

# URBAN DESIGN FORUM

## What value is urban design?

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**Most urban design literature is assertively premised on value being added to urban environments that receive design attention. However hard evidence in support of this is rarely provided. New Zealand is seeking to make the benefits of good urban design more tangible and conversely to identify the downfall implications of poor environments by identifying and understanding empirical evidence of the impact of urban design.**

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'The Value of Urban Design' document was prepared for the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment in May 2005 by a group of researchers at Victoria University, Wellington, and authored by Graeme McIndoe, Ralph Chapman, Chris McDonald, Gordon Holden, Phillipa Howden-Chapman, and Anna Bray-Sharpin.

The project called for a document that could help "build a stronger case for the economic, environmental, and social benefits that result from good urban design". The report is already influencing national policy for urban design as well as urban design education and action.

It targets advisers, central and local government, developers, built-environment professionals, educational institutes and the wider community. The first stage of the project identified key urban design principles and practices from recent Ministry for the Environment publications including 'Draft New Zealand Urban Design Protocol' (2005) and 'People +Places+Spaces' (2002).

The principles provided the structure for exploring recent literature and for discussing key urban design value propositions. The majority of literature reviewed was international publications since 2000. However, earlier works of specific relevance and seminal publications were also included. Reviewers identified economic, social/cultural and environmental outcomes of urban design and classified the material in terms of the quality of the evidence, under categories of 'conclusive', 'strong', 'suggestive' and 'anecdotal'. Mostly conclusive and strong evidence is reported. An evaluation sheet with content summary was completed for each item reviewed and this now forms a valuable database for future research.

Key findings are:

\*Good urban design can be profitable to the developer, and it also offers significant benefits to the community. \* Considerable evidence points to well designed projects generating higher returns to developers. Generally, some of the 'value' accrues to the developer, while some accrues to a wider group in the vicinity of a well designed building, street or other public place.

**Poor design can have significant adverse effects on the urban environment, society and economy.** Poor design can lower quality of life and limit employment opportunities. For example low-density peripheral urban development with rigidly segregated land uses, and residential areas poorly connected to commercial activity and with poor internal connectivity clearly adds to 'external' costs.

**Communities value the better quality of life that good urban design can deliver.** There is strong evidence that walkable public environments can lead, by a variety of means, to a better quality of life.

They can enhance public health, provide support and increased custom for business, reduce environmental costs, and may even help to enhance social equity.

**Urban design can help to make towns and cities safer and more secure.** The risk of crime is lower with interconnected network street systems than with complex cul-de-sac arrangements. A lack of connectivity can produce negative effects ranging from vehicle dependence and social isolation at the neighbourhood level to increased risk of burglary at the site level. Mixed use is also associated with reduction in some types of crime, and reduced fear of crime".

These potential benefits cannot be realised by a piecemeal approach to urban design. The various elements of urban design identified must be consciously brought together so that they reinforce each other. Urban design initiatives must also work at a number of scales, from individual sites to city wide and regional.

Urban design initiatives need to be supported by complementary economic, social and environmental policies and programs.

If you are looking for guidance to substantiate your urban design decisions and advocacy then this document will help. The full research publication as well as a 'summary' version can be accessed and down-loaded from the Ministry website at [www.mfe.govt.nz](http://www.mfe.govt.nz)

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