

New plan = new neighbourhoods

Auckland has a new plan, but what will we need to prioritise to ensure we are building liveable neighbourhoods, resilient communities and suburbs with a sense of place?

BY HELEN ROBINSON AND JORDAN MACANN, AUCKLAND COUNCIL

OVER THE NEXT few decades, Auckland is set to transition from mainly low-density suburban neighbourhoods to a more intensified, medium-density character. This transition, and the prospect of the change it might bring, has caused a stir over the last 3 years.

Unitary Plan promotes intensification

With the release of the Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan in 2013, neighbourhood intensification has been heralded both as the solution to Auckland's housing crisis and a death knell to our leafy green suburbs.

Auckland residents generally fell into one of three groups:

- The NIMBYs (not in my backyard), who wanted to keep the status quo.
- The QIMBYs (quality in my backyard), who supported intensification but only if it's quality development.
- Generation Rent, the huge number of renters locked out of the housing market who wanted somewhere decent and



Beaumont Quarter is a good example of housing with public fronts.

affordable to hang their hat, whether an apartment or a house on the city fringe. Today, the development sector is weighing up the potential benefits of intensification permitted under the Auckland Unitary Plan (which is now operative in part). For

many homeowners, it's the opportunity to put an additional dwelling on the back of their section. Many small to medium-scale developers are considering building terraced housing or low-rise apartments where they had previously built detached housing.

A chance to transform the city

A shift from low-density suburbia to medium-density housing over the next 20 years will have an impact on Auckland - on the way people live and whether neighbourhoods thrive or decline. The opportunity to transform the city has never been more tangible.

The question remains. Will this bring about a significant change for Auckland or simply more of the same sort of developments seen in the past? However, there will be twice the number of buildings on each site and one and a half times the current height.

Neighbourhoods we feel proud of will need to offer more than a few extra units stacked onto a site. Whether a greenfield subdivision or site redevelopment, the question underpinning Auckland's future success is what should be prioritised when thinking about our future neighbourhoods?

As Auckland faces the challenges of huge urban growth, there are a few touch points to ensure the residents of Auckland are the focus of our neighbourhoods and growth.

Getting from A to B

How easily people travel to work, get to where they study, see friends and family and move around the area will become integral to how well new developments perform as neighbourhoods. Successful neighbourhoods provide choices for movement - in both modes and routes. People can choose the method most appropriate to them at any given time.

Well designed and integrated movement networks incorporate options for walking, cycling, catching public transport and driving - often emphasising certain modes, or combinations of modes, over others.

New developments must work with the context of the street. For example, where streets prioritise pedestrians, attention must be paid to designing for the human scale, whereas major arterials carrying large trucks require different considerations.

Streets people can read

Legibility is also an important touch point. This describes an experience of a place and



Piermont Apartments in Wellington is a prominent corner-site mixed-use building.



Elliott Street – pedestrian priority streets parallel to motor vehicle priority streets mean everyone can move easily and safely through a neighbourhood.

is more than providing connections and information about how to navigate an area.

A poorly designed neighbourhood is like a badly formatted brochure. It doesn't matter if the information is all there - if the font is difficult to read and the pictures pixelated, it affects people's willingness to engage.

Legible neighbourhoods open themselves up to people, while those lacking legibility feel closed and disorienting. These experiences influence whether people decide to frequent an area or leave and never return.

Prominent corner site buildings at intersections can play an important role as landmarks helping people navigate their route. People need to distinguish one corner from the next to know where they are and where they're going. Developments along the street edge can improve legibility with signage, displaying an address, and standing out from the surrounding buildings with colour, façade materials and landscaping. These elements make streets more memorable, and easier to navigate. ➤



Blake Greens pedestrian priority route is reinforced with landscaping, a wide footpath and a relatively narrow street.

Life in a 20-minute radius

It is important to consider options for a range of commercial and residential activities. Mixed-use developments are often a sign of good health in a neighbourhood, as they offer a mix of retail, office space and residential units.

Without these sorts of developments, residents are forced to leave their neighbourhoods for employment, access to shops and entertainment, and opportunities to stay local are lost.

Reinforcing a sense of place

It's impossible to talk about thriving neighbourhoods without also touching on a sense of place. When subdividing, the character of a new neighbourhood should

be informed by the local context - landform, landscape and built environment. The use of landscaping, materials, naming, artworks and street furniture should all respond to the place and reinforce the sense of local.

Developments in already built-up neighbourhoods have even more onus on them to reinforce and enhance the local character. Consider drawing inspiration from neighbouring heritage buildings or material palettes, because this is what makes a neighbourhood unique and different from other localities.

Public and private realms

What about living in the buildings themselves? Aucklanders love their privacy, and some of the design features may take time

for residents to adapt to. However, there can be a lot of benefits for residents and passers-by alike when housing interacts with the public realm.

The rule is to provide housing that offers public fronts and private backs. The side of the residential unit that faces onto the street should ideally have an interface with the street. A front porch, an inviting front door with a small front yard or windows at ground level are ways to achieve this.

Ideally, there should also be private space, usually at the back of the unit, where residents can enjoy natural light, sunshine and outdoor spaces without being observed by neighbours or passers-by. Designing for public fronts and private backs creates opportunities for people to see each other, creating safer streets, while also providing for privacy.

Creating resilient communities

Simply put, neighbourhoods that thrive both socially and economically are places that people frequent more often. They have a sense of identity and character that helps to attract a broad pool of residents and visitors who identify with the local character of the place.

The more frequented a neighbourhood, the more likely it will be home to a resilient community and function to boost the local economy.

To quote New York city controller Scott Stringer, 'Once a developer's shovel hits the ground, the die has been cast for generations.' What we build over the next two decades will have a huge impact on future Auckland. We can't afford to get it wrong. ◀

For more ▶ See the Auckland Design Manual, the go-to guide for designing, building and developing in Auckland. Visit www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz.