



Evaluating post-graduate training in urban design

Kate Buller is a recent graduate of the University of Auckland's Master of Urban Design. As part of the Urbanism+ award for excellence in urban design, she has been asked to summarise the decisions and challenges that led her to pursue a career in urban design.

I became interested in urban design during my second year of a Bachelor of Architectural Studies degree at the University of Auckland, after enrolling in a core course focused on urban design. This paper introduced me to a discipline that I had never heard of before. Moreover it opened my eyes to the large amount of architectural and planning outcomes that contribute to Auckland's built environment. Many seemed to contradict the urban design principles I was learning about.

My interest in urban design grew over the next few years as I developed my understanding of the built environment. I was drawn to large scale architectural design projects, these allowed the application of the

theoretical and visionary design approach to a cluster of spaces and structures, instead of the detailed design of just one. Although they were not 'urban design' projects, they taught me how to think spatially at a large level. They also compelled me to look beyond the architecture during my analysis of the urban form around me; thinking about what makes certain areas vibrant, prosperous and comfortable, and others not.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture and working for a year as an architectural graduate, my awareness and constant analysis of the built environment tempted me to further specialise in urban design. As I knew that I had a lot more to

learn about the subject, I decided to go back to the University of Auckland to study the Master of Urban Design (MURbDes). It was not an easy decision because I knew that I would lose my full-time income, but I wanted to work at a larger scale and with a deeper understanding than was typically possible as a young architect. I also knew that I would be studying urban design in a context that is relevant to New Zealand's unique urbanism.

Although I enjoyed the one year full-time course, it was a complete shock. I expected it to be primarily concerned with spatial issues, but quickly learned that there is far more to urban design than what spaces look like. Instead it is a complex field that requires a broad understanding and consideration of many issues. It is a multifaceted discipline encompassing economic, social and environmental matters that all must be reconciled in almost always constrained circumstances.

The wide scope of urban design was reflected in the core papers. Dispersed over three primary disciplines; property, architecture and planning, the course covered a range of subjects including market analysis, investments and risks, the history of human →

↓ settlements, passive design, social capital, broadband infrastructure, and carbon emissions. Moreover it is reflected in my peers diverse range of backgrounds and work experiences, including traffic engineering; planning; landscape architecture; geography; fine arts; and architecture.

Because I developed my architectural design skills in a culture that pushed the limits of creativity, my largest challenge was learning to design with a different way of thinking. After a few weeks of questioning about how to begin designing an area like a suburb, I began learning to adapt my process so I could deal with the complexities of a larger site. Although the transition was not easy, I can now approach urban design more completely, after considering several complex layers of different strategies and objectives.

I was not alone in this dilemma. My peers from other backgrounds had their own challenges. We all had our own strengths and ideas about what urban design was from the content of our undergraduate degrees, and all were different. However, due to early group work, the close relationships created in the studio environment, and our diverse mix of experiences, we were able to share our knowledge in order to see the bigger picture.

The unique aspect of the course was the fact that we were learning about urban design in the New Zealand context. Although

most of the principles behind urban design are consistent around the world, the built environment and processes that give rise to it can vary when you compare the perimeter blocks in Barcelona to the high rise apartments in Vancouver. Moreover, issues like climate and rate of economic growth are equally as diverse. Because urban New Zealand is mostly assembled with low rise, low density developments that are slow to evolve, some international approaches to urban design are not as deliverable; we require an approach that is tailored to our environment, culture and economy.

The MURbDes course had a strong focus on the urban New Zealand environment, with project work based around Auckland. This maximised the opportunity for frequent visits and analyses. Two key projects that I participated in were located in Point Chevalier and Wynyard Quarter; two areas that are identified for intensification in the future. These projects allowed me to study local characteristics including history, demographics, character, challenges, and successful local developments. Useful information that has the added benefit of helping me prepare for a career based in New Zealand.

These studio papers were particularly important because they taught us more than just contemporary and local urban design principles and design methods; they also put

emphasis on strengthening our abilities to communicate. Although I felt comfortable with my visual communication abilities, I realised that I needed to redevelop the method of presentation that I had used during my architectural degree, so I could effectively communicate a range of different issues and scales to a technically diverse audience.

Fortunately, after weekly in-house presentation sessions, and a few formal critiques in front of different urban design professionals, I managed to improve my skills to a point where I was confident about presenting a clear logic while talking to my designs.

Benefits of the MURbDes

Looking back, I have no regrets about taking the time off to study full time for the MURbDes as there were many benefits. My new qualification has helped me to accomplish my goal to begin a new career, as I now have a job as an entry level urban designer. Moreover the MURbDes allowed me to mix with students from different backgrounds, taught me about subjects from a variety of disciplines, and built upon my key skills and interests. I now have a more rounded understanding about why and how New Zealand's built environments have evolved the way they have, and I have more confidence in my design skills because of this. **U**

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