

To: tengakau@wcc.govt.nz
Te Ngākau Project Team, c/- Property Team
WCC, Box 2199.

13th November 2024

THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE

Submission to the Te Ngākau Precinct Public Consultation

Submitter: The Architectural Centre
Contact : Stuart Niven (on behalf of The Architectural Centre)
stuartcniven@gmail.com
Mobile 027 209 1326

The submitter requests that they speak to this submission.

1.0 About the Architectural Centre

1.1 The Architectural Centre is a Wellington-based volunteer organisation established in 1946. It has consistently raised issues of good design and city planning and has been an active commentator and participant in the city's development for the last 78 years. With a currently active membership of 70 people drawn from artists, architects, designers and others sharing an active interest in architecture, the arts, the built environment and Wellington City it has been responsible for successfully advocating for a city planning function to be established within the City Council; advocating, through one of its former Presidents and City Councillors - George Porter – for the building of a significant public housing portfolio as part of the city's assets; a number of major public exhibitions – including *Vertical Living – Living in Cities (1954)*; *Unbuilt Wellington (1987)*; *Home Made Home (1991)*; *Reclaiming - Northern Gateway Exhibition (1999)*; and *The Manifesto Exhibition (2006)*.

1.2 The Centre strongly opposes what appears to be the driving premiss of the Wellington City Council's proposed ***Te Ngākau Development Plan*** – namely that the original concept of the Civic Precinct as a carefully composed and choreographed composition of connecting urban elements and related public buildings centred on the amphitheatre-like space of the Civic Square – is broken beyond repair and, consequently is no longer fit for purpose. From this entirely questionable starting point, the proposed Plan sets out to entirely remake this much-loved city heart by:

- Removing the physical containment and focus of the Precinct on the space of the City Square to the detriment of the Precinct's ceremonial function;
- Erasing the presence of The City Square from the Precinct's re-planned composition;
- Destroying the Precinct's existing (if currently partially obscured) bi-cultural narrative that binds the Precinct together from the city to the waterfront;
- Removing the City-to-Sea Bridge – an essential mediating space between the city's two most important, but very different public spaces and an important component of the Precinct's bi-cultural narrative;
- Introducing a significant new commercial presence into a previously public precinct to an extent that undermines the Precinct's original public qualities;
- Opening up the containment of the Precinct's central area to the adjacent major traffic route permitting much of the existing physical definition of the Precinct to leak away towards the waterfront; and
- Allowing the earthquake prone nature of many elements of the Precinct – essentially an issue of arbitrary risk – to override the original public concept of the Precinct and provide a rationale for its destruction.



the architectural centre inc.
PO Box 24178 Wellington

1.3 The Council's consultation document highlights three key focus areas articulated on page 8 of the consultation document:

- **Te Rauora – Revive** - bringing nature back into the precinct, creating a place that supports the natural environment and is adaptive to nature's challenges (climate change and resilience). The environment is of primary importance, a te taiao-first focus is reflected across the precinct.
- **Te Oho – Awaken** -. attracting people to the precinct to create an urban, civic, cultural and creative arts experience. Toi Maori is present in the co-design of the overall place through landscape, architecture and urban design.
- **To Oro** – enabling commercial opportunities that attract a variety of businesses operating both day and night an investment including mana whenua.

There is a mainline connection between these three focus areas and the **Te Ngākau Framework Plan** previously adopted by the Council in 2021 – a document couched in wording so general that its import for The Precinct was not fully appreciated at the time.

Te Rauora – Revive - The focus on “*bringing nature back into the Precinct*” – while embodying a “motherhood” aspiration (couched in *te reo Maori*) that, on the face of it, few might question – the reality of this “focus” has confused the established understanding of the Precinct as an “urban place”. This is not to say that the presence of “nature” within the Precinct is an alien concept. Rather the future planting of the Precinct needs to be understood as a support infrastructure within an urban environment articulated by public buildings and structures surrounding a central, ceremonial space. While this may appear to open The Centre up to a challenge of holding a colonially inflected view of the Precinct, we would remind everybody of the strong bi cultural narrative of the Precinct's originally commissioned Maori art works that presented the space of The Square as the city's *Te Marae Ātea* and wove a joined-up story of ocean, arrival and landing across the physical landscape of the Precinct – a quality comprehensively researched and articulated in *Tio Maori Aotearoa's* recent Report prepared by Dr Anna-Marie White – a dimension of the Precinct's composition and design that the Council and the Council's Design Team seem to be woefully unfamiliar with.

We could feel more confidence in this aspiration if the Council had had a track record of consistent care and attention given to the limited areas of planting that were part of the Precinct's original composition. Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case as an unpublished study of the Square and its potential restoration carried out independently in 2021 made abundantly clear.

Te Oho – Awake – the apparent belief that the creation of the Precinct in the late 1980s was largely devoid of *Toi Maori* input or influence is an entirely false premise that Dr White's

research completely contradicts. That is not to say that this important influence and involvement should not continue to play a significant part in recovering and restoring – in a contemporary sense – the original Civic Precinct concept.....it clearly should. The aspiration that a recovered Civic Precinct should attract people to the precinct to create an urban, civic, cultural and creative arts experience is not a new aspiration. It is exactly the reputation embodied and delivered by the Civic Precinct during its first 15 years of life – that is before the Council’s consistent lack of stewardship and its “death by a thousand cuts” approach to the Precinct began to reduce this vibrancy – one small unconsidered step at a time.

Te Oro – we don’t believe anybody would have difficulty with the view that one of the major deficiencies of the original Civic Precinct was its lack of ground floor edge activities – usually best provided by a variety of food and drink opportunities or by other edge activities capable of attracting and sustaining a consistent level of public presence and engagement. That these activities are best provided by a commercial component to the public mix of the Civic Precinct is a practical given. This ingredient to the recovery of the Precinct’s public life – particularly as an animation strategy to the building edges that surround and enclose its central space – The Square – is also well understood. Unfortunately, this understanding has been so enlarged by the proposed **Te Ngākau Development Plan** that it threatens to overwhelm the essential “public place” nature of the city’s heart. We completely understand that the redevelopment opportunity created by the new Wakefield Street development site delivered through the combined demolition of the CAB and MOB buildings should be seen as a private commercial development opportunity – but there should have been an important public inflection to that opportunity something there is no evidence of. Nobody has seen anything by way of a “public brief” that may have been put to the private development parties that expressed an interest in this opportunity. In fact, there has been a whiff of that old chestnut – commercial sensitivity – that has been caste over any question or “request-to-see” about the nature of the public requests for this transaction – although it is difficult to understand how the terms of a “public brief” could properly fall under this embargo.

The occupation of a major commercially tenanted building on this site could, however, be arranged so the lower floors of the building offer the opportunity for the mayor’s office, councillors space, space for their service staff and the Council’s meeting rooms and formal public chamber to be located along the inner edge of the building facing the Square. There could also have been thought given to how this presence could find explicit architecturally expression and how the building might be subtly shaped to make its role of enclosure to the Square a more apparent physical presence – but there is absolutely no sign of this in the Draft Plan or in its released enclosures!

Surely this isn’t an issue of “commercial sensitivity”?

The threat of a gradually more all-consuming presence of private commercial occupation within this “public” precinct is also evident in the options put forward for the City Gallery (including a hard to understand “food hall” option) and for the new building proposed for the Jack Illott Green site. The physical prominence designated by a building height for both in apparent excess of 9-10 stories just makes this commercial presence over the Precinct’s public role that much more pervasive.

1.4 The City-to-Sea Bridge and The Nikau Ramp

It is the “done deal” of the removal of the City-to-Sea Bridge, the Capital E structure beneath it and the related Nikau ramp connecting the Bridge to Victoria Street and the Library - that is the most offensive part of this underwhelming Development Plan. Nobody would begrudge the Council’s difficult dilemma and an attendant decision to demolish when faced with an estimate for an unsustainable cost of recovery for inherently weak structures when faced with an assessment of their high-risk earthquake prone nature.

It is surprising then that none of the Council’s commissioned pieces of engineering advice about the condition of the Bridge and Capital E and their recommended measures for strengthening both to an acceptable public standard actually recommend demolition. In fact, one of these Reports (from Becca) offers what appears to be a cost-effective solution to the strengthening of the Bridge. The question is – why was this piece of advice not prioritised amongst the range of Reports received? A further study of these various Reports (see Sir Hugh Rennie’s submission) identifies that none of these consultants offered an order of costs for what it would take to strengthen the Bridge to an appropriate level of support as stipulated in the various Government earthquake strengthening standards. Neither is there any apparent justification for including the costs of strengthening the sea wall or, in fact, Capital E into a calculation of costs for strengthening The Bridge. So, another question arises. Where did the “unsustainable” figure of \$96M - \$120M for strengthening the Bridge actually come from? Or is this a case of the tail wagging the design dog? As Hugh Rennie notes in his forensic examination of the Council’s engineering reports on the Bridge, “.....The Warren and Mahoney statement at 5.5.2 that demolition is:

“the only practicable option” is not validated by an examination of the reports referred to.....”

So, this is the nature of the slammed door the public have faced when queries have been raised about this Councillor decision to demolish the Bridge:

- No engineering recommendation to demolish!

- No precise costings (at least none that are provided as part of the Design Team’s technical support documents) that could lead to a figure of \$96M - \$120M to save the Bridge! And, consequently
- No validation for the Design Team’s statement that demolition “....*is the only practicable option.....*” for the Bridge!

What has subsequently given us pause for thought about all of this is the Council officers’ extreme reluctance to post up in a timely manner to the “support documents” part of the Project website all of the engineering advice they’ve received from their consultants. Most of this has happened only days before the public deadline for submissions on the Draft Development Plan. To this end, the advice from Dunning Thornton – one of the most experienced consultancies in earthquake engineering in the country – is still missing from the website, although it will apparently be available as part of the Officer Report to Council on the 5th December – absolutely no use to us in being able to understand the Council’s position on the Bridge and its demolition. Additionally, there is no sign on the website of any “public brief” material that sets out what the various engineering and other consultants advising the Council on the Bridge were actually asked to do about the recovery or removal of these vital elements of the Precinct’s original public composition.

The questions left hanging are:

- Why do none of the Council’s commissioned reports from their engineering consultants recommend the necessity for demolition?
- Were these consultants instructed that the Bridge (and less so Capital E) were considered vital elements of the Precinct’s overall composition, and could the consultants put their collective heads and expertise together to recommend the best way to retain at least the Bridge without this involving a ruinous cost to an otherwise cash-strapped Council? One would assume this cost would be as close as possible to the estimated demolition cost of both structures.
- What is the actual interrelated nature of the Bridge, the seawall and Capital E such that the desire to retain and restore the Bridge could be best achieved?
- Is there a viable proposal to address a future and a use for the Capital E building without descending into the realms of unacceptable costs?

1.5 The Separation of Square from Waterfront

The *Te Ngākau Development Plan*, and the *Te Ngākau Framework Plan* before it, all suggest that The Bridge (and Capital E) separates the central area of the Civic Precinct (aka The Square) from the waterfront and the harbour and that this is somehow a major deficiency of the Precinct’s current composition. Once again, an assumption of the flawed 2021 *Framework Plan* has been apparently carried through into the “thinking” of the Council’s Design Team. In urban design terms, this assumption would only be reasonable if

the original Precinct design had been significantly disadvantaged by its separation from the harbour by the Bridge. But this is clearly not the case. The whole point of this carefully constructed original composition was to make a clear physical separation between the focused, amphitheatre space of the Square-in-the-city and the public waterfront on the other side of the Bridge.

Considering the Bridge and its role in the original concept of the Civic Precinct - it is an important artifact of Central Wellington life – it makes a daily drama of movement and transition between the almost internally focused, urban experience of The Square and the openness and linear nature of our public waterfront. It creates, through movement, a uniquely individual sense of “here” and “there” – something an at grade, street crossing as a possible replacement would entirely dilute.

The Bridge and its cascade of stairs on the Square side makes a very strong contribution to the physical definition of the Square, or *Te Marae Ātea*, as a focused, amphitheater space where all eyes are drawn to its stage-like and communal presence. In the other direction, the promontory and outlook from the Bridge allows us our only truly broad physical prospect of the city’s public waterfront above the Lagoon as a central point of focus.

Consequently, the Bridge brings into sharp relief the adjoining, but different, realities of these two important city-defining spaces – waterfront and Square - with the essential experience of the Bridge and its visual sequence mediating between them by gradually introducing us to each of these very different public spaces.

It is the wonderfully fanciful and culturally charged overlay of Paratene Matchitt’s sculptural timber forms – its stylised whales, sea birds and pou - that emphasise and make the central space of the Bridge a landscape of shelter and celebration. It is impossible to think of the Bridge without engaging with this robust setting of sheltering timber structures and their iconography. It is a seamless part of the experience of crossing the bridge and an unforgettable marking of place – in an entirely unique way. Replacing it with either the proposed wide road crossing where the pedestrian will always be the second-class citizen or inviting people on to a narrow, snaking bridge without any place to pause and survey the waterfront and entirely dominated by the waterfront road and its endless parade of traffic can in no way be regarded as an acceptable replacement for the power and mediating qualities of Bridge. This is what we would lose forever if the Council were allowed to go ahead and lay waste to this special place.

1.6 The Disappearing Square

Finally, we come to the most extraordinary move of this whole flawed Plan. We are told that all the illustrations in the new Development Plan are notional only – to give us – the public - a flavour of what the re-designed precinct would be like. Unfortunately, any illustration, no matter how “notional”, will have a tendency to be taken as a real representation of what is envisaged.

The level of detail conveyed by these “notional illustrations” and the “notional plan” that they relate to simply add further reality to what is proposed.....and, at the centre of this weakened and diluted “civic heart”? – The space of the Square and its distinctive paving design in its fundamental role as our city’s *Te Marae Ātea* – well its simply disappeared and in its place is a rather uninspiring, wide, planted walkway leading from the busy road crossing at the Quays to Mercer Street.

In design and urban design terms we’d give this a solid D minus.

1.7 What We Seek

Given all of the above, there is really only one result we seek. That our Councilors pin back their ears and really listen with care and attention to what the Centre and the public are saying to them:

Pause this seriously flawed and uninspiring Plan. Take a breath (or a cup of tea) – understand and forgive the mistakes that have been made – “and start again – but this time begin by giving the strong, original concept of the Civic Precinct – its careful public enclosure from the private city and its integral structure of square, bridge, ramp, nikaus and public buildings – the respect it so urgently deserves.

Commit to “repair and restore” this fine utterly original concept so that we can continue to celebrate and enjoy the finest civic place in this country of ours.

The Architectural Centre is a volunteer organisation made up of professionals and non-professionals who seek to promote good design of the built environment. Incorporated in 1946, the Centre has a long and proud tradition of doing just this. On behalf of the Centre I would like to thank HNZ for completing the listing report on this important building.

President: Paul Harvey

Secretary: Rob Tse

Treasurer: Kate Linzey

Committee members: Stuart Niven
John Gray

John Daish

Peter Parkes
Duncan Joiner
Chris Watson
Tony Parker

Nāku iti noa nā

arch@architecture.org.nz