



# Team approach to urban design

By GRAHAM HAWKES

For many New Zealand ratepayers the traditional lengthy and slow-moving process of urban planning and design can be a turnoff. Well, in the past it certainly has been.

Ask any journalists who have covered city or district council planning sessions and most often they will tell you they have all the verve and creativity of a Soviet-era politburo meeting.

Another problem is that under the Local Government Act's consultation process, some ratepayers have a perception that when it comes to designing their environment, city and district councils have usually made up their minds well in advance of public consultation. An exaggeration obviously, but it's still a commonly held view.

But in recent years a different approach to planning, urban design and ratepayer

involvement has been rolled out by Urbanismplus and its director Kobus Mentz – and ratepayers and councils alike are noticing the difference.

Mentz is a Zimbabwean who graduated with an architecture degree before undertaking a post-graduate degree in urban design at the Joint Centre for Urban Design (JCUD) in Oxford and eventually found his way to New Zealand. Now with around 20 years international experience in strategic planning, master planning and “design by consultation” processes behind him, he is significantly in demand both here and abroad.

When Urban magazine contacted him in January looking for an interview – “would later this week be okay Kobus?” – he gave us the choice of the morning of February 2 or the morning of February 15. We opted for February 2, hoping that if the first date didn't work out,

at least we had a second chance of meeting him before the 2013 winter set in.

And so why is Mentz and his team – which includes senior associate Ian Munro and urban designer Nicola Albiston – so popular? Our investigations indicate that it's all about results. Team members have placed a strong emphasis on careful “engagement” with stakeholders and have a preparedness to go back again and again to check, not only that the appropriate people have been engaged, but also that they have been given every opportunity to contribute their points of view and expertise to the process of inquiry.

Late last year, the Hastings District Council worked with Urbanismplus to develop a strategy for the future of the Hastings CBD and its wider urban areas.

Hastings is surrounded by

some of the most fertile and productive soils known to man, and so urban sprawl on any large scale is out of the question. The council must look to intensification as the growth pattern of the future.

Within the city's existing boundaries there are some social and economic problems, particularly to the west where the often-troubled suburb of Flaxmere is located. On the eastern side of the city is the well-to-do ‘village’ of Havelock North. Built on the wealth of the sheep-farming era, the village is perfectly placed to serve the growing wine industry as well as a large proportion of Hastings' higher income earners.

However, visitors to Hastings' business district are still seeing clear signs that retailers and other businesses have been adversely affected both by the recession and the seemingly unsolvable conflict between



**TOP:** Workshop members in action with various sets of plans.



**BOTTOM:** An artist's impression of how the central area of Hastings' CBD could look.

traditional street-front retailing and the 'big box' stores situated on the city fringe, which steal customers away from the heart of town.

As well, there are issues with the way Hastings' town centre can better relate to its inhabitants in terms of improving green spaces, street furniture, amenities and attractions that will bring locals out of their houses and cars more often.

Once burdened by a somewhat bizarre one-way street system for traffic, the heart of Hastings is now more conventionally configured, although there is evidence that the diversion of traffic away from the CBD is not helping struggling businesses.

The city is entirely built on flat land in a layout of geometric blocks and like many provincial cities in New Zealand, its heart is split by a north-south railway line. While the line services industries which deliberately built

their premises nearby, it also cuts through central parts of the city which could easily profit from the railway being placed somewhere else – but that's not going to happen.

And so with all these issues – many of them conflicting with each other – Hastings District Council and Kobus Mentz and his team sat down to begin the review process. But where to start?

Well, it's a relatively easy question to answer for Urbanismplus, because these design strategy processes almost always follow a well-established pattern fine-tuned over a period of years. The UP team have a strong track record in helping councils and citizens of towns and cities in this country and overseas to re-design themselves – and yes, the use of the word 'helping' is not a mistake.

The process that Mentz and his colleagues employ is multi-step and aims to cover all bases

and to include as many different people as possible – but this is definitely no rigid, structured affair with predetermined outcomes and a strong element of inevitability.

Mentz deliberately chooses not to use the term 'design charrette' to describe the consultation and feedback parts of the process. He believes many people don't know the somewhat obscure meaning of the term and there's an impression in some quarters that a charrette is some kind of creative free-for-all where, at times, reality takes a back seat.

For Mentz, his sessions with councils and groups of citizens involve a collaborative process spread over a number of different days which draw on the inputs of ratepayers, councillors and council staff and so there is little chance that any whimsical plans will somehow float through the process.

Mentz is well aware of the danger of workshops delivering a syndrome that he humorously calls the 'Eiffel Tower' effect. It's an explosive process where 'fireworks' shoot out of the top of the tower: "Where all the ideas pour out within in a short time and then everyone sinks back into a warm glow," he says.

Instead, he favours the 'Rangitoto Island' effect. If you mentally picture Rangitoto's famous profile, it signifies a workshop process that delivers a gradual build up to the peak.

"And so what this means for us is that the way we achieve our outcomes is with a slightly more measured build-up," says Mentz.

"Part of the reason for failure under the Eiffel Tower system is usually that there is an anti-climax feeling to it and it usually delivers a shallow involvement by the local authority's technical staff."

Whenever the Urbanism Plus team is conducting a town centre regeneration plan, the meeting with council staff is vital for success, for four main reasons.

"Number 1 is that they have good local knowledge and that helps with the reality of the plans. We don't come in arrogantly as consultants and say, this is the way they do things in Sydney or Melbourne or somewhere...you just belittle people's thinking by doing that.

"Secondly, you would be surprised how many good ideas

are in these people but they very seldom get the opportunity to be creative or constructive. So there's this latent creativity that's sitting there. "The third point is that if the staff really, truly achieve buy-in, they'll keep championing it. And the fourth point is very important. The workshop gives them a real experience of working in an integrated, cross-disciplinary way with their colleagues. We often find that the workshops are the first time that traffic engineers and some of the parks people, landscape architects and even some of the community people have come together to discuss an integrated approach," says Mentz.

But back to the design strategy process. Before the workshops even take place, there's an initial meeting between Urbanismplus and the council to carefully sort out the logistics of holding focus group meetings. There is an understanding that communication in these situations is a discipline in itself. Sometimes the best ideas are never implemented because of minor breakdowns in understanding and an incomplete understanding of the pressures that individuals are under to operate within complex organisational structures. This is why Urbanismplus has a preparedness to go back again and again to a council, to check what barriers there might be to implementation. There is a two hour council staff 'induction' meeting which prepares the team for the workshop process to come and establishes objectives for the whole project.

The consultation process gets under way with focus group sessions for representatives from businesses and the community, which is followed by a public meeting. These meetings are purposely very specific and nuts-and-bolts-oriented – there's no room for vague, undefined concepts.

Extreme care is taken by Urbanismplus to engage with the public in a way that manages the natural inclination of many ratepayers to resist change. This is done by giving the public the opportunity and support to design their own town. The result, says Urbanismplus, is that the public begins to understand the competing drivers for change and realises that all issues cannot be

mutually resolved.

“When you get 10 to 15 groups of people in a room being proactive about the changes they want to see in their town, you actually learn a lot, because they have to make the transition from complaining about why isn't the council doing something, to thinking about what you actually do about it,” says Mentz.

“This process also brings out the contradictions and that's useful at two levels. One, it helps to set the agenda for legitimate objectives. One person might say they want more green spaces, while someone else says they want more jobs for the town.

“Now both of those people might be nature lovers and they both probably have the prosperity of the community at heart, but they're just coming at it with different emphasis. And it's also useful because in some instances these aims can't be mutually resolved and you have to have a discussion and be absolutely honest about it.”

This interaction with the public is followed by the 'inquiry

by design' inter-disciplinary workshops themselves.

They aim to produce high-quality, deliverable outcomes. Kobus Mentz looks to these workshops to give everyone an understanding of the complexities of the project under study and to give council staff the opportunity to take ownership and drive the project forward. The first two days of the workshop provide an opportunity to analyse the city's current situation in depth, looking at a wide range of issues including green space options, district plan requirements, urban growth and intensification.

On the third day there is a focus on the detail around areas of identified tension or opportunity. Working reviews are undertaken to try to reconcile different preferences from sub-groups and to integrate options into a preliminary proposal framework.

The morning of the fourth day sees the end of the design inquiry process and key findings are summarised. An outline

implementation plan is drafted and concepts and strategies are presented to key stakeholders for comment. Agreement is reached on issues to be followed up and actions to be undertaken.

At the completion of the workshop Urbanismplus wants to see:

- proposals for key strategies to address the urban issues identified
- proposals for specific initiatives for each discipline
- rationale to support workshop proposals and
- a core implementation strategy with the key actions and their staging.

After presentations of the outputs to council staff, councillors and then the public, an Urban Issues Report is delivered to council, usually within a month and is again commented on by both the council and members of the public.

The last stage of the process is an implementation plan – and then the project is handed over to the council.