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TOWN PLANNING IN NEW ZEALAND

THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF
THE DISCIPLINE

In the first years of the twenty first century it is comforting to believe that we are using concepts and tools that represent the zenith of planning knowledge and commitment. The reality is, however, that urban areas in New Zealand have been subject to some form of planning from as early as the nineteenth century. Furthermore in each period those doing the planning are likely to have been motivated by much the same concerns - that is to create a pleasant, healthy and workable urban environment.

This article will briefly trace some of those early urban planning endeavours in the period up to World War II.

COLONIAL BEGINNINGS

New Zealand was one of the last of the British colonies to be developed and as such it benefited from advances made in the knowledge and skills of both surveyors and public health engineers.

European settlement was a mixture of the entrepreneurial - for example Hastings - and the carefully planned. While the efforts of Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the New Zealand Company in creating urban areas with ready-made, carefully stratified societies were generally only partly executed, other church-sponsored settlements such as Christchurch and Dunedin met with greater success.

Successful or not most major New Zealand cities bear the marks of some attempts at creating a pleasant and attractive urban area. Hagley Park in Christchurch, the Wellington Town Belt and the Square in Palmerston North are all worthy examples.

Equally it is not difficult to find examples of the surveyor's art, usually in the form of gridiron street layouts, shown so well in Hamilton East, that were regarded as being both economic and healthy.

The theory was that wind would scour the streets removing the disease causing 'miasmas', thereby improving public health. As a minimum it probably helped to ensure reasonable road layout and the removal of smells.

BEAUTIFYING SOCIETIES - CARING FOR URBAN AREAS

Despite popular belief, New Zealand is and has been since 1911, a largely urban society. By 1926, 64% of New Zealanders lived in an urban area though that town or city was likely to be small in even Australasian terms. For instance in 1921 Auckland had a population of 157,757 whereas Sydney had a population of 899,059, the difference being a product of this country's more modest population growth and its relatively unsophisticated- farming dominated economy.

However within many cities there was a concern that urban environments required some enhancement. In 1887 the Dunedin Amenities Society was formed to plant trees, create play grounds, and develop reserves - in short to improve the urban environment. It was also inspired, particularly in the early twentieth century, by the belief that nature in the form of parks and planting would improve the moral and physical health of the community. Nature could and should become part of the urban landscape.

The Dunedin Society's work proved to be an example to others. The most successful group, the Christchurch Beautifying Society, was founded in 1897, and subsequently many other towns and cities followed suit. The groups drew their membership from the elite of society despite the fact that much of the work was very physical. Men like Samuel Hurst Seager a Christchurch architect, and Hope Gibbons Wanganui's Mayor, were prominent in the movement. In many towns and cities local authorities co-operated with the societies, recognising both the value of involving residents and the quality of the work they did.

The groups' work soon extended beyond beautification and came to include civic improvements and an emerging sense of civic-aesthetic consciousness.

The Christchurch Beautifying Association lobbied the City Council to control advertising hoardings and was involved in a scheme to improve the design of Cathedral Square to better accommodate the newly arrived trams. They

also provided a ready and enthusiastic audience for the new town planning ideas emerging from Britain, Europe and the United States.

Prominent among those who took an interest in town planning was Samuel Hurst Seager who was familiar with the new urban design ideas that underpin the Garden City/Suburb movement. His visits to Letchworth, an icon of the new movement, convinced him that New Zealand as much as the "Old Country" could benefit from these new ideas. Hurst Seager with other enthusiasts such as A Leigh Hunt and Charles Reade advocated the need to control urban development, the value of individual and communal open space and the ability of town planning to create environments that would produce physically and morally healthy citizens.

Reade, who was to play a major role in the Garden City and Town Planning Association, returned to New Zealand in 1914 with William Davidge as part of the Australasian Town Planning tour organised by the Association. It was during that tour that discussion centred on the potential for slums to develop in New Zealand - in short the dreaded symbol of urban decay could arrive if town planning was not instituted as a form of inoculation. While Davidge was in New Zealand he completed this country's first civic improvement scheme when he produced an elegant plan for New Plymouth. Sadly this plan was never instituted.

LEGISLATING FOR TOWN PLANNING

The town planning enthusiasts soon became convinced that legislation was required to ensure town planning was instituted and enforceable on a legal basis. The successful achievement of legislation elsewhere was a spur. The movement had attracted political support from politicians such as Arthur Myers and George Fowlds.

The first attempt at legislation was made in 1911 with a further attempt being made in 1917. Both bills only applied town planning controls to urban areas where the major focus was on planning for urban expansion. There were however provisions allowing for civic improvements and even a recognition of the need to preserve heritage sites. Both bills ultimately failed not through any real rejection of town planning but rather through disputes over how the process would operate and pure politicking.

The 1919 Town Planning Conference and Exhibition was the first official recognition of the town planning movement. The Conference

was held in the wake of the massive societal change produced by the First World War and was overshadowed by the report of the Influenza Epidemic Commission. These factors focused the Conference on dealing with what were regarded as deteriorating urban conditions and a looming housing crisis as repatriated soldiers returned.

Town planning was seen as addressing these problems by the 'replanning' of existing urban areas and the creation of well-planned and designed housing incorporating the best of the new garden suburb and town planning principles. The Conference was however largely a 'talkfest' and produced no real advances in the institution of town planning as New Zealand faced an uncertain and volatile economy in the 1920s.

Thus it was quite unexpected when after little consideration, the Coates-led government commissioned Reginald Hammond who had trained as an architect in New Zealand before undertaking town planning training overseas, to write the Town-planning Act 1926. The new act required urban areas with populations over 2000 to produce a town planning scheme. These schemes would control the development of these areas using a variety of techniques including zoning. Many councils were slow to meet their responsibilities with the Depression, World War II and a lack of trained town planners presenting real barriers.

DESIGNING THE URBAN FABRIC

If town planning legislation was slow to be instituted there was some progress in using town planning and urban design principles. In the early 1920s there was a competition to redesign the civic centre in Auckland, though the plan was never instituted because of concerns about its costs.

In 1925 a major design competition was held to create a garden suburb on the 600-acre government owned block at Orakei. While little of the winning design was ever put in place - most of it was later taken over as a State housing development. The three winning designs showed the sophistication of design skills that existed in New Zealand. Each of the place getters also became prominent in the developing town planning profession.

In the late 1930s John Mawson a talented British town planner who made New Zealand his home, also produced an elegant and farsighted plan to redesign the Government Centre in Wellington. It was again the victim of a lack of

funds and approaching war. Mawson however did contribute significantly to town planning practice when he, with the DSIR, developed a set of development controls based on New Zealand conditions. Many are still in use today.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of New Zealand urban town planning practice is the State Housing Programme that commenced in 1936 in response to an incipient housing crisis. The State Housing Programme aimed to combine the best of architectural design with the best of town planning practice to create pleasant living environments, equal to anything provided by the private sector. Many of the earlier, smaller State housing developments such as Savage Crescent in Palmerston North meet those requirements. While later development repeated some of the mistakes of overseas designs such as multi-unit developments, they were attempting to use the most current design philosophies. What the State housing programme did was to demonstrate how good town planning/urban design could be combined with quality architectural design in a productive relationship. It is a pity that these links have largely been lost.

CONCLUSION

This article is at best a brief survey of the early years of town planning in New Zealand. What it reveals is that within the urban context town planning and its practitioners have contributed significantly to creating environments that were pleasant to live and work in. In many cases they achieved this with considerable support from interested communities - something that we must never lose sight of in our practice. 