

## **Submission to the Local Government (Auckland Council) Bill**

**26 June 2009**

### **Urban Design Forum of New Zealand**

Clerk of the Committee  
Auckland Governance Select Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
WELLINGTON

By email:

AGL@parliament.govt.nz

#### **Introduction**

The Urban Design Forum of New Zealand (UDF NZ) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Auckland Governance Bill.

The Royal Commission's findings on the future governance arrangements for the Auckland Region were based on the importance of a high quality city. Urban design was seen by the Commission as a vital tool in achieving its (and the community's) vision for the city.

In acknowledging the importance of urban design to the livability, prosperity and social cohesion of cities in general, and Auckland in particular, the Commission recommended the use of:

- A regional spatial plan to set the wider framework
- Co-ordination with central government over transport, social infrastructure and the like
- Master plans, precinct plans and similar for areas of change
- Focused development agencies for areas like the critical waterfront area and redevelopment nodes
- Design-based assessment processes like a regional urban design panel for major projects, with the panel to be given sign off power
- Urban design provisions to be incorporated into District Plan controls.

As detailed below, the Urban Design Forum seeks that the enabling legislation that sets out the structure and function of the Greater Auckland Council and associated local boards supports these actions and outcomes.

## Importance of Urban Design

The importance of urban design to the future of Auckland cannot be understated. Auckland's future is urban. It has long passed being a collection of suburbs, loosely connected together by the motorway system, where poor design could be accommodated by virtue of its low density form and the city's stunning natural landscape setting.

The city is developing into a complex network of more dense centres, hubs and neighbourhoods, connected by an ever more web-like, multi-modal transport system. In this context, the economic, social and environmental benefits of a more built up city need to be enabled by high quality urban design. Put simply, as the density of the city increases the design input needs to increase as well. The Royal Commission recognised this vital fact.

The Commission's findings are in-line with international best practice, for example the UK-based Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has produced the following checklist for what makes an organisation fit for purpose to obtain good design outcomes (source: <http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications/good-design>):

### Behaviour

- leaders with vision who know that better design improves results
- effective partnerships internally and with the right public bodies and private companies
- knowledgeable, skilled and trained decision makers.

### Resources

- design champions who can influence decisions
- strong public buy-in and appetite for design quality
- in-house designers and/or a consultant design team with a brief to support the organisation as client or decision maker.

### Processes

- strong published policies and standards
- decision making that talks about and prioritises good design
- robust procurement processes which set absolute minimum design requirements
- access to design review for key projects
- learning through scrutiny of decision making
- post-occupancy surveys of projects.

The Royal Commission basically agreed with these statements.

Key concerns for UDF as the basic structure of the new local government system for the region is put into place are:

## **Powers and duties of the new Auckland Council**

While we presume that these will conform to those provided for under the Local Government Act (LGA), there does seem to be some additional powers that the council should have from an urban design perspective, as signalled by the Royal Commission. These should include:

- Urban design panel having sign off power. We presume that this would be wider, and separate to, normal RMA powers. To do so, this would need to be enshrined in legislation.
- Redevelopment agency. The ability to set up special purpose organisations with specific planning / land assembly / funding powers for important areas of the city with a strong mandate for exemplary design outcomes (e.g. for the waterfront, critical redevelopment nodes). As acknowledged by the Commission, the city's waterfront demands special attention.
- Regional spatial / infrastructure plan. This would need to be prepared under the LGA, but have ability to feed into regional and local RMA plans. It also needs to be well resourced and involve some serious analysis, thinking and monitoring.

## **Integration**

This relates to the transport / planning / infrastructure / community development arms of the Auckland Council working together on places and spaces. High quality urban spaces result from integrative analysis and actions, not from one agency "getting on and building something" in isolation of the wide range of other urban shapers and actors.

There is a danger that the proposed, single-focused transport and infrastructure agencies will not integrate well with the softer planning / community development parts of the main council. Then again, the infrastructure arms may be keen advocates for urban design, but maybe with different priorities in terms of where to act and invest.

The structure and governing framework must emphasise integrative solutions / approaches to road design, infrastructure development and place-based planning. Partly this will relate to the aims / objectives of the council, but also to reporting lines and capacities within the different "silos" that require integrative, design-based outcomes.

## **Functions of local boards v main council**

Urban design needs regional and local levels to have clear frameworks, and the skills and resources to develop and implement them. It is both a top down and bottom up exercise.

To make local places work (make them successful socially, economically, environmentally, culturally) there is a need for supportive regional policy and planning (hence the importance of the regional framework / policy), but also lots of detailed local engagement with communities, landowners and developers to make it all "gel" at the local level. Local engagement also allows for local flavours and identities to emerge.

In this regard, we are of the opinion that the local boards must have a have a role / function in relation to local place making, subject to the regional framework. But to do so, they need to be large enough to support and sustain a professional staff, as well as attract competent decision makers, and have some discretionary funds for improvement projects.

30 local boards are probably too small, on this basis. The likely outcome under this arrangement is that the local place making function will default to the main council. This is likely to divert the attention of the council from the strategic to the operational / local and to confuse policy and implementation roles.

We do not have the expertise to state what number of local councils is the right number. Neither do we consider that there is one right answer. In considering the number and responsibilities of the second tier councils, we consider that the following principles are important:

- The local councils must have a meaningful role in local place making for them to be an effective voice for the local community. They have to have the capacity to shape/ change a local area, if need be.
- To undertake this role, they need to be able to support professional staff in the various built environment spheres, who can work together as a team and get to know and understand their local area. This implies a minimum size of local council to support this outcome.
- The geographic boundaries of the second tier councils need to make sense in terms of the wider urban system. They cannot be too small (fragmented), nor too large. The need to take into account social and economic networks, as well as physical boundaries and features.
- The second tier councils need some form of direct political representation on the main Auckland Council to ensure effective communication, both ways, at the political level.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, we can do no more than quote the opening words of the Royal Commission report, and trust that the Committee keeps this thought to the fore as they make their decisions:

*The future of humanity lies in cities: in good urban governance and sustainable urban development.*

Urban design provides the tools to achieve this goal.

The Forum wishes to be able to present its submission to the Select Committee.

## **About UDF**

The Urban Design Forum NZ (UDF NZ) has, since 2000, worked to promote good urban design in NZ. Modelled loosely on similar groups in Australia and England, UDF NZ is supported by the New Zealand Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Engineering and Surveying Institutes'. The purpose of the Forum is to promote cross-disciplinary understanding of urban design amongst urban professionals, to raise

awareness generally at the national and local levels of the benefits of urban design and to provide a forum for discussion of design-based approaches that are relevant to the development and management of New Zealand towns and cities. Membership is open to anyone interested in urban design and includes planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, surveyors and other professionals, together with politicians, academics, developers and individuals. The organisation is run entirely by volunteers, with administration assistance from the New Zealand Planning Institute.

Further details are available on <http://www.urbandesignforum.org.nz/>.

### **Contact Details**

Urban Design Forum of New Zealand  
C/- David Mead  
Hill Young Cooper Ltd  
PO Box 99847, Newmarket,  
Auckland 1149.