

BY DUSHKO BOGUNOVICH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF URBAN DESIGN UNITEC, AUCKLAND

# PROTOCOL WITH POTENTIAL?

AN THE URBAN DESIGN  
 PROTOCOL DELIVER  
 DESIGN QUALITY AND  
 INTERNATIONAL  
 LEADERSHIP?

The growing community of urban designers in NZ might get a nice present from the Ministry for the Environment - NZ's first Urban Design Protocol. This would make an appropriate conclusion in which urban issues have become prominent in the Ministry's agenda following its adoption of the new Ministerial Portfolio of Urban Affairs.

But are we, perhaps, expecting too much from this document? Can a policy manifesto - by its nature a document of limited power (1) - compensate for 20 years of neglect?

I would not hold my breath. Still, I was filled with optimism recently when I received - like hundreds of you, I hope - a questionnaire from the Ministry, as a preliminary exercise to inform about the development of the Protocol. The questionnaire was very straightforward and had only three questions. Each one hit the nail on the head. Based on such simplicity and clarity of aim, and on the expectation that in the current climate of great interest in urban design many will respond to this survey, I concluded that we do stand a good chance of getting a document that will have impact.

The first question in the survey asked what were the barriers to NZ becoming 'an innovative international leader' in 'high quality urban design'. The second question asked how these barriers could be removed. The third was about 'issues on the ground' that presently needed most attention in NZ cities.

In responding to the questionnaire, I chose first to address the definitions of the key concepts implicit in the first question. Based on the Ministry's wording of the first question, I decided the key concepts were:

- urban design;
- high quality urban design;
- innovative international leader in the above.

My answers were:

**Urban Design** is the process of consciously and purposefully determining the physical form of urban development. It includes both the work of creative individuals and teams (urban design seen as 'the art of shaping cities', in the sense that many modern classics - such as Sitte, Bacon, Cullen, and Rossi - have seen it), and the long and patient negotiations between

developers, planners, architects, engineers, local authorities, and the general public, who often have different interests, visions, and type of expertise (the view which predominates in the more 'realistic', and more politically aware, town planning literature). Within the professional arena, urban design typically represents the meeting ground for city planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, and surveyors.

**High Quality Urban Design** is, obviously, a more value laden term. Here, more personally coloured definitions should be allowed, and perhaps even encouraged. My bias comes from the sustainable development agenda. Consequently, my reading of the word 'quality' in this context has to do with the ideal of attaining such urban development which keeps ecological, social, and economic goals in balance and harmony. Therefore, my definition is this one: 'high quality urban design' is the urban design that is capable of delivering 'triple bottom line urbanism'. TBL urbanism is about cities which are liveable, profitable, and sustainable (and not necessarily in that order of priority....).

**An innovative international leader** is presumably somebody who has answers to an agenda which is not just nationally relevant, but also internationally. Actually, it would be best if the agenda and the answers were global, rather than merely international. Based on information I have (and so does the Ministry, apparently - see foot note 1), the fate of the global environment - and therefore the state of the global economy and global security, and perhaps even the very survival of humanity - will be decided primarily by how quickly we are able to fix the runaway metabolism of our cities. Global peace and human survival on this planet will not so much depend on 'other' global environmental issues - such as deforestation, desertification, depletion of fisheries, atmospheric pollution, global climate change, etc - as it will depend on the form and functioning of our cities. The reason why cities have to be at the centre of the attention is that in them lie most of the causes of all those other environmental problems.

If this sounds credible, than the question of

'international leadership in innovation' surely must have to do with solutions to what seems to be the most pressing global environmental problem - urban environmental solutions.

An additional reason why we should expect the urban sustainability agenda to lead the innovation agenda is simply because we already have a quite well developed body of knowledge about what makes cities liveable and economically prosperous. This is not quite the case with what makes them ecologically sustainable. Some knowledge is there, but it is fragmented, it is experimental, it is 'work in progress', it is not easily accessible, and most of it has not been widely and systematically applied, tested, or assessed. Urban environmental solutions are a current process.

After all, the triple agendas of urban development and urban innovation need not be seen in competitive, or mutually exclusive terms. On the contrary, it is very likely that the real global leaders in urban design innovation will be companies, cities, and countries which will be able to offer three-in-one urban design solutions. In other words, the global leaders will be the purveyors of design solutions which make cities simultaneously:

- (i) ecologically friendly;
- (ii) more beautiful, functional, and safe; and
- (iii) wealthier - by turning urban

environmental solutions into a lucrative business in its own right, because the knowledge and the hardware that constitutes these solutions are ever more sought in the kind of urban, polluted world we live in.

Now about the barriers to quality urban design and international innovative leadership.

Currently, I see at least six major barriers to NZ's global leadership in urban design:

1) Government Policy. It is still in development, and still quite confused over the very concepts I addressed above, and over the equally crucial concepts such as 'sustainable cities' and 'sustainable urban design' (2).

2) Legislation. RMA, as it is, does not adequately sanction: - strategic planning - its nature, purpose, and integration with other policy areas and its relation to the ridiculous idea of 'effects-based planning'; - urban physical environment - its special character, as distinct from the 'resource management' idea and the 'physical resource' concept.

3) An anti-urban (or at least 'benevolent negligence', or 'benign myopia') attitude, or bias, in the national culture. Images of sheep,

snow, and beaches still occupy the iconic position in the national psyche. The CBDs of Auckland, or Wellington, or Christchurch are far less frequently seen on postcards, calendars, and brochures. Also, the suburban domain is physically and psychologically prevalent, and often confused with, the proper urban domain.

4) Professional education. Issues of urban context are poorly represented in the design cumculum in the schools of architecture, landscape architecture, and civil and environmental engineering. Similarly, urban issues are poorly represented in the curriculum of the programmes, or schools, which teach planning, environmental studies, and/or resource management.

5) Local government capacity. City, district, and regional authorities are inadequately staffed and resourced with respect to expertise in urban design. There is little support in the local constituency, or from the central government, for urban environmental projects and experimental eco-solutions.

6) Urban design expertise is both in short supply, and poorly understood, appreciated, and paid. That the two are correlated in these terms appears an economic anomaly. One would expect that the short supply of a service in the market would lift its price. But in this case this is clearly a consequence of nonexistent or weak demand.

How do we overcome the barriers? Here are a few suggestions.

1) I may be naive, but I do think that an overall umbrella for a concerted and successful action is government policy. Currently, the government's key policy document in this area is "Sustainable Development for New Zealand - Programme of Action" (4). This document in its current version is flawed, especially in the Sustainable Cities section. But this can be fixed.


(2) Two other documents issued by the central government - *Live+Work+Play* (5) and *People, Places, Spaces* (6) - could be worth revising, so that an updated, 'greener' version better supports the Sustainable Cities action. The problem with both of these (in somewhat oversimplified terms) is that there is too much emphasis on 'liveability', and not enough on 'sustainability'.

(3) Obviously, the work on this Protocol is an urgent and very important matter and, once adopted, the Protocol needs to be widely promoted and supported.

(4) All of the above suggestions regarding the role of central government policy will have little impact in the end if some of the recommendations are not backed literally with money (investment). The Government must adopt the idea of subsidising physical demonstration of 'high quality urban design' and consequently steer some of its funding - through MED, FoRST, Housing NZ, Creative NZ, NERF... - specifically towards innovative, high-quality urban design outcomes.

(5) The RMA must be investigated and ways found to ensure that this legislation, together with the Local Government Act, can mandate more attention to urban design issues.

(6) Tertiary education providers in the areas of environmental design, planning, and management need to be reminded that their current students will be entering a labour market in an almost 90% urbanised country and in a world badly degraded by an urban explosion. Design and planning must be taught on a solid basis of the young science of Urban Ecology.

While this is hardly an exhaustive list of issues NZ's first Urban Design Protocol should address, I am convinced that the above suggestions are crucial for achieving a quality of urban design in New Zealand which would attract the attention of the world. 

## REFERENCES

(1) On one hand, the Protocol lacks the mandatory character of a law; on the other, it cannot address the idiosyncrasies of NZ's extremely diverse urban scene.

(2) Have a look at the Briefing for the Incoming Minister for the Environment "Healthy Environment - Healthy Economy", July 2002, particularly pp 12-13, chapter on Urban Development, on the MfE website.

(3) See my article in *Landscape New Zealand* Sept/Oct 2003, pp 19-21.

(4) Available on the MfE website.

(5) *Live+Work+Play - Liveable Urban Environments*; Process, Strategy, Action. Ministry for the Environment, 2002. Available on the M E website.

(6) *People + Places + Spaces - A Design Guide for Urban New Zealand*. Ministry for the Environment, 2002. Available on the MfE website.