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EMERGING URBAN STRATEGIES

SUCCESSFUL URBAN
DESIGN IS THE KEY
TO A SATISFYING
URBAN EXPERIENCE.

In 1993, two years after my arrival in New Zealand, I was asked to write my first article for *Planning Quarterly*. At that time, urban design was not a particularly popular term and its issues as a distinct discipline were fully understood by few. Today, three years later, the situation is quite different.

To start with, the number of trained urban designers working in New Zealand seems to be constantly growing. Together with other enthusiastic professionals interested in the city, they have begun an inspiring promotion of urban design as an essential ingredient of successful city-making. Formal seminars and informal professional gatherings become forums for education and discussion of urban design concerns, endorsing the vast potential of the discipline as a means towards urban excellence.

All this has certainly lifted up the public status of urban design, facilitating a dialogue between politicians, professionals and lay people. Together,

they have started to understand the meaning and appreciate the value of urban quality, acknowledging its impact on the overall city's prosperity. This has generated an increased public concern with issues of urban identity, image and character, resulting in a growing number of urban design studies throughout New Zealand. This clearly demonstrates that urban design is slowly but steadily gaining public support, emerging as an integral part of New Zealand city planning.

At another level, the *Resource Management Act* has increased a general awareness of environmental issues, encouraging a consistent and integrated approach to the ever-changing city. In this context, the new planning legislation provides an exciting opportunity for local government to embrace urban design in response to their commitment to environmental quality.

However, it is important to understand that integrating urban design into public policy is neither easy nor straightforward. Urban design is

A skilful design, illustrating creative interpretation, of the "Multi-Unit Design Guide", has resulted in a new development successfully integrated to its context. Wellington, inner-city residential area.



a complex activity as it aims to simultaneously integrate the multiple dimensions of the city into a coherent whole. To apply and successfully implement urban design is a challenging task, since it is under the direct influence of constantly changing social, political and economic pressures. The process is difficult, often painful, and let me warn you, the experience is not always as satisfying as one can imagine.

As a distinct field of activity, urban design in New Zealand is in its emerging state. In that sense it seems natural that the paths to its successful implementation are still unestablished and many of the issues still unrecognised. While a reference to overseas experience can provide useful insights, experimenting in local conditions is equally important. Experiment and experience, as well as understanding current circumstances and local characteristics, are useful in facilitating the search for relevant and effective responses.

This article is about implementing urban design into New Zealand planning policy. Recognising the exciting prospects arising from this process is as important as identifying current difficulties and understanding major frustrations. The article gives an insight on the issue, drawing primarily on the present experience of Wellington City.

CURRENT ISSUES

Until recently, issues of urban quality for private development and public projects have always been considered separately, at two distinctive levels.

At present, although many cities have made a genuine commitment to integrated urban improvements, the major issues of this distinction remain unresolved. Thus, a district plan primarily controls private developments, mainly through design guidelines of various kinds; while the quality of the public domain is most often considered in a piecemeal fashion by individual asset management plans prepared by separate council departments.

Such a segregated approach to the city raises a number of issues.

- First, by considering public and private separately, the city's sense of unity as a total environment is lost. Thus, private developments are conceived in isolation, emphasising the individual quality of buildings regardless of the surrounding context. In this way the interface between the public and private domain is perceived as "no man's land", and the quality of its treatment often neglected.

- Secondly, the piecemeal improvements to the public environment carried out through separate and most often uncoordinated projects, seem to further break down the sense of urban coherence. The result is discontinuity of materials and street furniture, traffic and road alterations conceived in isolation, and accidental tree planting, all considered in a somewhat "factory-line" fashion.

Such an approach tends to fragment rather than integrate the city. By emphasising its parts it fails to recognise the fundamental and overriding urban design principles of continuity and wholeness.

THE CITY AS A TOTAL ENVIRONMENT

The city is a complex entity comprised of many different layers. The dynamics of the city are determined by the interaction and overlapping relationship between these layers which hold the city together. In this sense, it is imperative to understand that the city is more than just a collection of parts and that it is the interaction between the parts that describes its full complexity. Thus, the entire multidimensional nature of the city can be fully comprehended only in its totality.

The city exists and functions as a united whole, no matter to whom the individual parts belong. This requires that the overlapping relationship between public and private is well understood and the ambiguity of this relationship acknowledged.

Public streets provide the setting for private developments, while private buildings define public space. The visual qualities of both the private and public domains, and especially the treatment of their interface, have equal importance for the physical image of the city. In this context, a clear distinction between the public and private domains becomes difficult, even impossible to draw. For this reason, design controls over the quality of public and private need to be generated within the same design framework concerned with the city in its wholeness and in the context of a balanced public/private relationship.

THE WELLINGTON EXPERIENCE

Many cities have already recognised that economic vitality is not the only attribute of a successful city. Positive identity, strong character

and memorable city image have proven to be equally important. By acknowledging the attractive power of urban quality, such cities have made a commitment to promote and improve their physical image through integrating urban design into their public policy. In this sense Wellington is a case in point. It demonstrates a constant devotion to urban excellence manifested in two key documents – the proposed District Plan and the recently completed Urban Design Strategy.

Urban Design in the Context of the District Plan

The proposed District Plan for Wellington City integrates a strong urban design component presented in the form of design guides. The proposed guides are primary tools controlling the quality of private developments through performance-based criteria. These criteria are derived from a consistent philosophical approach to the city which strongly recognises the value of the existing urban context.

In this respect, Wellington design guides are developed from a consistent reference point. The underlying theme is creating a positive relationship between new developments and existing settings. In this sense, the guides appropriately derive their criteria from a comprehensive analysis of predominant urban patterns, by setting general principles allowing flexibility of interpretation.

Thus, whether providing a more general guidance (eg, multi-unit housing and central area design guides) or related to specific areas with a distinctive character (eg, historic Thorndon, Mt Victoria, Courtenay Place) the design guides have the same common objective – to encourage developments conceived as part of their context, with visual attributes responsive to the character and amenity values of their surroundings. The desired result is a positive contribution to the quality of their immediate locality as well as to the large scale urban setting.

Design guides are a well known and long established means of design control. They have been recognised world-wide as powerful tools for maintaining valuable urban qualities. In the case of Wellington, although in a limited scale, design guides have a well established tradition. New developments within Courtenay Place and Cuba St precincts, for example, defined as important character areas, have been subject to design control since the late 1980s.

In addition to the current design guides, the proposed District Plan incorporates a number of

new guides. These include a design guide for the central area, a design guide for multi-unit housing, and several institutional precinct guides such as the university, the hospital and the polytechnic.

No doubt, the Wellington design guides allow flexibility of application. This makes them a good example of a performance-based approach to environmental control. However, applying and administering design guides at such a large scale is a difficult, often frustrating task raising a number of concerns. Many of these concerns are interrelated and reflect on both applicants as well as resource consent planners.

Design Guides versus Rules

Poor understanding on the part of applicants about what a design guide is, how it works, and most of all how it fits into the District Plan rules, is one of the hottest issues. "After all, these are *just guides*" and "the rules come first" describes best the attitude of many applicants.

Wellington's design guides are an integral part of the District Plan. They are intended to work in tandem with the rules as an equally valid method for achieving the plan's general objectives.

Nevertheless, there is still a perception that a design guide does not carry the weight of a rule, that it makes advisory rather than compulsory recommendations. The very fact that design guides have a qualitative nature, dealing most often with unmeasurable characteristics, often raises people's doubts about the objectivity of design criteria. Many people find it difficult to understand how the assessment criteria were defined and especially how they should be applied. For a great number of applicants, the District Plan rules continue to be the only sound reference points that allow an objective and straightforward assessment. In this sense the design guides are seen as generators of uncertainty.

Such misconception has its reasons. First, applying design controls at such a scale is relatively unknown in New Zealand. For a very long time, planning rules have been the primary, often the only means of control. Probably the very title "A Guide" provokes misleading assumptions. Secondly, history and sense of urban identity, the underlying philosophical concepts behind the guides, are still emerging values.

However, a sole acknowledgment of the causes it is not enough to deal with the issue. Misinterpreting the intention and value of a design guide is a fundamental concern, as it challenges the very concept of a design guide, creating mental blocks that limit a genuine and

The joint planning project of National Mutual Funds Management and Wellington City Council aimed at testing the credibility of the new "Central Area Design Guide".

It included three proposals, Studio of Pacific Architecture, Wellington (top), Architecture Workshop, Wellington, (middle) and Peddle-Thorp, Sydney office (bottom).

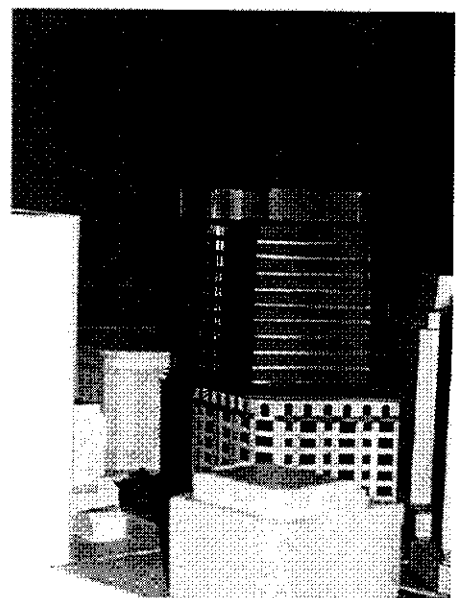
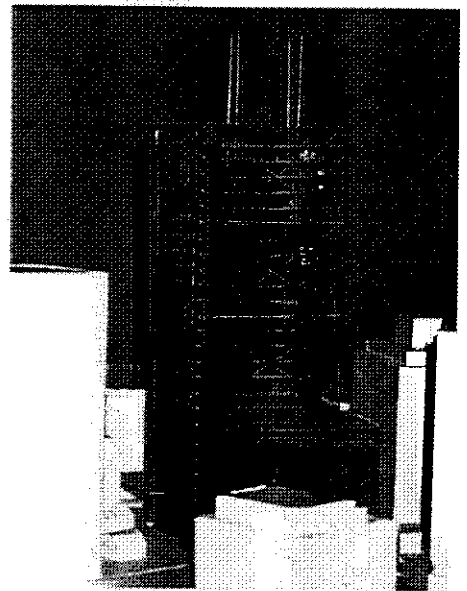
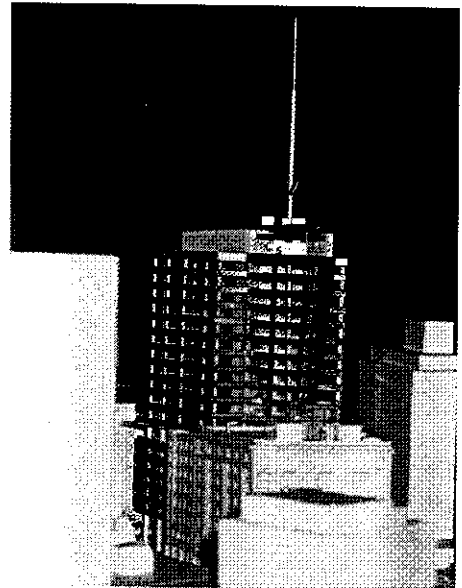
open-minded approach. Moreover, such an attitude may lead to other misconceptions that underestimate the value and usefulness of design guidance for private developers. Thus, a design guide is often seen as a daunting and restrictive device, instead of a facilitating one which it is intended to be. This can provoke a strong sense of resistance and negative attitude which in turn hinders the general acceptance of the guides.

Pro-active Approach to Design Guidance

Experience shows that when private developers have taken a proactive approach to design guidance they themselves often acknowledge that they have achieved overall better and more satisfying results. What are the actions that a positively disposed developer might take? Although these involve several simple steps, the benefits are rewarding. Here, two points need to be made.

- First, it comes to the right selection of an architect. This person should not only have the relevant professional training, but more importantly, a knowledge and understanding of what is the nature of a design guide and how it works. This includes both an overall urban design awareness, as well as good design skills to allow a creative interpretation of the design criteria.

An architect who understands urban design concerns will consider the relevant design guide criteria as an integral part of the client's brief, at the initial design stage. Before lodging the application, such an architect will consult with council's officers to check whether additional information is needed and possibly to accommodate some design modifications if necessary. This is a simple step concerning mostly approach and attitude, rather than actual design solution. Nevertheless, early consultation marks the beginning of a successful application. It saves not only time and energy but also later



disappointments which otherwise may arise from required changes once the design has been completed and the application lodged. Such an approach can also significantly speed up the process of obtaining resource consent permission, thus preventing time delay and financial loss.

- Applicants who open-mindedly have taken a positive approach to design guidelines, achieve developments with good physical image perceived as part of their context. It becomes more and more obvious that developments with strong individual identity which also contribute to the quality of the streetscape, are economically more viable. A small investment in a good quality design can be crucial for long term economic return and increased real estate values, for it is a well proven fact that a positive physical image attracts both people and investment.

Interpretation Issues

Interpretation of design guides is another cause of concern. It is equally valid for both applicants and council's officers responsible for the guides. Here, two interrelated issues should be addressed.

1. Applicants unaware of the fundamental urban design principles find it difficult to understand the validity and objective nature of design guidelines. What they see is an issue of aesthetics derived from one's own personal taste, or restrictive requirements, limiting design solutions to imitation of existing examples. Failure to understand that design guides are concerned with predominant patterns of the existing context often results in a narrow interpretation of otherwise broad and flexible design principles. This in turn can lead to a misunderstanding that design guides restrict solutions to particular styles, failing to comprehend that contextualism is not a style. Rather, it is an approach to urban development that, as practice has demonstrated, allows numerous interpretations and a variety of formal expressions.

2. Although considering design guides from another perspective, council officers often confront similar interpretation issues. In this case, it comes down to who administers the guides. To avoid this it is important that officers who implement the guides have relevant knowledge, understanding and design skills. The latter is especially important as the assessment of physical design requires understanding the principles of visual perception as well as specific training in three-dimensional design. Lack of such skills may significantly hinder the successful implementation of design guidelines, especially when it comes to negotiating design modifications.

Ability to negotiate is another essential skill required for people administering design guides. More often than not, applicants come to consult after the design has taken its final form. If design criteria have not been considered, it becomes especially difficult to negotiate changes in the context of a "win-win" solution. Good negotiation skills and effective communication techniques are crucial for achieving satisfying results without "hard feelings".

Where To From Here

Identifying major difficulties in the implementation of design guides, as well as acknowledging the validity of the main concerns, is an important step towards finding the answer. However, this can be a long process that should be approached as a learning exercise for both applicants and resource consent officers.

It requires continuous education and promotion of fundamental urban design principles to create a positive attitude and understanding of urban quality. This can be facilitated by providing various forums for formal and informal discussions where all parties involved can debate possible approaches and negotiate acceptable answers.

The Urban Design Strategy

While design guides are concerned with the quality of private development in Wellington City, public space renovations are guided by a special urban design strategy. The Strategy was completed in 1994, a year after council established its Urban Design Unit. (refer: *Planning Quarterly*, 112, December 1993)

The Strategy was conceived in response to council's commitment to make Wellington "the city of excellence" by addressing issues of urban quality and city image. The primary concern of the Strategy is improving the quality of central city public space by making it accessible, safe, lively and enjoyed.

The Strategy is one of the few New Zealand examples of an urban design policy addressing specific issues of public space. Its initiation is important for promoting the public status of urban design, while its special nature as a policy document adds enormous value to the New Zealand practice of urban design. In this sense, Wellington's Urban Design Strategy should be recognised as a positive precedent for other cities to follow. It provides useful insights, both as a method, as well as an approach to implementation.

The Strategy as a Method

The methodological value of the Strategy lies behind its flexible approach to urban

improvements. The Strategy is conceived as a living document that can be updated and revised at any time in response to changing demands and without compromising its general objectives. Instead of fixed ideas, the Strategy provides a "menu" of principles and concepts which allow flexible interpretation in the context of changing circumstances.

Thus, the Strategy introduces a "conceptual framework" which identifies important urban qualities and principles of a good city. "Fit", "structure and sense of orientation", "place character", "access and connections", "richness of sensory experience", "variety" and "continuity" are considered essential for a good city; together with principles like "centrality", "pedestrian balance" and "optimising potential" when viewing the city as an "open system". Defining a conceptual framework is fundamental for any urban design policy, for it provides a stable assessment base for guiding urban improvement and an objective reference point for taking responsible decisions. It also ensures a consistent approach to design interventions. It ensures continuity and consistency in the name of established strategic goals by preventing decisions in response to immediate or short-term momentary pressures.

Interpreted in the context of the Wellington's Central Area, the conceptual framework generates a "framework plan". The framework plan identifies the common elements and innate qualities of the city which determine its special character and uniqueness.

The enhancement of these special elements, as well as strengthening their integration to the city, become important design goals for the Strategy. In response to these goals, the Strategy identifies a number of design initiatives.

The initiatives are individual projects related to specific urban locations that build on existing potential, taking advantage of current circumstances. The projects are classified into four groups described as "links", "place", "area" and "programme and infrastructure" initiatives. Thus, they range from the improvement of city/waterfront connections and mid-block, through access, to projects for recovering public space, exploring the potential of waterfront and railway areas to mainstreet programmes, gateway projects, city events and urban detail.

While the conceptual framework and the associated urban image that it promotes are statements of strategic intent, the initiatives, together with the proposed implementation

programme, aim to carry the intentions forward into specific actions. The implementation programme is the other central component of the Strategy, for it determines whether the policy statements and design ideas will become reality.

The Strategy as an Implementation Approach

Translating design initiatives into practice is as difficult as trying to define them, since this is a complex process influenced by different and often conflicting interests. The implementation programme, rightly developed as an integral part of Wellington's Urban Design Strategy, explores a variety of implementation mechanisms. These range from education and persuasion, to discussion of funding mechanisms and defining specific approaches to particular projects.

The implementation programme has three major aims:

- to strengthen the coordination between various council departments;
- to promote the status of the urban design strategy as an overriding policy statement; and
- to facilitate integration into the capital expenditure programme.

Successful implementation of urban design, especially in its emerging state, is critically important for its credibility and status. Urban design for the public domain has a strong political flavour which adds another dimension to the complex circumstances of its implementation.

Very often, public projects aim to resolve more than one problem and satisfy many diverse interests. Thus, two issues become critical – the nature of the institutional structure and the approach to consultation.

In the context of a fragmented institutional structure, implementation of urban design can be extremely difficult. Integrating urban design into individual agendas of separate departments, with little coordination between them, can hardly produce satisfying results. The perception amongst the members of these departments that urban design is about aesthetics, cosmetic improvement and beautification, is often another factor to hinder the process.

Allocating funds to asset managers rather than projects is another big threat for the successful implementation of urban design. Although urban design is responsible for the total quality of the urban environment, its overriding status is still unrecognised. In this context, the public environment as a whole, remains neglected as an asset in its own right. Instead, it is managed in parts by breaking it down into traffic, open space

Top: Newtown shopping centre, Wellington. Public space improvements enhance local identity and sense of pride.

Middle and bottom: Innovative urban detail, Wellington Central City.

and road improvements, each working within its own budget. Under such circumstances, funding urban design initiatives becomes strongly dependant on the willingness of asset managers, or finding and negotiating with other sponsors.

In response to these difficulties, two issues should be resolved:

- reviewing the institutional structure as well as allocating funds to projects rather than assets; and
- advocating the overriding status of urban design and its coordinative role.

For this to succeed, urban design should be seriously considered at the strategic level. It also depends on constant education, advocacy, promotion and negotiation as a means to establish the role of urban design and its public benefits. It requires integration of aims and efforts between the various departments in the context of a flexible and integrated institutional structure.

Searching for successful urban design implementation is a long and difficult process. It relies on commitment, enthusiasm and willingness to experiment. Urban design in New Zealand is steadily finding its way. It is encouraging to see the increasing number of cities that have embraced and integrated urban design into their policy-making. Indicative of this trend are the Hutt City *Environmental Design Framework* (1996), the Palmerston North *Urban Design Framework for the CBD* (1995) and the *Sketchbook Study of the Place of Public Open Space in Central City Christchurch* (1992).

Successful urban design is the key to a satisfying urban experience. It relies on a simple formula – always think about the city in its totality and never compromise it. This requires coordination of efforts and integration of aims.

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