

## SUMMARY OF URBAN DESIGN FORUM – AUCKLAND LEGACY EVENT



### Background

On the afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup> October 2010, members of the New Zealand Urban Design Forum (UDF) reviewed the urban design achievements of the eight local authorities that have been merged into the Auckland Council. Approximately 20 years has passed since the last major amalgamation process in Auckland. Over that time, the importance of urban design and city-making has been widely acknowledged and accepted, both in New Zealand and Auckland. With all eight councils undertaking a wide range of projects to improve the quality of the built environment there is a lot to reflect upon and the event aimed to acknowledge this history, as well as to understand some of the lessons that might be applied to the future.

The seminar involved 10 short presentations, with representation from all those councils that have been brought together to form the new Auckland Council. These presentations were followed by a general discussion. The event was held at Auckland University and Professors Errol Harrhoff and John Hunt, leaders of the University's Urban Design Masters programme, were invited to provide comment.

Over 60 people attended the event.

The event was sponsored by UDF's strategic alliance partner, the Ministry for the Environment, and the University of Auckland.

### Important Lessons

**“Leverage – having skin in the game”**. Urban design outcomes are improved when councils have a “lever” that they can use in negotiations. This lever may be landholdings, capital projects or planned infrastructure investment. It may be related to RMA processes, such as bonuses related to additional density / height if public benefits are delivered by the development. RMA processes offer many opportunities to advance good design, but skilled development control staff are needed to identify opportunities and negotiate good outcomes, linked in with non-RMA projects to add leverage. A simple focus on time and cost recovery ignores the more important issues associated with managing development and achieving good urban design outcomes.

**“Continually raising the bar”**. Improvements generally come from taking many small steps; very rarely is there a “big bang” which changes the state of play in one go. Continually improving processes and outcomes requires good feedback loops between policy and implementation. It also requires establishing and maintaining good working relationships between all involved - councils, developers and users. There is a strong need to develop feedback loops that can survive changes in people and policies. Independent peer reviewers, like urban design panels, have a role here, providing resources as reference groups for both standards of good design and models of good practice.

**“Urban/Suburban/Rural”.** The Auckland region is a diverse place. Urban design for rural localities/ villages is a new concept for many. It will become increasingly relevant for those working and living in rural settlements. Urban expansion via suburban-type development will continue on the edge of the city; the pace of urban redevelopment is likely to quicken as transport conditions change, and redevelopment is likely to occur across the city (not just be confined to town centres, for example). Urban design principles are relevant to all development types and locations. They need to be applied in a way that is context / place specific. There is a danger urban design will be seen as a singular and inflexible set of principles, simplistically applied in a way that ignores place, landscape and the wider urban context. This would obviously be unhelpful and urban design relies on practitioners capable of exploring relativities through qualitative and comparative concepts.

**“Neighbourhood, Block, Street, Lot”.** The basic building blocks of urban form are interlinked, yet their design and management involves a host of professionals. It is easy to get one part of the jigsaw wrong, with consequences for the end result: In Flat Bush, street blocks were too shallow, meaning back-to-back distances between dwellings were cramped; in Addison, the quality of the intensive housing was interlinked with the design of streets and small public spaces, yet design of these streets and spaces was problematical from an asset management point of view. There needs to be a meeting of minds. Everybody needs to have ownership of the outcome – or “a win” – in these processes if they are to succeed. There is a danger otherwise that the process of negotiation involved in resolving the different components leads to “lowest common denominator” outcomes with which we are already all too familiar. Good outcomes come from carefully marshalling and understanding the concerns of a wide range of people before filtering them to create integrated and coherent designs.

## Summary of Proceedings

### Introduction

**Brenna Waghorn** from the Auckland Regional Council welcomed everyone and summarised the purpose of the event, which was to provide a snapshot of the progress made by the 8 Councils being amalgamated, identify features and ideas to be taken into the new Council, and to celebrate the achievements made by the outgoing Councils.

### **Bruce Harland (Manukau City Council) Flat Bush**

Bruce explained his involvement over the last 13 years at Flat Bush, where he led the planning for the area from a ‘green field’ site to the first stages of implementation that aimed to epitomise urban design excellence. The Barry Curtis Park bridge was held up as both a turning point and ultimately an example in the debate between urban design quality and functional (and cheap) mediocrity, and where the team always aspired to do ‘something greater’.

He identified the process and principles that were fundamental to the Flat Bush development, including engagement through community workshops and the application of the fundamentals of urban design relating to connected street systems, reserves fronted by streets, mixed densities and positive public/private interfaces. He explained

how strategic land purchases enabled not only implementation of the award-winning Barry Curtis Park but also an effective private/public sector partnership in the development of the town centre.

Finally he talked of the importance of monitoring and reviewing projects, and described some of the lessons learnt (and the contribution made by the late Barry Rae), including the need for more prescriptive designs for roads, and a more robust urban block.

**Sue Evans (Auckland City Council)** 'shared space streets' proposed for the Auckland CBD.

Sue outlined the differences and consistencies between shared space design for streets and council's traditional approach to streetscape design. She noted that the shared space projects proposed for the CBD were consistent with the CBD design guidelines (that focus on a consistent 'look and feel' and quality of places), but also included differences through specific design where differences were allowed (and appropriate).

Consistency between shared spaces was also important, for ease of maintenance and to signal recognition of a shared/public space e.g. paving type. A key feature of 'consistency' was zonal arrangement within each space, while other 'differences' were also used to reinforce the spatial arrangements (light boxes, seats and paving in Lorne Street were used as an example) and identified as being particularly important in site response and placemaking for public spaces.

**Graeme McCarrison (Papakura District Council) Karaka and Addison**

Graeme explored differences and consistencies between Karaka Lakes and Addison developments in relation to urban design outcomes. Both projects were initiated between 1998/2000 and elements that were compared included reserves and street width. He noted that some fundamental design principles were founded on the actions of other parties, for example, Addison was planned for low car usage in anticipation of a rail station, which was subsequently axed.

The introduction of laneways in Addison was held up as a particularly successful outcome, as was the 'landscaped out' utilities, and treatment of public spaces and public-private spaces (originally planned as streets), including swales.

A key message was that different design outcomes were enabled from the same urban design guidelines, so that complex and big projects need continuous input through project management and buy-in from all parties involved, as general principles are applied to a specific site / context. In addition, it should be recognized that development codes are only guidelines; capital works need to be aligned with development; and reviewing/auditing projects is an important learning tool.

**Raewyn Catlow (Rodney District Council)**

Raewyn presented a project that aimed for positive urban design outcomes but failed to get off the ground due to lack of political acceptance. The project involved creating residential design guidelines for Matakana subdivisions that sought to reinforce 'country town' design ideals through intensification and design. The design guidelines were to be

introduced as performance-based controls where lots were subdivided below the permitted 1000sq.m. (e.g. to 500sq.m.).

Examples of design guidelines were presented that included architectural style, form and appearance, materials, colour, location of garages, and streetscape/landscape character. The lessons learned included that rural communities and Councillors may not be ready to embrace urban design, but then traditional planning tools do not facilitate good urban design.

### **Ian Alexander and Murray Cameron (Franklin District Council) Pukekohe Town Centre**

Ian and Murray jointly made a presentation on the upgrade of Pukekohe town centre. An outline of the planning framework was described, including the planned ringroad, and the role of the community, with their full involvement in the project. Key elements that contributed to the success of the town centre were identified as the combining of retail and industrial areas within a single Business zone, and rear site servicing. In addition, the creation of a town square was regarded as a particular benefit.

Other features of the town centre improvement were the Town Centre Concept (including intensification and height) and creation of increased vibrancy (through streetscape improvements and longer opening hours).

### **John Stenberg (North Shore City Council)**

John focused on the importance of developing relationships to achieve good urban design outcomes. He started by including a list of the projects with urban design involvement, and the numerous staff involved (over 20 in each case). Two projects were used as examples – the North Shore City Transportation Manual and Road Safety Improvements (at Knights and Beach Road).

Through these projects he described a process for establishing what level of involvement was appropriate, and the gains to be made, and criteria for decision-making. Describing urban design as ‘art with boundaries’, he identified what the boundaries are, and how to work within them.

A key lesson from these projects (in relation to urban design and developing relationships) was the need to get something that works for everyone regardless of the different sets of standards and rules used by those involved. Other learnings were the need to develop intuitive criteria for assessing the relative opportunity/importance of a project, and using and developing tools to determine what process is appropriate. This includes defining and developing a brief as well as deciding where effort is most rewarded in terms of urban design outcomes.

### **Richard Knott (Manukau City Council) Manukau City Centre**

Richard described the development plan for the Manukau City Centre, which is aimed at reducing the large area given over to parking, and introducing residential development (within the restrictions created by the airport flight path). He explained how the project was focused on creating a built form and spatial plan including a radical plan for density growth in the town centre. Included as part of the plan are a public domain manual,

precinct identification, and detailed programmatic information such as street design. He also led us through the detail for the campus and civic precinct plan that covers bulk and mass, frontages, open space typology and height relationships.

An impact assessment was used to test new housing proposals to ensure community wellbeing. State Highway 20 was noted as being problematic due to its barrier effect, while the proposed railway station was identified as an opportunity. Other positive benefits of the plan include recent new developments such as the AUT Campus.

### **Robert Lipka (Waitakere City Council) New Lynn**

Robert presented the Urban Plan for New Lynn, which built on planning and design work started in 1995. He describes how the creation of new roading connections has improved connectivity for vehicles and pedestrians, in concert with improvements to the railway through double-tracking and trenching, which has enabled a redeveloped transport centre (for trains and buses).

He compared TAD (Transport Adjacent Development) with TOD (Transport Oriented Development) and described the Plan as a comprehensive visionary document, named “the stitch” due to its cross-boundary focus on linking New Lynn and Avondale. As part of implementing the plan, he talked of the need for a carrot and stick approach, to prevent infill and achieve strategic objectives including a new school and retaining businesses.

Other parts of the plan include concepts for ‘quarters’, key moves and an implementation plan.

### **Omar Barragan and Gabriel Seo (Auckland City Council) Development control**

Omar and Gabriel provided a snapshot of projects over the last 5 years where they considered win-win solutions had been enabled through the regulatory process of the District Plan: Isthmus. Examples used were:

- a mixed-use development at College Hill where a pre-application meeting enabled improvements to the design;
- the Pt Chevalier KFC, where persuading the applicant to change the access improved the street frontage;
- improvements to the design of elevations of an Indian Temple in Sandringham, which was a permitted activity, was achieved by requesting attendance at the Urban design Panel;
- the Auckland Hospital Carpark, which had long been an issue for council was also improved with dialogue and design of the façade and street frontage;
- the BMW (Mini) site at Ponsonby was controversial, but with innovative design it provides a temporary activity that is attractive and an open space popular for events.

The lesson learned from these projects was the importance of working with developers to turn things around and enhance the city.

### **Brenna Waghorn (Auckland Regional Council)**

Brenna started by discussing how cooperation between the Councils had been achieved, starting with the Regional Growth Strategy, and concluding with the studies in Future Housing Demand and Corridors. In addition to regional involvement in those projects concerned with function and form (as provided in the presentations by others), she also noted the important work the regional authority had undertaken in relation to sustainability, land use and transport, and urban structuring, reminding the audience that there was a lot of information to build on from this work.

Other regional involvement included working with MfE, and examples given included the Value of Urban Design Research and the Urban Design case Studies, where the ARC piloted training together with MfE. In addition, ARC organised a programme of international speakers and was a foundation sponsor for the first NZ urban design conference (Urbanism Downunder Conference).

As well as these initiatives, a number of guidance documents were produced and financial support was given to the initiatives of others, including the Urban Design Forum, and Brenna noted the important contribution of advocacy.

Brenna also identified some mishaps and lost opportunities. These included the inadequate support and training for (political) urban design champions, and the failure of the YBE 2005 to reward urban design (which awarded a sustainable building). She also regretted that a Regional Urban Design Panel was not created, noting that its time has come! She also wondered whether there was too much guidance, making it too difficult for designers and developers, and warned of the pitfalls of design competitions.

Her final comments were a summary of the Growing Smarter review, and an urge for simplicity and action, with reference to a quotation from Jamie Lerner.

### **Erroll Harhoff and John Hunt provided a perspective of the work of the University of Auckland.**

Erroll Haahoff made a brief presentation on the history and value of the Urban Design programme at University of Auckland. Erroll noted that interest in the Urban Design programme had increased over the last 10 years, and how it had changed, including new initiatives into research.

John Hunt talked about the Auckland City Urban Design Panel. John suggested that improvements to the standard of designs presented needed to be raised, for example strengthened presentation and urban design analysis. He also identified the need for a watertight process for recommendation, and the dangers of the S127 loophole where significant urban design changes could occur through 'minor change' to the consented application.

## Discussion

The following is a summary of the discussion that followed the presentations:

- Frustration of practitioners where good urban design outcomes were obtained through the Urban Design Panel process only to be undone/precluded by the District Plan regulatory process. It was questioned whether RMA reforms were necessary to address this issue, or whether it is more a matter of changing District Plans.
- Discussion also continued about the increasing sophistication of district plans but the difficulty in implementation, with increasing reliance on investment and public ownership to help lever good outcomes. There is a major issue of co-ordination between the consent process and the investment / partnership process.
- Various non-regulatory tools were discussed. For example the possibility of rates relief for developers. The decline in CBD residential growth was arrested in part by the council offering rates reductions in the 1990s. It was suggested, however, that the interest in residential development in the CBD may be more due to the then economic climate and the lack of demand for office space, rather than lack of incentive by Council.
- It was noted that urban design evidence at resource consent hearings was often “patchy”, lacking reference to agreed frameworks, making the evidence appear very subjective. The importance of urban economics needed to be reinforced when considering urban change, as many of the concepts of urban economics supported urban design principles (mixed uses, urban intensity where appropriate, mitigation of externalities through good design).
- Need to survey developers as to where quality urban outcomes work. It was suggested that in many places in the city, development economics did not support high quality design, while in other areas where land was expensive, and could be redeveloped in a high quality way, height and density restrictions stopped this from occurring. The result is a conundrum where the public will not buy a poor quality product but achieving the “big picture” is too difficult / expensive for developers.
- Carparking requirements in terms of land/construction expense and environmental cost. This resulted in an incentive for out of centre retailing and offices, while making apartment developments more expensive (e.g. basement car parking). Do we need car parking requirements?
- The scales at which we operate, comparing the density of Matakana with a village in Provence and considered we need new typologies to deal with the investment challenges (for growth).

- Need to work with developers to build a good track record with regard to negotiation involved in improved design outcomes. Tend to use “old formula” because of ease of process / certainty. Consultants have a role to give developers good advice (rather than the “message” solely coming from Council).
- Need to look at other places in New Zealand for examples of building on small lots. Practitioners should identify case studies as MfE were looking for new projects to write up as a searchable database. It was also noted that government departments were looking for advice on how they could improve urban design.

Ludo Campbell-Reid provided a wrap-up to the event and talked of the future of Auckland City. He noted that it was an exciting and challenging time, with the new Council offering good opportunities. He also noted that criticism paralyses local authorities and we need to be empowering by showing how projects can succeed in an economic sense (with before and after examples).