

## Ruminations on making urban space

Pip Cheshire

**The bricks, mortar, concrete and glass that make up a city are the spore of the sum of its inhabitants past and present; a built aggregation of human endeavour. Where the individual buildings tell stories of an owner or company's hopes and dreams the pattern of city streets and public spaces tell more complex stories. Some cities are formed by the inexorable accretion of occupation, the streets and laneways paved, formalising the pathways and carriage trails that have been worn into the landscape over years of human passage. New Zealand cities are a more recent construct; a planned and designed pattern of ownership overlaid on the land, and the trails and shapes of earlier occupants.**

Auckland is just such a city, laid out by surveyor Felton Matthews in 1840 as a series of concentric arcs radiating out from Albert Park. The arcs create a series of gentle crescents each containing a particular use and linked by a number of avenues radiating from the heart. The erratic economic fortunes of the fledgling colony's economy constrained the ability to realise the Felton Matthews plan. Though the plan was more honoured in the breach than its observance the aspirations of the colonial development agencies which commissioned it were clear; the ordered arrangement of human affairs based on the familiar models of Britain and Europe.

Though founded and planned to achieve the ordered look of empire Auckland, like the rest of the country, has grown in sprawling low density suburbs surrounding the inner city. Where the suburbs reflect, for better or worse, the utopian notions of the mid twentieth century welfare state, the inner city is a composite of public and private sector investment generally unconstrained and undirected by either ideology or coherent urban design strategy.

The absence of a deliberate design strategy in the inner city reflects the relative indifference of the

population to urban issues. The making of public space and its impact on the body politic are at best arcane issues, shrouded in jargon and beset by arguments about environmental determinism and the ability of design to effect behaviour. The laissez faire economic policies of the 1980s have also led to the dismantling of much of the local authority design apparatus; the council architects offices dismantled, services outsourced and the office of city architect, once the guardian of the quality of city life, abolished. In place of the city as an entity designed and constructed with a social and political program came the city as the consequence of unfettered market activities; if councils could attract and oil the wheels of private enterprise then a working city would surely result.

At the height of this monetarist surge the councils themselves embraced the machinations of developers and colluded with business to ease the path of development, sometimes to the extent of being major developers in their own right. One might only look to the abandoned Britomart scheme of the early 1990s to see the singular focus council officers bought to bear on assisting the city to grow its corporate base.

In the rush to assist the development of the property councillors and officers set aside decisions as to the quality of city life that the development would deliver to either the development itself or the wider city. Quality is a difficult criteria to argue, especially so in the face of the 'hard data' of projected revenue streams. It was, though, just such criteria that slowed the project enough in the Environment Court for the mid decade reverses of the Asian tiger economies and a change of city mayoralty to undermine the financial viability and political will of the project. Covering nine city blocks at the bottom of town it proposed the demolition of heritage buildings to make way for a thicket of office towers above a transport centre and it was over issues of the preservation of heritage buildings, described as cultural markers, that the arguments waged and the project ground to a halt.

While the end of Britomart was a miasma of politicking and legal action in many ways it represents the beginning of new engagement by both citizens and council in the deliberate making of a city. It was also the formal acknowledgement that history, in the form of the remnants of colonial warehouses if not of earlier Māori occupation of the site, is an important element in the creation of city life. . It was also an acknowledgement that the provision of a safe, attractive, vibrant city and inclusive city is too complex a task to be left to the happenstance of corporate decision making and that public agencies needed to engage in the shaping of the city. Urban designer Stuart Niven has characterised the role of council urban design as "representing those not at the table when decisions are made". This refers to the way in which the city is given physical form in negotiations between council's statutory regulators, the town planners, and property owners, yet is occupied and used by a far greater number of building occupants, passers by and citizens in general.

The disjunction between those who shape the city and those who occupy it is evident in the debate over the location of Auckland's football stadium. This was a rare opportunity to engage in the debate over a new construction in the city, a building which will have a significant impact on public space and which will determine much of how the eastern part of the Queen Street valley relates to the harbour edge. While the debate focuses on issues of site location, building bulk and appearance and

transport access many of the more critical issues affecting the quality of the city failed to enter the public debate.

It has been said by architects that 'god is in the details', by others that 'the devil is in the details', either way the point is made that the way in which things are assembled, be it buildings or public space, determines the quality of experience. Aotea square is well located between old and new town halls, at the head of the city's main street and within a precinct that mixes entertainment, education and commerce. For all these positive aspects the square has consistently failed to excite the imagination of the city and is a diffuse unfocussed space that welcomes neither large crowds nor solitary users.

Those in the business of making public space will point to a number of failures such as the lack of containment to the south that prevents the concentration of users or the lack of occupied edges that fill the surrounding buildings with people rather than blank walls. It is, though, the failure for the space to have been conceived with any sort of vision that underlies the square's failure; it is neither considered in the memory and knowledge of Felton Matthews nor of any other identifiable model.

If Aotea Square is both a failure of imagination and a failure to consult precedent it is not alone, the city being scarred by public spaces, and buildings, that share similar shortcomings. To address this the City Council has, in the last five years, established urban design panels, groups of worthy architects, urban designers and developers whose critiques of projects are intended to ensure a better quality of city prevails. Projects are required to be submitted to it as part of the resource consent process are reviewed with reference to the quality of experience that users and passers by will experience. The criteria employed by the panels is founded in urban design theory and values which invariably refer to European models as precedent, indeed until very recently the discipline's education was entirely dominated by a few colleges in Britain and the north east of America.

It is timely to consider the degree to which public space might be culturally determined given the changing makeup of the city's demographic.

Designers and urbanists have great difficulty agreeing common criteria for discussing the extent and qualities of even simple space and the identification of the parameters of culturally specific space is an extremely tall order. The art, or science, of spatial analysis is an imperfect craft yet one might make some empirical observations of public space in order to guide the makers and reviewers of such space in this country.

Consideration of the qualities of public space must build on assumptions of physiological comfort and security as a priori human wants. There is a considerable body of literature analysing the successes and failures of public space in dimensional terms. Such analysis typically concentrates on the ratio of height of building in relation to the width of public space enclosed, the width of pavements, orientation of streets relative to the sun and prevailing winds and the nature of occupation of buildings containing the space, the examples are invariably European.

In this context the Chinese lantern festival and the Pacifika festival stand in contrast to the ordered processional celebrations that inspired colonial public space. The vast number of people attending the events temporarily overwhelms the city and imposes a new order of public space; spaces that are dense, active and noisy. Crowds have always gathered in this country, to celebrate the end of war or the winning of a sporting prize, or the annual arrival of Santa. The two festivals are different events though; they are gatherings in which the primary focus is not the glimpse of a sports prize, or of Santa, but derives in large part from the crowd itself- the pleasure gained from being part of a large number of people with a roughly common aim.

These events take existing built space, Albert Park and Western Springs in these cases, and transform them such that traditional patterns of use and movement are reconfigured; gentle axial walkways and curving promenades lost underfoot and suggest the necessity of less proscribed and delineated design of open space.

Setting aside the formal preoccupations of nineteenth century British colonialism does not however imply an abandonment of public space as a place in which to achieve cultural objectives. The formal arrival and welcome protocols of Māori and

other Pacific people for example requires a highly structured organisation of space. This can include orientation to landform, the locations of host and visitor and the sequence of procession, challenge and speech making associated with the welcome.

The ability of such Māori protocol to be adapted to available space indicates both the flexibility of the culture and the minimal importance of specific spatial organisation to the ability to stage the event. The example though also reveals the importance of spatial organisation to ritual; even if a welcome is performed within 'found' space, an office building for example, the relative placement of host and visitor is maintained.

The city gets very few opportunities to make big new areas of public open space, those that are constructed invariably being in the outer city and required to accommodate the full range of suburban family life, recreation and sport. It is, therefore important that those charged with making urban public space respond to the needs of a less homogenous populace within the city. The evidence of events such as Pacifika suggests that appropriate spaces are large, open and non-specifically designed and able to be reconfigured to suit anything from a large celebratory event to a formal ceremony. Successful European examples point to an occupied built containment over much of the perimeter as important criteria though open space from other cultures shows containment by landform or vegetation is equally as effective. The desire for both open uncluttered space and containment are not contradictory imperatives though the degree of planting and landscaping within the space remains a moot point. Where the European model is invariably hard paved, probably reflecting the most robust climatic conditions, the more informal lifestyles that have evolved in Auckland seem to suggest a grass surface to allow informal games, picnics and so on.

The uses that the open space in the middle of the Britomart precinct has been put to have been an interesting laboratory. At various times it has been a tarmac topped carpark, an open paved promenade, a grassed art gallery with outdoor bar and plants, a soccer field, film set, motorbike rally location, market, skateboard zone and the location of a number of cultural festivals. In each the organisation of space has been manipulated to suit

the event but the base geometry remains; that of a simple shape contained by buildings forming a clearly marked perimeter. This somewhat minimal prescription for new city space should be refined, with smaller more intimate spaces for smaller groups, more solitary activities at the edges and the acceptance of the vagaries of site and geometry to loosen the hard edged geometry that is so evident in Britomart.

Despite the generalisations the prescription for loose fit and informally laid out public space is a useful start. Such spaces will be much the richer if they are able to generate an awareness of the particularity of the site location, some combination of orientation and outlook that is unique to the site. Marae are perfect examples of outdoor space organised in close relationship with their site, entry and main buildings being organised in relation to land features of special significance. Where marae are organised around relationships with land particular to that area identification with this country's land, light and natural elements is increasingly important as a means of identity in the wider population.

One need only look at the critical role landscape plays in the promotion of New Zealand in international media, not only is it shown to be beautiful to look at but we are portrayed as a nation of people actively engaged in the physical world, be it jumping off high bits, sliding down steep bits and running or walking through lonely isolated bits. The simple informal open space that is uniquely related to a location's underlying landforms and their symbolic relationships thus offers a welcoming ground which the many strands of culture in this city can claim.

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