

RETROFITTING OUR TOWNS AND CITIES

– *Density, Suburbia and the Future*

EVENT SUMMARY NOTE BY

Stuart Niven and David Jones of Stellar Projects
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On 28 June 2023 Stellar Projects convened a panel event on the topic of housing growth in New Zealand at The Generator function space off Waring Taylor Street in Central Wellington.

An audience of nearly 70 people drawn from Stellar Projects clients and Infrastructure New Zealand members from across government, architects, planners, consultants and more made for a lively event. The event was opened by Nick Leggett, Chief Executive of Infrastructure New Zealand and David Jones, Wellington Business and City Development Lead of Stellar Projects.

The proposition by Mark Fraser was to challenge why New Zealanders have such a negative view of density when, if it is understood in lifestyle terms, it has so much potential variety to offer people's various living circumstances and their desire to fully engage in all the life and action a city can offer.

He put this down, in part, to the nature of New Zealand's settler origins where many of the original European settlers were escaping the kind of squalid densities of the Victorian cities for something more, spatially open and free. He also pointed to New Zealanders more generally equating "density" with "tall", "ugly" apartment buildings coupled with the absence of any really

good examples of what density – skilfully done – can achieve in a lifestyle choice sense of the word.

Guy Marriage introduced the audience to the main arguments of his very successful book – MEDIUM – by arguing that "medium density" residential development translates to approximately 60 to 250 dwellings per hectare where typical residential densities are more of the order of 20 dwellings per hectare. This implies a major future change in the appearance and experience of our town centres and inner suburbs where new residential densities of this kind also need to go hand-in-hand (in a planning sense) with associated shared outdoor, semi-public and new public space to balance the work/live/recreation equation.

Moreover, Guy spoke of the need for the "ground to talk to the height" of the built form and for the landscape to inform where and how the placement of buildings is decided, taking account of land geology and topography. He referred to the substrate conditions suited to densities of this kind and that neither Central Wellington/Te Aro or the Hutt Valley (given their long history of shifting subterranean water courses) are well set up – in substrate terms - for large aggregations of tall buildings. Rather, he argued that a better direction

for proposed Central City development for Wellington might favour a 3-6 storey building scale for the central city's narrow side streets with higher building storey heights located along the city's main north-south streets.

He further noted that while prospective population increases in the Wellington region are expected to require the construction of between 24-to-32 thousand residential units over the next 30 years, the outlook for the same period for Central Wellington was for 8-to-9 thousand extra residential units.

In concluding, he stated that medium density residential development is likely to replace the single house on a piece of land as the typical inner city residential type within the next 6-10 years.

Following the keynotes there were quickfire presentations from the expert panellists.

Kim Kelly pointed out that whether we agree with greenfield development or not, we have a large number of areas already "enabled" for development. In her words – "the horse has bolted". She raised questions about the cost of sufficient infrastructure into these zoned "greenfields" areas to support appropriate density (think medium density).

Stuart Niven further highlighted the importance – nationally – of working to replace the fears of “density” with a popular, national understanding of the opportunities denser forms of residential development offer: a wider and more personally tailored choice of lifestyles - currently limited by the single-family home on its own piece of land. He also raised the issue that we need more skilfully designed examples of a variety of more dense forms of housing with an emphasis on ingenuity of design and on the gradually more varied range of

the community to be discovered in this form of housing. She emphasised the conservative demeanour of our Banks and financing institutions and their wary investment behaviour when confronted with new or “unconventional” forms of higher density living – and how this might be eased through better programmes of explanation and the existence of tangible examples. Once again, a national programme of sophisticated information was advocated.

their co-existence in a city gradually transforming around the introduction of more intense forms of residential development.

Questions raised with Isabella Cawthorn from the floor led to several interesting forays into aspects of retrofitting towns and cities. These included the contribution of an Urban Design Panel for new development, shifts in development capital, the feasibility of un-zoning greenfields areas, developing an Aotearoa vernacular architecture of density, and new ways of framing for shifting public perceptions (like not saying “density”).

The evening was brought to a conclusion by David Jones from Stellar Projects who thanked the participants and encouraged the audience to adjourn to the more relaxed environment of the Generator’s bar and catering services to further discussion at a more informal level.

MC:

Isabella Cawthorn – Talk Wellington

PRESENTERS:

Mark Fraser – Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities

Guy Marriage – First Light Studio & the Victoria University of Wellington

PANELLISTS:

Kim Kelly – Wellington Regional Leadership Committee

Stuart Niven – Stellar Projects

Alistair Cattanach – Dunning Thornton

Pamela Bell – New Zealand Institute of Building



tenancy and ownership types. He also noted the differing needs of very different types of residential occupant - from the “empty-nesters” to the young – and for those that share facilities to those that prefer more communal forms of residence.

Pamela Bell further emphasised – through her own experience of helping to bring up her family exclusively within a city apartment – of the need to break down people’s attachment to the house-plus-land pervasiveness of our suburbs. She emphasised the personal safety aspects of apartment living and

Alistair Cattanach drew on his experience as an engineer and as an advocate for the strengthening and retention of heritage-listed buildings in the city. As with Guy, he spoke of the need for “the ground to talk to the height” and for landscape to inform where and how when it comes to deciding the placement of buildings and what parts of the city and its topography are best suited to high density apartment-type living. He spoke also of his considerable experience with assessing and strengthening heritage-listed buildings - some significant, some more humble - and

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME



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