity building exercise for development control staff so that they have the ability to successfully engage in design-based, negotiation-led, discretionary consent processes
- Decision making delegations that create an incentive to promote good outcomes

# Urban Design Panel

To support improved and more sophisticated development assessment processes, there is a need to improve decision-making processes, both statutory and non-statutory.

A city-wide urban design panel is to be constituted, with appropriate terms of reference to review major development proposals. The question is the scope of this Panel and its resourcing. This Panel should assume the responsibilities of the range of general and specific Panels that are beginning to emerge.

The public good role of this Panel should be appropriately resourced, ensuring that the Panel has the membership and time needed to engage in significant project review processes.

# Urban Design Panel

Experience to date with the Auckland and Manukau Review Panels suggest that the Panel may need to operate in two different ways, depending upon the geographic location of development.

In areas outside the urban centres, lifting standards of urban design will be a major task, and there is need to establish a base line of quality design. In the interim the Panel should remain a non-statutory body tasked with improving standards. Its focus should be on raising the game in suburban / edge areas, with processes that emphasise early engagement and advice.

# Urban Design Panel

In the CBD, the focus of the Panel needs to shift to a more formal decision-making body, reflecting the longevity of the Panel in this area and the need to better integrate its work with the associated resource consent process, which is increasingly more design-focused. CBD development is generally of a size and complexity that demands considerable urban design input. In this context the Panel's role is now more about review and assessment, rather than critique and advice. This will require co-ordination with the formal RMA Hearing process to avoid overlaps and double ups.

With regard to RMA processes, Independent Commissioners should be used for most major resource consents. A pool of Commissioners with urban design expertise should be established and appointed to Hearing Panels as required. This will require some co-ordination with the Urban Design Panel process to avoid conflicts of Interest, while recognising the limited pool of appropriately qualified professionals. In the CBD, the Urban Design Panel could be constituted as a Hearing Panel for specific applications.

# Major Project Reviews

The new Council will engage in significant urban projects, in terms of transport, infrastructure, open spaces and community facilities.

In-house design review processes need to be brought together and strengthened. A particular challenge will be how to undertake integrated review of projects driven by the large CCOs.

The Urban Design Panel should be used to vet major projects, and for council proposed projects, the Panel should have the ability to “send a scheme back to the drawing board” if need be. Ideally a similar process would be agreed with major projects advanced by other public agencies (such as NZTA, Corrections, Housing NZ, Ministry of Education).

# Monitoring and review

A rigorous monitoring and review process needs to be developed to track beneficial and negative changes to the urban environment, helping to identify the consequences of council decisions and to adjust and improve policy and processes.

A monitoring system equivalent to that which applies to our transport system needs to be applied to the built environment. Just as traffic, passenger transport use and road crashes are regularly monitored across the city, so too must be key indicators of the health of the urban environment, such as pedestrian activity, street-edge conditions and the like, to a similar level of detail as occurs in the transport sector. This will require appropriate data gathering and GIS systems.