

IS THE URBAN DESIGN MESSAGE BEING HEARD?

Urban Design Forum Event – 13 July 2011

In mid July, the Urban Design Forum met to debate the effectiveness of urban design advice and input within the resource management process. The event looked to consider the impact of urban design input to the universal objective of achieving high quality built outcomes. The event centred on a series of presentations by a panel of six speakers. The panel members represented public and private sector experience; planning, urban design and legal professions; and both technical experts and decision makers.

The panel consisted of the following presenters:

- Ludo Campbell-Reid, Manager Environmental Strategy & Policy, Auckland Council
- Penny Pirrit, Regional & Local Planning Manager, Auckland Council
- David Hill, Independent Hearings Commissioner
- Andrew Green, Partner, Brookfields Lawyers
- Rebecca Skidmore, Urban Designer and Independent Hearings Commissioner
- Environment Court Judge Laurie Newhook

Attended by approximately 160 people, the seminar benefited from a range of information and opinion from both the speakers and the audience. The following themes were raised repeatedly, providing a focus for the UDF to support urban design input to New Zealand's resource management process.

Importance of combining a generalists understanding with a specialist's technical focus

Members of the panel raised the ongoing importance of urban designers balancing a technical focus with a generalist understanding of the many issues and objectives that will inform a final built outcome. Recognising competing objectives and providing a balanced assessment was expressed an important role of an urban designer.

Misalignment between urban design expertise and the resource management framework

Comments made from many of the speakers identified a misalignment between technical urban design input and the resource management process it contributes to. A frustration was expressed regarding experts presenting urban design advice often portraying a poor understanding or acknowledgment of the resource management decision-making framework. The panel argued that when delivering urban design evidence individuals should clearly articulate how a development proposal either contributes or detracts from the relevant policy framework's objectives. While an expert may disagree with the merits of a development proposition, they should always acknowledge an alignment with the agreed public policy position.

The importance of demonstrating 'why' and 'how' an expert opinion has been reached

Several speakers commented on urban design evidence regularly lacking description of the methodology used. Experiences were shared of urban design evidence being presented as a 'fait accompli', with opinions and conclusions presented without explanation of why and

how such conclusions were reached. This reduces the opportunity for decision makers to both understand the viewpoint presented and, most importantly, to understand the implications of other decisions or evidence upon urban design advice. This diminishes the value of the urban design input.

A specific recommendation made encouraged urban design evidence to present a framework to assess competing demands. This approach reflects the multi-faceted nature of urban design and helps enable a transparent and defensible position.

Still no New Zealand urbanism

On-going frustration was voiced regarding the lack of definition of a 'New Zealand urbanism' and the perpetual risk of over reliance on urban design technique and evidence from European and North American advice.

Disconnect between resource management process and urban designers input

A disconnect was expressed between decision makers expectations of urban design input and a varying quality of actual contributions made by 'urban designers'. In part this disconnect was seen as a result of urban design within New Zealand lacking a unified definition, profession and methodology. In the absence of a clear professional mandate, difficulty occurs for decision makers to accept urban design input that does not sufficiently base itself within the resource management framework.

Concern regarding disconnect between urban design panels and resource management decision making process

Significant discussion focused on the use and value of urban design panels. A key issue raised was the need for greater clarification regarding the weight of a panel's advice and the Council urban designer's final recommendation. This issue and further discussion regarding the use of urban design panels could benefit from further consideration by the UDF.

It is noted that comments made regarding urban design panels drew from experiences from across New Zealand and therefore did not relate purely to Auckland's panel(s).

'Is the urban design message being heard?' proved to be a challenging topic. The event highlighted a range of issues currently preventing urban design advice from having sufficient and satisfactory input to resource management decision making. Observations made by the panel and audience identified multiple opportunities for urban designers as individuals and as the collective profession to improve their contribution to the quality of New Zealand's built environment.

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