

A city within a botanic garden concept

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What if you could live within a Botanic Garden? Wouldn't that be the dream of all botanically minded people, and indeed most people?



Mixed use of residential and business property amongst abundant plantings in Brisbane, Australia

For a privileged few, such as Botanic Garden directors and key park staff it can be a reality. For a time my wife and I lived in a park house at a premier city park. We loved the lifestyle. The envy of our friends, they all enjoyed spending time at our place. It was a grand house in a garden location and when we left we knew it would be a while before we could live that way again. It was a safe, beautiful, leafy place with a lot of healthy social interaction, pride and a sense of community. So often the neighbourhoods around a Botanic Garden reflect that mood. Most often, leafy suburbs are considered desirable places to live.

These oases of green open spaces provide mental and physical replenishment, are living places, social hubs and the lungs of our cities and become proud enclaves to seek out and spend time in.

While often the city is the very environment that drives people out of it, spare a thought for some of the world's most popular cities; it is no coincidence that Vancouver and Melbourne are both the two most 'parked' cities in the world.

Name a city and most people will know the focal park or botanic garden – New York, Central Park; London, Kew Gardens; Edinburgh, the Royal Botanic Gardens; Wellington, the Botanic Gardens; and so on.

Ask yourself if a city was run by a Botanic Gardens Director what would it look like? Certainly within a Botanic Garden the transportation and utility needs of people for example, often appear to work harmoniously within the beautiful settings.

Go "wide" for a moment; enjoy the vision in colour, on a widescreen. If the overarching approach long term was to introduce to a city the elements that work so well for a Botanic Garden, wouldn't you achieve the very environment that people so eagerly travel to get to?

I do not believe it is just the intrinsic New Zealand egalitarianism coming out in me to suggest that cities within Botanic Gardens should prevail when the very values and features that urban designers constantly look to retrofit into our cities are already present in urbanised Botanic Gardens and in many cases their immediate neighbourhoods.

Cities run by visionaries, that can take a simple idea and take the people with them, would surely look to the universal enthusiasm people have with their Botanical Garden. If the very thing that people strive to be a part of was in fact their lifestyle, what would be the impediments in achieving that long term? These values seem to be those that are already sought globally in managing our impact on the planet. If Earth is to get through the next 100 years doesn't our

industry already have the best practice approach available for researching this future for within our cities?

It is not an accident that some locations call themselves the 'garden city' or a 'garden state'. In some ways, what is not complete in practice can be made up for by marketing in the interim. In the same way when an 'award winning garden' can have only minimal vegetation elements, then surely a city is no different?

Cities have undergone transformations based on themes. "A city within a Botanic Garden" may not be such a massive concept when one witnesses many of the principles that constitute a well led Botanic Garden already taking place in progressive cities.

Incremental victories such as roof top gardens, street tree plantings, 'sustainable' commercial developments, improvements to city land and transportation corridors, and even café planters already occur as people instinctively seek to establish a balance and all play their part.

Increasingly, the focus of retrofitted city design is centred on diligent street and public land plantings. These, when combined with integrating multi-modal



Plantings associated with a converted warehouse in Perth, Australia

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Plants, people, and buildings at the Montana International Jazz Festival, Tauranga, New Zealand

transportation systems and renewal projects for cities, can align a series of visions in their urban context. Cities run by the values of car transportation and by the needs of utility companies look like they do for a reason. The result is nothing like a park setting, yet a park mindset would appear to make the proper integration of utilities achievable. An overall vision of a Botanic Garden would be everyone's solution, and no matter how long it takes.

If the overall underlying value was that your city was working towards a Botanic Park vision as its environment, a great deal of other things fall into place. The very goals sought by leading communities, transportation systems, and the many environmental goals pursued by various agencies, would have to look no further to convert their rhetoric into reality. It would turn 'sustainability' into a word with integrity, and not just slang.

The behaviour and requirements for utility companies and the public themselves are often quite different when within a Botanic Garden environment. Transposed into an urban environment these success models, for not only utilities but say educational programmes and philanthropy that work so well within

the Botanic Garden, could work for the same reasons once outside the physical boundaries of a Botanic Garden itself. It is no coincidence that downtown beautification projects, when led by landscape designers as opposed to other professionals, win more awards. Same solutions but larger scale.

In Tauranga City where I work, we are currently undertaking a review of strategies and policies to determine, in collaboration with the community, an overall plan for treescape and vegetation and to explore with the population the 'levels of service' and preparedness to pay for the various approaches. This is within an overall 'Smartgrowth' agreement between three local governments. Our funding sources for implementation include development levies ('impact fees'), some philanthropy, but principally property tax (rates) based on the capital value of the property.

Compared to the USA, New Zealand is in the infancy of philanthropy and could take a leaf out of the book of nearly any USA botanical institution in their approach of receiving good income for development programmes. Tauranga City is in the early stages of a city wide investment strategy. Companies and organisations

become 'City Partners', and commit to a corporate giving programme for a prioritised listing of infrastructural assets of NZ\$120 million for Tauranga City. A target of a \$60 million contribution within the programme is intended to be funded this way.

"A City in a Botanic Garden" is precisely the concept the infrastructural managers at Tauranga City Council are entertaining as a viable vision. It is also a vision people are quick to pick up on. The approach is city wide and could influence all infrastructural development. It would complement private developments where a collegial theme is embraced. And the result? A truly liveable city and a good place to live.

The first challenge for an overall vision such as this is the inter-agency relationships. As you start integrating this work you strike every other sector which is inherently given to "elbowing" with each other to be dominant. Leadership, and the consolidation of the respective strategic projects based on an overall vision, will be successful through the promotion of integrated implementation plans.

Politically, there is no problem in advocating the position that "we will be trialling the approach", and gives any elected member an 'out' to manage the direction of the vision, through any stage of its journey.

We know a Botanic Garden should not merely be a ring-fenced plant zoo corralling the staggering survivors of planet wide vegetative destruction, for only the viewing appreciation of those able to get to the garden.

There are some important messages in Botanic Gardens that should infiltrate communities beyond their gates, and feature in those communities themselves.

Maybe, the ancient City of Babylon was onto something.