

14 July 2008

Re: Draft Centres Policy

This submission is from the Architectural Centre, a group which represents both professional and non-professionals interested in architecture and design, and in the promotion of good design in Wellington.

Arch Centre supports the Objectives as outlined in the Council's Draft Centres Policy, and makes the following points:

CBD – Wellington's Centre

Wellington is a vibrant city with a dynamic centre, that retains its liveliness through being the focus of most Wellingtonians. The continued presence of working people in the mass of building stock at the centre of the city is important for the continued dominance of the Golden Mile as the prime shopping area in the region.

We would note that other cities in New Zealand rely more on the dominance of single centre mega malls, typically controlled by the major property owner and consequently lacking in all signs of individuality and intelligent life. Wellington's much-lauded Golden Mile is indeed 'golden' precisely because it is not controlled by external property interests and its dominance and independence needs to be supported and nurtured.

Its present prominence is due as much to inherent geography as it is to centralist planning, and as Wellington's suburbs grow, it is at risk from encroachment by bland megamalls, especially if transport to and from the centre is clogged or slowed.



Golden Mile shopping

The continued advancement of clean, fast, and good quality public transport is one of the more important factors in the continued success of Wellington's golden heart. This does not however stop the possibility of the growth of other centres growing to prominence along the



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growth spine corridor, as set out in Objective 1 in the WCC's draft Centres Policy. We agree that the retail development within these centres should be of a scale and intensity appropriate to that context, and would particularly note that large scale ("big box") development is not appropriate for Wellington's Centre and needs to be handled carefully wherever it is proposed for.

Big Box Retailing

We find that Big Box retailing is typically both visually disruptive, environmentally distasteful, and is non-conducive to the successful outcome of the Council's declared aim to become carbon neutral. Big box retailing, by its very nature, is typically wholly car focused, not compatible with a coherent urban plan, and typically unlinked to a viable and regular public transport network.

However, for large bulky items such as furniture and builders supplies, we recognise that such items are not feasible on public transport, and instead do need to be somewhere either with good quantity of carparking – or with excellent public transport and a well-maintained delivery service. We therefore support the moves by the Council to control the size and spread of large scale big box retail developments, and to have strict control over their location and restrict this to approved locations only.



Big Box retail barn, Petone

We note however in some parts of the USA that there is a trend away from mega Malls, and that they are dying out in areas. Malls and big box retail, by their nature, are heavily car dependent, oil-reliant, and therefore potentially redundant as a medium for retail. Their days may, and should, be numbered.

Arch Centre notes the continued pandering of some other New Zealand cities to big box retailing, such as Hastings, Rotorua, and even Hutt City is leading to the ensuent near-collapse of the traditional retail streetform in these cities. We believe that the City should continue to hold firm against the big box retailers and control their spread and appearance.



Dead Mall: Dixie Square, Illinois

Car Parking

One of the greatest visual disharmonies to our cities is the proliferation of large and ugly sheds containing large scale retail complexes. This is further degraded by the hectares of asphalted car parking that inevitably accompanies the retail outlet. Not only is this visually obtrusive, but it is a destructive force to the continued retail functioning of our capital city. We agree that the nature of future big box retailing must be changed by encouraging mixed use centres, with both large retail and also other uses such as entertainment, manufacturing, and residential apartments to enrich the development and enhance the neighbourhood. This will encourage more integrated, urban responses rather than the suburban, disparate and disjointed city fringes more commonly seen elsewhere in the region today.



Car parking sprawl, Northgate, Seattle



Mega mall carparking, Petone

The need to mandate for active edges is a vital part of the integration of retail into architectural landscapes, and we note that a lack of active edges to retail areas should be actively discouraged. While Warehouse, Placemakers, Supermarkets etc may all prefer the bland encompassing of a solid retailing box for their internal display purposes, this does nothing for the city wherever it is located, and should not be permitted.



Mega interior, Petone

We support the review of the city's current spread of suburban centres, and would note that smaller centres such as the Mitre 10 at Crofton Downs and the nearby Garden Centre are not

feasibly situated either for continued existence or potential growth, despite their present fortuitous siting next to a small suburban railway station. We are supportive of Council efforts to look anew at the siting of such suburban centres and to encourage more suitable and integrated siting wherever possible. We note that developments such as the New World in Newtown, where a large scale supermarket has been integrated into the nearby retail neighbourhood, is a successful compilation of needs, and is far more successful on urban terms than the Pak'n'Save development at Kilbirnie, which sits alone in an ocean of carpark.



Pak'n'Save and car park, Kilbirnie

Integration into the Public Realm

The Council's desire to influence the nature of centres could be reinforced by more adventurous ways of integrating the public realm into projects. Council could perhaps investigate a public area percentage requirement for certain projects, to avoid public-private dislocations that happen in many suburban centres. A warehouse-type store could be a vibrant addition to a suburban centre if designed with a strict public realm component, material restrictions and strong visual or functional integration between the store interior and the street life. The integration of any residential element into an otherwise warehouse style of architecture needs to be handled skillfully, and we recommend that Council takes a pro-active attitude towards suburban residential / retail integration, rather than sitting back and waiting for the inevitable poorly designed conglomeration and aggregation of uses to be proposed by developers.

Industrial Zoning

The Arch Centre notes that the continued removal of light industrial services, such as panel-beaters and mechanics, from the edge of the CBD, to the outskirts of Seaview and Porirua, is not conducive to a successfully functioning city and needs to be reversed. The conversion of the Te Aro basin from light commercial and small industrial, to an almost exclusively residential ghetto, is to be regretted. While we lament the passing of the many small commercial and industrial businesses from the city, squeezed out by rents and high land prices, a move by Council to create a residential and carparking free ground floor will have significant effects for the availability of space for small businesses to flourish. It will also enhance the city dwellers urban life style by allowing them to encounter a mix of other uses on the ground floor.

Concurrent with that, we also support the Council's objectives to ensure a supply of land for industrial uses, and note that the nearer to the centre, the better for the city. Relocating industrial uses and the livelihoods of the incumbent industrial workers to the back blocks of Granada does not help the long term needs and viability of the city.

Urban Streetscape

The street has often been called the living room of the city, and this indeed is where the life of the city needs to remain. The recent developments in College St, mixing small retail alongside the Café L'Affare bean roasters and the Metal Recyclers create a far more interesting city than would the prospect of wall to wall residential and urban carparking. However, these same residential developments in College St project blank levels of carparking facing onto Vivian St, and are a shameful addition to the functioning and enjoyment of the city for other residents. Vivian St as a pedestrian and vehicle and thoroughfare has been irreparably damaged by the visual affront of the blank, carparking walls, a place only suitable for the existence of random anonymous graffiti; a situation that we believed the Council was trying to avoid, not encourage.

Lessons should be learned here and applied to other centres – the need for active edges is even more vital at small suburban centres, and should be a solution designed from the outset, not attempted to be resolved later via efforts at planting out blank walls or instigating anti-graffiti patrols.



Vivian St blank facades

The Council's Objective 7, to improve the urban design quality of the suburban centres, is to be encouraged. While we do not necessarily support the strict application of Design Guidelines, as this can lead to an unappetizing 'tweeness' if not carefully managed, the involvement of Urban Designers in the small Suburban Centres is to be encouraged. Too often the smaller suburban centres are drab, unloved, and dingy places, badly thought out in all aspects except for vehicle servicing and retail carparking.

The Arch Centre firmly believes that the addition of medium scale residential development, good design of the centres, and an urban design framework of the smaller centres is to be supported and encouraged.

General Comments

We make the observation that while most of the policy appears to be good sense, it risks missing some opportunities by being too vague in terms of wording used. Terms like 'high quality,' 'strengthen,' 'design,' 'urban design,' 'character,' 'public realm,' 'sustainable' and 'place' are used very loosely and sometimes very sentimentally. The vagueness of language in this policy suggests that the council has not yet thought critically about these issues. There is potential for this policy to outline strategies for developing and understanding these vague ideas and developing more specific responses - for example, by 'design' does the Council mean developing more aesthetic style guides or are they suggesting high quality design will be actively pursued and mandated for?

The policy also appears to ignore some of the bigger picture realities of town centres/public spaces present in our current situation, and give only a token recognition of the very real issues that are increasingly important in the near future, namely: climate change, peak oil, effects of digital technology, contemporary cities/anxieties etc. Issues of peak oil and climate change get only a token mention: we would propose that a forward thinking strategy needs to integrate these realities on a much deeper level, as they have the potential to make much of the discussion about 'high quality' or 'character' completely irrelevant if not strategically addressed.

The extent to which this policy integrates with transport infrastructure appears vague and unresolved. The removal of cars from prime public realm and integration of transport hubs as a public activity should be addressed as a scenario in the development phases. Finally, the mention of BIDs is interesting, but seems only the tip of the iceberg in finding alternate models of business-community-council interaction.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Centres Policy. If you have any questions about any of the points raised please contact me.

Yours sincerely

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The Architectural Centre