

Strengthening social dimensions in urban design

Despite the best efforts of urban designers, planners and community specialists, elements of social well-being, often less easily defined or quantified, are still inconsistently embedded into plans and decision-making processes.

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Scratching the surface of urban design-led projects reveals continuing difficulties in the way 'social' considerations are captured, integrated, and reconciled across projects. Seldom are case-sensitive, often qualitative issues such as community equity, accessibility and identity brought to the table as equal partners to transport data, land-use projections, and environmental models. Should this be a reasonable outcome, or should urban design, as a holistic, integrated approach, be expected to do better?

Urban designers are comfortable representing issues spatially and those in the social sciences more often communicate verbally, with words and policies. A number of tools to bring these together have been developed: producing a CPTED plan; designing a public space for the mobility, comfort and the amenity of its users; determining where and why social infrastructure should be provided in an urban environment to support densities, ethnicities, and other socio-economic indicators. Yet intangible dimensions are less well-evaluated and remain harder to represent compared to other components of the urban system.

This article explores the value of spatial analysis techniques and tailored project methodologies to tackle the difficult contours of things 'social'. It discusses a series of steps that practitioners can draw on to achieve this objective. It argues that despite being sometimes problematic, persevering with the issues can demonstrably lead to more robust outcomes. These not only provide a more rounded and integrated outcome, but one which better reinforces the arguments supporting other 'non-social' components.

Step one: Get the right people around the table

Target those involved in the day-to-day planning, provision and delivery of services such as central Government agencies, Local government officers, private sector providers of community infrastructure, and

non-governmental (third sector) providers and groups. This is critical in order to input local knowledge about specific characteristics and constraints, ensure continuity and understanding through implementation, and to gain cross-agency support. These participants must be able to be part of the answer rather than confined solely to reporting a role or position.

Step two: Analyse the existing social context of the study area

Explore:

- ▶ knowledge and policy gaps;
- ▶ demographic trends;
- ▶ the provision and performance of services and facilities;
- ▶ social service disposition;
- ▶ factors that contribute to community cohesion; and
- ▶ community-led initiatives.

This has been effectively achieved elsewhere through the following techniques:

- ▶ represent community infrastructure: Plot the distribution and provision of social service providers, educational, health, recreation, leisure, and cultural facilities (both public and private). Understand where the high order sub-regional, district or city-wide institutions are located - universities, hospitals, courts, emergency services, and sports centres. Understand where the lower-order local and neighbourhood facilities are located - community centres, churches, primary and secondary schools, childcare, marae, and RSAs for instance.
- ▶ represent known social issues: Understand the social challenges facing the area. Mark up areas with high social-deprivation; areas with severance and poor accessibility to services and amenities; pockets of geographical isolation; places with a prevalence of crime and anti-social behaviour; areas of vandalism and degradation where community ownership

may be lower; and locations of tension between different demographic groups. Other socio-economic variables such as ethnicity or education are often also relevant.

- ▶ support the mapped analysis with a literature review of significant projects, strategies and policies that contribute to social capital building in the study area. Case studies of previous initiatives, including what worked and why are extremely valuable.

Step 3: Collate and compare social infrastructure and issues

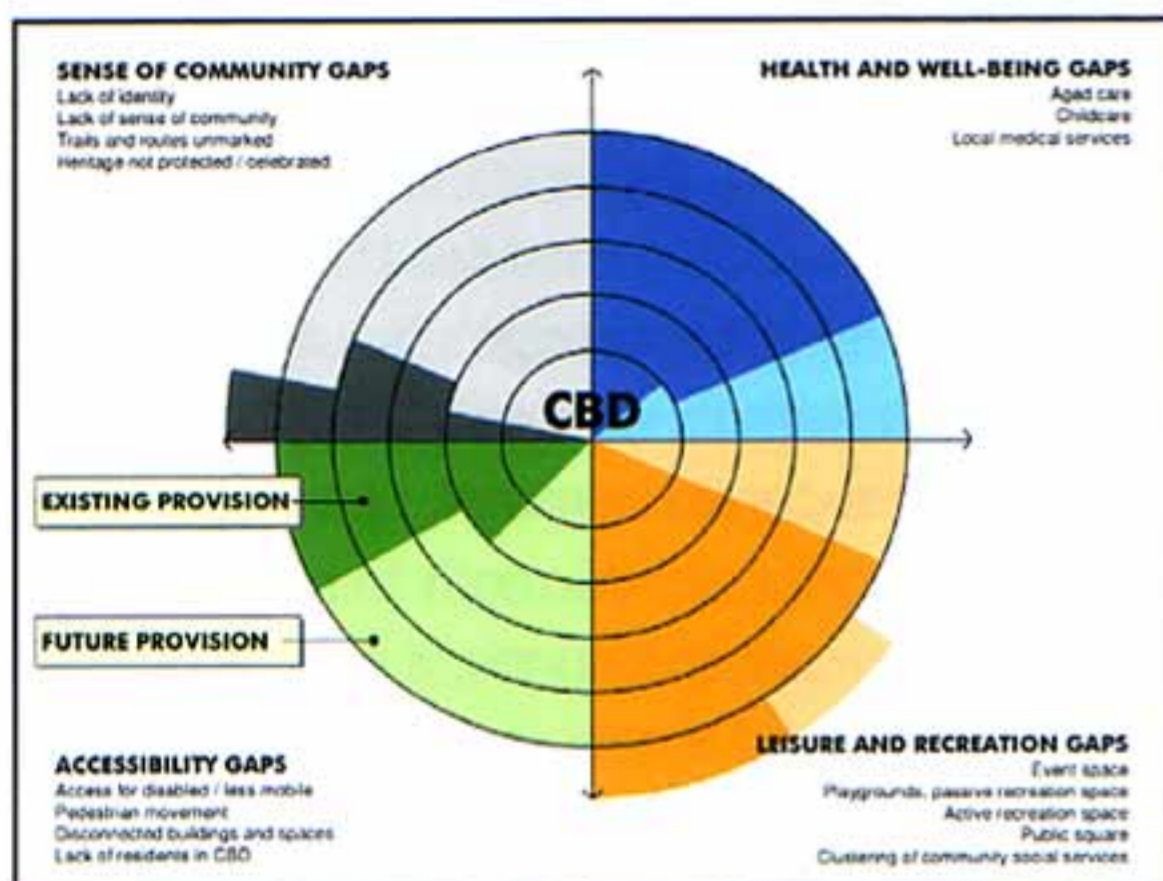
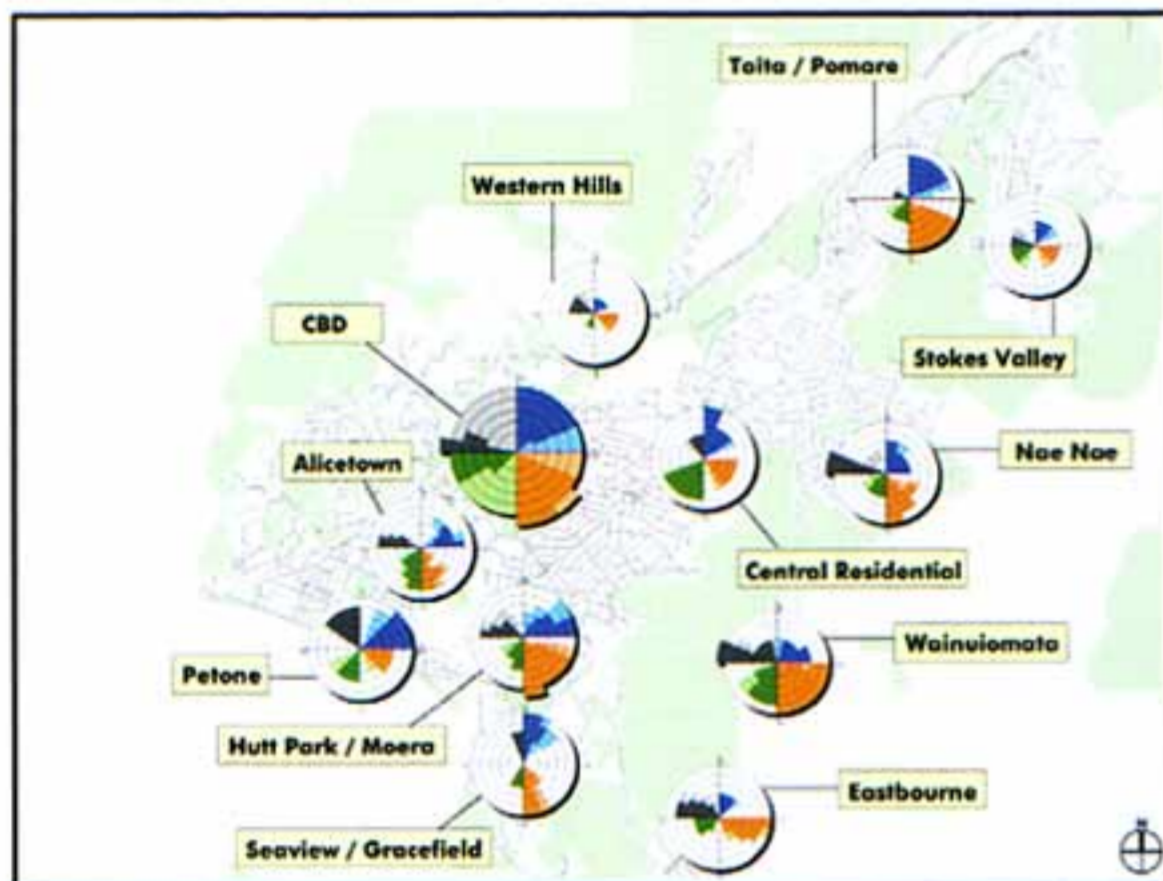
Evaluate social and community well-being in the study area and the wider context.

- ▶ identify socially distinct communities of interest peripheral to the project area. These may overlap and fluctuate between issues as people are now often members of more than one community. These community catchments may be defined by topographic, demographic, ethnic or socio-economic change; land use type and housing mix; ward or suburb boundaries.
- ▶ graphically represent the social networks within the study area and the surrounding community catchments. This should include a relative assessment of:
 1. the existing provision of 'hard' physical infrastructure;
 2. how well intangible, qualitative aspects of community well-being are being met;
 3. the scale (or quality) of provision from neighbourhood to regional levels; and
 4. the potential or desire to grow (or improve) services, accessibility and sense of community.

Step 4: Determine community network opportunities in the study area.

Look at the comprehensive picture. Evaluate all data and maps and identify possible actions. Amongst others, opportunities may exist to:

- ▶ consolidate or co-ordinate multiple



- agencies and organisations e.g. sharing or pooling of information, resources and venues;
- ▶ build local self-sufficiency, leadership and capacity through utilising what was already at work in the community;
 - ▶ leverage additional or improved community facilities through expected population growth; and
 - ▶ grow cultural and creative recognition and expression in the community.

Horses and courses

There are many 'typical' tools that will be relevant in almost all instances. However as demonstrated in two urban design-led projects from New Zealand and Australia, the use of custom methodologies to truly unlock rather than just map the issues, has benefits.

Case study 1: Social understanding can influence decision-making priorities

As evidenced in Casey-Cardinia, one of five urban growth areas in the Melbourne 2030 Growth Strategy, the articulation of community infrastructure issues had a direct influence on resultant transport funding priorities. Use of a 'social pin-wheel' tool to evaluate the provision of physical infrastructure across suburbs, revealed it was not possible to provide all services in each location. Each instead had to essentially specialise, with people moving between suburbs to access the full range of amenities. Specific transport investments were then prioritised to make accessibility easier.

Case study 2: A community network proposition needs an equally enabling process and meaningful engagement

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Tamaki Transformation Programme, an urban and community renewal project on a scale not attempted before in New Zealand. The workshop-based approach, led by Urbanismplus, sought to develop a clear and prioritised action plan (distinct from a spatial master plan). It addressed three important objectives:

1. build integrated partnerships between community champions and the local residents and communities they represent, multi-sector agencies, and other stakeholders;
2. explore both non-spatial and physical (built) initiatives around all social issues; and
3. be firmly grounded in delivering real, tangible action.

The workshop, building on significant previous work by many of the stakeholders, explored each aspect of the community through a process of dialogue and co-design. The

resulting Development Plan builds on a unifying vision for the area, finding opportunities for the people of Tamaki to more easily provide for their own well-being. A suite of integrated community and social initiatives are co-ordinated and organised under five 'change strategies':

- ▶ **Tatou tatou (all together):** Engage with people in their communities through centralised multi-agency / community service hubs and grassroots care networks within local neighbourhoods.
- ▶ **Tangata whenua (people of the place):** Celebrate the environment, heritage and cultures through story-telling in public spaces, event programmes, trails, community gardens, and medicinal/edible landscapes.
- ▶ **Haora (well-being):** Create healthy, creative, learning environments through cultural enterprise, trade-based and health sector training schemes for residents, a technology-based learning network for children, more high quality early childhood centres, and expanded marae-based service delivery.
- ▶ **Whai rawa (abundant resource):** Connect people with their full economic potential through building on amenities offered in town centres and along Tamaki River, affordable business incubation, and a community transport scheme.
- ▶ **Kainga (home):** Deliver quality, integrated living environments through state housing renewal demonstration projects in community and town centre nodes, non-shelter outcomes, a redeveloped people's park and sense of pride and ownership initiatives.

The Plan places initiatives into a 20-year strategic sequence for comprehensive renewal with responsibilities for different agencies and stakeholders identified. It builds on foundation projects for 2009-2011 with full or seed funding and is backed by clearly defined targets. Economic analysis estimates the Plan will grow New Zealand's GDP by around \$2 billion (1 per cent), directly support 20,700 jobs over 30 years and decrease crime and avoidable hospitalisation rates to the Auckland average¹.

Conclusion

While spatial mapping techniques follow a relatively straight-forward formula, giving social dimensions a voice within a broader programme of engagement and implementation remains the continuing challenge. Analytical tools must be tailored and new methods developed if urban design is to truly commit to social sustainability imperatives. **U**

¹ Tamaki Development Plan: Economic Value Proposition, October 2010, SGS Economics and Planning Pty. Ltd, SGS