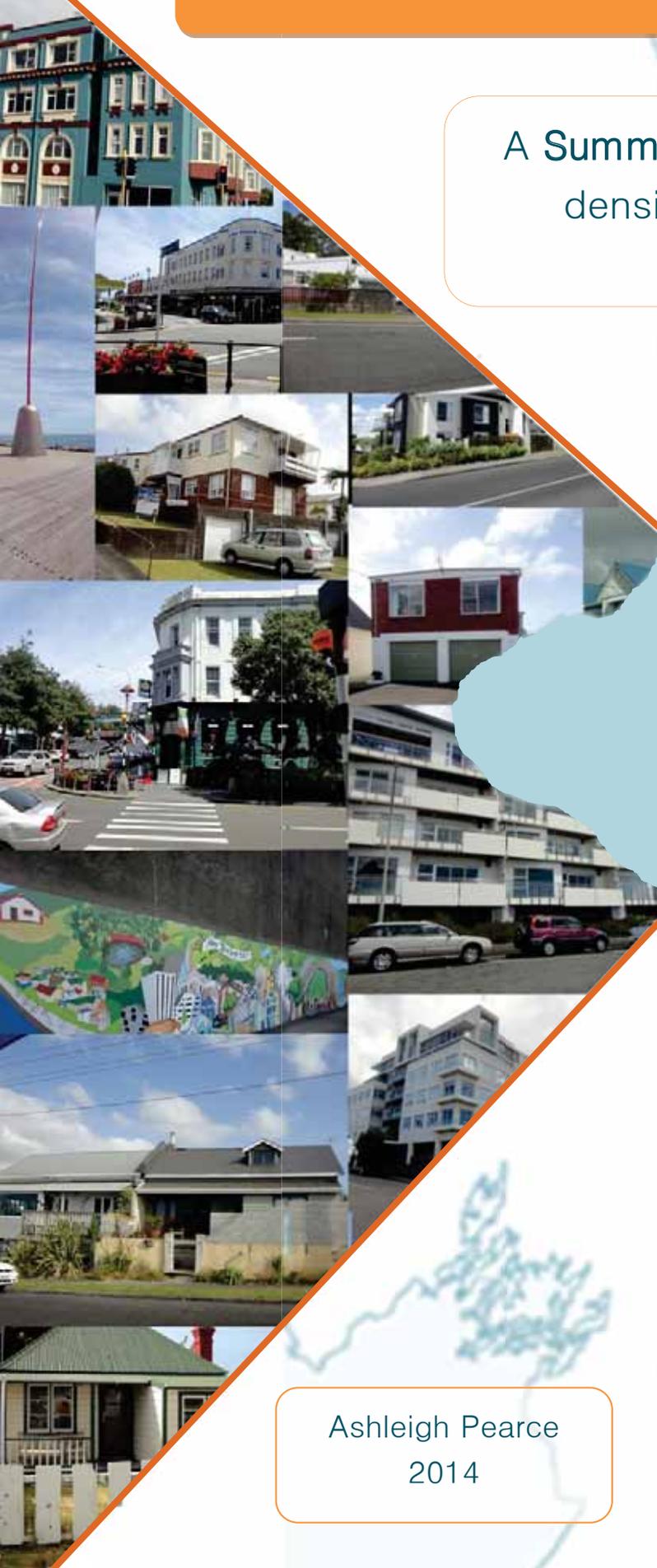


# Central Area Housing Project

A Summary Document of medium density housing choices for New Plymouth



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2014

March 2013  
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This is a summary document to complement the full analysis of the *New Plymouth Housing Choices Project Report – Inner city medium density housing choices for New Plymouth*.

The Central Area Housing Report has stemmed from the New Plymouth Central Area Urban Design Framework, actioning commitment to improving the liveability, competitiveness and vibrancy of New Plymouth city. The research report has been produced for the New Plymouth District Council to inform the 2015 District Plan Review.

Please refer to the full document for the comprehensive analysis of housing in the New Plymouth context, and overcoming barriers to medium density housing.

# Executive Summary

The success of New Plymouth District is closely linked with the success of the New Plymouth Central Area. A vibrant, efficient and accessible Central Area is key to achieving success. New Zealanders are discovering that living close to good quality open spaces, community facilities, schools, libraries, banks and shops and at the same time being close to work makes life easier and more enjoyable. In some places developers are capitalising on this and building a range of housing types in and near to city centres increasing the range of housing choices for people. Until now the focus for this medium density housing has been on the large cities of New Zealand while the provincial cities have quietly assumed inner city living is not really for them. There is a lack of knowledge on medium density housing in provincial urban environments.

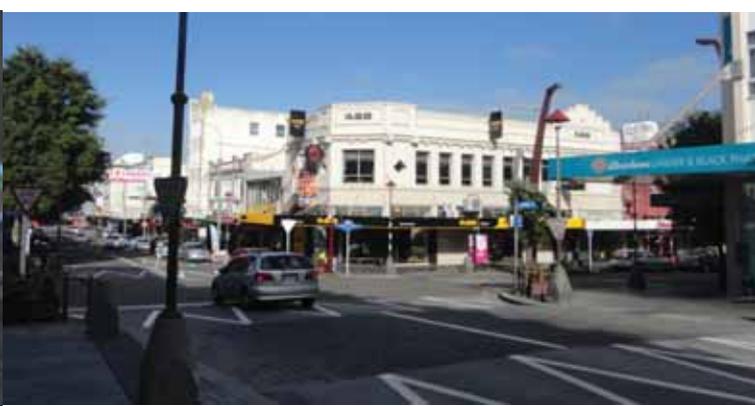
The New Plymouth Central Area Urban Design Framework sets a shared vision for the area and highlights Central Area residents as a major part of that vision. The popular view is that more residents in the Central Area equals a better place! This project adds more detail to the space between what we have today and the future vision.

It is acknowledged inner city living is not likely to be an attractive option for the majority of New Plymouth residents. However, this project concentrates on the proportion of current and future New Plymouth residents that it would work well for. This project looks at New Plymouth's Central Area and it's liveability and how increased residents would influence the life of the Central Area. It investigates what might work to encourage those residents, property owners and developers who recognising an opportunity need an extra incentive to act on it.

The project shows New Plymouth Central Area has the necessary bones in place to cater for increased housing in the Central Area.

Cities are actively encouraging ways to make safe, healthy, attractive urban spaces. As cities grapple with how to become more sustainable and achieve a compact urban form, housing typologies, inner-city redevelopment and intensification are evolving as ways to combat suburban sprawl. Encouraging inner city mixed use development is important for the vibrancy of the Central Area of New Plymouth, as a place to live, work and play, but also an economic imperative to keep business thriving in the city centre.

Like the majority of New Zealand's towns and cities there is a strong tradition of detached family homes in the New Plymouth urban environment. This project does not seek to change this preferred housing type for the majority of residents. This study focuses on good quality, well designed housing choices that take advantage of the benefits of living in the city. Due to the status quo of housing, there are negative public perceptions of medium density living and intensification. Research into medium density housing shows a lack of awareness surrounding what well designed medium density looks like and what it's like to live in. Intensification in the Central Area will remain relatively conservative, while the potential demand of new housing choices currently remains unrealised.



There are a complex mix of barriers that are preventing the development of medium density and inner city living. One barrier to medium density housing is the abundance of land available for residential development on the periphery of the urban environment. The New Plymouth district does not operate with a 'town belt' or 'urban limit'. Ample land has been rezoned to cater for residential growth. This is in contrast with some larger cities in New Zealand that have experienced higher growth rates and had a stronger rationale for implementing urban growth limits. In these other cities there is more incentive for medium density housing because of this urban limit and the demand for housing. In addition, for the next four to five years there will continue to be development of older, single unit detached dwellings in the Central Area undergoing gentrification that will continue to affect housing demand and the uptake for medium density housing. For medium density housing to work in New Plymouth it must be because it's simply the best option for people.

Another barrier in the New Plymouth context is the unfounded perception that Greenfield development is cheaper and more straight forward to develop. The low hanging fruit for development is actually found in the inner city and the residential fringe rather than in Greenfield development. Established urban environments are already serviced. Existing infrastructure including roads, water and waste services, telecom cables and the ultra fast fibre networks and stormwater systems are up and running which means 100% of an individual

lot can go towards the desired development. Frequently Greenfield development requires so much land for servicing that expected lot yields may halve during the development process. In addition, an established residential environment has neighbours that expect to have neighbours. Unfortunately, Greenfield development can suffer from some of the most vehement opposition from neighbours that have moved to the quiet open spaces on the city fringes.

Letting the market decide demand will not cater for unrealised opportunities and housing options. There is a range of incentives that New Plymouth District Council could use to support developers and encourage more suitable housing projects. Of the incentives discussed, education, advocacy, advice, collaboration and process smoothing show most potential for the New Plymouth Central Area. This is because processes of placemaking work on a long term scale. Developing the understanding and visions now will translate to better inner-city places and a flexible housing stock in the future. Establishing an Urban Design Panel and developing Medium Density Housing Guidelines offer opportunities for increasing densities and ensuring good design. Leadership and vision has been highlighted by local developers as vital for the long term success of the Central Area, driven by a visionary, future focussed champion. The coast, Pukekura Park, Cultural Precinct and high quality outdoor spaces will be central to guiding this public vision, while a stronger private vision for business and residential development success needs to be explored.



# Executive Summary

People will choose to live in a place that is attractive and inviting, and is in close proximity to amenities and services. Parts of the Central Area are not ready to embrace inner city living. Attention is required to make these areas investment ready, and demonstrate a willingness to grow and support private and public development. Ensuring the streetscape, private and public spaces can accommodate high quality inner city living as a nice place to live lays the foundations to allow vibrant mixed use spaces to thrive. Only then will medium density housing development be seen as a viable, alternative housing choice. This is made difficult by the current period of fiscal restraint, where council is challenged to do more, with less. It is however, a good time to explore the issues and make a plan for the future so that when a development opportunity arises there is a shared basis for a conversation around how that development may best be supported and guided through the necessary processes.

Projects on individual lots can be the small scale start that encourages inner city living. We may not be in a climate of large scale high end development. Our attention is focussed on medium sized developments that overtime and collectively will make a significant contribution to the vibrancy and life of New Plymouth Central Area. Three case study best practice medium density examples have been illustrated in this project, based on a comprehensive analysis of the

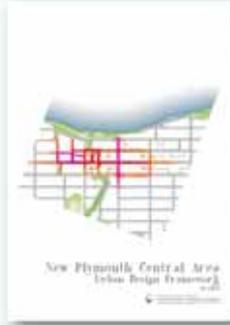
existing situation, and with urban design principles in mind. They represent that vast opportunities and potential that New Plymouth has locked up behind the 'business as usual' mindset.



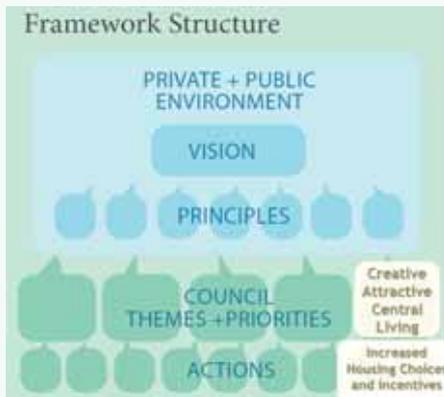
# New Plymouth Trends

## The NP Housing Project

The New Plymouth District Council has signalled commitment to making New Plymouth city more successful through quality urban design as a signatory of the New Zealand Urban Design Protocol since 2011. This has required developing an Action Plan, which has led to the formulation of the Central Area Urban Design Framework developed in 2012 and 2013.



This Central Area housing report has stemmed from the Central Area Urban Design Framework, supporting one of the five top priorities and actions- investigating creative, attractive central living, and increased housing choices



Encouraging inner city mixed use development is important for the vibrancy of the Central Area of New Plymouth, as a place to live, work and play, but also an economic imperative to keep businesses thriving in the city centre.

New Zealand cities are uniquely Kiwi and are very different, even from each other. Geography, landscape and history strongly influence the distinctive flavour of each city and gives them their own identity. This is especially true in New Plymouth, as a unique coastal town, beneath the mountain and beside the sea.

New Plymouth has had a lot of boom years, attributed to the dairying and oil and gas industries. Through the 1960s and 1970s gas exploration off the Taranaki coast was attracting big companies to the district. By the 1980s, New Plymouth central had a very motley collection of buildings and railway yards. City development continued to ignore the sea, with most of the central foreshore being occupied by rail yards, council gasworks, and other commercial areas. The 1980s city master plan began to change this, and through the 1990s there was an active effort to turn the city towards the sea.



The Central Area is not experiencing the same investment and growth of the recent past, raising questions regarding whether it still remains a thriving and lively atmosphere. The number of occupied residential dwellings has only slightly increased over the past twelve years. The residential population of the Central Area has also slightly increased.

In relation to the growth trends of medium density it is generally in the form of apartments. New apartments constructed in the Central Area are relatively high end. Apartments have a volatile market in New Plymouth following a boom-bust cyclical demand. When apartment living is in demand, developers rush to cater for this demand and when the demand is taken up, the demand falls. For those developers that build apartments too late in the demand cycle means they may struggle to sell.



# Medium Density Housing

In recent years urban intensification and increasing the densities of dwellings in existing built areas has become an important planning and policy tool around the globe. In the New Zealand context, many cities are characterised by urban sprawl and low density cities, evolving from a predominantly rural nation of detached family homes. The historic Kiwi aspiration for suburbia is a difficulty in promoting visions for a compact, higher density city.

We have shaped our cities so that we develop to favour the car rather than the person, we reward cheap building costs rather than long term sustainable benefits, and developers can only make a profit on small lots rather than well designed master plans. The way towns and cities have developed is a result of both deliberate planning, and the choices and decisions made by investors, property developers and home buyers. Global concerns surrounding climate change, rising fuel prices, sustainability agendas, green house gas emissions, energy consumption, sprawl and of course population growth and demographic change are now issues under scrutiny.

The change over the next 40 years will be unlike anything we have seen in the recent past. The demographic composition is changing (aging); the number of households is rapidly rising but the average number of people per household is declining. Housing demand still remains strong, however the size and nature of this housing will not be the big family four bedroom suburban home. There is a need to incentivise and instigate new forms of housing *now*, to provide for future demand of flexible alternative housing types. A continued decline in household size is projected for all regions and territorial authority areas between 2006 and 2031.

Fortunately over the last decade many people (in cities such as Auckland and Wellington) have concluded that they prefer different sets of choices and housing, and cities are rediscovering the virtues of encouraging change and broadening choices in their down towns. The built form has become central to creating compact, pedestrian-friendly and mixed use communities, to meet future housing needs and alleviate global challenges. A growing selection of literature is highlighting the importance of increasing population density to solve problems associated with growth. However before lurching from a low density to a higher density city structure, careful consideration is needed in relation to the potential health and social impacts to avoid unintended consequences.

Although the word 'density' appears familiar at first, it is a very complex concept. The term has a multitude of definitions, which leads to different understandings in different disciplines. It loosely refers to the number of units (people or dwellings) in a given area.

Medium density housing loosely refers to:

"Housing developments with four or more dwellings per lot, including stand alone, semi detached, terraced housing or apartments with four stories or less. In New Zealand, the most common definition used by Housing NZ Corporation and a majority of city councils is "housing at densities of more than 150m<sup>2</sup> per unit, and less than 350m<sup>2</sup> per unit, or 30-66 dwellings per hectare"



# Barriers to Medium Density Housing

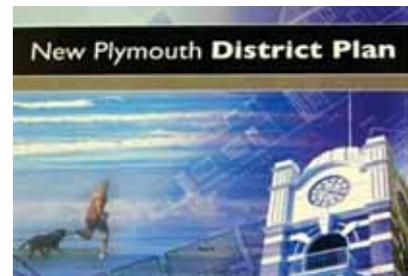
## 1. Perceptions of medium density housing

Because housing in New Plymouth has evolved in a very detached suburban nature, higher density living, and medium density housing has not developed as viable or dominant housing option for developers to cater for. There is a lack of understanding about what good quality, best practice medium density looks like, which may have led to an unrealised demand in the market.



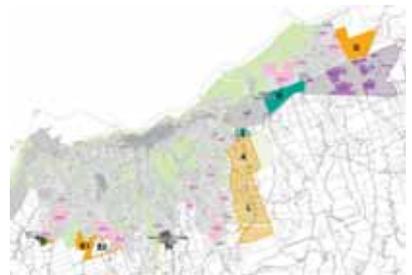
## 2. Abundance of periphery land and a perception of Greenfield development being easier

New Plymouth has large amounts of land available on the outer skirts of town for development. The costs of development within the Central Area are higher, translating to higher spec housing fitted out with high quality appliances and furnishings. Greenfield development is perceived as easier with less economic costs. Greenfield development costs twice as much infrastructure wise, and it is often underestimated how much land and cost is required for infrastructure. Greenfield can conflict with rural character, fragment/impose on productive lands, and increase unsustainable commuting patterns. Inner-city development has the ability of utilising existing infrastructure and contributes towards a sustainable compact urban form, while residents experience a range of benefits from the central location.



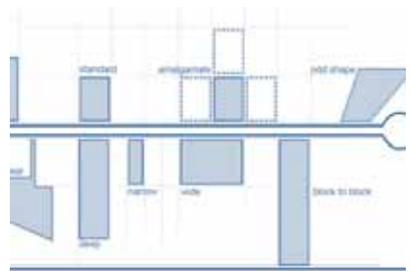
## 3. District Plan

The District Plan is neither encouraging or discouraging housing types, and lacks incentives for innovation. Housing types are neither identified as appropriate or inappropriate, rather, they are all permitted as long as they meet permitted activity standards. Minimum lot sizes restrict the development of medium density housing, and the required resource consent process can deter people that want to work within the rules. This does not necessarily translate to the best design outcomes for the site, neighbours or wider community.



## 4. Site Selection

In order to develop medium density housing arrangements in an appropriate layout, amalgamation of sections may be required. This can prove difficult in a built up area. It can also increased the perceived risk to the developer. Therefore, single lots are commonly redeveloped. Currently in the Central Area, older single detached units on a individual sites are redeveloped into large, higher priced new single dwellings, not contributing to increasing density or affordability. The building stock is being renewed in particular areas, but there is a lack of *new affordable* housing choices in the Central Area.





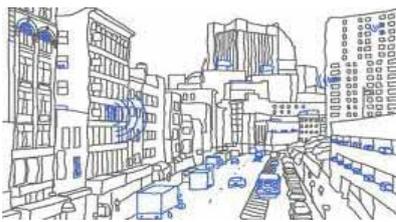
## 5. Business as usual

The slow deterioration of the housing stock is coupled with a gradual trend of redevelopment over time. This ad hoc approach commonly sees redevelopment in sought after areas and will not deliver higher quality housing choices. There lacks coordinated visions and aspirations for the future of the Central Area. New Plymouth has not hit rock bottom and does not require the radical urban reinvention policies that cities have resorted to overseas. There is so much potential, but a lack of leadership and urgency to discuss or plan future development and long term visions of private development for the Central Area.



## 6. Earthquake prone buildings

Because there are many older, character buildings in the Central Area, earthquake prone buildings may manifest as a future issue. The cost of strengthening poses a real threat to the protection of heritage buildings within the Central Area that are important to the character and sense of place, not only for the city centre, but for the wider District. Restoration funding and support is vital for this issue.



## 7. Perceived noise nuisance

Because of the nature of the commercial activities in the Central Area, perceived noise is a barrier to housing development. The Business zones are designed for the nature of core activities central to the function of the city centre, and housing cannot impose on the zone's normal levels of noise. It is up to the developer to ensure noise is mitigated for the residents' quality of life. Site layout, orientation, noise sensitive rooms and materials are all effective mitigation techniques.



## 8. Parking

The minimum parking requirements in the District Plan have led to apartment buildings in the Central Area to have inactive street frontages. Floor levels are commonly car parking space to be compliant with this rule, to the detriment of the vibrancy and street appeal of the Central Area.



## 9. Developers and the planning process

The planning process has associated uncertainty, delays and costs. A way to avoid this had been 'designing to comply', where the developer sticks to working within the rules to avoid the red tape hassle of consenting and submissions. This does not necessarily lead to the best design outcomes. Also, a lack of experience and knowledge with new eco-materials and techniques have more risk than tried and true products, becoming a barrier to innovation.



# Incentives to encourage Medium Density Housing

International experience strongly suggest a linkage between more successful housing intensification outcomes and various incentives promoted by local authorities, however remain largely underutilised in New Zealand. Some incentives are focussed on removing barriers, other are focussed on promoting and supporting sustainable higher density housing outcomes.

## 1. Education, advocacy and advice

Because a major barrier to Central Area housing development is the negative perceptions and unclear comprehension of higher density living, building public understanding of the issues, opportunities, benefits and nature of medium density housing is vital. Presentations, workshops and expos are a good way to strengthen understanding of a concept that may seem quite foreign to many currently. Home buyers that had previously not understood medium density living concepts may see it as an appropriate living arrangement for their stage of life or lifestyle. Hence, this may reveal an unrealised demand of housing choices that has not been discussed or comprehended previously, as the demand to provide it has not manifested in the market place.

## 2. Collaboration

Working with professions and the development industry is fundamental to draw in experience, and make the most of resources and ideas, hence 'innovation by integration'. Personally reaching out to stakeholders and locals with vested passion in the Central Area can go a long way. These individuals can share their visions and talent as an urban collective. There are many overseas examples of private-public partnerships producing successful higher density projects.

## 3. Process

New Plymouth will benefit greatly from an Urban Design Panel. The panel of experts offer opportunities to support and improve the quality of design, while reassuring the development community that quality design is valued and important in New Plymouth. Leadership and vision that guides medium density housing and quality design is also important. The vision for private and public development, spearheaded by a visionary champion pulls together existing activities, and identifies new opportunities for improvement.

Thirdly, process smoothing the planning process support developers, appropriately balancing certainty and flexibility. Both developers and council officers need to understand and be receptive of new sustainable building typologies and techniques, making it easier to include them in good quality housing. Urban development agencies, Urban Design Panels, case managers and eco-advisors are part of this process smoothing, encouraging pre-application discussions that get the creative design conversations going before thousands of dollars are spent.

## 4. Guidelines

The quality of housing design in New Plymouth will be enhanced from the development of a Medium Density Housing Design guidelines document. These guidelines are short, in plain English and inspire people to do good design. There are many New Zealand examples of these documents, and can be coupled with regulatory incentives that gives development flexibility with certain rules when they are in line with the design criteria. Criteria could include urban design principles such as streetscape, connection with the foreshore, human scale design, landscaping, universal design (age friendly), low impact design, and sustainable features.



## 5. Capital investment

There are a lot of things in the Central Area that are pleasing, especially the high quality outdoor public spaces, however, it is just not set up to embrace inner city living yet. Capital and lead investment provides certainty and can be a catalyst for development and economic growth, while making the most of existing infrastructure and services. Programmes that improve streetscapes, green spaces, open space and amenities in specific areas have a positive effect on the 'feel' and atmosphere of the down town landscape, making them more investment ready and residentially friendly. For example, creating open space on the eastern side of the Central Area can be a catalyst for further development and housing.

## 6. Regulation

Regulations should set the bar high so that good development can feel confident that their investment is protected. As a couple of District Plan incentives, developments that will contribute to increasing density or encourages mixed use in certain areas could have incentivised bonuses. For example, If you are developing two or more dwelling units (in Residential Environmental Area B) and the development complies with the Medium Density Housing Design Guidelines, the 250m<sup>2</sup> minimum lot size does not apply. The Design Guidelines set out parameters to ensure that the dwellings are still well designed, have good layout and design, and are of good quality. This could be implemented as a Controlled Activity with no affected parties. Conditions can be imposed, reserved to assessment criteria, along with evidence of urban design consideration and in line with Design Guidelines.

## 7. Financial

Because land value prices in the Central Area are not a major barrier that is holding people back from inner city housing development in New Plymouth, financial incentives are less important than some of the other incentives that work towards building community support for high density living, guidelines and collaboration. Generally a financial incentive needs to be coupled with other incentive types in order to encourage development. Examples in the report include reducing permit fees, users fees and consent fees, rates, development contribution and financial contribution remissions, loans and grants.

*In summary, the following recommendations should be implemented:*

- *Creation of a Medium Density Housing Guidelines document*
- *Establishment of an Urban Design Panel*
- *Incentives and bonuses in the District Plan to allow minimum lot size a Controlled Activity*
- *A champion for the Central Area future development, supported by local urban visionaries*
- *Further development of a private development vision for the Central Area*
- *Development community collaborative workshops*
- *Community workshops– getting medium density out there as a housing choice*
- *Investigate a green space or pocket park on the eastern side of the Central Area*



# Case Study Examples of Inner-city Housing

*“Even if placemakers can point out successful precedents in other cities, they are often met with a litany of reasons why that would never work here”*

- Department of Urban Studies and Planning

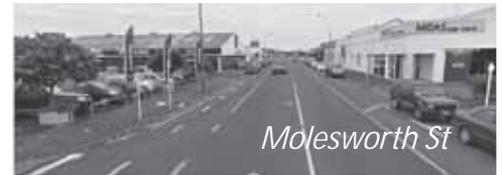
In an effort to overcome the commonly expressed view in the quote above, this report has looked at several site specific examples of housing choices and options in the New Plymouth context with urban design best practice principles in mind. A picture can be worth a thousand words in illustrating how medium density housing would look in an existing neighbourhood.

## Gill Street



In 2005, a residential development on the eastern end of Molesworth Street illustrates how apartments can be designed to fit in with the existing situation, on a relatively small section, while still providing comfortable living space. This development consists of two dwellings, with one apartment per floor, and features such as a deck facing the sea, and bottom level storage and car parking.

## Molesworth Street



As a different layout example, around the corner on Hobson Street, three dwellings (two attached and one standalone) have been developed on a long, narrow section. Dwellings are split across the second and third level, with a basement garage that fits below the Hobson hill, bring the second level living floor to street level.



### Examples of features

#### Access and Privacy

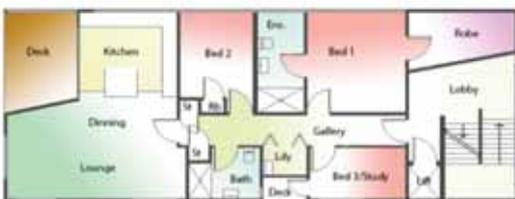
- Private balcony
- Vehicle parking and storage
- Internal elevator/wheelchair access
- Universal design standards

#### Spaces

- Shared outdoor spaces and planting
- Roof garden
- Well laid out internal spaces



Level Two and Three



Level One



#### Sustainability Features

- Solar panels on roof
- Passive solar design

#### Outlook

- Private and public outlook
- Sea view outlook

#### Location

- Short walk to beaches, Coastal Walkway, Centre City, Pukekura Park, Puke Ariki Library and super-markets

Level One



Level Two



Level Three



## Devon Street

The main retailing strip along Devon Street East and West has opportunities to incorporating housing above the commercial street level. There is a majority of second level buildings that are underutilised or used as storage for businesses. Apartments would fit seamlessly above the verandas of street level retail frontages, and add to the urban charm and vibrancy. Many of the buildings along Devon Street have a heritage features, contributing to a distinctive character.



Because of the height of existing buildings, and the downhill slope of Devon Street, the building fits comfortably in the surrounding urban form without protruding or sticking out.

Targeting streets with good connections is important to make the most of inner-city locations and accessibility. Apartments developed in this area are so central that residents can enjoy a walk to the foreshore, Pukekura Park, Huatoki walkway, Puke Ariki landing or the library, all within only 5 minutes.

### Examples of features

#### Access and Privacy

- Generously sized private balcony and privacy screening
- Vehicle parking and storage
- Internal elevator/wheelchair access

#### Spaces

- Shared outdoor spaces/courtyard
- Roof garden
- Well laid out internal spaces

#### Sustainability Features

- Solar panels on roof
- Passive solar design

#### Outlook

- Private and public outlook
- City outlook

#### Location

- Short walk to beaches, Coastal Walkway, Centre City, main streets, Pukekura Park, Puke Ariki Library, cafes, restaurants, and work

