

Earning respect

Urban design education needs to earn the profession's respect by delivering a better quality of graduate, argues Kobus Mentz.

Words by **Kobus Mentz**

Urban design education has an ongoing need to remain relevant and deliver higher quality graduates that earn the profession's respect. New Zealand's urban issues are evolving at a significant pace, especially with Auckland's amalgamation (and, perhaps, others to come), proposed changes to the *Local Government Act*, and affordability challenges set against a concerning economic outlook. Different urban responses are required and the profession needs new and more relevant skills.

Urban design education in New Zealand is emerging out of its infancy and standards are improving steadily. More courses offer interdisciplinary participation which better reflects the complexity of our urban challenges. Students learn from each other's disciplines and skill-strengths; typically landscape architects better understand networks, while planners better understand

process, and architects three-dimensional design. In addition to these and other core course deliverables, education programmes need to place increasing emphasis on: issue-based problem solving; enhanced design skills; understanding development realities; producing clearly articulated intellectual frameworks; and learning from overseas.

ISSUE-BASED NOT TREND-BASED

If we are to deliver graduates who think independently and critically, urban design education should be purposefully issue-based and not trend-based. Failing to be issue-based can result in falling into the trap of 'solving problems no one has'. Students should be encouraged to address urban issues as comprehensively as possible, working across all scales and exploring the interconnectedness of issues, such as those between quality of place, movement, bio-diversity, social inclusion, development economics, and so on.

ENHANCED DESIGN SKILLS

Upgrading design and drawing skills should be an ongoing focus. Many students are not design-educated and thereby disadvantaged in their ability to articulate three-dimensional initiatives. Substantial amounts of time need to be spent on this area and may require drawing on outside professionals.

UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT REALITIES

Deliverability of projects should be addressed and students should be encouraged to explore innovative implementation mechanisms without inhibiting the aspirational nature of their designs. In order to understand development realities, education should include development economics with input from property developers and other professionals.

CLEARLY ARTICULATED INTELLECTUAL FRAMEWORK

Students often dive into the "how" before articulating the "why". To avoid the programme being unrealistically utopian, the thinking behind projects must be rigorously interrogated; these should be expressed in formalised rationales which clearly articulate the projects' values, principles, initiatives, and design attributes. Emphasis should be put on how these are communicated in verbal, visual, and written terms.

LEARNING FROM OVERSEAS

The above measures will strengthen graduates' ability to deliver outputs relevant to local conditions, but there is still benefit to be had from international examples. However, case studies and references to overseas work need to be critically evaluated in order to translate their relevance for New Zealand. It is encouraging to see that some programmes are learning from overseas and even undertake overseas project work. One such example is the formal link between the Masters of Urban Design programme at the University of Auckland and the urban design course at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver. This was done with the support of Prof. Penny Gurstein, Director of the Department of Planning and Community Development, and was built on already established relations between Larry Beasley (celebrated former director of planning at Vancouver City) and Scott Hein (Chief Urban Designer, City of Vancouver) and myself. This year, the first joint studio was held in Vancouver involving 11 New Zealand students and 10 UBC students. The course was run by Larry Beasley, Scott Hein, Brent Toderian, and Maged Senbel, UBC urban design programme leader, along with Prof. Errol Haarhoff, Prof. John Hunt, and Lee Beattie from the University of Auckland. The project area centred around False Creek, which was home to the Winter Olympics Village and a world class exemplar of sustainability design.

The Vancouver studio was preceded by a study tour to Portland to meet with key urban development authorities and investigate their exemplary urbanism, compact development, transit-oriented development, and housing typologies.

STUDENT AWARDS

Encouragingly, the qualities outlined in this article are reflected in two examples of recently graduated students work. They are Amy Zhu and Cameron Wallace, recipients of the 2011 annual Urbanismplus Award for Excellence in Urban Design. Their work is described in their own words.



MIDDLEMORE TOWN CENTRE PROJECT – Amy Zhu

My studio project was for the redevelopment of Middlemore as a new town centre. I identified Middlemore as a strategic site for intensification, in the context of the Auckland Spatial Plan's intensification strategy. It is well connected by bus and rail and the adjacent greenfield site (previously a golf course) provides a rare opportunity for development. I proposed a bio-medical focus, building on the presence of an existing major teaching hospital and employment anchor. Drawing upon Auckland's economic pillars, Middlemore Hospital has the ability to become a major driver to create a Centre of Excellence for affordable healthcare. To achieve that, it needs to expand to form the focus of a dynamic urban neighbourhood.

The aim is to create a pedestrian focused Transport Oriented Development anchored around Middlemore Hospital and the new Bio-medical Research and Development Centre. Middlemore Town Centre would become a destination to Aucklanders and draw visitors nationally. It is designed to be a self-reliant and dynamic urban neighbourhood, connected to other neighbourhoods through an extensive public transport network, and provide a mixed use of areas for people to live, work, and play.

WIRI NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECT – Cameron Wallace

Following group work to develop a regional growth strategy I undertook detailed studies of the Manukau City/Wiri area to determine how the growth strategy could best be implemented at a local level. These studies were refined further to work at a precinct scale of selected masterplans around the Onehunga Basin which was identified as a key area for managing Auckland's residential and commercial growth aspirations. Overall, the studio project allowed an understanding of how important urban design principles affected the urban form at a variety of scales. As part of the final studio project, I prepared a detailed Masterplan as part of a wider redevelopment of Middlemore Golf Course. A key driver of the studio project throughout the year had been the important relationship between residential density, amenity and the economic viability of urban intensification in Auckland. In developing my final precinct masterplan for the redevelopment of Middlemore, quality open space and the enhancement and expansion of natural networks into the urban environment were critical elements used to achieve a more compact and economically viable urban environment.

01: Excerpt of work prepared by Amy Zhu for her studio project as a part of the urban design course at Auckland University. **02:** Excerpt of work prepared by Cameron Wallace.

SUMMARY

Urban design educators in universities across New Zealand will be grappling with how to deliver students that are responsive to the issues in their regions. In 2009, the University of Auckland's Masters of Urban Design programme response in this regard was to fully revise the course content and restructure their design studio, with support from external professionals.

An immediate measure was to introduce a course selection procedure in order to ensure quality entrants and limit the studio size. This also served as a signal to the profession to take the course seriously. Course numbers grew

from a low of 5 to around 20 a year with up to 50 applicants annually.

This year John Mackay, visiting critic and principal urban designer at Boffa Miskell stated: "The course has improved immensely – students are now producing very sophisticated analysis and quality design response to real issues of urban growth and structure. The hard challenges of economic urban development are being addressed".

While Mackay's comments suggest progress is being made, earning the professions respect is challenging and maintaining it will be even harder. **U**