

COUNCIL PRESENTATION - THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE

STUART NIVEN - 25th November , 2024

Illustrations:

- Framework Plan Timeline
- Civic Precinct - 9 Operating Principles and 7 Recommended Actions

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I'M HERE REPRESENTING THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE AND MYSELF AS A CITY RESIDENT GIVING ME 10 MINUTES

I'M ALSO HERE AS AN EXPERT - AN URBAN DESIGN PRACTITIONER WITH ALMOST 40 YEARS OF PRACTICE BEHIND ME.

To save time, I've handed you a copy of a short bio that justifies that claim and a list of 9 Operating Principles and 7 Recommended Actions that I'll be referring to.

If a thoughtful understanding of The Civic Precinct - it's extraordinary structure and intent when it was conjured out of a motley collection of city buildings and streets 34 years ago had been the proper starting point for this project then I don't think we would be here today with the predicament we're now in,

The 2021 Framework Plan - and now The Development Plan that cascades from it - are almost entirely missing any sign of an intelligent and respectful appreciation of that original concept of the Civic Precinct - widely regarded in professional circles as, hands down, one of this country's best public precincts.

Then as now - the Precinct is a carefully composed and choreographed composition of connecting urban elements and related public buildings centred on the amphitheatre-like space of the heart itself - the Civic Square - our Te Marae Atea.

Instead, that strong original concept of the Precinct as an elegant, walled civic enclosure with the private city kept back, discretely, outside its walls - (and with the bi-cultural narrative of its art works binding it together) - has been cast aside - trashed even.

We all know that the Precinct is damaged, but it is far from being beyond repair.

There is also a real need to understand that this damage is not just the result of the arbitrary and speculative nature of earthquake risk.

More realistically it is due to a fundamental absence of responsible civic stewardship where the Precinct has been the victim of a kind of unacknowledged "death by a

thousand cuts" - an approach, perhaps unconsciously, applied to the Precinct by numerous City Councils over almost the entire life of this very special place.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY "DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS"?

OK, LETS LIST SOME OF THEM

- Firstly the Precinct's water pools and the artist - Robert Franken's - wonderfully abstract and colourful murals that shimmered inside them. Early work on the pools involved their re-tanking which removed Franken's murals and never bothered to re-commission them.
- Then the city gate was destroyed with the removal of the 2 storey portal structure - our first example of that now familiar refrain - it was an earthquake risk - but, because there was no commitment to a set of working principles that captured the essence of this special place - it was not seen by the Council as custodian as important to commit to a reinterpretation of that gate - such an important feature of arrival and departure from this public Precinct.
- The public space fabric of the Precinct was largely fashioned from Oamaru Stone - a beautifully soft and golden material - easily repaired when occasional cracks and discolouring occurred - if there had been a commitment to look after this material. Well there wasn't because once again there was no operational principle established to give this repair a priority - and every time a crack appeared someone was assigned the task to fill the crack with a nasty white mastic like an awkwardly applied bandage. - where something beautiful became something ugly.
- The accumulation of extraneous bits and pieces that were allowed to accrue haphazardly across the precinct - like that awful, ugly attempt at a planted green wall that was allowed to be attached to the side of the steps that descend into the Square from the Library.
- The plethora of unrelated signage that was also allowed to accrue randomly across the Precinct - sourced, no doubt, from various parts of Council's organisation - where the left hand never seemed to know what the right hand is doing.

I could go on - but my point stands - this place has been the repeated target of an almost wilful cycle of neglect.

What was required was a lot of care informed by knowledge and an inspired commitment to repair.

Instead we have the gutting of that still strong composition and its replacement with a confused mix of over-planting and some very forgettable public spaces - the jewel being a new, meandering pedestrian walkway from Mercer Street to the edge of one of the city's

busier traffic arteries and the laughable idea that an over-planted reproduction of the Queens Wharf crossing - where - faced with the car - the pedestrian will always be a second class citizen - will somehow, miraculously be better than the protected and insulated public crossing of the City-to-Sea Bridge.

I returned permanently to Wellington in Mid 2018 and was dismayed at the poor physical condition and a certain level of uncertainty that surrounded the Square and the Civic Precinct as a whole.

I had an opportunity to raise my concerns with Liam Hodgetts who had just arrived in the City as the new City Planner, and who I knew from Melbourne where I had been the State Government's Urban Design Director and Liam had been a senior city planner at one of the city's growth Councils. We met and spoke about my concerns about the state of the Precinct - and was made aware that Council had recently commissioned a piece of strategic work - the Te Ngakau Framework Plan.

He asked me as an experienced urban designer very familiar with the city and with detailed knowledge of the Square and its creation - to look carefully at the Precinct and to give him the benefit of what I would recommend the Council might do to begin to repair the Precinct as a vitally important public asset.

I spent 10 days looking at the Square and its uncared for, neglected state - with its gardens behind the City Gallery choked with weeds.

The resulting Report embodied 9 operating principles and 7 recommended actions:

9 OPERATING PRINCIPLES:

- Maintain the Square's design principle of a "walled civic enclosure" within the city.
- Maintain the primary focus on the physical "bowl" of the Square (including the City-to-Sea Bridge) - in short, its shape.
- Ensure the increased public activation of the Square's edges
- Re-establish the Square's original water pools and the role of water movement in the design of the Square.
- Recreate a new version of the "City Gate" to the Square
- Ensure the gradual re-establishment of the primary pedestrian routes across and through the Precinct
- Maintain the Precinct as the locus of city government

- Remove all poorly conceived and extraneous physical elements
- Introduce consistent, informed design oversight

7 RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- Appoint a City Square Champion with the authority to adjudicate all proposed changes to the Precinct.
- Assign Prime Responsibility within the WCC for the regular Maintenance and Care of the Square and its Surroundings.
- Create an Effective Place making Function for the Square.
- Reaffirm The Square's Original Design, Management and Programme Principles.
- Realise the Repair Potential of a Possible Combined CAB/MOB Development Site.
- Acknowledge the Missing Development Site of Ilott Green and a Commitment to Re-address It.
- Resolve the current "Dead Space" of Capital E.

And there you have it - a clear set of principles and actions and a stewardship committed to their maintenance.

I never knew what happened to that Report - it was paid for and disappeared - and when the inevitable Framework Plan arrived later that year - I couldn't for the life of me detect any influence it appeared to have had on that Plan.

I read it with interest and growing unease at what might lie behind a hell of a lot of words and a record number of "motherhood generalities" - with apologies to "motherhood".

But there was one salient and disturbing sign that this document was actually informed by ignorance.

THE TIMELINE

This timeline - on page 10 of the Framework Plan - showed a sloping line from bottom left to top right charting the history of the idea and aspiration for a City Square that first appeared back in the 18th century and on up to the present day. Small, equal dots were placed along the timeline marking salient points in the life of this idea.

I fully expected to see a much enlarged dot at the 1992 date marking the miraculous arrival of this long held aspiration - but no - the actual creation of the Square was marked as just another dot along this timeline - so not a very insightful interpretation of our city's history.

This seemed to me to be more than a little ominous for where the inevitable Development Plan might lead.

And now we know:

We have an exercise in Civic lobotomy:

- Gone the Bridge
- Gone the ramp and its emblematic parade of stylised nikaus - the very symbol of Absolutely Positively Wellington
- AND - most painful of all - Gone The Square itself - a Te Ngakau without "the heart"!

In short the systematic demolition of that delicate interconnected concept and structure that defined this unique area of the city for the last 30 years - apparently animated by the depressing idea that nothing of value lasts.

And this is where we should allow ourselves to pause - as it's not too late - as many informed people have pointed out over the last 2 days - there is actually no obligation on you to spend any more money.

Where there is obligation - is the need for some serious public reflection on the true value of what you have and what it would actually take - slowly and carefully - to repair and enhance and to turn that long history of neglect around and commit to real repair.

THE ARCHITECTURAL CENTRE URGES YOU TO TAKE THIS GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO THINK AGAIN - IN THE INTERESTS OF ALL OF US.