Māori identity in urban design

Māori urban design is an exciting new approach to urban development in New Zealand that comes from an awareness among planners and architects of the strong cultural, social and physical benefits it provides.

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IN THE PAST, cities and urban centres have been spaces where Māori identity has often been excluded from the environment. The histories and cultural recognition of the urban areas have often favoured the European settler narrative at the expense of the indigenous perspective, creating a sense of exclusion for Māori.

Now, Māori urban design is attempting to bring Māori pūrākau (stories) and identity back to urban centres in New Zealand.

Study looked at Te Whāriki and Wigram Skies

To understand the recent movement in urban design towards greater indigenous representation in new urban development, a case study looked at two residential developments by Ngāi Tahu Property in Ōtāutahi ‘Christchurch’. These two master-planned developments - Te Whāriki and Wigram Skies - incorporate Māori values in different forms of urban areas.

Te Whāriki, located in Lincoln just outside Ōtāutahi, is a Ngāi Tahu Property and Lincoln University joint project. This subdivision reflects the natural features of the surrounding environment, such as neighbourly Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere, with a focus on wetlands and native plant species.

Wigram Skies was an air force base purchased by Ngāi Tahu Property in 1997 through the right of first refusal process, part of the Ngāi Tahu Treaty claim settlement. The design of the development was based around the land’s recent history as an air force base. This can be seen through elements such as the main road called The Runway that runs along the old runway of the air base and various street names that pay tribute to past pilots.

An entrance to Wigram Skies with traditional Māori artwork designs.
**Māori values in design outcomes**

The case study assessed the similarities and differences between the two developments using a Placecheck analysis. This approach involved walking through the spaces and scoring the various design elements in accordance with established Māori urban design principles.

These values focus on a number of concepts including:
- **kaitiakitanga** – how the natural environment is cared for and protected
- **manaakitanga** – how the design of the developments provide for a sense of inclusivity and safety to residents and visitors
- **mātauranga** – shared stories and cultural heritage depicted in the urban design.

**What the values mean in practice**

The open swales and wetland areas in both subdivisions are an important reflection of the values of kaitiakitanga, whereby the natural flow of water and protection of waterways is enhanced. The use of open watercourses provides a vital connection between people and the land, not commonly seen in typical urban areas.

Both developments are extensively planted with native vegetation throughout the landscape design. While the decision to use native vegetation is not always the cheapest option for developers, it provides a pleasing integration of traditional landscapes with urban areas and promotes indigenous biodiversity.

Other examples of the values include the mahinga kai (traditional food gathering) and harakeke (flax) gardens found in Te Whāriki where they are recognised as culturally significant practices by the local rūnanga (council). They also reflect the value of manaakitanga where food is vital in the welcoming of manuhiri (visitors) to the area.

The harakeke memorial garden also represents the value of mātauranga, where people share in the customs of harakeke harvesting and weaving, as well as paying respect to a renowned weaver from the local rūnanga.

The cultural artwork woven throughout Te Whāriki development is another expression of the cultural narratives in the design fabric of the development. The artwork represents the Māori pūrākau of air travel with the representation of manu (birds).

**Meaningful collaboration crucial**

Ongoing engagement between property developer and tangata whenua was crucial to adopting these innovative design elements. For example, the Te Whāriki development established an advisory board that included representatives from the local rūnanga as well as the developers. This successful example of meaningful collaboration helped to promote the use of Māori design elements.

The developments show it is possible to express indigenous narratives through innovative urban design. They exemplify what can be achieved when urban designers, landscape architects, planners and, most importantly, tangata whenua work collaboratively to create a space with a greater sense of identity.

This can be done through Māori artwork, the use of wetlands and planting of native vegetation, which work to provide a valuable connection between tangata (people) and the whenua (land).

**Innovative designs bring benefits**

The key lesson is that integration of core Māori values into the built landscape provides positive outcomes for the space they are incorporated within, particularly for tangata whenua and their sense of identity.

As Māori urban design emerges as an important aspect of urban design, developers, planners and architects should find innovative ways of expressing the indigenous narrative in the urban environment.