

URBAN DESIGN AS MEDIATION

An evaluation of the work of Auckland City's Urban Design Panel

By Barry Rae, published in *URBAN September 2008 issue*.

Our cities are largely the result of thousands of incremental design interventions. Project by project, the built environment is transformed or expanded in response to new functions and demands. But the result needs to be more than the simple sum of the bits. Each new project should leave the city more connected, more responsive, more healed, more whole.

With every project the questions that need to be asked are:

- how can this project contribute to the public life of the city?
- how can this project leave the city more healed?
- how can this project create a larger whole?
- how can this project create synergies with others?
- how can this project generate other urban opportunities?

Project design

But these questions have been rarely asked by the initiators of projects in the past. Project definition is usually highly focused on the primary objective of the project. Briefs for subdivisions, infrastructure and buildings are more often than not based on single purpose objectives.

Such narrow programmes cultivate a design mindset that cannot see beyond the site boundaries and ignores opportunities for the urban context and the public realm that each project potentially brings.

Further, design professionals have become strong advocates for their client's interests and their own specialties, such that the design of the public part of our cities often drops off the radar of many urban projects.

And yet, if project design engages with the larger urban issues, the economic basis of the project itself is often enhanced.

Resource management

Resource management has not done much to help the situation. We are busy managing resources, instead of designing them. But, as well as designing adverse effects out (as required by the RMA), more emphasis should be on designing social, economic, cultural and ecological value in, to create sustainable urban environments of complexity, diversity and vitality. District plans can define urban design objectives and assessment criteria, but regulatory methods and an adversary process under the RMA are not sufficient in themselves to promote quality human environments.

phone 09 309 2555
fax 09 309 2557
email admin@transurban.co.nz

Victoria Square 2/143 Wellesley St West
PO Box 90921 Auckland 1142

www.transurban.co.nz

Auckland City Urban Design Panel

The above deficiencies of project design and resource management have led to the need to mediate between private and public design issues. In response to public outcries about the design quality of Auckland City developments and to the prompting of the Urban Issues Group of the Auckland branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, the Auckland City Council Urban Design Panel was initiated in early 2003.

Modelled on urban design panels that have operated successfully in overseas cities for decades, it is an independent, advisory, peer review panel which, by default, mediates between project design and city planning to put the design of the public urban realm back on private agendas.

The panel has no statutory power, and is advisory only. It is important that this status is retained as it is difficult, if not impossible, to legislate for good design. Urban design is highly contextual and each project site is unique. Statutory criteria and guidelines are important, but nothing can replace site-specific analysis, review and debate. By being non-statutory, the panel is free to simply advocate good urban design outcomes in parallel with the statutory planning process.

Importantly, the panel engages with the design process, ensuring that wider public issues are recognised and dealt with specifically by design.

How does the Urban Design Panel work?

The panel is made up of urban designers and representatives from contributing professions including architects, planners, landscape designers, and property specialists. The concern is not with project design per se, but with the relationships between project design and public open space and the contextual environment.

The panel needs to ask constantly, what can this project do for the life of the city? The value of the panel is to engage with projects early in the design process so that urban design objectives are a fundamental part of the design programme. Applicants are encouraged to present preliminary design options to the panel so that they can be evaluated in terms of public value as well as private needs. Further presentations can be made to the panel as project design proceeds through its iterative stages, with recommendations from the panel taken on board.

Currently all central area projects go before the panel. Elsewhere in the city, large housing projects, and projects situated adjoining a heritage building, in a town centre, in a character residential zone, adjoining public open space or where design assessment criteria apply, are all presented to the panel. Large projects and proposed Plan Changes of Council also go before the panel for scrutiny.

It is important that the panel is consistent when dealing with any project so that fundamental issues are raised at the first meeting and recommendations to applicants are clear and immediate.

The recommendations of the panel are grouped by a hierarchy of categories: fundamental (must be addressed), significant (should be considered) and other (may be addressed); recognising that any development project has a complex array of design objectives, many conflicting, and trade-offs amongst them are inevitable.

Design issues commonly dealt with by the panel include pedestrian and vehicle access, pedestrian safety and convenience and shelter, public amenity, social interaction and economic vitality (especially active edges to streets and other public open space), building bulk and spatial arrangements, character, building scale and articulation, open space quality, functional and visual relationships with the urban context, ecological sustainability and opportunities that would enhance public use of the area.

The work of the panel is also backed up by council's in-house urban design specialists who review and assess development proposals prior to, and after, the lodgement of resource consent applications.

Where quality urban design outcomes are considered by the panel to be unnecessarily limited by operative district plan requirements, recommendations for change of policy are addressed to the council.

What the Urban Design Panel has achieved

It is clear that the panel has raised awareness of the need to promote the wider design issues of the city within the property and development industry. Without any doubt, the Panel has raised the design quality of development proposals across the board. Designers, property owners and developers have generally expressed support for the work of the Panel, recognising that what is good for the city is also good for their project.

The Panel has also provided peer support for the design industry to address the needs of the city as well as their clients. The value of the work of the Panel is manifest in the seriousness with which most developers and their designers present their proposals.

District Plan and Resource Consents

However, the Urban Design Panel cannot work in isolation from the district plan. It is important that District Plan provisions are conducive to demanding good urban design outcomes because, at the end of the day, resource consents must be based on statutory provisions. Recent district plan reviews have produced new urban design-led provisions for the Central Area and in particular the Victoria and Wynyard Quarters which provide the statutory basis for the advice of the Urban Design Panel.

The promise of the Urban Design Panel is that urban design issues have been dealt with prior to resource consent application. However, projects supported by the Urban Design Panel do not necessarily get approval from planning

commissioners or the Environment Court. They, of course, have to take into account matters other than urban design under the RMA, but in practice the positive and beneficial value of projects for a community's wellbeing (for example as in the case of intensification) unfortunately often lose to perceived adverse effects.

Urban Design as Mediation

As a direct result of the work of the Urban Design Panel, developers and property owners are now appointing urban design consultants to project teams at the inception of the project to ensure project design identifies and deals with all relevant urban design issues throughout the design process, to assist with presentations to the panel and to prepare urban design assessments for resource consent applications.

The role of the Urban Design Panel is essentially a very necessary one of mediating amongst project design, the design of the city and resource management.

Barry Rae

Published in *URBAN September 2008 issue*.

Barry Rae was an urban designer/planner/architect and founder of Transurban Limited, consultants on urban development and has been a member of the Auckland City Urban Design Panel since its inception. Sadly he passed away in 2009. The company is now run by his son, Nick Rae, Urban Designer and Landscape Architect.