



# Auckland's first spatial plan: Ambitious aspirations or furthering the status quo?



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## ABSTRACT

Auckland's first spatial plan (locally known as the Auckland Plan) is the principal document providing strategic direction for the city's development over the next 30 years. The Auckland Plan aspires to radically transform transport in Auckland, from a car-dominant system into an integrated public transport network, by proposing a series of expensive infrastructure projects, including rail tunnels under the CBD, rail extension to the airport, and an additional harbour crossing. This paper critically assesses the transport strategies proposed by the Plan from a broad spectrum of sustainability perspectives. In drawing on the events leading to the 2009 Auckland local government reform, the Plan making process and the content of the Plan, this paper shows that the Plan's transport strategy suffers a range of drawbacks, including limited political support, a rushed consultation process and lack of a robust framework for funding public transport projects. These problems raise questions about the Plan's capacity to drive a 'transformational shift' in Auckland's transport landscape and ultimately contribute to the vision of making Auckland the world's most liveable city. This paper concludes by recommending Auckland Council adopts a more proactive approach to transport planning focusing on better civic engagement, more strategic mechanisms to incentivize public transport and to overcome institutional inertia.

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## Introduction – spatial planning, liveability and transport

In recent years in New Zealand, spatial planning has been emphasised as a means of addressing transport and urban planning issues. The country's first ever spatial plan – the Auckland Plan (2012–2042) – is the newly established metropolitan-wide Auckland Council's response to the spatial planning challenges of transport, housing and population growth in the Auckland region in the coming decades. The Plan aspires towards liveability by radically transforming the car-dominant transport system by establishing an integrated public transport network. This paper critically assesses the transport strategies proposed in the Auckland Plan in order to generate lessons for other world cities.

Originating in Europe, spatial planning is concerned with the coordination or integration of the spatial dimension of sectoral policies, through territorially-based strategies to address fragmented urban structure and automobile dependency (Faludi, 2000; Friedmann, 2004; Healey, 2009). Compared with traditional transport and land use planning, spatial planning is believed to

promote greater cross sectoral integration by adopting a holistic vision, a long-term planning approach and improved accountability of planning institutions (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2013). Spatial planning sets visionary goals to deal with continuously changing political, socio-economic and environmental problems (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013), and to address institutional ambiguity (Hajer, 2006). These elements of spatial planning support new governance arrangements which draw on collective wisdom to identify and resolve contemporary transport and urban planning issues (Olesen, 2012). It is therefore argued that spatial planning in association with improved governance will increase legitimacy, respect, empowerment, equity and efficiency by adopting effective and meaningful engagement with a full range of stakeholders (Getimis, 2012; McCall, 2003).

The spatial plans of many cities, including Auckland, emphasise 'liveability' (Friedmann, 2004), a concept originating in the British 'garden city' movement, the American 19th century 'city beautiful' movement, and the 'New Towns', 'Suburbanization', 'Eco Towns', 'New Urbanism' and 'Sustainable City' movements of the 20th century. These movements share a focus on individual quality of life and community cohesion. Quality of life experience relates to the ability to access: physical infrastructure (such as housing,

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transportation, communications, water, and sanitation); social infrastructure (such as equity and social capital); economic infrastructure (provision and access to appropriate employment); environmental infrastructure (clean air, green space and parks); and institutional infrastructure (involvement in local decision making) (Douglass, 2002; Evans, 2002; Pezzoli, 2003). An argument is advanced that such infrastructure can only be made possible by preparing a spatial plan.

Transport plays a critical role in spatial planning and its world-wide vision of making cities liveable (Banister, 2002; Downs, 2004). Hahlweg (1997) explains that a liveable city is a city where 'I have the chance for easy mobility – by foot, by bicycle, by public transportation, and even by car where there is no other choice' (p. 12); a city which cares for all its residents. Similarly, Southworth (2003) argues that in the liveable city 'convenient access systems are essential, including walkability and bicycle access; connectivity of the street grid and block size; and transportation systems that allow us to move about easily by variety of means' (p. 345). Thus, interconnected pedestrian and bicycle networks linking educational, work, health and recreational areas, alongside efficient public transport systems enhance the liveability of a city. Consequently, the provision of transport mode choices is suitable for each resident to achieve the long term vision of a liveable city.

Vuchic (1999) proposes a multi-level analysis of transport planning for liveable cities. The first level complements the spatial planning principles of coordinating and integrating transport policies with urban development, economic, social and environmental policies over the long-term. This is a complex strategic-level planning challenge requiring a spatial plan with strong public input. Level two includes coordination and integration within transport policies to achieve a multimodal coordinated transport system. A spatial plan facilitates evaluation of the competing goals of transport and urban planning at level one and two, where coordination and integration occurs at the policy rather than project level. For example, in making a city liveable, one goal should be reducing auto-dependency. Consequently, policies and investment should favour public transport and at the same time disinvest in and disincentivise car use.

Auckland is an auto-dependent city, with in 2013 over 85% of journey to work trips being made by car (Stat NZ, 2013). The city transport system contributes 38% of the city's total carbon emissions (Auckland Transport, 2011), \$1.25 billion in congestion costs (Wallis & Lupton, 2013), and creates social exclusion for disadvantaged groups (Davey, 2007; Emily, Karen, & McCreanor, 2009; Human Rights Commission, 2005). Increasingly, there have been calls to shift towards a transit-oriented transport system to secure Auckland's economic, environmental and social sustainability (Auckland Regional Transport Authority, 2006a). The 2009 local government reform opened-up a unique opportunity to transform the city's transport system, requiring preparation of the first ever spatial plan – the Auckland Plan, which came into effect in 2012. With the Plan's overarching goal of making Auckland the world's most liveable city, sustainable transport has been identified as a central focus.

This paper finds that while the Auckland Plan has received considerable praise for its forward-looking vision, its actual ability to influence the existing transport system is limited. This analysis is made in three parts: the first section backgrounds the formation of Auckland Council, revealing how the conflicting political agendas of the left-leaning Council and a right-leaning central government have provided an unstable foundation for the Auckland Plan; the second points to flaws in the plan-making process as the Council, in its attempt to combine local democracy with efficiency, prioritised efficiency over local democracy. The third section presents a close-up study of the Auckland Plan, identifying transport policy weaknesses in areas including target setting, investment

priorities, funding mechanisms and land use policies. The final section presents the research findings and identifies lessons for other world cities wishing to promote transport sustainability.

### Supersizing Auckland: governance reforms

In 2009, Auckland underwent New Zealand's most extensive local government reform in two decades to become a 'super city' under one unitary authority – the Auckland Council. Prior to the 2009 reform, Auckland had a two-tiered governance structure consisting of one regional council and seven territorial authorities,<sup>1</sup> a legacy of major amalgamation in 1989 expected to deliver more efficient local government at lower cost (Cheyne, 2011a). By the early 2000s, 'against a background of infrastructure crises' (Reid, 2009, p. 40), concerns had started to gather momentum, regarding the failure of the 1989 reform to deliver its initial promise (Memon, Davies, & Fookes, 2007). The 2004 establishment of the Auckland Regional Transport Authority had been intended to promote more integrated regional transport planning, but failed to fundamentally resolve the issue of weak regional leadership, as the fragmented decision-making framework persisted (Mein, 2008).

Eventually, growing discontent about Auckland governance arrangements pressured the then Labour-led government in 2007 to set up a Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, with a mission to investigate the potential for another reform to secure a prosperous and sustainable future for Auckland (Salmon, Bazley, & Shand, 2009). In its 2009 report, the Commission recognised a wide range of challenges confronting the region, including: inefficient public transport; congestion; poorly coordinated urban growth; failure of councils to listen to people; and delays in consenting processes. The Commission argued that these issues were caused by two underlying factors: (1) fragmented and weak regional leadership; and (2) poor community engagement. The Commission's solutions included replacing the eight existing councils with one unitary authority, Auckland Council and establishing one integrated planning framework consisting of one spatial plan (strategic plan) and one district plan (statutory development control plan).

Despite criticisms, the Commission's single council concept received almost immediate endorsement from the National-led government which had been elected in 2008. Only two weeks after the release of the Royal Commission report in April 2009 – the government published a 33 page document 'Making Auckland Greater' announcing its decision to amalgamate the region's cities and districts into one 'super city' governed by one unitary authority – the Auckland Council – before the 2010 local elections (DIA, 2009). The government document presented a far more radical blueprint of unitary Auckland council than the Royal Commission originally suggested (see Fig. 1) by proposing a mayor and only 20 councillors (DIA, 2009; Salmon et al., 2009). Given the region's population of 1.4 million, this is equivalent to a representative ratio of only 1:65,000, significantly lower than elsewhere in New Zealand.

Secondly, government rejected local councils (Mutu, 2010; Palmer, 2009) in favour of twenty-one local boards in charge of decision-making on localised, non-regulatory matters, including some transport issues (Cheyne, 2011a). Although these boards are expected to facilitate community engagement, their capacity is likely to be limited due to resource constraints.

Thirdly, the government rejected the Commission's proposal for three reserved Māori seats on the Auckland Council to safeguard Māori representation (Mutu, 2010). The government's exclusion

<sup>1</sup> Including the Auckland Regional Council, four city councils (Auckland, Manukau, North Shore and Waitakere) and three district councils (Rodney, Franklin and Papakura).

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