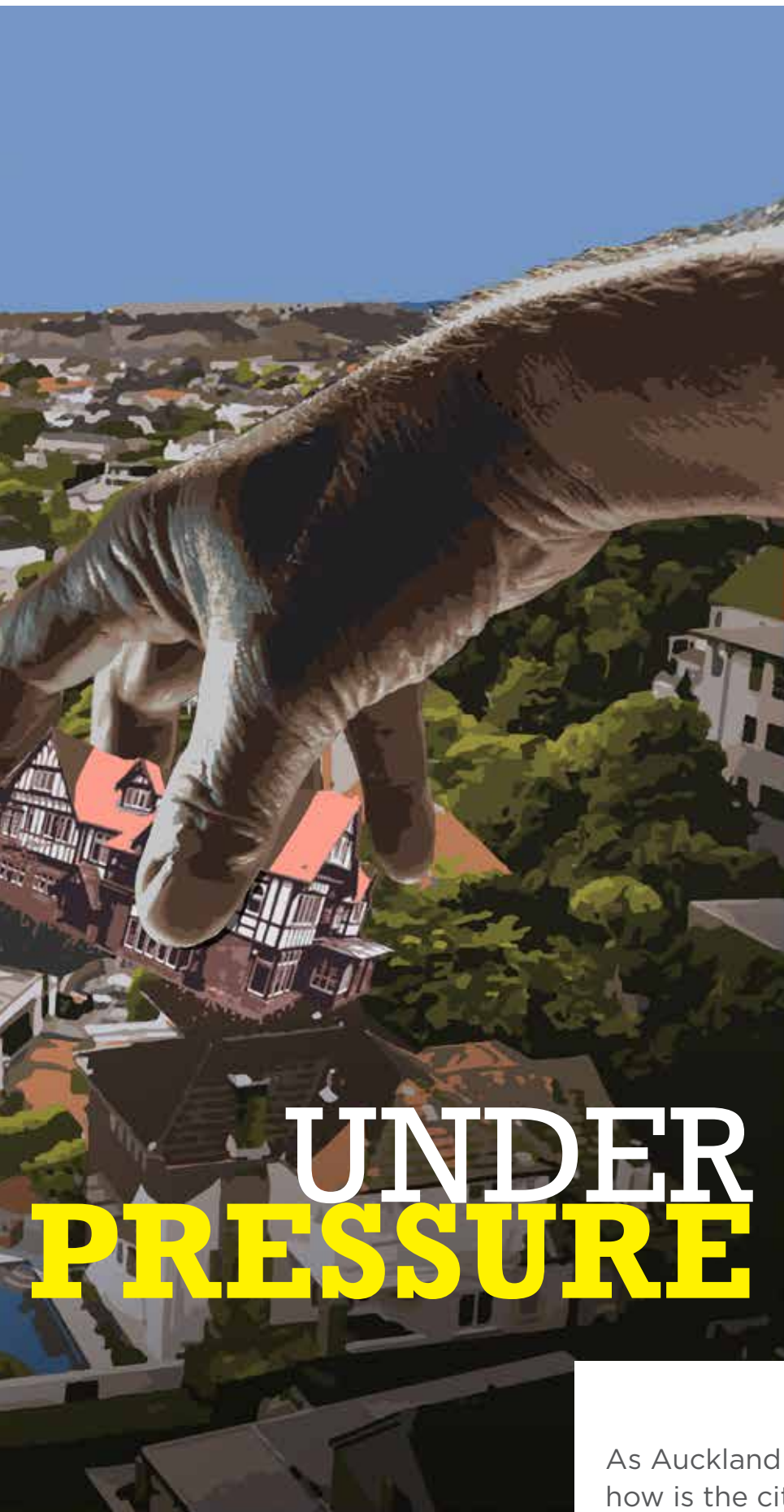


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UNDER PRESSURE

As Auckland feels the pain of its housing crisis, how is the city's heritage faring?

Auckland has a housing crisis: too many people, too few houses. Scarcity fuels demand, and as house prices have escalated affordable homes have been left in their wake.

The Government wants action and councils everywhere, particularly in Auckland, are feeling the pressure. As Noel Reardon, Heritage Manager for Auckland Council, explains, "The Government has a national policy statement requiring all councils in growth areas to have sufficient urban capacity."

To prepare for the future, the council has developed the Unitary Plan – a master planning guide (now legislation) designed to meet Auckland's economic and housing needs, which determines what can be built and where, and how to create a higher-quality and more compact Auckland.

A more compact city means increasing density (densification) – in other words, finding 'available' land and building more dwellings on it. That might be a piece of land with a single house that can be demolished and replaced with a multi-storey dwelling – low or high rise – better utilising the land.

"Say you've got a big heritage mansion that's on a 2000-square-metre site in Remuera," says Bill McKay, Senior Lecturer at the Auckland University School of Architecture.

"The moment that goes on the market, someone is going to come in and bowl it and develop the whole site. And even on a smaller site, you've got a little Vernon Brown house, which is deliberately bach-like and humble, but it's in Remuera. Someone is going to buy that site and bowl it. It's the site location."

Land might also be in the form of a greenfield, or undeveloped, site that can be rezoned for residential use.

Noel points to the example of the property adjacent to the Otuaatua Stonefields Historic Reserve, where Fletcher Construction gained permission for a special housing development.

"For greenfield projects, the council does a structural programme and addresses the heritage values and we engage with iwi. That's all included in the process. But for special housing areas, they get fast-tracked. And whether those same processes happen, I don't know."

View the map of Auckland through the lens of the Unitary Plan and the areas of densification are shown in orange, spread haphazardly across the city, with, according to Stephen Selwood, Chief Executive of infrastructure think tank Infrastructure New Zealand, limited infrastructure connectivity. In itself, this can have undesirable long-term consequences, but it also points to a solution that can meet the city's housing demands, he says, without compromising its heritage.



The Unitary Plan has turned the tap on for **GROWTH**”

“The irony of it is that you’ll intensify and then you’ll realise that you have to retrofit the infrastructure, which is now going to be much more expensive with much more opposition because, naturally, communities are going to react adversely,” says Stephen.

Proposed additional transport networks, such as light rail on Dominion Road, often trigger conflicts with heritage and character areas. So does the Unitary Plan and its response to the housing crisis pose a threat to our built and natural heritage?

The aim of the Unitary Plan is to lubricate developments and rapidly increase dwellings, with a particular emphasis on affordable houses. “The Unitary Plan,” says Bill, “has turned the tap on for growth.”

Some obstacles to development have been removed from the consent process, such as notifiable consents in order to expedite the consent process – an initiative of Nick Smith, the previous Minister for Building and Housing and Minister for the Environment. Notifications allowed affected parties to a development, such as neighbours, to have a say. Under this new legislation, notifications are not part of the consent process.

“One of the big issues in Auckland is around the notification of consent applications,” says Noel. “Notification in the Resource Management Act 1991 [RMA] was changed to say that if it’s an application for residential dwellings in a residential area, it can’t be notified. So the neighbours won’t know.”

If a developer purchases character villas with the intention of building a block of flats, it is now, by law, a non-notifiable consent process.

“There’s a lot less protection in the Unitary Plan than before,” says Sally Hughes, spokesperson for the Character Coalition – an umbrella organisation representing around 70 heritage, historic and special interest groups.

“There is far less opportunity for communities to have input on what goes – significantly less notification and less protection. The Unitary Plan was aimed at removing as many constraints to development as possible.”

Pressure and politics meant the Unitary Plan was fast-tracked into existence. The council has catalogued and identified the city’s heritage through robust area studies, with some 30,000 properties being afforded protection. For character areas, they applied a ‘character overlay’, which affords some protection.

The Unitary Plan states: “The Special Character Areas Overlay seeks to retain and manage the special character values of specific residential and business areas identified as having collective and cohesive values, importance, relevance and interest to the communities within the locality and wider Auckland region.”

Time constraints, however, have meant that some areas of character and historic merit remain unassessed and therefore vulnerable to development.

“You can always argue that more should be protected in the Unitary Plan and the protection mechanisms should be better, but we’ve just come out of the Unitary Plan process where all that has been considered and we are adding more scheduled buildings,” says Noel.

“We’ve just added another 48 buildings to the schedule, so it’s a constant process. It’s a moot point whether its adequate.”

Heritage New Zealand Senior Conservation Architect Robin Byron, while supportive of the council’s “robust” approach to the city’s heritage protection, is more direct: “The problem was that the pressure of time to push through the Unitary Plan meant there were a lot of areas left unexamined.”

Allan Matson, President of Civic Trust Auckland, a heritage group that has just celebrated its 50th anniversary, argues that insufficient resources were applied to proper assessments of heritage areas and that the need for housing has overridden the importance of preserving our heritage for the long term.

“The Unitary Plan does not balance the protection of heritage with the provision for more housing. Instead it prioritises housing over heritage, and this, predictably, is enabling the destruction of some of the city’s valued heritage,” he says.

Exacerbating the problem is how we define ‘heritage’. What’s actually at risk here?

Heritage New Zealand has properties that are listed but not inherently protected. The council has properties that are scheduled and protected. Allan and Bill have advocated for more properties to be listed and scheduled simultaneously; Robin sees the value of heritage listing and scheduling, however, as separate functions.

“Listing is for identification, knowledge and owners and the public to know about. It’s helpful to be both

The Unitary Plan can be seen online at <http://unitaryplan.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/pages/plan/Book>.

listed and scheduled because we can have an advocacy function. As an autonomous Crown entity, we have a role to act in a professional capacity for heritage. That's a mandate, but we don't come under the same political pressure that the council might."

"Heritage New Zealand lists sites and those listings have no statutory protection," says Noel.

"It does not have to go through the RMA process. Scheduling does. It has statutory protection and has to go through the RMA process, which is contestable. In a Heritage New Zealand context, listing a property is the be-all and end-all. In the council's process, even if something has heritage value, the planning test might say it's not worth protecting for other reasons.

"We lost a number of heritage buildings because of growth. The planning side of things was considered more important than protecting the heritage buildings. So that did happen through the Unitary Plan."

There are many sites, predominantly streets with character dwellings, that are neither listed nor scheduled and yet have a significant impact on the character and culture of the city.

"You've got a street of bungalows. It may not be heritage with a capital 'H' but it gives character to that area," says Bill.

Sally agrees that the areas most vulnerable to development in the push for additional housing are character areas, and this is having a major impact on heritage overall.

"The council does have a very good heritage team and they do look after the scheduled buildings, but where the great losses are occurring is in the special character areas and the areas that don't have protection. So heritage in the broader term is being very significantly impacted."

And it's not just built heritage that is affected.

"I would argue that the impact on the region's heritage is on cultural heritage, particularly Māori cultural heritage, and that has always occurred through greenfield development," says Noel.

"So this is land being urbanised. It's not common for heritage buildings to be demolished and replaced with apartments, whereas you get a lot of greenfield development happening and earthworks, and that could destroy Māori cultural sites."

So, on balance, has the housing crisis actually affected our heritage? Growth at any time applies pressure on a dwindling resource – land – and this, in turn, places heritage in the spotlight.

"It's growth that has the impact in Auckland and has always been the underlying issue. The housing crisis is just a blip," says Noel.

But the demands of Auckland's rapid growth and the council's current planning methodology of creating a compact city do threaten built heritage, character dwellings and greenfield development, according to many heritage interest groups. And the most vulnerable are unidentified, unlisted and unscheduled areas of significance.

One city planning model aimed at meeting housing needs without compromising heritage comes from Infrastructure New Zealand, which advocates an alternative: construct a new city. Coined Innovation City, it's a greenfield proposal on available land to the south of Auckland, accessible via the current main railway trunk line, a key, it says, to the success of the proposal.

"There's a large north-facing crescent of attractive and developable land that looks to the sea," says Stephen Selwood.

"So you would be looking at true innovation using great compact urban planning, designed to encourage as many people to live, work and play in that location. The long-term vision is to build something the size and scale of Hamilton, which would grow to a Christchurch."

The business approach, he says, would provide the council with a sustainable financial model through the acquisition, rezoning and on-selling of land to developers.

Ultimately the demand for housing is about placing people in homes and few would argue against the importance of this. But what about creating well-functioning communities that embrace historic and cultural values?

"We need to ensure that growth is quality and that we end up with quality environments," says Bill.

"We can't just go, 'All right, we need to urgently house a whole bunch of people, and sacrifice quality and the environment'."

Robin echoes Bill's sentiment. "It is really important that we build good-quality buildings and environments that contribute to the amenity of the city, are respectful of and complement the heritage and character of our valued built inheritance, and look to the prospect of possibly becoming tomorrow's heritage."

While there's no doubt that Auckland needs its housing issues addressed, the question is, how will we view the outcome when that point is met? ■

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