

Streets as potential precincts: a personal view

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Introduction

The term precinct is defined as “a space, especially an enclosed space around a building or other object” in the *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1976). Streets fulfil this definition, whether linear or curvilinear, as they are spaces enclosed on either side by buildings. Streets are places that we hold in our memories in a multitude of ways, such as processional routes or just the happy days of 'going to town'. By using the term 'precinct' rather than street, a more contained environment is suggested, one more friendly to pedestrians. Within New Zealand there are some urban streets and avenues of merit that would qualify as precincts. In this article Wellington's Lambton Quay will be used as an example of one of the finest precincts in New Zealand. The evolution of this street will trace how Wellington City Council made it happen. Some overseas examples are also used to illustrate the make-up of a street precinct.

Precincts

New Zealand has magnificent scenery on the open road, but the arterial approaches to cities and towns are through dismal suburbs, into narrowing veins of feeder streets, finishing in urban vascular congestion. While conditions are similar in the Old World cities and towns of Europe, they somehow achieve a refined and pleasant urban impression through the respect shown for their main streets. The historic evolution of many of the older

cities created the advantages of curvilinear thoroughfares. New Zealand city grids laid down 170 years ago do not have those advantages.

The imposed grid patterns of New Zealand urban streets have to be accepted. However, we do not have to accept only the street's function, and resign ourselves to noise and pollution, to visual monotony, and 'seeing but not seeing'. There is a need for visual quality. A change in commercial and public attitudes could mean thinking of a street as something more than a traffic route. A change to a more imaginative term than street is needed, to one that will conjure up an image of possibilities. By using 'precinct' for a main shopping street it could suggest something more enjoyable than a dull street. A fresh look at building facades old and new, pavement widths, tree planting and slower traffic movement can reveal a potential within the existing street grid layout.

However, plans for comprehensive street upgrades by local authorities are regarded by citizens as high-handed interference, causing outrage or at least a silent resentment. The 90's vogue for 'Main Street Programmes' failed to win over many of the public. Cost over-runs on big schemes designed by ambitious consultants led to much antipathy and public hostility. Street improvement designs had metre long plans and were short on detail, and became a testimony that 'grand schemes invite long delays'. This was particularly the case in provincial towns.

Wellington's Lambton Quay

It is very difficult to present a comprehensive improvement strategy when the ratepayer is more interested in what happens at their front door. Staged implementation is essential. The Lambton Quay development is a good example of making staged improvements in a very narrow enclosed street at a pace the public could see and absorb as the improvements were taking place.

The high rise building boom years of the 80's was due partly to bringing buildings up to earthquake standards. Wellington City Council (WCC) firmly managed these requirements, and opportunities were taken. A visionary team from the Planning, Traffic Management and Parks Departments took some co-ordinated steps for staging changes. Tower block developers were persuaded to allow for setbacks to double pavement widths, small seating areas within building boundaries, awnings from buildings for pedestrian comfort, and tree planting. The WCC developed the concept of 'pocket parks' that incorporated these improvements. The plan was to have pocket parks at 500m intervals along Lambton Quay, the main shopping street.

The best pockets were small and alongside busy pavements. They consisted of perhaps a tree, a seat and some paving or grass. The spaces, which were sponsored by developers, became very popular. The public was won over by examples of what could be done.

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The perennial resistance to the loss of car parking spaces was soon overcome. The public requested that the pocket parks be linked by a green ribbon of trees and asked for a reduction in traffic volumes. Earlier action by the WCC team had constricted traffic to discourage vehicles by creating bus lanes, making part one-way sections, and adding a median strip for tree planting. Motorists soon found alternative, speedier routes that had earlier been devised by the WCC.

From these staged changes emerged one of New Zealand's most pleasant street precincts. Good fortune did play a part: the street is curvilinear, following the original Wellington shoreline, with a change of aspect on each curve. The historic shoreline reference theme is proudly displayed in the paving design, with bronze inlays at intervals that have become highly polished by thousands of pedestrians' shoes.

The awnings of the new high-rise buildings provide canopy shelter for pedestrians. The pavements are wide and in modular patterns (for ease of damage replacement), and include historic cues together with pavement texture cues for the visually impaired. Rest spaces occur every 500m. Median strip tree planting has helped to effect an overall greening of this exemplary street precinct.

This delightful street is now being eroded. In spite of planning agreements made a decade ago, three sponsored pocket parks have been reclaimed by property owners and turned into retail shops and bar forecourt(s). It is essential to retain vigilance and to maintain precinct quality. By being listed on district plans any changes to precincts would require public notification.

Nelson's Trafalgar Street

Nelson provides a provincial example of staged streetscape development. One main street shop owner



Wall frames used to good effect in the limited space available in Fiddle Lane

requested permission from the Nelson City Council (NCC) to pave the frontage to a new shop. The NCC decided that paving safety and uniformity was important, and selected a paving unit and paving pattern at an early stage. By permitting specified shop front paving, this decision resulted in similar requests from other businesses. More importantly, the shop owners paid for the paving frontages.

Encouraged by local firms, the NCC decided to transform the small, locally well known Fiddle Lane as a public example of what could be done. Lane design improvements comprised pavers, kitset street furniture and modular frame units for bare walls. The frames were designed to hold climbing plants where there was insufficient width for tree planting. When good public comment was received in response to this pilot, the NCC commissioned a design for

staged work in Trafalgar Street, Nelson's main shopping street.

Within two years, the NCC had married the paved areas outside individual shops, and paved and raised pedestrian crossings were placed at strategic points. These dramatically slowed traffic and encouraged the use of the preplanned ring road for easier traffic movement. The Fiddle Lane kitset street furniture was used along the newly paved areas, and trees were planted. In the ten years since the development started the trees have grown and softened the old and new building styles. Nelson now has a street that is a shopping precinct street much admired by locals and visitors alike. Despite this, shopkeepers who profit from the precinct complain about leaves from the trees in autumn. Trafalgar Street, if listed on the district plan as a precinct, would require public notification of any proposed changes.

Lessons can be learned from these examples for the creation of successful street precincts, whether in towns or large cities. Simplicity in design and a respect for existing public usage can be the most effective design tools. Not *my* street design, but *their* street or open space. Landscape architects and amenity horticulturists working together have the skills needed. Experienced professionals have a responsibility to offer guidance and encouragement. The scale of the development is important: Big cities have big budgets; provincial towns have small budgets.

Approaches to developing street precincts on a smaller scale

Problem identification and existing activities must have priority before any design ideas are proposed. Traffic use and flows, parking, pedestrian crossings, existing artefacts, such as memorials, vegetation and drain locations, would be analysed. It is important to research the town or village history to develop the first step in designing amenities for a potential precinct. A local theme can encourage public interest and lead to imaginative solutions. There are always theme references to be found, whether myth, past events or personalities. For example, the Irish community of Geraldine had made the linen covering for World War I aircraft from local flax (*Linum*), and a design motif of a clover leaf was used as a theme. Nelson had a nautical theme. Masterton was a town where wooden barrels were made. Offering communities themes for their towns is very persuasive and makes for design integrity.

must have a design discipline of simplicity. Designed kitsets using boltable parts that are interchangeable and broadly adaptable have great advantages. Existing street lighting can be supplemented with lamp standards at the lower height of 3.5m made of the same kitset design parts. This is pedestrian-friendly both in tone and warmth.

Amenity horticulturists will be able to advise on theme plantings suited to local soil and climatic conditions. The correct plant for the correct site adds to a local theme feature. Selection of non-variegated tree species has a soothing influence in a busy street and will give harmony to the street, irrespective of diverse shop front colours. Shrub planting should be incorporated in pocket parks or off-street spaces, thereby avoiding litter collecting at street level.



Kitset street furniture with a barrel theme used in Masterton

Much impetus can be gained for streetscape upgrades simply by the elevation of the word street to precinct. Elevation does not necessarily mean complex or elaborate sophistication in design. It means revealing opportunities for fresh thinking. Usability and a simple design approach are ingredients for public acceptance. Using a minimal number of materials that can be fabricated locally will help win the day.

Durability and maintenance of the street furniture

The ready availability of replacement parts that allow for immediate repair work is known to discourage vandalism. These parts

Effecting change from street to precinct

In summary, the ingredients for upgrades are in name, from street to precinct. Precinct engages a local theme, a small development by example with uniformity of materials and simplicity in furniture part fabrication and assembly. If the precinct feels good to be in, people will use it even if they have not analysed why. A small scale pilot demonstration package of a tree and a seat, with some paving or grass, draws public attention to the possibilities of street enhancement. It is cost-effective by being modest, does not cause major disruptions, and excites comment and interest. Interest breeds participation, gains goodwill and effects change.