



Photograph: Photo Esasi Ltd

### THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

In December 2008 I wrote an article for *Architecture NZ* entitled "Re-placing Infrastructure". The article reviewed the design of recent transport infrastructure in Auckland, focusing on the difficulties these large projects faced integrating successfully with their urban environments. A common outcome was the creation of significant adverse effects for local communities and places because of the projects' singular approach to the programme. In essence, these projects lacked support and the skills to build the city into the outcome.

One of the case studies I examined was the SH1 Victoria Park Tunnel Project, currently under construction (01). This project is the final stage of the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA)'s plan to ease congestion through the motorway corridor which circumnavigates Auckland's CBD. It involves building a tunnel under Victoria Park for motorway traffic heading northwards towards the harbour bridge and converting the existing four-lane viaduct over the park to southbound lanes only. In the medium term (that is, before 2030), NZTA plans to underground the southbound lanes and demolish the viaduct.

NZTA's tunnel design required movement of the Birdcage Hotel, an architecturally significant heritage building (built 1886), sited on the original

coastline before Freemans Bay was reclaimed with Victoria Park. NZTA's consented proposal in 2006 permanently relocated the hotel 40 metres up Franklin Road. This would have protected the physical substance of the building, but not the important relationships with its urban landscape and social context.

My practice advocated for the return of the hotel to its original position on top of the tunnel in order to maintain these relationships. We developed many design drawings to promote this outcome, as well as to convey how this could be achieved. Our vision was later shared by the Auckland City Council Urban Design Panel in their recommendations for the project. In June 2010 NZTA announced that it would now return the hotel to its original position on top of the tunnel. This article explores the wisdom of this decision from an urban design perspective and illustrates the potential benefits that may accrue for the hotel and the city as a consequence.

I have often been asked why the hotel and its site are important. The answer is that the underlying landform structure and the complementary human arrangement of features on top of it imbue the place with a special character. In ancient Chinese terms, this place would be called an auspicious





Images referred to in Richard Reid's text: **01** A recent aerial photograph of Victoria Park and Freemans Bay, Auckland, showing construction underway at the Victoria Park tunnel project. In the photograph, the Birdcage Hotel is at left centre. Franklin Road runs on the diagonal up through the image. **02** The Birdcage site in the mid-nineteenth century, before the construction of the hotel. **03** (Overleaf) Reidian prospect for the future. **04** (Overleaf) Map showing present and proposed future development around Victoria Park.

site. The Birdcage Hotel started life as the Rob Roy Hotel (a name it has reverted to) directly across from the Freemans Bay shoreline. A photo taken before the hotel was built (**02**) portrays the empty site's proximity to the water, yet just as telling is the formed network of dirt roads which converge in front of where the hotel now stands. The hotel's strategic position is also evident in a pre-1930s plan of the reclaimed waterfront with the coastline of 1841 overlaying it. This shows the building was sited at the confluence of water, residential and business catchments flowing down from above it, and sat at the head of the bay opening in front of it. The drawing and photo indicate how much the site was a focal point and meeting ground for these natural and social environments.

This big-picture configuration is echoed by the small-scale arrangement of buildings and trees that settle around the hotel today. These gently contain or "harbour" the hotel in the same way the architecture of the bay does at a larger scale. The overlooked open space in front of the hotel acts as an invisible foreground for appreciation of the hotel. However, it also imbues the building's small stature with a civic dignity, and ties together the buildings and trees surrounding it. Only the oppressive weight of the viaduct overhead

blinds us to the space's value and its potential to be transformed into a landmark urban square in conjunction with the hotel.

These different scales of relationships are further charged by the orientation of the hotel itself. The hotel was essentially designed as a corner building with the building's two most important façades aligned with the historic street pattern. One of these faced the tangential approach of Franklin Road whilst the main façade was built up to a former laneway which ran diagonally between Franklin Road and Union Street (the line of which is continued by the adjacent apartments). The resultant eccentric angle of the hotel in relation to Victoria Street works on many levels: its three-quarter turn shifts focus away from an orthodox frontal relationship to the street; it enhances the sculptural treatment of the building in the round (both façades can be viewed as one continuous elevation); it deflects attention towards the adjacent Victoria Park Markets (which uses a similar warm earthy brick); and it creates a dynamic pocket of open space in front of it.

The return of the hotel to its original site allows these relationships to be maintained. What, therefore, are the potential benefits from removing the viaduct?

## ACROSS THE BOARD 6.2010



- Built development 2010
- Planned development 2010
- Likely development 2010–2030
- Potential development 2010–2030
- Potential underground Cook Street off-ramp
- Proposed linear park

NZTA's plan to remove the viaduct (it has a limited life due to concrete cancer) will allow all aspects of the precinct to be developed to their potential over time. Importantly, the benefits will cross both sides of Victoria Street and work at both the micro and macro scale of the city (04). Firstly, the hotel and open space, properly joined together for the first time, will become the focal point of the precinct. A new public space is created that no longer speaks solely about origins but starts to form a new relationship with the city. The dimensions of the space are enhanced by claiming the car parking area on Union Street and by pushing back the tunnel portal wall in order to float the hotel in front of it. The ground plane's earthy palette responds to the warmth of the heritage brick and a grove of kanuka (*Kunzea ericoides*) from the motorway corridor planting is invited into the social realm of the city.

The public space acts as a congregation point for public and personal gatherings, provides generous room for hotel patrons to socialise outside, encourages free movement across it in order to better connect the network of pathways from the surrounding catchment, serves as a spill-out space from the tightly woven interior of the Victoria Park Markets, and potentially forms a dropping-off point for public transport. The frequency and intensity of the space's use is already ensured by the current trend for large corporations (Vodafone, Air New Zealand and Telecom) to move their head offices and thousands of staff to high-profile residences around Victoria Park. The park's value as a new location for development is also recognised by a rapidly growing and more densely stratified residential population (Beaumont Quarter, Rhubarb Lane and Wynyard Quarter). The outcome in time will deliver a much stronger urban structure and form, wealthier and more sophisticated business and residential communities, a significant increase in pedestrian activity and the need for high value public space to socialise in (04).

The viaduct's removal also enables the northern side of Victoria Street to be brought meaningfully within the re-visioned precinct. Community use of the Logan Campbell Free Kindergarten (built in 1910 and currently being restored by NZTA) is strengthened by a gateway structure alongside. The steel-and-glass-canopy marks a formal entrance into Victoria Park and accommodates a weekend market, thus retaining a populist association with the precinct even if the Victoria Park Markets are redeveloped into a high-end retail and commercial enclave, as presently planned. The lightweight structure reflects the delicate London plane trees either side and filters the open space of the motorway corridor which flows down the valley into the park.

The northern side's contribution to the precinct would also be enhanced

by a five-storeyed V-shaped residential block built along part of Victoria and Beaumont Streets to re-energise the dead space of the park's south-western corner (in purple, 04). This would help stitch together the weak transition from city to park at the base of College Hill, intensify use of the precinct both day and night, dramatise the gateway entrance into the park and strengthen Victoria Street's definition as a key urban corridor. Rather surprisingly, this section of the park used to house multiple residences until fairly recently, so the proposal is not as controversial as it might sound. Only the scale is different in order to maximise the city-making opportunities on offer.

All these concrete proposals significantly extend the initial gesture of returning the Birdcage Hotel to its original position. The two sides of Victoria Street will be joined as an urban experience, making the precinct more intimate in scale, grain and texture, and more subtly containing in the round. Moreover, the looming presence of the old brick 'Destructor' chimney now forcefully comes into play, with the precinct's tripartite arrangement of building, gateway and "column" (or obelisk) becoming a local Trafalgar Square of sorts (03). This rather grand association is enhanced by the precinct's location which, remarkably, is sited on the political and spatial boundary of the CBD. The precinct, in fact, marks the crossing between suburb and CBD, and hence at the larger scale of the city forms a new western gateway to the CBD.

Our short- and long-term design proposals for the Birdcage Hotel precinct demonstrate how infrastructure and urban design can work together on multiple levels, drawing together local communities, healing the ruptured fabric of the city and creating a new urban vision for Auckland. These ideas are evidence that large city problems can be solved through the sensitive inclusion of many factors and scales, instead of avoided by their exclusion. The skills required embrace a diverse programme of possibilities which concentrate on revitalising the city, not just on accommodating a transport project through it.

In this respect, our design approach strives for a whole-of-environment outcome where the quality of the mutual relationships establishes the success of the project. With this and the other cases I examined in "Re-placing Infrastructure", we discovered such an approach also produces a surplus of social, environmental and economic opportunities, inspiring new directions for the more sustainable evolution and liveability of the city. **Richard Reid**

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