

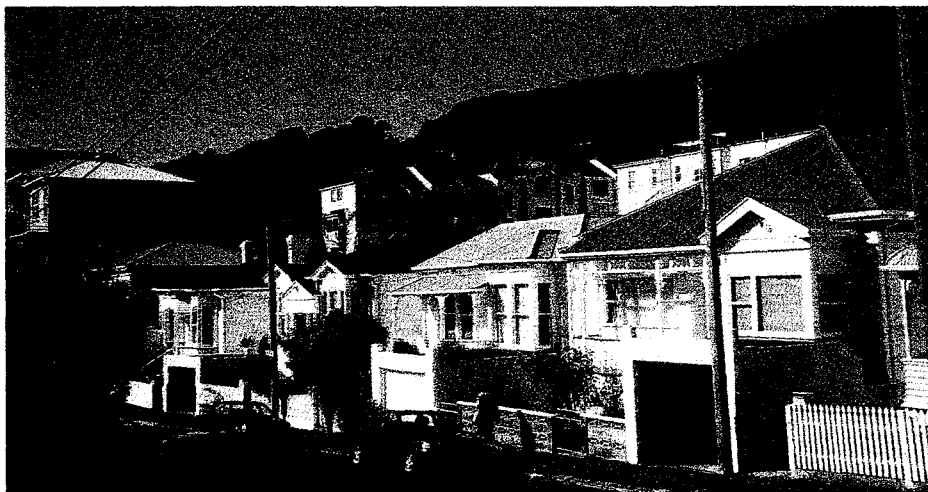
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INCREASING RESIDENTIAL DENSITIES

AN INSIGHT INTO THE ISSUES BEHIND VARIOUS "URBAN CONSOLIDATION" SCHEMES IN WELLINGTON.

Below: Austin St, Mt Victoria - a complying row-housing scheme which nevertheless imposes a different building scale and orientation, and which compromises established rear yard and open space patterns.

Above right: Tasman St, Newtown - townhouse development in a suburban centre area. The bulk and scale of the townhouses is based on a 12m permitted height and 100% site coverage, which exceeds the typical patterns of older dwellings in the surrounding residential area.



Increasing densities in existing residential areas, urban containment and restricting suburban sprawl are well-established and valid items in the agenda for sustainability.

Multi-unit development, or establishing more than two units on a site, whether horizontally or vertically, has become a recurring type of new residential development. New "infill" subdivisions, semi-detached or row-housing schemes of variable scales, conversion of existing central city buildings into apartments and purpose-built apartment blocks are all becoming common features of a changing cityscape. This has certainly been the pattern in Wellington over the past five years.

The integration of new multi-unit developments into existing neighbourhoods on one hand, and the relationship between the individual units within a development itself on the other, often raise complex issues that provoke unexpected concerns. Such concerns relate to the multiplicity of site-specific contexts and a difficulty of predicting the variable issues likely to arise when drafting new district plan provisions.

As planning and urban design consultants, a close involvement with many recent developments has given us an intimate insight into the underlying issues and often conflicting



agendas behind various "urban consolidation" schemes. This article, based on our Wellington experience, provides a brief personal overview of some controversial aspects typically inherent in the implementation of such schemes.

EXISTING RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER AND MULTI-UNIT DEVELOPMENT

Maintaining the existing character, especially of long-established and valued residential areas, is a recurring theme. Such areas have distinctive features based on strongly identifiable development patterns. Consistency of building type, form and scale, together with common rear, side and front yard dimensions, and limited on-site parking, largely account for their collective character. Although when viewed from the street such areas often appear densely built, typically with one- and two-storey old villas and cottages, their site coverage rarely exceeds 40 per cent.

The collective character of such older neighbourhoods is highly valued and many people see them as very desirable "heritage" areas. Hence the expectation is often of minimum or low-impact change along with a conviction that new development should maintain the present character and existing residential amenities.

Given the strength of support and "feeling" for these older areas it is interesting to note that if some of the current district plan amenity provisions (for example, sunlight access envelopes and front yards) were applied to an existing streetscape of older buildings, few if any of those buildings would be likely to comply.

Furthermore, if the current provisions were made to apply to new developments, whether of a multi-unit type or not, the result can often be a building with a shape and form very alien to its older neighbours. In larger multi-unit developments the effect of the building bulk resulting from current "bulk and location" provisions can potentially be disastrous.

It seems, however, that the "conflict" between the existing character of older neighbourhoods and contemporary amenity standards is rarely understood or fully acknowledged by the residents. They expect new development to both maintain existing character as well as achieve compliance with current district plan amenity requirements, particularly when it is a "next door" development. Failure to recognise that existing character goes hand in hand with a different set of "amenity" provisions (for example, sun access, front yards and to a lesser degree privacy) often results in upset local residents.

On another matter, requirements for on-site car-parking and vehicle manoeuvring, together with the permitted site coverage (which is usually higher than that existing), seem to compromise the opportunity of providing usable ground level private open space for each dwelling with dimensions and a location typical for the older neighbourhoods. Thus, a multi-unit development that complies with access, parking requirements and site coverage provisions usually does not and cannot recreate the amenity of existing private open space, nor successfully maintain side and rear yard patterns.

WELLINGTON DISTRICT PLAN

Multi-unit development means different things for the different parties involved in the process of its implementation. Local residents' expectation of a minimum change has to be counterbalanced with the developers' goal of a maximum development and hence maximum profit on one hand, and future residents' desire for an attractive living environment on the other. Attempting to "mediate" between these different expectations are the specific district plan provisions. It is the nature of these provisions and their particular but at times variable interpretation that often creates confusion, thereby giving mixed messages to the parties involved.

The Wellington District Plan has been a forerunner in establishing policies for design

excellence. The 1995 Proposed District Plan introduced a generic design guide for multi-unit housing that set a framework of qualitative parameters for the design of multi-unit development anywhere in the city.

The design guide was intended to complement the more quantitative District Plan rules. However, certain tensions between the two sets of provisions (design guide and rules) have often made their collective interpretation ambiguous and at times apparently conflicting. This has raised serious community concerns, particularly within the older inner-city residential areas of Mt Victoria and Thorndon. In response to these concerns the Council in 1998 notified Variation 14 to the District Plan. The variation was based on comprehensive urban design research and character analysis and extensive community consultation.

VARIATION 14

The primary objective of Variation 14 (now part of the operative District Plan) was to ensure that new multi-unit development was of a scale and form that closely related to characteristic development patterns. To this end the emphasis went on character "measured" according to "compliance" with design criteria, rather than rules, with each new development for two or more units requiring a resource consent for a discretionary activity. This means that compliance with the permitted activity conditions will not necessarily set the scene for an "as of right" development - that is the "hard" District Plan rules no longer allow an instant calculation of how many units a site can accommodate.

Rather, an interpretation of both rules and design standards against the character of the specific neighbourhood will determine the development potential of an acceptable scheme. In addition, there is a rule requiring that the demolition of any pre-1930s buildings requires resource consent as a discretionary activity (restricted) in respect of the "*contribution of the building to the streetscape character of the neighbourhood*". For such applications a written statement confirming the outcome of consultation with the local residents' association is required. The Variation 14 approach, which recognises the character of established inner residential areas and their citywide importance, was to a very great extent community-driven.

The benefits of this approach, the effectiveness of its implementation and its

impact on the scope and nature of future multi-unit development is still to be tested. However, some of the implications of Variation 14 could be rather problematic. The variation provides a lesser degree of certainty and blurs the developer's picture of a permitted development. In a way it also limits the potential for new development, as character provisions imply restrictions on building bulk and form on one hand and impose site-specific requirements for ground-level open space on the other hand, therefore restricting site coverage.

As a counterbalance, however, a "Variation 14" type approach encourages a building form that can mediate between amenity standards and character values, while promoting a good quality on-site residential environment.

The "Variation 14"-type approach, while justified in areas with an established value of city-wide significance, should not be applied as a blanket provision throughout all of the city's older residential areas.

In the decision-making process of determining where and what types of provisions are most relevant, establishing the relative importance of each area and the distinctiveness of its character is paramount. To this end sound urban design research and character evaluation, together with effective community consultation, is critical. Wellington's experience is a case in point. The Wellington City Council has initiated character evaluation for all the inner-city residential areas to ensure that the effects of future multi-unit development in these areas are appropriately managed, while still enabling urban intensification.

MULTI-UNIT SCHEMES IN SUBURBAN CENTRES

The Proposed District Plan (1995) "amalgamated" the formerly separate industrial and retail shopping zones into new "Suburban Centres Areas" able to accommodate the full range of industrial and commercial activities as well as residential activities.

This "new" opportunity seems to be creating a trend toward large-scale residential developments (comprising anywhere from 30 to 40 and up to 100 units) on sites formerly occupied by industrial enterprises.

While the local residents usually welcome this obvious change in the type of the activity, issues of a different nature come into being.

"Reverse sensitivity" and the loss of commercial and industrial development sites is something that should not be ignored or left to be resolved by the market alone.

The District Plan provisions recognise the changing patterns in suburban centres by enabling most activities to be permitted. The plan boldly supports this as it will "provide flexibility for centres to respond to changing market situations".

Yes, the market is indeed "speaking", and it is the residential market that is winning the race in a manner that was possibly not envisaged by the council planners when the provisions were first drafted.

However, once established, large residential developments will take on a life of their own, imposing a perimeter of "residential influence". The question to be asked is whether the present redundancy of certain commercial and industrial buildings and sites will still apply in 10 or 20 years. Moreover, is the envisaged flexibility not in fact compromising future possibilities of mixed used developments in suburban centres?

CENTRAL CITY - THE "VERTICAL" MULTI-UNITS

Converting existing multi-storey buildings into residential apartments and constructing new high-rise apartment blocks in the central area raise different "urban consolidation" concerns.

Similar to residential areas, fitting a proposal into the existing context and ensuring a good level of residential amenity are "hot items" on the central area agenda as well. However, such issues are much less straightforward to deal with, given the Resource Management Act's effects-based approach, the District Plan's encouragement for mixed-use environments, and a general lack of residential amenity provisions for the central area.

The latter "omission" is partly explained by the somewhat unexpected growth in the popularity of central city living since the District Plan was first researched in the early 1990s.

Sunlight access provisions, availability of public open space for new inner city residents, noise, parking, vehicle calming, timing of street cleaning and rubbish collection etc. are some of the issues on the agenda for the current Te Aro (central area) strategic planning exercise in Wellington.

"TO NOTIFY OR NOT TO NOTIFY"?

The quantitative District Plan rules, if applied in isolation from the multi-unit developments design guide, might allow a development of a size way beyond what the local community considers appropriate. At the same time the rule applying to multi-unit developments outside of the central area specifically ranks such applications as a discretionary activity, with discretion restricted to design, external appearance and siting; site landscaping; and parking and site access. Further to this such applications can be dealt with on a non-notified basis and without the written approval of affected persons. Nevertheless, local residents rarely accept this approach as valid, especially with regard to larger multi-unit developments. Large developments require larger sites often associated with high amenity values such as open space, mature vegetation or highly-regarded older buildings. This, coupled with many developers' intention of maximising a site's potential, keeps the argument of "to notify or not to notify" very much alive and well!

Given that the District Plan specifically states that applications for multi-unit developments will not be notified, any issues are essentially resolved through negotiation between the applicant and council's urban design, traffic and planning advisers, with little or no community involvement. It is no surprise, therefore, that increasingly some local residents vigorously and continuously challenge the council's "right" to deal with these applications on a non-notified basis.

And so, while the District Plan starts from the soundly-based policy of urban containment, for which multi-unit developments are a key implementation strategy, the integration of such developments into existing residential neighbourhoods is still an issue of considerable debate. Since the initial notification of the Wellington District Plan the council has sought to identify through urban design evaluation the locations most suitable for this form of urban consolidation, a task that is still continuing.

We see that there is still much to be debated and a lot more to be said on the subject matter. **D**

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