

Opinion

New needs for new-look Aotearoa NZ

As the faces of our cities change, we must find new solutions for living that meet people's needs and enable them to thrive, writes BRANZ CEO *Chelydra Percy*.

FOR MANY New Zealanders, the terms intensification, densification and urbanisation cause a negative reaction. Our response is often shaped by what we've personally experienced. Globally, there are too many examples of unattractive, dystopian concrete jungles.

While I don't have a quick fix for the terminology, I think we have the power to collectively remove the stigma in the way we develop, design and build for the future.

Responding to demographic change

If we're going to meet the needs of our changing demographics and help achieve New Zealand's decarbonisation goals, we need to make higher-density housing an attractive proposition for all.

It's interesting to look at the concept of densification through the lens of our nation's changing demographics. There is no question that the face of Aotearoa New Zealand is changing. We have declining birth rates and a rapidly ageing population, Auckland is growing exponentially and we increasingly rely on immigration to supplement our workforce - as COVID has highlighted. What do these changing statistics mean for our industry and the built environment?

Leading demographer Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley wrote in his book *The New New Zealand: Facing demographic disruption*, 'In 2030 there may be six million of us. One and half million of us will live overseas. We will be clustered around Auckland, dependent on migration, and worried about a shortage of workers. We haven't planned for this. We need to.'



Professor Spoonley promotes the need for a coherent, comprehensive population policy to account for these new realities, including the role the built environment has in addressing changing demographic needs. He talks about the importance of designing neighbourhoods better equipped to cater for older people or those with dementia and to adapting our views to recognise the diverse nature of families in the 21st century.

Selling the benefits

To meet the needs of our predicted population make-up in 2030, a lot must change in less than 10 years. The articles in this *Build* demonstrate that the building system understands the importance and the how of densification. What is less clear is how successfully we are selling the concept to consumers. We need to encourage acceptance for new ways of living and then drive demand.

It was hard enough for a generation to let go of the quarter-acre dream. The next generation is now being asked to adapt to live fulfilling lives in medium or high-density homes, environments and communities. Our changing demographics also give rise to the need for far more choice - whether that is the style of home, how we fund home

ownership or better options for long-term rental. For many, this is a huge cultural shift.

Innovation successes

Several countries - notably the Netherlands and some Scandinavian nations - have developed medium and high-density living concepts actively promoting mixed generational living in response to changing demographics. There, you find communities specifically built to meet the special needs of the elderly, living alongside young families, singles and groups of students. In some cases, the younger residents are encouraged to provide care and companionship for the elderly through rent reduction or other incentives.

The implications of such arrangements are significant. The elderly can stay in their homes for longer, living independently with neighbourly assistance, while younger people benefit from the wisdom and support of the older generation.

Changing our mindset

I'm not saying that this is THE solution for Aotearoa New Zealand. However, whatever we do, we must respond to what society looks like now. We can no longer focus on solutions that only meet the needs of mums and dads with 2.5 kids. With changing demographics comes the requirement to recognise the need to change our thinking.

And most importantly, our collective focus must be on ensuring our solutions do not simply meet the brief but are attractive, safe, vibrant and soul enhancing. We need to create places where people thrive. ◀