

New New Lynn

Jym Clark
& Joe Hoyt

Auckland is New Zealand's largest city, with 1.4 million people. Like many cities in the 'new world', Auckland is a place where the private vehicle is king. In New Zealand, public transport has long been a low priority, with the bus and train regarded as existing only for those who can't drive, or can't afford to own a car. But things are changing: public transport use is increasing in Auckland, and around the world. Between 2006 and 2013, total public transport commuting trips in Auckland grew by 27%, while car trips only grew 2%.¹

Alongside this shift the city's urban designers are calling for housing intensification in places served by the rail and to a lesser degree the bus network. This type of development, in contrast to the road driven sprawl, is part of how Auckland plans to create a quality compact city going forwards.

New Lynn, which is where the western suburbs converge to meet Auckland's isthmus, has recently been re-zoned as a special housing area, and combined with this there has been a push from Auckland Council to develop New Lynn as a regional hub, an area where mixed-use development, retail and dense housing can coexist. New Lynn has no direct

1 See table 3.3, 'Journey to Work Patterns in the Auckland Region, Analysis of Census Data for 2001-2013', Richard Paling Consultancy, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/nauib8dprhf2ex7/Richard-Paling-report-TransportPatterns-in-the-Auckland-Region.pdf>

motorway connection, but does have a railway line running through its centre.

Planning sustainable transport linked with housing is vital to reducing our carbon emissions – not just now but in decades to come. With that urgency in mind, Joe Hoyt and Jym Clark walk around the West Auckland town centre of New Lynn, approximately 40 minutes by bus or rail from the city centre, 20 minutes by car. The focus of their talk is a new transit hub and mixed-use development in central New Lynn, incorporating rail, bus, shops, parking and a large apartment building. As they talk, they wander through the development onto nearby streets.

Joe is an artist usually based in Los Angeles, but living for a time in the suburb of Titirangi, adjacent to New Lynn. Jym is an urban planner who has been living and working in Auckland for ten years. They talk about the intensification of New Lynn and how this kind of process can be analysed and absorbed from the varying perspectives of their own disciplines.

Joe Hoyt

This new building here, it really calls attention to itself. There's nothing nearly as tall as it for miles around.

Jym Clark

I know, you can see it from Avondale, and a bit further away. It's become a bit of a landmark.

JH

Do you think this apartment building has a symbolic value to people? To me coming here from the outside, it really seems to be advertising a hub or a centre.

JC

Yeah, I do – the Deputy Mayor of Auckland bought an apartment in there. And I think she did need somewhere to live, but it is a sign of a push for development of that kind. It does stand out so clearly now because the rest of the built landscape is so low, it has a real presence. And those yellow features make it stand out.

In terms of this central New Lynn area, it's a place where growth has been planned. The former Waitakere City pushed hard to get infrastructure investment here in New Lynn. Part of that was to get the rail line out of the way of traffic and down in a trench. Where we're standing now there used to be railway crossings.

JH

So without the trench, you would have had gridlock from the commuter trains blocking traffic. This is a pretty busy area. It is interesting, in a way the most important half of this new development is hidden underground and you can't even see it.

JC

Apparently this structure was meant to be just a large car park with retail sleeved around the bottom. But then some voices called for an apartment building to be put on top.

JH

So have the apartments been successful?

JC

Yeah, they're selling. There's quite a demand for more compact living spaces, especially with the aging population. There are people who want to downsize, and most housing is limited to three-bedroom, detached

dwellings in the suburbs. To have the option of a one or two bedroom apartment, with limited upkeep, is desirable.

JH

These retail shops, below the apartment building, don't look like they're doing so well. A lot of them are still empty – but all the stores in the mall across the road are occupied.

JC

Yeah, I wonder when this retail will start fully functioning. When the electric trains are operating on the line straight into central Auckland, and the frequency is up, more people will be passing by, that will make a difference.

JH

So the infrastructure serving this area is slowly getting ramped up...

JC

There used to be a bus interchange on this site, and it was a pretty grim-looking place. For two and a half years I caught the train out here to Henderson. They were building the trench. They built the walls into the ground, and then they dug it out, revealing the walls that they'd constructed underground. They had the railway line on top of the ground, and then put it into the trench. It's a clever technique. The guys who knew how to build the walls were from Egypt. It was such an expensive project that it had to be funded by both the local council and central government. The Labour Government of the time put money into this rail trench – maybe 120 million dollars?

But in terms of the retail development, that's also private investment. The Council owned the land, so I

think they leveraged for development to occur. There was a consortium set up that the Council was involved with, to make this Merchant Quarter a reality.

Why did you become interested in the New Lynn townscape, and centre? Just because it's close to where you are living at the moment in Titirangi?

JH

It is close and, with sustainability in mind, focusing on what is local to you is important. We come here to shop and also to catch the train in to Auckland central. But also it's an area in flux right now. That's creating interesting contrasts and disruptions, so you have a site where there are conflicting ideologies. Clearly this is still a car-dominated hierarchy that's thriving, but alongside you have an attempt by public and private groups to insert some urban sustainability. And they're doing it in a way that seems to coexist alongside the car-dominated one. That also interests me. Here you have a train line that's directly linking into a shopping mall, like a subway would. These are supposedly opposing interests. So I think this is an experiment that has relevance to a lot of other places, like Los Angeles even.

JC

I don't think New Lynn has any more potential to be a sustainable development than anywhere else on the railway line, but in saying that, everything you could want to buy you can get in New Lynn. And you can get the train to work, within a reasonable walking or cycling distance. With public transport there has to be a high level of convenience and accessibility to make it a viable choice.

JH

We are surrounded by a lot more desirable places

to live, that have coastline, trees and nicer houses. People who live in those neighborhoods could use New Lynn as a hub instead of going in to central Auckland. They don't have to live in the town proper for it to still function as a centre.

JC

They see that tall building, and they're like, 'That's what they want us to live in'. It can be a bit difficult for people who are scared of density. You go from very high density to a low density area and there's not a lot of a transition. They don't see dense development as an option, an option that in fact will be the new residential growth typology. There actually is a little bit of medium density development around here, just two minutes walk from the train here.

JH

I never realised those were there. They're really tucked away. Should we walk over?

JC

Yeah, so these are definitely medium density. I suppose this land was available because it's former industrial land from the Crown Lynn ceramic works. All that land was developed 15 or so years ago. So the industry leaving really freed the land up for development.

But the construction and design looks really terrible, it's just garages facing the street. As you say it's still a very car-orientated environment around here, as soon as you leave the central area.

JH

I guess that transition away from cars just takes a long time.

JC

These houses are relatively new, built I would say in

the early 2000s, but they've been plagued with issues, such as the leaky building syndrome. It's a phenomenon of poor building quality in which water gets inside the building frame and rots it from the inside out. It happened especially in the mid 90s after changes were made to relax the building code. It was a consequence of deregulation.

JH

I see a lot of buildings around in shrink-wrap.

JC

It's very expensive to fix, to the point that it's ruined people's lives. Apparently the total cost of the leaky building crisis is roughly equivalent to the cost of rebuilding Christchurch after the earthquakes there, around twelve billion dollars.

JH

Do you think the leaky building crisis has affected the way high density housing is judged?

JC

Yes, even though the leaky building crisis has affected many single-family dwellings, I would say it's been most associated with the two or three storey apartment or townhouse complexes.

JH

And maybe it also coincided with an increase of density?

JC

There was a lot of urban growth at that time, and through to the mid 2000s residential development reached a peak, just before the global financial crisis. It's definitely tainted people's perception of medium density housing. Any building that is covered in fibre

cement has a cheaper look, and eaves that are close to the edge of the building rather than wider. That sort of look is disappearing now. Developers will put things like eaves in to make new dwellings not look like those leaky buildings.

JH

This is a pretty large grouping of apartments, and right next door is a pretty big park, which also seems new. Those seem like native species that have been planted.

JC

When I caught the train out West for work, you would come across here and you could see lots of people spending time in this park.

JH

It wouldn't be too bad – to live in the apartment here, walk to the train, be close to the park. It seems like how you would have to plan these developments for them to be attractive to people. I mean, you can't just put buildings like that as stand-alone developments. There needs to be coordinated planning to make sure what's built around them fits with a certain lifestyle. I'm not sure that's happening here in New Lynn because a lot of the new construction continues to be these big box stores.

JC

So you were doing drawings along a new light rail line in Los Angeles – is that right? And what was the density like around those stations?

JH

It was pretty varied. A couple of stops are residential and have 'park and ride'. One of the stops is a big university, another is a transit hub downtown. There

are stops that are in industrial areas. But those are developing. They had to lay the tracks along a former freight line, so it takes a cross-section of the city, incorporating pretty much every kind of neighborhood.

JC

What was it about the rail line project that attracted you? Is it the type of project that you've done before?

JH

I've always drawn from life, and I like the idea of going to all these places through using the line. Many people never set foot on public transport so to physically go there and do drawings of these stations helps to bring transit to people's attention. So there's also an element of advocacy.

JC

Do you do a lot of your drawings in public spaces? What does it mean to draw in a public space?

JH

If you think about most public space that a pedestrian can access, it is designed for people to move through. Sometimes you stay longer for a coffee or to eat something, but that involves making a purchase. There are exceptions like parks, cultural spaces and museums. But much of the built environment is designed to be passed through or facilitate purchasing something. In many sprawling cities, there are very few spaces for people to congregate or engage outside of commercial activity. Doing a drawing is claiming a space for a different kind of purpose.

JC

Like a mall, which is a highly controlled environment. It's interesting that you're capturing a space that is quite utilitarian – you could see it as a utility, as an

element of infrastructure. It's infrastructure to move people to do other things. It's a catalyst for people getting to other activities.

JH

Yes, infrastructure is important to me also. But also the more conflicted spaces like the mall attract me as well. Take the Lynn Mall right here. It is a private space that has taken over the functions of a public space. The train was probably put underground to better accommodate its traffic, so it is a main beneficiary of the transit investments. And right now it really is the focus of the town's life, there are so many people in there at any time. But to me it's dangerous. The mall's use as a public space is compromised or subverted because the whole thing is designed with a commercial impetus.

Where we're living up the road, in Titirangi, they're building a major new art gallery, Te Uru, to go alongside the existing cultural hall, Lopdell House. That would be the kind of thing you'd hope to see alongside the train station, the kind of place that people in the community could use. Why not build it here if New Lynn is meant to be such a centre? The focus here seems to be only commercial.

JC

A redeveloped Lopdell House has been in the pipeline for twenty years, so longer than the recent changes in New Lynn. Titirangi has been home to a lot of artists, and there was community support for the new gallery to be in Titirangi despite it being a much smaller town which is hard to get to, even with a car.

JH

In a way I get it, living there. Titirangi also seems to be a better-off community; they must have had the

resources and connections to get something like that built in their neighborhood. It certainly is nice to have that kind of thing there. But I think for the artists and the institution, you'd probably get more exposure in New Lynn, and I think it's the kind of place that really needs a cultural and artistic centre. It used to be known for its ceramics, but now that's all gone. From what I understand, the tableware designs of Crown Lynn were a real cultural institution for people in New Zealand.

JC

The clay attracted the ceramic works here. If we walk down here, we'll find some of the old kilns. Roof tiles are still made here, by other companies, but the days of sourcing the clay from here have long since passed. The tiles are now made of cement. All this land we've been talking about was available for development because it's left over from the land used for the ceramics.