

RE-IMAGINING THE CITY

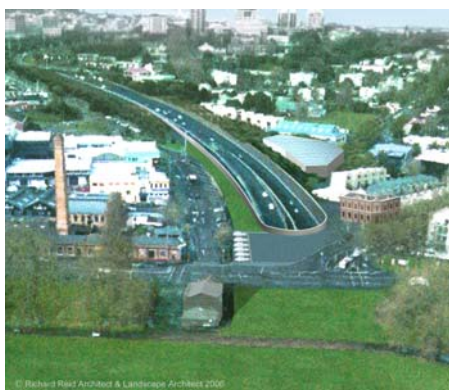
Solutions for local situations

Communities and small interest groups are largely unrecognized players in the seamless guise of contemporary city making. Yet it is often through their involvement and contributions that sound city planning and development can occur. In sometimes stark contrast to city officials and consultant experts, these collectives' resource much needed common sense, worldly experience, astute thinking and accurate observation for the better realization of projects in their urban environments. Indeed, wisdom and generosity, two key ingredients for a responsible and sustainable approach to city making, are usually found in abundance.

Although the typical account of communities' participation portrays them as reactionary and disruptive, my insights on their contribution suggest something profoundly different. It seems to me that a very special kind of social and environmental conscience is enacted, one that draws deeply from its own sense of a body politic so that an injustice served on a community and/or environment might be righted.

In this respect, concerned communities and small interest groups work intensely against the terrible truth of Jean Francois Lyotard's observation, that "it is not estrangement that produces landscape; it is the other way around. And the estrangement that landscape produces is absolute." It is as though issues need to be dragged into the contestable realm of the public domain before official acknowledgment of the city its citizens recognize and want to maintain can occur. Perversely, such transgressive actions usually substantiate and give life to the very planning documents which the developments were expected to comply with.

Birdcage Hotel Precinct, Victoria Park Tunnel Motorway Project



Consent proposal



Richard Reid alternative proposal

As a designer of large scale environments in Auckland, I frequently align my practice with or act on behalf of these groups and their causes. The situation is most often one where the city and its representatives have other priorities which conflict with the recognized values of a place; or, they have given up on a place because of past problems visited upon it; or, the sheer scale of new development

seems to overwhelm the possibility of any other kind of fit (an outcome now seen the world over with inter-generational infrastructure renewal and expansion).

Each city has its own culture of dealing with these situations. Auckland is a relatively youthful city in European terms but has been occupied by Maori for nearly a millennium, with impressive evidence of settlement still visible on the many volcanic cones which rise above the volcanic field Auckland has been built upon. Seen together with the city's two harbours, serene outlying islands and distant forested ranges, Auckland enjoys one of the great natural and cultural settings of anywhere in the world. Yet we lack skill in the art of city making and combine this with a poor record of protecting and enhancing our heritage.

Recent large-scale urban proposals have produced very unsatisfactory design outcomes unless significant remedial action was taken by the public, including from community groups and Maori. These proposals initially represented the vested interests of one party who used its power and resources to try to override opposition through an adversarial or superficial consultation process. Typically, projects offered singular responses with only one outcome in mind. Conceptual designs were formulated by specialist professions, mostly with a technocratic, engineer-led vision many years out of date in its approach to city making. Other consultants, such as architects and landscape architects, seemed to have little power to shift outcomes and were employed instead to wallpaper projects with cosmetic design features.

Gloucester Park Interchange, Onehunga



Existing situation

Consent proposal

Richard Reid alternative proposal

Future opportunities

Mitigation of effects was used as a reconciliatory gesture after the conceptual design process was completed, mainly on the periphery of the project - the 'promise' of a soft touch. Few public good benefits were offered that extended beyond the programmatic concerns at hand. What constituted the interests of "the public" was often limited to users of the development itself (a good example being motorways). Local environments and communities almost always came off second best. In effect, people responsible for these developments did not know how - or perhaps want - to build the city into the outcome.

New Zealand's planning controls encourage the public to prepare practical and workable alternative solutions as one way of establishing convincing evidence of these projects' adverse effects. The

onerous demands of such participation threaten to exhaust public interest in regulatory processes, however recent resource consent decisions have recognized relevant and astute public contributions.

My practice's contribution of alternative solutions is founded on a conceptual approach whose governing principle is best espoused by Henri Lefebvre: "It is not a question of localizing in pre-existing space a need or a function, but on the contrary, of spatialising a social activity, linked to the whole of a practice by producing an appropriate space." Through focusing on bigger picture considerations and integrating public good outcomes as a core component of the solution, we have been able to solve complex problems and transform adverse situations into assets for both the applicant and the city. Intrinsic to the formation of each proposal was knowledge of local histories (both Maori and European) and an appreciation for the spatial relationships that have developed, or might have the potential to, over time. Our solutions have been deceptively simple and usually create space where none was perceived to exist.

Proposals have included redesigning a portal entrance for an inner-city motorway tunnel so that a strong urban space and heritage building could be retained and enhanced at ground level (see *images: Birdcage Hotel Precinct*); completely redesigning a proposed motorway interchange in order to avoid destroying a volcanic cone and severing a suburban community from its town centre and coastline, the roading solution also outperforming the original proposal in traffic engineering terms (see *images: Gloucester Park Interchange*); redesigning a trench for another motorway so that it extended the slope of a local volcano instead of cutting through it with an 11m high retaining wall, then re-organizing the spatial layout of the reserve on top of the same volcano to reflect the worldview and land use patterns of Maori settlement on Auckland's volcanoes (see *image: Puketapapa Mt. Roskill Volcano*); and, significantly increasing a cemetery's burial capacity without requiring further space, destroying protected vegetation or diminishing the heritage status of the cemetery, all the while enhancing its landscape values.

Puketapapa Mt. Roskill Volcano



Redesign of northern face of volcano by Richard Reid in collaboration with Ngati Whatua o Orakei & URS (for NZTA & Auckland City Council)

All these projects were developed from a 'whole environment' approach, suggesting that design at this scale works best when it is conceptualized as a 'bridging structure' incorporating multiple concerns and interests, rather than as built form concentrating or monumentalizing individual ones. I found that

large city problems can be solved through the sensitive inclusion of many factors and scales instead of avoided by their exclusion.

Hence, the relationship between large scale urban development and its locality can be mutually supportive, not only to foster sustainable cities and communities, but as a core approach to problem-solving and city making. Lateral thinking will produce a surplus of social, environmental and economic opportunities, as well as inspire new directions for the sustainable evolution of the city. Similarly, imaginative designs will open our sensory field of perception to wider experiences and interpretations. Weak existing patterns can be interrupted, areas can be transformed and communities revitalized.

First, however, we need to engage with the city and all its complexity, diversity and emotions. Therein lies the task: re-placing and re-imagining our approach to urban development so that it inhabits the city meaningfully and creates better local places for us to live in. Simply put, this is the desire of public interest groups whose concerns for the well-being of the city, its communities and environments, helps sustain us towards achieving this goal.

Until such a time ever arrives, the right and ability of the public to contribute is vital. I have experienced several occasions where the life-force and intelligence of interest groups has overcome intractable organisations and irretrievable situations. A particular feature of our success has been a willingness to collaborate with other parties in a manner normally expected of authorities. Although this is undoubtedly a reflection of the need to gain wide support for alternative solutions, the effectiveness of such an approach is still astonishing, supplanting as it goes forward the role and responsibilities of those same authorities.

Perceptive recognition of this was included in the resource consent decision for a nationally important transport infrastructure project which the Gloucester Park Interchange was a part of: "The Auckland City Commissioners witnessed the significant positive involvement of submitters from the local community, who together with Maori, have put forward a well considered package of alternative options. The community response overall reflects a more balanced approach."

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