

14 July 2008

Re: Infill Housing

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 notes the Objectives as outlined in the Council's Infill Housing Discussion Paper: *How and where will Wellington grow?* and makes the following points:

Infill Housing

1. Arch Centre understands that suburban life is one of the most desired, but also one of the most inefficient ways of living in a city. Suburbs are an inefficient use of land, promote inefficient means of transport, and involve inefficient means of building. Although we realise that suburban lifestyle is highly desirable in many people's eyes, Arch Centre firmly believes that the answer to population expansion within the Wellington region is not to keep expanding the limits of the suburban ring, and that the answer to coping with presumed population increases is to intensify housing within the existing city and inner suburbs.



Existing 'heritage' medium density housing, Mt Victoria

Arch Centre believes that areas of the city with high density, such as Mt Victoria, show that ordinary suburban characteristics such as side yards, and off street parking, are largely unnecessary for satisfactory outcomes in terms of design character and quality of place; Council rules should be rewritten to encourage sensibly designed cheek-by-jowl planning in other suburbs as well. Recent correspondence in the Dominion Post from residents of Tawa

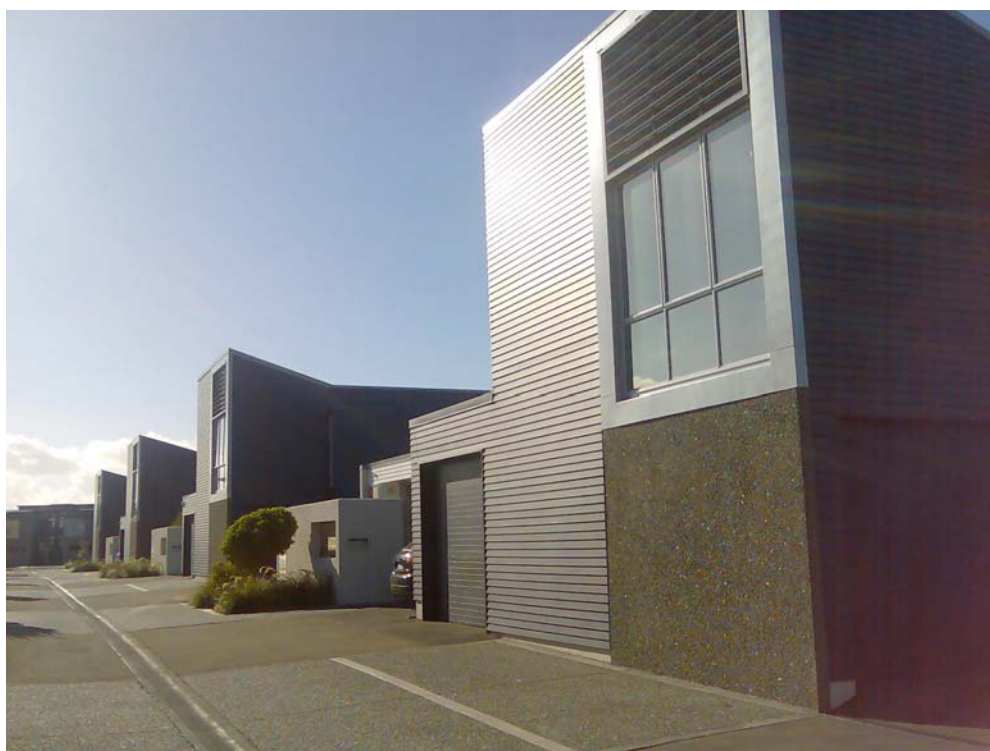


the architectural centre inc.
PO Box 24178 Wellington

complaining that they were being unfairly targeted with infill while Mt Victoria residents were exempt from this policy are laughable indeed.

We note that current New Zealand rates of residential density are some of the lowest in the world, and are extravagant in their use of land that could be better utilised for other purposes. The burden of maintenance on roading, services etc is significantly higher, in proportion of rates, in the suburbs than it is in the inner city, and we believe it is only reasonable to increase inner suburban density, and especially in places that have good public transport links such as Tawa and Johnsonville. We would propose that certain values such as green space, privacy, access to sunlight and green space be protected across Wellington, and allowing infill growth across the city rather than limiting growth to certain geographical areas.

We therefore support the moves by WCC to target infill housing, as a way of managing expected population growth in a more sustainable manner than 'greenfield' development. We believe however, that targeted infill housing itself will not necessarily lead to a better quality city, and are particularly concerned that although there is a focus on the quality of individual development in areas designated for 'limited infill', no such focus is mentioned for those parts of the city designated as areas of 'change' (aside from provisions already made in District Plan Change 56).



Existing modern medium density Courtyard housing, Seatoun

Arch Centre believes that design quality should not be sacrificed for higher density living, especially in areas where comprehensive redevelopment and change of character is being encouraged. It should be noted that in these areas of change, a new sense of place is being created, and the quality of this sense of place will be mostly informed by the quality of developments that are carried out. Arch Centre suggests that it is imperative that these areas of significant redevelopment are carried out subject to the highest possible design quality for the success of not only the residents of that area, but also for the success of the particular model of higher density living being promoted.

We are aware that individuals' views, sunlight access, and daylight provisions are highly sensitive matters, and that the blanket provision of increased height and bulk conditions must be sensitively managed to avoid criticism by existing housing tenants. We would also note that intelligent and well-informed design can proactively improve quality of life in housing, and that some recent projects around the city have been successful in increasing density, without

decreasing quality of life. Residential development projects such as the Courtyard houses in Seatoun have been a phenomenal success as an experiment in medium-density, low-rise, good quality housing and the lessons that can be learned from this (no side yards, common boundary walls etc) should be promulgated into general Council policy.

Although a piecemeal approach to housing infill is an answer, it is probably not the best answer. The 2005 Housing Corp competition (*Housing New Zealanders 100 years On*) for a run down public suburban housing area in Mt Albert, Auckland was instructive for the approach of increasing density over a targeted area as a planned whole, rather than rely on individual sacrificial movements on rear sections as could be happening in Wellington under this Policy. A planned approach will always take more effort, but will also always produce better results than a piecemeal market-based approach which will only damage the overall ambience of some suburbs.



Recent poorly designed, piecemeal, non-contextual infill housing, Miramar

Areas of Change

2. Arch Centre supports the identification of areas for change, and the general thrust of the key criteria that were employed in making the selection. However, we note an important omission within the 'Proximity to centres and employment' criterion, where topography does not appear to be considered. It should be noted that 10 minutes walk uphill is considerably different physically and more importantly, psychologically, than 10 minutes on the flat. For example, much of the proposed areas above the Karori and Johnsonville public transport spines are neither conceived of as walkable, nor adequately serviced by public transport themselves. Added density in these areas will encourage use of private vehicular transport, a less sustainable mode than public transport. We suggest that topographic incline factors be added into the GIS sieve mapping.

Other issues relating to the proposed identification of areas relate to broader Council growth planning, and in particular, the Urban Growth Spine concept proposed in the Urban Growth Strategy (and supported by the Ngarauunga to Airport Study). Arch Centre is deeply concerned that with resources and time invested along the identified growth spine, areas proposed for targeted infill housing will be neglected in terms of infrastructural growth. Karori

is a case in point. It is ridiculous to suggest that the existing carrying capacity of the road network can sustain further growth in commuters (being close to public transport is of no benefit when the current service is incredibly unreliable due to traffic congestion). Does the identification of Karori as an area of targeted infill mean that the access to the suburb will be improved? If so, what does this mean for the current Urban Growth Strategy? Arch Centre believes that the various Council growth policies be aligned in their objectives, and these policies are clearly communicated to all before final decisions are arrived at.

Related to this, we also note the inclusion of Lyall Bay Parade as a proposed area for targeted infill. We are aware of Council proposals for developing Lyall Bay Parade and see that some attempt has been made to be consistent across a broader range of objectives than targeted infill housing alone. This is to be applauded. While we do not disagree with the selection of this area, we observe that there is a much larger area of Lyall Bay / Rongatai that have similar eligibility for targeted infill (if, as the discussion paper does, it is assumed that Lyall Bay dairies, hair dressers and a café qualify as a suburban centre). We question why these areas have been overlooked (especially Onepu Road and its immediate environs), given the shortage of flat land in Wellington.

We also feel that it is important to consider that areas that do not already have the required infrastructure for immediate development (such as Karori or Island Bay), should not be omitted from consideration, but that instead proposals are developed to eliminate existing infrastructural deficiencies before increased density is encouraged.

Character Protection

3. Arch Centre has reservations over the creation of Character Protection areas, and believes Council's policy needs to make a clear distinction over what it is trying to protect. We do not support privileging character over broader quality considerations such as functionality and suitability, and we note that some of the places identified as having character and heritage, are also the best (and most sustainable options) we have for higher densification – e.g. Thorndon, Newtown etc. In these suburbs much of the existing housing stock is low quality in terms of sustainability, both to physically maintain and live in, although it may have superficial heritage / character appeal.



Faux-Victorian, medium density, modern housing, Aro Valley

Arch Centre notes that recent special “character area” infill housing in Aro Valley, for instance, has achieved little success in architectural and heritage terms. While we recognize that Aro Valley has existing architecture with strongly individual character, the imposition of ‘character’ guidelines has not been a success. Faux Victoriana has as little to commend it in Aro Valley as would mock-Edwardian architecture have in Newtown. Character in an area has as much to do with people and ethnicities as it does with scale and materials. Therefore while we commend the Council for continuing to propose protection for genuine heritage buildings, we do not agree that future surrounding infill must be faux-old to be considered correct character.

It is important to note that protection of character should not be about historical pastiche, with replication or reproduction of heritage or traditional details using modern materials – a superficial surface treatment to mimic the existing context. Instead it should be about an awareness / understanding of character in with regard to context, proportion, materiality etc. Modernity and progression in architecture must be encouraged, as well as a high degree of design intelligence in the future infill housing. We therefore encourage characterfull housing, but not via a strict adherence to rigid mock-heritage guidelines. A new building should be ‘unashamedly of its time in terms of materials and building technology used’ (AC PC56 submission).

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. We are strongly supportive of the council's aims to create a more sustainable city, which supports existing centres and increased housing choice.

If you have any questions regarding our proposal, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Guy Marriage
President
The Architectural Centre