

**Medium Density Housing:
A Local Strategic Response to Urban Sprawl**

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Introduction

Historically, New Zealand's urban housing market has been dominated by owner occupied, detached dwellings built on relatively large sites. This form of housing development has however, become highly problematic in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Over the last few decades Auckland's population growth, fuelled by international immigration, immigration from other New Zealand areas and by natural increase, has risen to close to 1.2 million people. Although infill housing has become increasingly commonplace in Auckland's suburban areas, housing Auckland's population growth has, until recently, been met largely by outward expansion and the formation of new suburbs. These suburbs, have generally been serviced by motorway construction, with only meagre new public transport services set in place. By the 1990s however, as Auckland's population grew, and urban sprawl came to be perceived as a major traffic and environmental problem, so too concerns became increasingly evident over environmental sustainability, inadequate or failing infrastructure, and the need for a wider mix of housing options, in a relatively expensive real estate market.

Response to these issues has been simultaneously regional and local. In 1998 a regional growth strategy was proposed and later adopted, which advocated regional urban containment, to be matched by urban intensification policies at the local level (Auckland Regional Growth Strategy, 1999). The local-regional connection is crucial to the Auckland Region, which is in fact made up of four administratively independent, but physically contiguous cities; Auckland City, North Shore City, Waitakere City and Manukau City. Auckland is the 'collective term' given these cities. There are also three peri-urban district councils, Papakura, Franklin and Rodney, which are located on the southern and northern edges of the Region¹.

A key component of urban intensification in the Auckland Region was the development of medium density housing, defined here as terrace housing, cluster housing and low rise apartment buildings (i.e. apartment buildings up to three storeys high). The rapid growth of medium density housing over the past few years has made a definite change to the appearance of the Auckland landscape. However, given the thoroughly entrenched acceptance of detached, stand alone dwellings as the housing norm in New Zealand, it is not surprising that the rapid growth of medium density housing has been met with polarised responses.

The initial section of this paper provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the issues around the management of growth in the Auckland urban region. It does this via a discussion of urban development, and demographic and administrative changes over recent decades. This also sets the scene for the subsequent analysis of the *Auckland Regional Growth Strategy*, the regional response to the myriad of issues associated with urban sprawl. The final two sections focus more closely on medium density housing *per se*. The first of these outlines the polarised nature of the current debate surrounding medium density housing in the Auckland Region. The second,

¹ Regional councils were created as a consequence of local government reform in 1989. There are 12 regional councils and 4 unitary authorities (combined regional and district councils) in New Zealand. They are primarily responsible for integrated management of natural and physical resources in their region. Regional councils and unitary authorities are required to prepare a regional policy statement, and a regional coastal plan. They may also prepare other regional plans.

reports on a case study of a medium density housing development in Waitakere City (known also in the vernacular as West Auckland). In particular, it addresses the issues of the tension between intensification and urban amenity, and the operation of body corporates. While these are issues that arose from a particular piece of research, they are certainly germane to the development of medium density housing more generally across the Auckland Region.

Setting the Scene for Urban Growth Management

This section of the paper is largely contextual, aimed at providing a background to issues around urban growth management. It discusses urban development and population growth in recent decades, and in addition, provides an examination of recent key statutory and administrative changes that have impacted on urban growth management.

Auckland's metropolitan region covers 4,518 square kilometers, but urban development only covers 530 square kilometers. Population density is 21.32 persons per hectare for the urban developed area (Fookes, 2000: 264). Auckland's growth as a city since the 1950s, and the expansion outward has been due to the following factors:

- ?? considerable investment of public money on motorway development;
- ?? decline in the use and service levels of public transport;
- ?? from the 1950s until the 1970s, the availability of public funding for the erection of low cost housing on greenfield sites;
- ?? a construction industry that operated well within the parameters of available funding and relatively easy conditions for construction;
- ?? land on the urban fringes of the Region that was relatively easy to develop, build on and service;
- ?? the fact that local and central government agencies provided social and community services in the new suburban areas (Auckland Regional Council, 1994; Fookes, 2000: 266).

Statistical data on the Auckland Region's current population clearly show the dominance of the region. With a population of 1,175,400 at 30 June 1999, approximately 31% of New Zealanders live in the Auckland Region. Not only does the region have the largest population, but during the year to June 1999, the largest numerical increases in regional populations were also in the Auckland Region (15,800). The four cities that make up the Auckland Region rated in the top five largest cities in New Zealand in terms of actual numerical population increases. Manukau City (4,400) had the largest numerical increase, followed by Auckland City (4,000) and Waitakere City (3,200). North Shore City (2,000) had the fifth largest population increase. Over the same time period, while the combined population of New Zealand's 15 cities grew at 0.7 percent, the Auckland Region's annual population growth rate was double this at 1.4 percent.

Projected population growths indicate similar population trends will continue in the future. For example, with regard to household data, the Auckland Region is projected to have the largest growth in households, up by 200,000, or 56 percent, to reach 562,000 households in 2021. By then, 33 percent of all New Zealand households will

reside in the Auckland Region, compared with 28 percent in 1996 (Statistics New Zealand, <http://www.stats.govt.nz>).

Urban growth management in the Auckland Region, must also be seen within a particular statutory and administrative context, significantly shaped by the bevy of institutional reforms that were enacted in New Zealand since 1984, with the broad aims of rationalisation, privatisation and devolution (Boston, 1991; Jesson, 2000; Kelsey, 1993; Mulgan, 1994). At the local level, one outcome of the reforms was that local government was reorganised and many services, which had previously been publicly operated, were either privatised or re-established to run as business enterprises. As Fookes (2000: 265) points out, these changes have important implications for urban growth management, the most significant of which was that no longer was there one agency that functioned to oversee planning, policy making and infrastructure development.

In the Auckland Region, the vacuum created by reform has been filled by a group called the Mayoral Forum, made up of the Auckland City Mayors and the Chair of the Auckland Regional Council. Although having no precise sanctioned basis for its authority, this Forum has acted as a regional co-ordinating body. A major initiative emanating from the Mayoral Forum has been the Regional Growth Forum, which does have official status as an Auckland Regional Council committee. The creation of this body has been much heralded as a significant step in a political context which, up until recently, has been very polarised and parochial. It was this Forum that produced the Auckland Regional Growth Strategy, a vision for the development of Auckland for the next half century (Auckland Regional Growth Forum, 1999).

Auckland Regional Growth Strategy

The Auckland Regional Growth Strategy was released only after an extensive public consultation process. As part of the process, project teams were established around a range of topics. These teams were given a statement of aims, issues, objectives and outcomes, and later, published reports on their work. The broad vision of the Auckland Region's future thus established, was used as the basis for a more detailed framework of urban growth management.

Key considerations that underpinned the framework and fed into the final preferred strategy were, population growth estimates, the capacity of the Region to accommodate this growth, and the pressures thus exerted on the Region. It is expected that Auckland Region's population will grow to between 1.6 and 2.2 million by 2050. It is further estimated that to accommodate the upper estimate of 2.2 million people, some 179,000 new dwellings will be needed over the next five decades. Recent figures show approximately 366,000 dwellings in the Region. To allow for the numbers of future dwellings needed to be constructed, changes to current district plans² were deemed necessary. In terms of the Region's capacity to accommodate such growth, issues of the ability and nature of the infrastructure were put forward for consideration. A series of desired regional outcomes, expressed in rather general

² District plans are required to be prepared by every city and district council under the Resource Management Act 1991. The plan sets out policies and rules for guiding development and subdivision of land. District plans are required to "not be inconsistent" with higher level policy statements and plans produced by national or regional government.

terms, were also put forward. Related to the outcomes was the identification of priorities, thought necessary because of possible trade offs required across outcomes. Statements of principles were also offered. Finally, a range of choices was advanced for assessment.

From the framework sketched above, the preferred strategy of intensification emerged, key features of which were:

- ?? a focus on the existing metropolitan area, where 70% of the proposed new dwellings will be built;
- ?? the encouragement of growth in existing metropolitan areas around town centres and major public transport routes;
- ?? a vision of the future in which 25-30% of people in the Auckland Region will be living in multi unit housing, with the balance in lower density accommodation in suburban or rural areas.

Ideas were also put forward for how the intensification strategy would be implemented. Fundamental to implementation was an integrated approach, involving bringing together various stakeholders, i.e. representatives from a variety of government agencies and the private sector. It is expected that stakeholders work within the legislative frameworks, in a partnership model. The type of working relationship envisaged in the Strategy was a partnership between local government and their communities. Currently, sector agreements are being negotiated with the Region and city and district councils to manage implementation of the Strategy.

The Medium Density Housing Debate

The previous section has delineated the main features of the Auckland Regional Council's Growth Strategy, based on the notion of the emergence of a more intensified urban form. Clearly therefore, at the administrative and planning level, the Auckland Regional Council's urban intensification initiative has been promoted as a major platform from which to address urban sprawl. It has also been supported by developers and obviously by an increasing number of people who are choosing to buy or rent the units in medium density housing developments. It has been recognised that medium density housing offers housing consumers greater choice, and a low maintenance option that does not tie people to their homes and gardens. Broadly, this can be termed 'the lifestyle option', where flexibility of living arrangements is an important consideration.

Nevertheless, medium density housing has not been met with widespread approval. It is an extremely controversial topic in the Auckland Region, with much of the debate resting on polarised, rather than balanced views. Within the views opposing medium density housing however, criticisms have come from a range of positions. One position is firmly ideological. This position is voiced by a significant proportion of the New Zealand population for whom medium density housing is an anathema. For these people there can be no other 'proper' way of living for New Zealanders than in the detached family home. For them, the importance of a house on its own section is so ingrained within the New Zealand ethos and identity, that any other form of housing is perceived as almost unnatural - an aberration. A typical comment in this vein refers to people in medium density housing as living 'like rats in a maze'. Or critics ask in

tomes of very real disbelief, “How can anybody live like that?”, seemingly unaware that for urban dwellers the world over, medium and high density housing is the norm. Such criticisms, based as they are on entrenched positions and beliefs, are most difficult to address rationally. It is expected however, that over time, the ontological threat that medium density housing represents, is likely to decline of its own accord.

A second, and related critical position, sees medium density housing developments as ‘the slums of the future’. This position is captured, for example, in a recent letter to the Shore News (a local North Shore City newspaper), where a correspondent claimed to be ‘not opposed to well-designed sympathetic development. But ... opposed to the unsustainable, ugly subdivisions which will be our ghettos of the future’ (Shore News 14/02/01). The letter was accompanied by a picture of North Shore medium density units and the caption ‘NEW HOMES: Subdivisions - the ghettos of the future?’ While the caption posed the notion of slums of the future as a question, for many people the outcome of much medium density housing is already a fait accompli.

At this stage in the advance of medium density housing in Auckland, no such assumption can be made. It might very well be the case that some medium density housing developments may deteriorate in the future, just as some stand alone housing developments of the past have deteriorated. However, currently there is no necessary reason for this to occur. Moreover, it is still far too early to be able to judge the possible veracity of such claims, given the newness of medium density housing in the Auckland Region. It is suggested, however, that the groundswell of concern over this issue is enough in itself, for planners, councils, developers and others to take seriously comments about possible slum development.

A further criticism of medium density housing cites its impact on infrastructure. In particular, adherents to this view, focus on the likely increase of traffic on existing roads, that are already recognised as being overloaded, and the pressure such housing developments will place on sewerage and stormwater systems, that have been shown in the past to have insufficient capacity to cope with additional demand. This strand of criticism is easier to address than criticisms based upon ideological beliefs. Here at least, those involved as ‘partners’ in the development of medium density housing, can operate to ensure that medium density housing is designed and constructed with full awareness of the implications for the infrastructure. Stakeholders in the process can give full consideration to infrastructural requirements throughout their projects: from the outset of the planning process, through to the final stages of construction and finishing.

Having sketched key elements in the controversy over medium density housing in the Auckland Region, we now turn results of a research project on medium density housing that will offer further insights into the debate.

Case Study: Ambrico Place Research Issues

This section of the paper draws from a study of medium density housing in Waitakere City - one of the four cities of the Auckland Region. Ambrico Place, the subject of the study, was the first major medium density housing initiative in Waitakere City, whose Council have been promoting a compact city, or urban village approach, since 1992. For this reason Ambrico Place has been seen as something of a test site for the City. The development of the site from 1996, in fact preceded the adoption of the Regional Growth Strategy, and thus reflects policy outcomes of Waitakere City's urban development strategy, which commenced in 1992, and the Proposed District Plan (Waitakere City Council, 1995). Nevertheless, the Ambrico Place development itself, is located very near to a town centre and in close walking distance to major transport corridors, being serviced effectively by both trains and buses. It is therefore consistent with the overall direction of the *Auckland Regional Growth Strategy* (<http://www.waitakere.govt.nz/ecocity>).

Waitakere City Council has been seen as a leader and innovator in producing sustainable medium density housing developments in the Auckland Region. In theory, medium density housing fits well within Waitakere City's eco-city vision, which is based on the principles of Agenda 21, the document that resulted from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development - the 'Earth Summit' Conference. The development of medium density housing in Waitakere City fits congruently into the eco-city vision, a major goal of which is sustainability.

Like the Auckland Region as a whole, it is expected that Waitakere City will also experience considerable future population growth. It has been estimated that the population of Waitakere City will double by 2050 to reach around 330,000, and that 60% of the capacity to accommodate this growth will come from intensification of existing urban areas. Given the commitment of Waitakere City to urban intensification, and in the context of its broader eco-city principles and policies, it was important for the City to find out how well medium density housing, as a new form of housing, was working for both residents and local communities. Hence, the request from the Waitakere City Council, for an independent research project on Ambrico Place, to be undertaken by a team from Massey University and the University of Auckland.³ It was intended that results of the Ambrico Place research would be used to evaluate and modify policies guiding the location, design and amenity of medium density housing.

The broad objective of the Ambrico Place Research Project was to gather data on life in and around Ambrico Place. These data included: a profile of residents; current and previous housing information; housing preferences and expectations; design issues, amenity etc.; community; transport; leisure, recreation and consumption (Dixon *et al*, 2001).

³ Other team members involved in the Ambrico Place Research Project include Professor Paul Spoonley, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Albany, and Professor Richard Le Heron, Department of Geography, University of Auckland. Dr Larry Murphy and Ms Enid Bryner, Department of Geography, University of Auckland, were involved with the team in earlier work on Ambrico Place. Support and funding of the Ambrico Place Research project by the Waitakere City Council and the Auckland Regional Council is acknowledged.

To meet the research's objective, 51 in-depth interviews were held with Ambrico Place residents. The data were gathered between November 2000 and January 2001. At the time of the research, 250 units were occupied across a total of eight separate developments. Information was gathered therefore, from approximately one fifth of all units. A further 35 interviews were conducted with developers, architects, designers, off-site owners, body corporate managers, local retailers, nearby residents and Waitakere City Council staff.

The remainder of this section addresses issues that arose from this research: the tension between intensification and urban amenity, and the operation of body corporates in Ambrico Place (Dixon, Dupuis and Lysnar, 2001). Comparisons made with other research on the topic show these issues are not confined to the Ambrico Place development, but pertinent to the study of medium density housing more generally across the Auckland Region (Hill Young and Cooper, 2000; Research Solutions and Auckland Regional Council, 2000). It is argued that for medium density housing to succeed well in the Auckland Region, attention should be paid to these issues.

a) Intensification and Urban Amenity

The challenge of providing for intensification of housing at affordable levels, and at the same time maintaining or enhancing urban amenity, is one of the most pressing planning issues in the Auckland isthmus. One strand of the debate about medium density housing has centred on how to provide for more intense residential use of a site, without reducing what is perceived by existing residents to constitute accepted levels of neighbourhood urban amenity. While the debate focuses on determining acceptable environmental thresholds, such as provision of green spaces, infrastructure services and sufficient on-site parking, it is also about community acceptance of changing lifestyles and new forms of housing.

Table 1 provides a summary of views of Ambrico Place residents and non-residents on what constitutes "good" medium density housing. The table shows that the interests of various parties involved may not always be compatible. In these circumstances, tradeoffs are then required to reconcile differences and therefore need to be made explicit. These tradeoffs relate to the requirements to provide:

- ?? a range of good quality housing at affordable levels, while at the same time ensuring profitability for the developer
- ?? flexibility for the developer in designing the development, yet still ensuring certainty for neighbours and new residents about what might happen on the site
- ?? sufficient outdoor open spaces, while still trying to maximise use of internal space and minimise off-site impacts such as parking and traffic generation
- ?? transparency about what constitutes "private" and "public" space within medium density housing developments, and recognition of where the tradeoffs have occurred

The above tradeoffs are driven by the desires of various groups to pursue and maximise their own interests. The problem is that frequently these interests do not coincide. Often they cannot, because of the iterative nature of the decision-making processes, as the development of an area progresses from a concept to a built reality. As this progression takes place, new parties with new sets of interests become involved, and there is increasingly more at stake for everybody concerned.

In medium density housing, all parties want to maximise their own interests, as is clearly evident in Table 1. For example, developers are concerned with profit margins, while simultaneously meeting urban design principles and producing units that will sell on the open market; neighbours want to minimise environmental and social impacts and ensure their property values are maintained or increased; councils have a whole raft of objectives to meet, including accommodating current and future residents' needs, regional planning strategies, local neighbourhood aspirations and good environmental outcomes; residents are interested in such things as safe and secure environments, proximity to facilities and transport, maintenance of property values and liveable internal and external environments; and off-site owners are interested in good investments and smooth management of their assets by body corporates.

The role of the Council is critical when it comes to maximising interests for all parties. The Ambrico Place research shows that the Waitakere City Council has put much effort into achieving workable outcomes. They have tried, and largely succeeded, to put their sustainable, eco-city principles and policies into practice. For this, the Council should be commended.

The Ambrico Place experience has reinforced important principles which the Council can continue to apply and extend in subsequent medium density housing developments. These include: ongoing and active engagement and communication with interested parties to ensure good information flows; requiring an integrated design brief; and making certain close attention is paid to design details. Ambrico Place goes a long way to demonstrating that urban amenity need not be compromised through increased residential densities.

(b) Governance of Body Corporates

A major issue that emerged from the interviews related to the operation of body corporates. A body corporate is the legal entity that represents all the owners of a property developed under the Unit Titles Act 1972. The body corporate, through its agent, is responsible for the maintenance and management of common property. The rules of a body corporate are set out in the Second and Third Schedules of the Unit Titles Act.

The law has not kept pace with the expansion of different housing types and the scale of new developments that have been constructed since the Unit Titles Act of 1972, and its subsequent amendments, came into force. In 1999, under a broader brief, the Law Commission reviewed the shared ownership of land (Law Commission, 1999). As part of the review they considered changes to body corporate provisions.

A pertinent issue considered by the Law Commission was the ability of owners to change the rules of their body corporate. Currently, under Schedule 2 of the Act there is a requirement that any decisions for changed must be agreed upon unanimously by owners within the body corporate. There is provision in the Unit Titles Act for rule changes where unanimity has not been achieved. If however, a vote of eighty per cent or more in support of changes has been achieved, application may be made to the High Court under Section 42, to approve the change, despite the lack of unanimity. They concluded that the principle of unanimity should be retained, if the change should result in an alteration of the conditions at the time an owner contracted to acquire his or her interest.

(c) *Body Corporates in Ambrico Place*

Each development at Ambrico Place has a body corporate, the management of which presents five particular issues that require some redress. First, interview data indicated that it is difficult to change body corporate rules, which has led to considerable frustration for many owners. The Law Commission's recommendations offer no help in this regard.

Second, communication between Ambrico Place body corporates and owners could be improved. While the Act provides mechanisms, such as annual general meetings for owners to raise issues, devices such as regular newsletters, printed in more than one language where appropriate, and the facilitation of active owners' committees, could be useful means of addressing particular matters.

Third, many Ambrico Place residents were born overseas and have English as a second language. Thus, communication between body corporates and these residents needs to take account of their particular language requirements.

Fourth, off-site owners are not always exercising their responsibilities and advising tenants of the body corporate rules in place for their particular development. This exacerbates communication difficulties for non-English speaking tenants.

Finally, seven of the eight Ambrico Place developments are relatively small, containing fewer than 40 units, thus constraining the financial ability of the respective body corporates to employ on-site managers. This issue was noted in the report *Building a Better Future* (Research Solutions and the Auckland Regional Council, 2000), which pointed out that larger, better resourced developments are able to establish an effective body corporate structure with sufficient resources to employ an on-site manager. Attention to on-going maintenance and on-site management is a crucial factor in sustaining the long-term success of medium density housing.

In resolving these issues, two further steps could be taken. First, an integrated approach to management could be adopted, whereby Ambrico Place body corporates could work co-operatively in employing on-site managers. This may be more practical where the same management firm administers more than one body corporate. In addition, effective on-site management could also pay greater attention to cross cultural communication issues. Second, if legislative change is proposed to the Unit Titles Act, the Council could make representations to ensure that the operation of

body corporates can accommodate an increasingly wide range of housing and tenancy circumstances.

It is suggested that a well governed, well run body corporate, characterised by accord and common purpose between body corporate manager and residents, will go a long way towards ensuring that medium density housing is well maintained. In fact, it would appear (at the level of logic at least), that because of the upkeep and maintenance responsibilities carried out by body corporates, medium density housing developments should have very good chances of success. As noted throughout the report however, there are issues to be addressed in the way body corporates operate. The sooner these issues are dealt with, the greater the likelihood that medium density housing developments will not deteriorate, as feared by some critics.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the background to the rapid growth of medium density housing in Auckland and focused, in particular, on the issues of urban development, population growth and administrative and statutory changes that have fed into the need for urban growth management at regional and local levels. It has also outlined the key features of the *Auckland Regional Growth Strategy*, the plan adopted to deal with these issues. This strategy is based on the idea of urban intensification, offering a vision of the future in which medium density housing plays an ever increasing role in accommodating future expected population growth.

While medium density housing might be seen by local councils and others as a panacea for urban problems, it has not been met with widespread public approval. Such housing does not fit the New Zealand ethos, dominated as it is by the stand alone, owner occupied dwelling on a relatively large site. Other critics of this new form fear that the units currently being built will turn into the slums or ghettos of the future. Other critics again, are concerned about the added strain such intensive building will place on an infrastructure that has had problems in the past with its capacity to cope. Thus, it is important for councils and other stakeholders to adequately address both the technical and social dimensions that underpin the successful development and operation of medium density housing, as outlined in this paper.

More importantly, the acceptance of medium density housing as an appropriate form of urban housing is a critical strategic element in Auckland's growth strategy. If it is widely resisted by communities, or fails through unsuitable location, poor design and poor on-site management, local politicians and regional planners will be forced to rethink some basic assumptions about managing Auckland's growth in the long term. Such a re-evaluation would have significant economic and environmental implications for the future shape of metropolitan Auckland, consumption of resources and management of physical and social infrastructure. Thus, there is much at stake. Evidence to date suggests that there is considerable demand for medium density housing as a desirable alternative to traditional forms of housing. Much has been left to market forces since the reforms of the 1980s which reduced the extent of government intervention in sectors such as housing. However, it is important for councils, in partnership with others, to maintain active oversight at both strategic

policy and operational levels to ensure the viability of medium density housing as an increasingly significant part of Auckland's housing stock.

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