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VISIONS OF THE FUTURE:
REPORT FROM THE UPTOWN FUTURES FESTIVAL

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Devon Sanson and Natalie Allen

Uptown – comprising the urban fringe Auckland suburbs of Eden Terrace, Newton and Grafton – has a rich history, which has been shaped and reshaped by movement. Lava flows and magma created the steep gullies and ridgelines which were used by Tāmaki Makaurau’s earliest inhabitants to move between pā and mahinga kai; the ridgelines were later developed into tramways and roads that spurred industrialisation and suburbanisation of Auckland; and the motorways and flyovers that destroyed communities of so-called slums appeared in the mid-twentieth century. In many ways, this part of the city has always been seen as somewhere to move through – with the people who live here given only passing consideration.

Uptown became a place to pass through and bypass. However, over time, a strong arts culture flourished in the relatively affordable city-fringe rental market. Today, Uptown is an eclectic mix of professionals, students, artists and manufacturers, home to some of the city’s best eateries and most innovative businesses and NGOs. But at first glance, the area’s undeveloped lots and dearth of public space conceals this vibrancy – the built environment is a poor reflection of the life in this precinct.

Now, Uptown is entering an era of resurgence, unifying the suburbs of Eden Terrace, Newton and Grafton in a shared identity. Thanks to the Maungawhau City Rail Link development, Auckland Light Rail and proximity to the city, Uptown will be Auckland’s ‘most connected place.’ As more people and businesses arrive, the challenge will be: how does Uptown preserve and enhance its identity as a vibrant, innovative and attractive urban place?

Meeting this challenge is the mission of the Uptown Business Association. Established through Auckland Council’s Business Improvement District (BID) programme, the business association has taken an active role in advocating for Uptown’s interests to local bodies, and strengthening the links between business and resident communities in the precinct.

During 2020, The Urban Advisory, the Uptown Business Association and the communities of Uptown came together to develop a community vision and devise six “place pillars” for the precinct. This process involved community workshops and a survey to determine what the future of the precinct should be. The survey process and questions evolved through workshops with BID members, and the survey was completed by 300 current and future local residents, business owners, workers and potential developers. Questions covered if, and how, a sense of belonging to the community was defined, as well as what kinds of amenities people used, when and why, and how needs might change in the area over time. Respondents’ sentiments about the future rail station development were also explored.

In addition, both, at in-person workshops and online, participants told us what they loved about living in Uptown, what they didn’t love, and what they hoped the future would look like. Participants included residents, business owners and workers, as well as people who simply enjoyed spending time in Uptown or hoped to live there someday.



Figure 1. The Uptown Place Pillars, developed through the Community Vision process undertaken in 2020.

The Pillars represent what development in the precinct should facilitate.

Illustration credit: Nathalie Drujon, courtesy of the Uptown Business Association.

At the conclusion of the community visioning project, the following vision was arrived at: “A thriving, accessible, neighbourhood that embraces its heritage and diverse creative solutions for its community.”¹

Thriving

The people and businesses of Uptown can flourish through social, cultural, environmental and economic connection and activity.

Accessible

Different demographics, incomes and mobility options are all found in Uptown.

Creative Solutions

A range of ideas is developed in a collaborative way to achieve a broad range of housing options, business and recreational opportunities, and create a sense of discovery and a strong vibe in Uptown.

Neighbourhood

All the people and places that make Uptown what it is.

The six “place pillars” corresponding to these points to guide future development thinking are shown in Figure 1:

But how do we test these ideas and design principles? Do these pillars encourage architects and urban designers to think differently, in a way that responds to place?

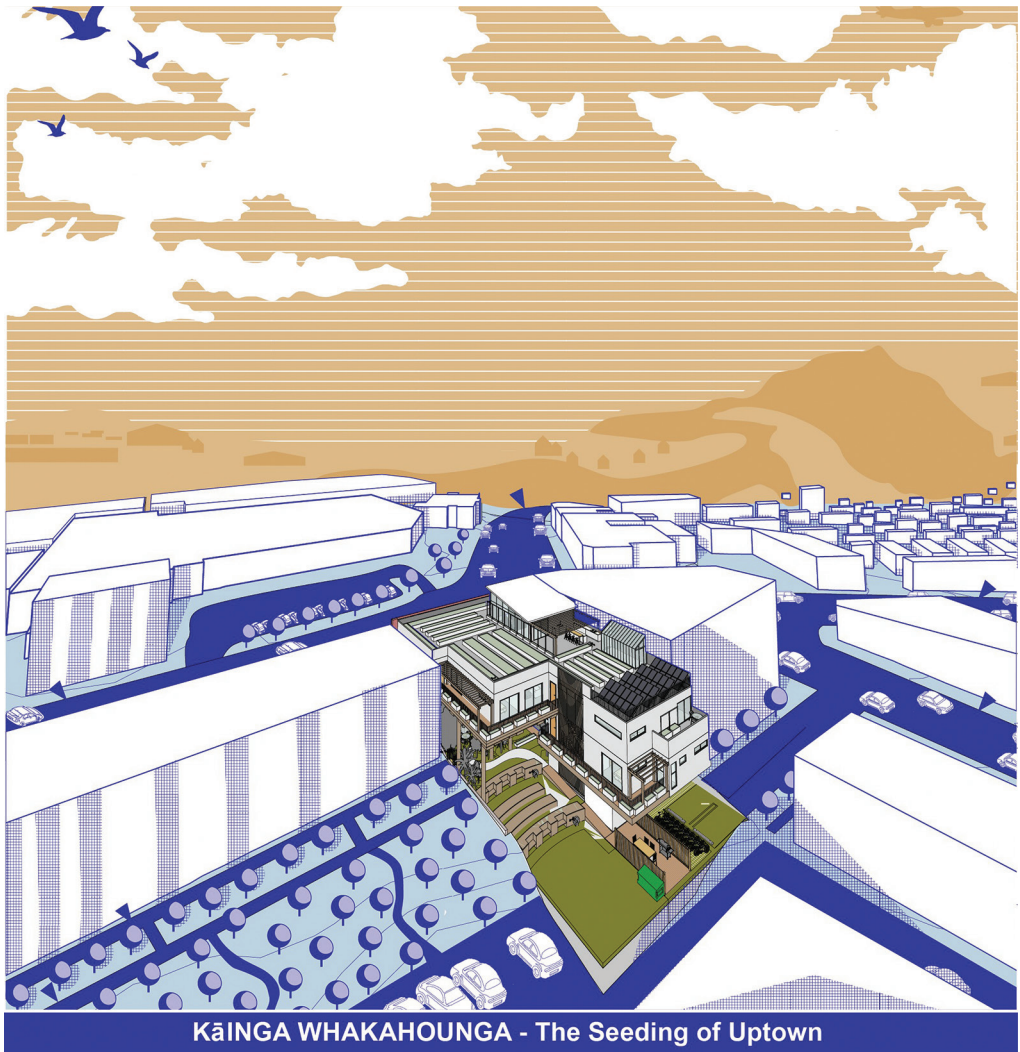
To answer these questions, we worked with the respective architecture schools of Auckland University of Technology, Unitec and the University of Auckland. Over 550 students, from first years to those in Masters programmes, were asked to respond to a variety of lifestyle elements and challenges in Uptown.

Students walked the streets to discover the hidden places of this precinct and where planning decisions made in years gone by had severed community connections. This was a reminder that it is on foot that we really begin to *understand* our neighbourhoods and cities – the sounds, smells and sights that define a place. This is important in a precinct that has in the past been defined by how people move *through* it, rather than *within* it. Students rediscovered heritage buildings, learned about the birdlife that makes its home in Uptown and learned about Te Uru Karaka and Ipu Pakore, two important pre-European mahinga kai (traditional food-gathering sites) which are no longer visible in the built environment. It was these discoveries of the place that led many to focus on temporal elements within their designs, as well as future-positive schemes that were strongly tied to stories and memories from the past. The BID saw this exploration as an opportunity to build on their own knowledge of the history of the neighbourhood and weave their findings into their communications about the development with stakeholders.

Throughout their courses, students became embedded in the businesses and institutions that define Uptown. Over a period of 12 weeks, dozens of architecture, urban design and urban strategy concepts and interventions were delivered by students. These included innovative adaptive reuse projects, spaces for artists and creatives, dense cohousing projects, recreation spaces and artefacts that represented or supported elements of Uptown’s environment.

This process culminated in the week-long Uptown Futures Festival. Three dedicated pop-up spaces were open to the public to visit and learn about the future of Uptown, and see the work of students. Visitors were encouraged to provide feedback about what they saw, or what they hoped for the future of Uptown. There was also a large panel discussion, where local and political leaders discussed visioning work of this kind, and a ‘leaders’ night’ which included senior officials and project leads being guided through the pop-ups.

The futures festival showed that a strong, place-based design strategy can produce unique and creative additions to our built environment. A significant concern in urban regeneration projects is that the new architecture and urban design will alter the character of an area, and that, as a result, it would be unrecognisable to local communities. Tāmaki's emerging practitioners were encouraged to spend time in the area and understand the types of communities that are and could be in Uptown. The BID showcased designs that were place-specific, rather than generic architectural responses. It intends to continue its conversations with the wider design community so that as projects continue to come online, the place pillars – and especially the pillar titled “keep the character and stay edgy” – can be embodied in the design responses. Beyond architecture, the BID also wants to see creative governance and finance models explored to facilitate key local groups, such as the not-for-profit sector, staying in Uptown.



KāINGA WHAKAHOUNGA - The Seeding of Uptown

Figure 2. Kāinga Whakahounga, designed by AUT student Tina Le Phan.
This project incorporates affordable community-focused housing and urban farms.
Illustration credit: Tina Le Phan.

CONCLUSION

This brings us to the question, what are the impacts of a festival (or a placemaking process) like the Uptown Futures Festival?

Fundamentally, the festival was an example of 'future-positive' messaging from the BID which engaged a broad variety of stakeholders in the process. This included people passing by on the street going into a pop-up event, local residents engaging in the community visioning events, the students dreaming up ideas for the area, the senior officials and project leads. Reframing change – getting people excited about its potential, rather than focusing on disruption – positioned Uptown as a thought leader in the community, as well as serving as an exemplar project for other BIDs.

From Uptown's perspective, a further key impact lies in activating 550 creative minds and future designers who have the vision of Uptown in mind as they move forward in their careers and shape Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland. This initiative has snowballed into an increasing awareness about Uptown, as media coverage also helped to promote the area and the opportunities that change would bring it.

What does this mean for the role of BIDs more generally in Aotearoa? It showcases a different way to operate by creating a central place to connect and by developing a shared vision for an area or precinct using a citizen-centric lens. In essence, the focus is on using placemaking as a tool to communicate the simple idea that businesses are people. Uptown is a business association, yes – but what businesses need to thrive is people and engagement, and the way that happens is by creating a neighbourhood that people want to come to and spend their time (and money) in.



Figure 3. | Mt Eden Road was transformed into a pop-up gallery for the Uptown Futures Festival, drawing people into the future from the busy thoroughfares.

Image credit: Blink Ltd, courtesy of the Uptown Business Association.

The festival has spurred on a series of 'next steps' for Uptown. Primarily, the BID is planning a series of activations for 2024 which build on the conversations from the festival and focus on different place pillars. A key focus of 2024 will be the pillar "Grow up in Uptown" and will include events such as street festivals and physical and digital content including guides to intergenerational opportunities and opportunities for families in Uptown. An additional survey round will also add to the evidence base about the community vision for the area. While, in these ways, the Uptown Futures Festival formed one approach for supporting the Uptown community vision, the BID will continue to explore a variety of ways to advocate for the precinct and create the thriving place Uptown can continue to be.

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I The Urban Advisory, *Towards a Community Vision: For Uptown and Development of Land Surrounding the New Mt Eden Station*, 2020, <https://uptown-vision.partica.co.nz/uptown-community-vision/uptownvisioningsummary/flipbook/1/>.