

NEIGHBOURHOOD TRANSFORMATION

The Concept of urban neighbourhoods is redefined as a relevant unit of contemporary urban structure.

The urban structure of Auckland City is analysed as a basis for neighbourhood definition and transformation in the context of regional urban growth pressures and the need to provide for a greater diversity of lifestyles.

The strategy of urban intensification as promoted by the Auckland Regional Growth Forum and by the Auckland City Liveable Communities initiative is critically reviewed in terms of neighbourhood definition.

A strategy for urban transformation is proposed for Auckland City that promotes both centre and corridor based intensification in the form of a comprehensive lattice structure defined by main roads and bus routes, incorporating railways stations and defining local sustainable neighbourhoods relevant to contemporary urban life.

Growth Strategy

The Auckland Regional Growth Forum promotes urban intensification within existing metropolitan urban limits as a strategy for managing the growth of the Auckland Region which dominates urban New Zealand. A regional system of growth centres and corridors is promoted.

Within Auckland City these intensification corridors follow the rail routes. In addition, there are five corridors based on regional arterial roads. Four of these are radial, centred on the CBD on the northern side of the city and one is an east-west corridor across the southern side of the city. These corridors are up to seven kilometres apart.

In response to the regional growth strategy, Auckland City has promoted a Liveable Communities initiative, which identifies centres and corridors within Auckland City suitable for intensification, but these are exactly the growth centres and corridors identified in the regional growth strategy. Intensification areas have been prioritised for action where they are centred on railway stations and associated town centres and where they have available utility infrastructure.

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In addition to providing for intensification, the central theme of the Liveable Communities initiative is to create compact urban environments where people live within walking distance to work, schools, civic facilities, shops and parks, and have easy access to public transport. To date, liveable community initiatives have been centre-based and any opportunities for road corridor-based development have been largely ignored.

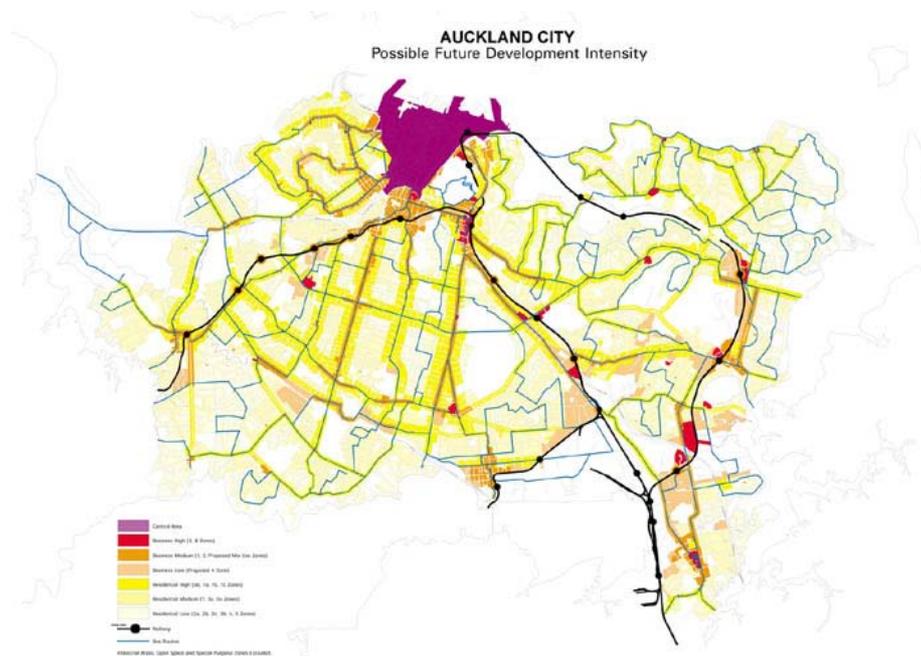
The role of neighbourhoods

This approach for an intensification framework, which responds to the pressures of growth and change within Auckland City, is an entirely "region-down" approach. There is little evidence of a "neighbourhood-up" approach. The latter approach would begin with the cognitive definition of local neighbourhoods and would examine the opportunities and constraints relative to growth and change at the neighbourhood level.

The structure and role of neighbourhoods in contemporary urban planning and design has, in recent years, been largely ignored, as if they no longer matter. However, it is at the neighbourhood scale that people respond to identity, character, lifestyle, the feeling of belonging and the feeling of being at home. Contemporary urban neighbourhoods are not necessarily social units of community, but are physical units with strong cognitive values. People relate to neighbourhoods, rather than to metropolitan areas. People choose to live in particular neighbourhoods. As our urban systems become larger and more complex, and as the importance of tele-communications grow, neighbourhoods may become even more important. Urban neighbourhoods are often quite small in area, easily walkable, and distinguished from others by strong boundaries, specialist services, a particular environmental character, cultural attributes, etc. Physical boundaries often define the edges of neighbourhoods and may take the form of commercial and community development, passenger transport routes, main roads, topographical features, major open space and the like.

Sustainable cities call for a range of different neighbourhoods which support a diversity of lifestyles and cultural values. Even at the neighbourhood scale, a variety of environmental characteristics are likely to be important. Intensification and change, wherever it occurs, will affect neighbourhoods. Whole neighbourhoods can be transformed, others protected. Alternatively, parts of neighbourhoods can change, while other parts remain constant.

Essentially neighbourhoods are the smallest comprehensive units of urban structure characterised by environmental conditions that are of human scale. The edges of neighbourhoods are interconnected to form larger urban cells, which are further connected to the wider city and region by main roads.



Main Road Network

The dominant main road and bus transport infrastructure of Auckland City provides a complexity of opportunities to identify potential corridor intensification at the neighbourhood scale and this indeed can be used to structure and strengthen the identity and function of different neighbourhoods.

The existing main road/bus routes of Auckland City form a grid structure, setting up a network of urban cells bounded by such routes. The distance between such routes varies, but the average is of the order of 1.5km. The walking distance from the centre of these cells to their periphery is, on average, about 0.75km (or approximately 10 minutes).

Land use Patterns

The pattern of existing land use zoning in Auckland City reflects the above main road network. Zones providing for commercial activities, mixed use and higher residential densities form centres and corridors superimposed on the main road network. The zoning promotes corridors of intensification along main roads and bus routes and promotes centres of intensification at key transport intersections and railway stations.

The scale and complexity of this pattern of intensification is much more finely grained than that promoted by the Auckland Regional Growth Strategy and by the Auckland City Liveable Communities initiative. The potential for intensification and the transformation of urban neighbourhoods to better accommodate a diversity of

lifestyles, and to promote urban sustainability in Auckland, is to recognise the complex network of urban cells, bounded by main roads and passenger transport routes, that already exist.

Corridors and Centres

A comprehensive growth strategy for the Auckland Region needs to look at the issues of intensification along corridors and around centres at both the regional and neighbourhood scales, not simply at the regional scale as has been the case in Auckland.

Rail stations, major road intersections and passenger transport interchanges generate the formation of urban centres. This is because such locations are spaced far apart and serve relatively large catchments. Railway stations in Auckland City are spaced up to 3 km apart.

Bus transport, serving by far the larger geographical area of Auckland City, is based on frequent stops located some 0.3 km apart. Bus routes on main roads, like tram routes before them, naturally generate urban corridors as opposed to centres.

Neighbourhood Structure

Urban neighbourhoods continue to be important components of the urban environment. They vary greatly in size, but are commonly grouped within urban cells measuring some 1-2 km across, and are bounded by main road routes.

Neighbourhoods should be of a walkable human scale with every part of the urban cell within 10 minutes walking distance of the main road passenger transport route.

Corridors of mixed use and higher density development along main roads will promote bus passenger transport and provide for growth and change. They invariably form the edges of neighbourhoods or urban cells. Between these corridors, existing quality environments can be protected, thus providing for constancy.

Neighbourhood transformation should be focused on the main road routes which become intensification corridors servicing and defining the neighbourhood areas, while providing environmental protection within the neighbourhoods.

Such an urban structure as described above will provide a hierarchy of both centre and corridor-based intensification at the neighbourhood, city and regional scales, providing a close-grained diversity of environmental and functional characteristics while providing for growth and change as well as constancy.

Cognitive urban neighbourhoods of difference, supporting a growing regional population that is increasingly multi-cultural and heterogeneous, should flourish, making the Auckland region a richer place.

Barry Rae

Barry Rae was an urban designer/planner/architect and founder of Transurban Limited, consultants on urban development. Sadly he passed away in 2009. The company is now run by his son, Nick Rae, Urban Designer and Landscape Architect.