

Inner city development

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Inner city development has previously been met with derision and suspicion by a large percentage of New Zealanders. For most of us, that is not the lifestyle we are after in New Zealand. In the past, we wanted our quarter acre and we were going to get it.

Times are changing, and so has the outlook of the average Kiwi. The backyard is being carved up. Lives are getting busier and there is not the time or inclination to look after the once compulsory vegetable patch. Land, too, is getting scarce and more expensive. Time is ripe for inner city development. Developers need to respond quickly and intelligently in order to offer an urban lifestyle to those Kiwis who are keen to reject suburbia and embrace the excitement and buzz of the city.

Another reason we need to turn our attentions toward the bright lights of the city is that future demands for housing in New Zealand will not be met by green-field development without having a negative effect on the environment and the quality of life to the inhabitants. Following studies carried out in Canterbury it is estimated that central Christchurch will require 33,000 additional homes by 2026, with 63% expected to be developed within existing urban areas. These findings have led to Councils around the region working towards developing a strategy to ensure that development is undertaken in a manner that will provide a high quality of life for future generations.

In contrast to high density development, greenfield expansion has suited developers in the past as it is relatively trouble free. There were fewer owners to deal with, no existing contamination issues, few historic issues, and less public interaction required.

High density living

Despite current trends and discussion about the benefits of high density living, research in the United Kingdom suggests that the majority of home buyers are unlikely to choose to live in high density developments. This evidence is reflected in New Zealand as well, where many people would like to have their quarter acre block. Although the back yard has generally shrunk to approximately 500 square metres, private outdoor living and space to separate ourselves from our neighbours is still seen as a necessity.

When looking in detail at the initial responses, however, it is possible to see how requirements can be partially met through

contemporary higher density development. Modern apartments offer better security than traditional detached housing. Elderly or disabled people have the advantage of easy access, with ground floor apartments or lifts, and good design can provide successful innovative outdoor living in the form of shared gardens or balconies. Privacy is an important issue with problems solved by sound insulation and layout designed to avoid over-looking.

Buyers of housing are also concerned about security in investment. For most people, their home is the biggest item they will purchase in their lives. With high density living, one concern is that owners have less control over the maintenance of the area they live in – outdoor spaces, appearance of buildings and frontage to the street. Consequently, it is particularly important to ensure long-term maintenance of these public areas with sound management agreements. With appropriate design, high density development has the potential to build on the existing appeal of neighbourhoods that have character homes and buildings, to create or enhance lively, well-used neighbourhoods and a sense of community.

Benefits of higher density development

Many of the problems associated with high density developments are a combination of location, design, tenure mix, lack of management and lack of maintenance. Studies around the world identify that higher density housing in the areas we work in is not only necessary because land is scarce, but is also desirable because it can deliver real social benefits. For example –

- Higher density housing in existing urban areas creates vibrant, successful, neighbourhoods. The additional number and variety of people who live there support local shops, transport and community facilities.
- Higher density housing allows for private, shared, outdoor spaces and facilities such as parks, pools, gyms and tennis courts.
- A combination of different types of high density housing can allow for designs to cater for different stages of a person's or a family's life.

Higher density living can be designed and constructed to provide a range of benefits for both the occupants and the environment such as –

- **Increasing value** – Particularly in Europe, areas such as historic towns and areas in city centres have higher house prices and are built at higher densities. Examples of this exist around New Zealand. Sumner, the beachside community of Christchurch, has numerous older houses that are on relatively small lots of 180 to 300 square metres. The current zoning does not allow for these section sizes. They were constructed 70 to 100 years ago before current zoning rules and provide for small living spaces. This closeness of living contributes to a community atmosphere with cafes, restaurants and its own local cinema.
- **Convenient shops and services** – With more people living in one area, better shops and schools become economically viable, as do regular bus services. Approximately 25 homes per hectare are required to support a fairly frequent bus service. Double this number and express bus services can be added. Places that are not overly dependent on car use enjoy livelier streets and in turn create a better neighbourhood.
- **Safer streets** – Streets that are overlooked by homes not only feel safer but are safer, with much lower rates of burglaries.
- **Design for living** – Well designed housing can respond to the many demands of 21st century living. Flexible layouts can provide for lifetime houses that can be readily adapted for the elderly or disabled.
- **Energy conservation** – New homes cost less than old homes to heat due to better insulation and more efficient heating systems. Higher density homes further reduce energy loss and can include schemes to save natural resources such as combined heat and power, and treatment plants able to turn foul water to drinking water.
- **Mixed age communities** – In an effort to increase affordable housing, mixed-tenure developments can create the opportunity to include more affordable housing. The larger the scheme the easier it is to provide a balance of tenures and house types.
- **Creation of identity** – Higher density development in large blocks have the ability to create a sense of identity and place. When combined with greenery and attention to detail, it can turn locations into desirable places. Far from reducing the quality of neighbourhoods, higher density housing can make them more distinctive and introduce a much needed element of diversity. This is particularly the case in redevelopment of existing or brown-field areas.

Barriers against high density development

The term higher density generally invokes distaste in the mouths of public perception. This stems from the association between high density housing and the high rise, system-built housing estates that suffer from physical and social problems. Although mainly associated with the housing estates in England, they also exist on a smaller scale in New Zealand. Most cities have examples of Housing New Zealand estates that are largely situated in lower, socio-economic areas.

There is a general belief that by adding higher density housing to a neighbourhood it is unlikely to make it a better place to live. People see disadvantages in having to compete for the same schools, the same public transport and the same parking spaces.

Feedback from communities in Christchurch indicate there is public opinion that poor quality and unnecessarily large use of multi-unit development has continued to occur despite introduced rule amendments and the publishing of voluntary design guidelines



Typical higher density housing estate area.

for developers. However, this is largely due to the way high density development is happening in the community. Rather than large areas, small individual lots are being developed with on an individual basis.

Existing inner-city residents feel that the inner urban area has an established character which some residents value, feel comfortable with and would like to see retained. Concerns have been expressed about developments within the high density living zone being of an inappropriate design, appearance or quality. This seems to be partly the result of current Council rules surrounding development in the high density zone. To rely on non-compulsory Council guidelines, incentives and education for developers is to almost guarantee keeping the status quo. As this has not worked in the past, it is unlikely to in the future.



High density housing built on an individual section basis.

Overall design, appearance and/or quality of buildings determine the quality of high density living. These factors include –

- Size and shape of the site which has the greatest effect of any factor as it determines the nature of development that can occur on the designated piece of land
- Size and shape of the buildings
- Location
- Orientation of the buildings
- Style and detail of the buildings.

Voluntary design guidelines are unlikely to have a large effect on developers that are focusing on the lower end of the market

because they cannot see how the additional costs of good design are going to be recouped. It is easy to overlook the advantages of higher density living as the benefits are not always noticeable in the short term. There are a number of common issues that need to be addressed for us to build better high density neighbourhoods:

Distrust and conflict – Plenty of development schemes appear to comply with local government policy, but due to a non-compliance to rules, are turned down at the planning stage. The relationship between local authorities and developers needs to become one of mutual understanding and co-operation. Instead of the Council fighting developer's proposals, a process that tends to tie up time and resources, this time could be better spent in improving the quality of the presented design. This process could lead to better informed developers who would more likely come in with less issues and a more positive attitude next time.

Institutional inertia – In the last 10 years Councils have changed how towns and cities are assessed for development. In the Canterbury area the Urban Development Strategy has been developed by neighbouring local authorities, the Canterbury Regional Council, and Transit NZ to look at the direction of future development in the area. New schemes are welcome but they take time to take effect, and demand an adjustment in local authority staff attitudes who are making the day to day decisions on applications.

Lack of capacity – A more fundamental barrier to higher density housing is existing infrastructure, such as water supply, stormwater treatment and disposal, sewer treatment and disposal, that is old and out of date and suffers from overloaded transport, service and social requirements.

Design challenges – Good design may cost more but there is evidence it can add much more in terms of value to the neighbourhood. Ensuring good design must become the responsibility of the local authorities. A study in the south east of London identified the 10 biggest barriers to the building of higher density development in public opinion. The results are in the table.

Public concern over the impact on traffic and parking	62%
Residents that were generally not in favour of high density development	51%
Out of character with the local area	44%
Concerns on the effect on local services such as schools and hospitals	39%
Concerns about the lack of quality public spaces and play areas within the developments	20%
Belief that they were associated with 'problem' families	16%
Local councillors that were not in favour	12%
Perceived to be ugly	11%
Perceived to reduce house prices	9%

Important design issues that create successful high density developments are often not related to style and detailing. The more basic concerns and issues need to be corrected, such as –

- Parking – needs to be designed so that cars do not dominate public areas. Underground or multi-story parking resolves this issue. However, intelligent design needs to be incorporated in developments where underground parking is not viable.

- Privacy – Acoustic and visual privacy are a major concern. Careful planning to avoid problems of overlooking and better methods of insulation are needed.
- Mixed uses – Planners often want multi-functional neighbourhoods but this does not have to involve different uses in one building.
- Mixed age communities – Maintaining and improving the balance between household types and tenures is extremely important. While locations will differ on their basic appeal, a carefully planned mix of tenures can entice renters to become owners and vice versa. It can enable people at different stages of life to find appropriate accommodation without moving too far.
- Management – Higher density housing requires on-going management at block and neighbourhood level if standards are to be maintained and rubbish, graffiti and deterioration are to be avoided. Setting up standards and service charges at a realistic level can reduce risks and maintain the value of the investment.

Site densities

When looking at high density developments we need to understand typical site densities that we currently see in communities. The table below identifies the meaning of density. Typically, the perception of the numbers involved in high density living is less than that of our European counterparts. This will have to change as our population increases. Our traditional idea of neighbourhood densities will gradually make way and become more in line with European countries.

Nature of development	Site density	Example
Detached houses located on sections typically sizes from 450 square metres to 700 square metres	12 to 15 houses per hectare	Typical suburban section.
Duplex units on typical lots sized 300 square metres to 400 square metres	15 to 25 houses per hectare	Duplex housing, one common wall normally joined at the garage.
Joined apartments, typically two to three storeys on lots sized 110 square metres to 200 square metres	25 to 50 houses per hectare.	Coronation Street style housing with common walls between units.

Current high density development situation

In the Christchurch City Council's Proposed District Plan rules the zones comprising Living 3, Living 4A, 4B, and 4C allow for medium to high density development. The rules themselves are not the issue, they allow for the required densities to be developed. The problems lie in how they are implemented. Currently re-development occurs on a small scale carried out by predominantly smaller developers. Lots often originally comprise of an old villa built in the early to mid-1900s on a section typically 1000 square metres in size are being individually developed into approximately six, two to three storey units.

This creates an acceptable site density in terms of perception of high density development and in terms of the Council's rules and regulations. It does not, however, resolve the negative connotations that are commonly associated with high density development. In



A typical three storey high density development amongst historical villas.

Looking at a typical Christchurch inner city block located in the living three zone, the typical lots are 20 metres by 50 metres with the road frontage being the north facing boundary. As shown in the photograph below individual development of the lots only allows for one unit to gain full value of the north facing aspect. This area of Christchurch is one of the older areas and typically has character buildings within the areas close to the central parks and Christchurch CBD. Individual development of these lots does not create a co-operative neighbourhood.



Typical example of high density housing that does not take advantage of light and sun.

Current development trends to develop these areas into higher densities are typically never going to provide for positive living environments while they are developed on an individual basis. Recent examples of housing infill have raised issues about the loss of period housing, light and privacy, open space and greenery. There has been an increase in noise and a decline in the ability of neighbourhoods to maintain identity.

Current Council thinking on strategies

To implement desired urban design, Councils have a range of tools that fall into four broad categories.

- Championing and raising awareness
- Regulating private developments
- Investing in infrastructure
- Integrating management.

The UDS sets the framework for managing urban growth in greater Christchurch. This is by a combination of staged urban expansion around the rural fringes of Christchurch and neighbouring towns, and an increased emphasis on accommodating a growing proportion of urban growth through more intensive use of the existing urban area, especially in the inner suburbs and the city centre. Due to the perceived amenity and design benefits that can result from site amalgamation and comprehensive developments it has been suggested that planning incentives could be introduced to encourage such developments in the form of increased height and plot ratio allowances. Concerns have been raised that these larger scale developments be subject to additional planning controls due to the greater potential for adverse effects that can arise from poorly designed large developments.

An option is for the council to introduce plan provisions that encourage comprehensive developments and the amalgamation of sites. Provisions could, for example, include increased plot ratio and height allowances for sites over a certain size such as 2400 square metres, typically three 800 square metre sections.

Approaches on this subject from overseas

Melbourne is a city well known for its good urban design and has been used as an example of one of the greatest cities to live, work and play in. The inner city Melbourne action plan sets out 11 regional strategies and 57 actions to address one simple objective – to make the inner Melbourne region more liveable. The local and regional authorities have grouped together to address this issue. This has come about from the fact that Councils are increasingly paying more to develop strategic planning responses to inner regional issues, often with limited results. There is a growing realisation that a shared agenda at state and local government level is required to effectively manage liveability issues. This new approach challenges existing structures of government, administration, and resourcing arrangements.

An alternative approach used in London, was for the development of the Docklands in London.

The Isle of Dogs – Docklands

In January 1974, the Docklands Joint Committee was set up to take responsibility for planning and implementing the redevelopment of the London Docklands. The basic aim of this was –

‘To use the opportunity provided by large areas of London’s Dockland becoming available for development to redress the housing, social, environmental, employment/economic and communications deficiencies of the Docklands area and partner boroughs and thereby provide freedom for similar improvements throughout east and Inner London.’

In 1976 the South East Economic Planning Council, an independent authority which advised the government, urged the setting up of a development corporation free of political intervention. This would be more likely to win the confidence of developers and investors. The suggestion was not acceptable to the Labour government of the time which left the development of Docklands to the local authorities, who in turn adopted their normal approach of wide public consultation and discussion between the different councils and other interested parties.



Aerial view of Docklands.

Accordingly progress was inevitably slow. However, in 1981 a change of government to the Conservative party who were seeking to accelerate redevelopment, vested control of the Docklands area to the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). The LDDC was given powers to acquire and dispose of land, as well as responsibility for all planning matters in the Docklands area. The LDDC was not subject to the financial constraints then imposed on local authorities, and did not have to answer to an electorate. The result of this was a whirlwind of development producing a physical transformation that has been rapid, secular, and plain to see.

The LDDC preferred to rely on market led re-development rather than formation of any sort of master plan, subsequently allowing for flexible development in the area. Such a flexible approach was based on the thesis that conventional land use planning was inhibiting the entrepreneurial flair and investment that was necessary to regenerate Britain's rundown industrial and inner city areas.

The running idea behind the development of Docklands was to rely on market forces as this would be the quickest way to successfully develop the area. This method of development may be on the extreme side and not viable in New Zealand under the Resource Management Act 1991. However Docklands has ended up being a vibrant area of London and from a public perspective is a success story, so perhaps there is merit in using these ideas to move our own urban areas forward.

Summary

The issue behind controlling high density redevelopment does not need a change in the rules for zoning as the majority of rules allow for the appropriate quality and density of residential development to occur. The issue we face is the way development is allowed to proceed rather than the rules associated with site densities, boundary setbacks and recession planes.

There are numerous studies that look into the benefits of design in higher density living. But we must take this to the next level, the actual nuts and bolts of development, which will determine the details of how to make it work. There are large costs involved in setting up the infrastructure to handle these types of redevelopment. Should the upgrade costs of sewer, stormwater treatment, high pressure water supply, roading infrastructure be borne by developers? This could halt redevelopment if the costs are too high. Or is it in the local and national government's interests to provide these services as part of their responsibility to future generations?

Can we allow redevelopment to continue to occur in one off developments and continue to have the issues we are currently dealing with? Is it the responsibility of the Council to designate blocks of land for redevelopment and control the acquisition of these blocks to ensure that large scale design and development?

The above questions are the key to progressing and having quality high density redevelopment of existing areas. The current planning policies do not appear to be working and it is now time to review these policies. While some of them will not benefit the public in the short term, there would be significant long term benefits for generations to come.

Russell Benge is experienced in all aspects of land surveying, greenfield subdivisions, project management of development projects and has an interest in the implementation process of urban design and inner city redevelopment. Russell is a Director of Davis Ogilvie and Partners Ltd. He started work for Davis Ogilvie in 1994 as a graduate surveyor after completing his Bachelor of Surveying Degree at Otago University and gained survey registration in 1997. He has been involved in many large-scale projects in and around the Canterbury area including Northwood Estate (Christchurch), Ambrose Estate (Rolleston), and Moorcroft (Kaiapoi).

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