

## Excerpt from Royal Commission Report on Auckland

### Part 3 Vision for Auckland, Pages 192 to 197

#### Urban design and architecture

8.49 Urban design refers to the physical arrangement, appearance, and functioning of towns and cities, in other words, how a place works and how it looks and feels. It is more than just style or taste, streets, footpaths, or buildings, but rather how all these elements work together. Quality urban design creates places that work, and that people use, value, and feel good in. It respects the history and special character of a city, is environmentally sustainable, and is sensitive to the social, recreational, and physical needs of people. It considers matters such as safety, accessibility, quality of life, the protection of heritage, and the environment.

8.50 The New Zealand Institute of Architects Auckland Branch and Urban Issues Group stressed the importance of quality urban design:

If Auckland is to prosper, and become one of the world's most desirable places to live and work, any structure for Auckland's governance must encourage and make possible quality urban design.<sup>32</sup>

8.51 The Commission agrees both with this view and with the criticisms of many submitters as to the poor quality of urban design in Auckland. The Commission has had the opportunity of visiting cities with a high quality of urban design. Of particular note is Vancouver. Many elements of urban design in Brisbane, Melbourne, Seattle, and Toronto are also of high quality. Vancouver has taken a proactive approach to making its city centre more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists. It has identified streets where pedestrians and cyclists will be given priority. It has required developers to provide small parks, seating areas, and water features immediately adjoining footpaths in its downtown area. The steps that Vancouver has taken have contributed to that city having the lowest obesity rates in Canada.<sup>33</sup> The Commission commends this approach to Auckland. Vancouver takes a strong line in relation to the design of new high-rise buildings. It has an Urban Design Committee, which has the power to prevent a development if it is not satisfied with the design. The Commission's understanding is that local authorities in England have a similar power. Many cities, including Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne, have pedestrianised streets in their central city areas restricting private motor vehicles during at least part of the day and in some cases prohibiting vehicular traffic altogether.

8.52 The Commission heard descriptions from overseas experts of Auckland's central business district as "shabby". The Commission has to agree. The quality of the design of many recent buildings in Auckland is poor. With notable exceptions, the streetscape is bland and dingy, and there is a lack of green spaces and seating areas away from pavements and roads. Developments such as the motorway in Grafton Gully have cut off the Domain from the rest of Auckland. The opportunity must be taken when development occurs to address these issues.

8.53 The quality of urban design is one of the features of a city that immediately impacts upon visitors. The city centre often creates the first impression that a visitor has of a city.

Failures in urban design have allowed Auckland's waterfront to be cut off visually from pedestrians. A particularly bad example is the apartments that destroyed a beautiful harbour vista for pedestrians in Princes Street, which is where Auckland's University is situated. Failings in urban design in the past have allowed tall buildings close to the waterfront, thus obstructing views of those built behind them. Planning for the interface between the city centre and the waterfront remains fragmented and incomplete.

8.54 It should be said that past failures of Auckland in this respect are being recognised, and the focus in Auckland is changing. In the past three or four years the Auckland City Council has set up an urban design panel to review building proposals. Auckland City has appointed an urban design champion with an international reputation. Recent work on Queen Street has improved the quality of that street from the point of view of pedestrians. The architects who designed Stages 1–3 of the Queen Street upgrade received a design award for that project and another one for the urban design framework for the Wynyard Quarter. The master plan designs for Monte Cecilia Park and the new Beaumont Quarter have both won design awards. The Viaduct Basin is a successful illustration of the integration of mixed uses with the waterfront.

8.55 The present Auckland City Council is developing two policy documents that will help the city achieve its vision for the city centre as a high-quality urban environment. They are an urban design framework and a public open space plan. The six urban design goals for Auckland City are

- a more distinctive city that reflects its tangata whenua, Māori, Pacific, and multicultural identity, and is visibly recognised as a place of the South Pacific
- a more compact city containing high-quality, compact, walkable, mixed-use environments that help reduce the need to travel long distances for everyday tasks
- a more connected city where people have a choice of transport options that are comfortable, convenient, efficient, and affordable
- a more sustainable city where land use, the natural environment, and the built form lead the way to a more sustainable city
- a more beautiful city where the design of buildings and spaces (including ordinary, everyday spaces) contribute to creating beautiful places “worthy of the truly unique and stunning city that is Auckland”
- a more human city where the built environment is much more respectful of people and how they experience the city – giving people more priority over cars.<sup>34</sup>

8.56 The Commission endorses these goals as both necessary and desirable to ensure that the urban area of Auckland realises its potential.

8.57 The need for good-quality urban design is not confined to the Auckland city centre. It is needed city-wide. Some of the important urban design decisions the region needs to face and that will shape its urban form for the future are:

- development of key city centres and transport corridors
- development around the key public transport nodes
- the future needs for airport and port services and supporting transportation infrastructure
- management of Auckland's coastal edges.

8.58 To this, the Commission would add the important value of connectivity. The Ministry for the Environment has identified good transport connections as a feature of competitive cities. Connectivity is the degree to which networks – streets, railways, walking and cycling routes, services, and infrastructure – interconnect. Good connections encourage access within a region, city, town, or neighbourhood.

8.59 Earlier in this chapter examples have been given of poor urban design in the city centre, but urban design is not confined to that area. Onehunga residents complain that the lack of good-quality urban design has resulted in Onehunga being separated from its waterfront by motorway and bridge construction. There are many new subdivision developments throughout the Auckland region that are characterised by the sameness of the houses and the inadequate provision of community facilities. What this demonstrates is a lack, not only of urban design, but also of master planning. The Commission considers that master planning should be adopted for all significant new residential and public development and redevelopment. A master plan precedes such development and shows street layout and design, built form and uses for all land areas, heritage zones, public space designs, public transport services, walking and cycling linkages, community facilities, reserves, and other elements that go towards creating a sustainable community. Potential candidates for land use master planning and development could include

- the Auckland waterfront
- the airport to Auckland transport corridor
- the Tamaki/Panmure revitalisation.

8.60 Danish urban designer Jan Gehl says that while people will do only what they need to in poor-quality public spaces, an additional “wide range of optional activities” will occur in high-quality spaces “because place and situation now invite people to stop, sit, eat, play and so on”.<sup>35</sup> He says that “only architecture that considers human scale and interaction is successful architecture” and “first life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works”.<sup>36</sup> He points out that the 5-kilometre-per-hour scale is different from the 60-kilometre-per-hour scale. Designers constantly confuse the scales and expect pedestrians to walk in areas designed for 60 kilometres per hour. Humans need something new to look at every 4–5 seconds. This is why the 5-kilometre-per-hour scale is so important. Gehl’s vision is:

- to create lively, diverse, and safe cities and neighbourhoods
- to improve peoples lives – rather than focusing on design aesthetics alone
- to consider, develop, and accentuate amenities.<sup>37</sup>

The Commission believes that these considerations need to inform Auckland’s urban design.

8.61 Jan Gehl and his team have prepared a *City to Waterfront Study* for Wellington city.<sup>38</sup> In the Commission’s view, it provides many lessons for Auckland. Amongst the issues it addresses are public spaces and public life, including the importance of creating a pedestrian network in the city centre. It addresses places for recreation and the visual environment. The report places a strong emphasis on urban quality and improved conditions for walking, cycling, and public transport.

## *The waterfront*

8.62 Perhaps the greatest failure in the Auckland city centre is the disconnect between the city centre and the harbour. Some attempts have been made to remedy this, but the need for “big picture” thinking, leadership, and staged master planned thinking on urban design form was exemplified to the Commission in a case study on the history of the development of the waterfront. Currently there is a recognised need to upgrade all the harbour frontages, not just the Wynyard Precinct and the central business district quarter. The upgrade should be undertaken in a staged planned manner so that consistent urban design themes are achieved and the economic value added is maximised. Indeed, the Commission believes that it is not going too far to say that a successful, integrated, master plan approach to the waterfront and its linkages with the city centre is crucial to the success of the Government’s objectives for Auckland and to the success of the city itself. The waterfront is part of New Zealand’s international shop window as it stands. The poor quality of much of the built environment significantly reduces the amenity value of what could be the region’s, and one of New Zealand’s, most important areas. There must be improvements to the connections for pedestrians between the waterfront and the central city, and along the waterfront. Proposals already made that the Commission considers to be essential include an iconic building or feature in the new Wynyard Quarter and a multi-use cruise ship terminal at Queens Wharf. Additionally there must be high quality and visually stunning pedestrian connections between the waterfront and the downtown area. A submitter noted that in addition to the failure to conclude negotiations in respect of central government’s offer of a national stadium for the waterfront, a lack of leadership has slowed progress and this has led to:

- a multiplicity of mandated public entities (Auckland Regional Transport Authority, Auckland City Council, ARC, North Shore City Council, Ports of Auckland Ltd, Transit New Zealand)
- a lack of connection between each part of the waterfront, for example Princes Wharf and the old Railway Station sitting in isolation
- the high level of political and popular interest not matched by momentum
- in the absence of an agreed long-term plan, stop/start investment direction as politicians and owners change.<sup>39</sup>

8.63 The relationship between the city centre and the waterfront is one of the most important issues for Auckland. Auckland is coming to appreciate what many harbour cities around the world have recognised, that the waterfront is a strategic asset that is at the core of shaping and demonstrating quality urban design. The redevelopment of the waterfront in Toronto has been recognised as so important that a joint venture company consisting of the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario, and the City of Toronto have joined forces to fund and manage an integrated master plan approach for the renewal of that city’s waterfront. In the Commission’s view, the importance of Auckland as a gateway would justify a similar joint government/city approach in Auckland. Further reference to the importance of Auckland’s waterfront and the Commission’s recommendations appear in Chapter 17.

## **The Commission's conclusions on urban design**

8.64 The Commission has already referred to the submission from the New Zealand Institute of Architects Auckland Branch and Urban Issues Group. This submission recommended the establishment of vision groups that would sit at the table in any structure the Commission might propose. It suggested there should be one group that looked at regional issues and others that looked at local issues.

8.65 To achieve more integrated planning solutions, Auckland must have a connected and systemic approach to thinking about urban design for the city. That requires improved coordination and cooperation between central and local government and the private sector, and it requires good design that considers how to get the best social, environmental, and economic benefits from future development.

8.66 Business has a strong interest in quality urban design. The attractiveness of the central business district leads directly to increased business activity. To that end there should be an opportunity for joint ventures and a joint funding approach between business and local government. One proposal suggested involves the city council matching business-provided funding for urban improvements. Joint ventures of this nature will be facilitated through the City Centre Committee of the Auckland Council as included in the recommendations.

8.67 There are other steps that can be taken to encourage good urban design. Systems can be developed to ensure that proposals that meet good urban design standards are fast tracked through the consenting process to minimise the holding costs, which present problems for developers.

### *An Urban Design Panel*

8.68 As noted earlier, the Commission was impressed at the emphasis placed upon urban design in most of the cities it visited. In Vancouver, all major new development is reviewed by an urban design panel. If that panel considers that the standard of design is inadequate or not appropriate, it has the power to refuse to allow the development. There is no right of appeal from such a decision. Such a model would not be acceptable in New Zealand, at least insofar as the lack of appeal rights is concerned, but the Commission is satisfied that there should be an Urban Design Panel, which should review all major development throughout the Auckland region and have the power of sign-off for major developments. The starting point is resource management planning documents. Those documents must incorporate urban design policies that will apply to all or particular parts of the region. Urban design is about more than architecture, so the panel needs to include in its membership not just architects and urban designers but also representatives of business, education institutions, and the not-for-profit social sector. The panel should have the funding and power to call for reports and designs for specific projects. It should include representatives with expertise.

## Footnotes:

32 Submission to the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance from New Zealand Institute of Architects Auckland Branch and Urban Issues Group, p. 1.

33 See [www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news\\_releases\\_2005-2009/2008HLS0013-001472.htm](http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2008HLS0013-001472.htm), accessed February 2009.

35 Ministry for the Environment, *Summary of The Value of Urban Design*, Wellington, 2005, p. 17 (available at [www.mfe.govt.nz](http://www.mfe.govt.nz)).

36 Project for Public Spaces, [www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/jgehl](http://www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/jgehl), accessed February 2009.

37 Auckland Regional Council, [www.arc.govt.nz/auckland/aucklands-growth/speakers-and-events/jan-gehl.cfm](http://www.arc.govt.nz/auckland/aucklands-growth/speakers-and-events/jan-gehl.cfm), accessed February 2009.

38 Wellington City Council, *City to Waterfront Study*, 2004 (available at [www.wellington.govt.nz](http://www.wellington.govt.nz), accessed February 2009)

39 Submission to the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance from Committee for Auckland, Waterfront Case Study submission.