

## Improving the Quality of the Built Environment using Urban Design Review Panels: An Appraisal of Practices in Australia and New Zealand

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### Abstract

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This paper presents a critical appraisal of Urban Design Review whereby building development proposal are subject to comment and advice from an expert professional panel, prior to being submitted for formal approval by local authorities. In the context of urban authorities vigorously promoting ‘best practice’ design on the basis that this will improve the quality of the built environment, Urban Design Review is contextualised as a form design governance. Recent evaluations of Review in the UK, Australia and New Zealand are presented and integrated with the outcomes to interviews with Urban Design Review Panellists in Auckland, Queenstown, Wanaka and Cockburn City (Perth). Consistent with other studies that focussed on the views of developers and city officials, this study confirms that Panellist consider that Review leads to positive outcomes for the built environment, and serves public interest, but there remains a lack of sufficient empirical evidence to support these contentions.

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**Keywords:** urban design review, urban design, built environment, design governance.

### 1. Introduction

Urban Design Review (also referred to as ‘Design Review’) <sup>1</sup> is defined by the UK’s Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) as an: “...independent and impartial evaluation process in which a Panel of experts on the built environment assess the design of a proposal. The projects that Design Review deals with are usually of public significance, and the process is designed to improve the quality of buildings and places for the benefit of the public” (Design Council, 2013, p6). Widely practiced across parts of North America and Europe, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, the process involves the submission of building proposals to an expert panel prior to being lodged for formal approval, where the advice given leads to design modifications. What is argued is that this process over time leads to an incremental improvement to the quality of the built environment.

The idea of facilitating better quality urban environments through the building development approval process has been traced back to the 1960’s in New York by White (2015), and to Vancouver in the 1970’s by Punter (2003). From the late 1990’s, CABE emerged as a strong international voice for good urban design. The Vancouver system of Urban Design Review was strongly advocated in Australia in the late 1990’s by John Brine (1997), and is now common practice in many Australian cities (London, 2012). In New Zealand, Urban Design Review was first established in Auckland in 2000 (Hunt, 2014), and now adopted by several New Zealand cities (Ministry for the Environment, 2010). Given the claim that “Design Review is becoming increasingly influential in shaping the design of major new development” (Paterson, 2011, 103), this paper offers an appraisal of the extent to which the CABE (2013) aim to ‘improve the quality of buildings and places for the benefit of the public’ is being achieved in Australia and New Zealand.

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This is done by reporting on interviews with Urban Design Review panellists in Auckland, Queenstown, Waneka and Cockburn Central (Perth), and comparing findings to similar studies in the UK and Australia. This enables a critical appraisal of the process, and the extent to which the aims of Urban Design Review are being achieved.

## 2. Enhancing Urban liveability

Urban Design Review is one of a number of strategies deployed by urban authorities to encourage improvements in built environment quality. Indeed, this goal has perhaps become more important alongside urban planning policies for higher density cities, where the public realm take on enhanced roles in delivering necessary quality of life experiences (Fincher and Gooder, 2007; Haarhoff, et al, 2012, 2013; Haarhoff, Beattie and Dupuis, 2016).

Recognising this enhanced role for the public realm, newer iterations of urban growth policies now emphasise 'quality of life' and 'liveability' as urban planning goals (Bramley, 2006; Yang, 2008; Ingram et al., 2009; Haarhoff, Beattie, and Dupuis, 2016). For example, Perth's metropolitan plan, *Directions 2031 and Beyond*, is argued to lead to "a world class liveable city: green vibrant, more compact and accessible with a unique sense of place" (Department of Planning, 2010, 2). Similarly, the Auckland Plan (Auckland Council, 2012c) aims to establish the "world's most liveable city...by attracting people across all demographic groups to a mix of cafes, restaurants, shops, services and well-designed public spaces ... meeting the full spectrum of people's everyday needs" (Auckland Council 2012c, 42). How Urban Design Review contributes towards these outcomes is the concern of this paper.

## 3 Good Design as Public Policy

Strongly associated with liveability as an urban planning goal is the argument that improved built environments depend on the quality of design across a range of urban scales, and urban authorities "starting to understand the long term consequences of this for cities" (Moore, et al, 2015). This approach has also been bolstered by political support for better quality urban development (Darby and Campbell-Reid, 2014), the development sector recognising the economic value of good design (Carmona, 2013), and the establishment of urban design Champions by cities. The latter include roles played by State Government Architect offices in Australia (London, 2012; Van Ruth, 2015), and the appointment of urban design Champions by city councils (Darby and Campbell-Reid, 2014). This drive for better design outcomes is reflected in current urban management growth strategies, such as the Auckland Plan (Auckland Council, 2012c), that encourages new development...to adhere to universal principles of good design and promote identity, diversity, integration and efficiency, whether at the scale of a site, a street/block, a neighbourhood, or the city. Better place-making, rather than development control, will become the focus of the planning process." (Auckland Council, 2012c).

Also in New Zealand, the Queenstown Lakes District Council's (QLDC), the local authority for the towns of Queenstown and Waneka, set their strategic urban development mission "to enhance the quality of life for all people within the District by carrying out sound social, physical and economic planning" (QLDC, 2017), supported by an Urban Design Strategy (QLDC, 2009).

In Western Australia, the State Government's 'Better Places and Spaces' establishes a commitment to "improving design quality in public works...(and) good design outcomes...in private sector development" (Van Ruth, 2015, 20). The policy expresses the view that:

Good design in our built environment is crucial to achieving value for money. Good design means creating buildings and making spaces and places that properly fulfil their purpose, stand the test of time, are safe and are environmentally responsive. (Government of Western Australia, 2013).

The New South Wales State government promotes better apartment design through its State Environment Planning Policy No 65 (SEPP 65), to:

"...deliver a better living environment for the residents now choosing this form of housing, and enhance our streetscapes and our neighbourhoods across the State. It does this by establishing a consistent approach to the design and assessment of apartments and the way they are assessed by councils.

(Department of Planning and Environment, 2015)

The idea of public authorities promoting and regulating for better design reflects what Jonathan Barnett (1974) called ‘urban design as public policy’, theorised by Carmona (2016) as ‘design governance’, and defined as:

...the process of state-sanctioned interventions in the means and processes of designing the built environment in order to shape both the processes and outcomes in a defined public interest. (Carmona, 2016, 705).

Urban authority sanctioned design governance raises many issues, one of which concerns the imposition of design standards or criteria argued as necessary to achieve good design outcomes. As argued by Carmona (2016), attempting to regulate for ‘good’ design does not necessarily achieve the desired outcome, and imposing specific design criteria may stifle design innovation and eliminate good potential solutions. It also raises questions about the role of the urban authorities in regulating urban development, especially in the context of resistance from the development sector. On this point, Gunder (2009, 186) sees “dissatisfaction with restrictive regulatory land use planning codes...coupled with the rise of public choice theory and a neoliberal agenda supportive of market-driven values”. History also shows that state sponsored development was not always imbued with enduring good design, and that market-driven development can lead to good design outcomes and successful urbanism (Adams and Ties dell, 2013).

The promotion of design as public policy has also been challenged by studies that demonstrate that regulation in general, including measures such as Urban Design Review, adds significant cost to the development process and the subsequent cost of housing, that in turn impacts housing affordability (Grimes and Mitchell, 2015; Lees, 2017). However, these arguments need to be treated with some caution. Both studies referred to only measure costs, and not the value social benefits potentially derived from regulation. For example, in Western Australia the Government’s policy of requiring walk able neighbourhoods has been shown to lead to measurable health benefits and cost savings to the health care system (Department for Planning and Infrastructure, 2007). Consequently, any costs ascribed to the promotion of good design aimed at promoting quality built environments needs to be balanced against the value of benefits to individuals, wider communities and stakeholders.

Carmona (2016) suggests that rather than imposing policy or regulation for good design, design governance should seek to bring together public and private stakeholders, as a process that has:

...at its heart the idea of complex shared responsibilities for delivery that transcends the simple public/private binary and the limitations of the state’s statutory responsibilities as an inclusive process, led by the state, but reaching out to all parties with a stake in shaping places for the better. (Carmona, 2016, 726)

This also reflects the reality that while public authorities promote good design as a public benefit, the greater part of building development is undertaken by the private sector where goals can be very different (Gunder, 2010). It is in this context that urban authorities have created a number of ‘tools’ to require, or in most cases encourage and promote, better design through market-driven development, as a pathway towards improved built environments. Tools to achieve this aim include the City of Sydney’s promotion design competitions among competing architects for major developments in the CBD, assessed by independent juries, where discretionary floor space bonuses are offered as an incentive to participate (Baker, Freestone and Davison, 2016). More typical, are the ‘best practice’ exemplars and urban design guides established by urban authorities and infrastructure for its promotion, such as Auckland Council’s Design Office and Design Manuel (Auckland Council, nd).

The other key measure adopted, and the focus for this paper, is Urban Design Review. Indeed, Williams and Maginn (2012, 49) see an increasing reliance on independent expert Urban Design Review Panels assisting state and local government decision making as a “contemporary feature of planning systems in Australia” in what they describe as the “panelisation of planning in Australia”. This requires, according to To derian (2014, 19), that “all players in this growing culture of design will have to step up – politicians, city staff, land developers, private-sector designers and architects, community leaders, citizens across the board, and even the media.”

#### 4 Evaluations of Urban Design Review processes and outcomes

Urban design Review, and the use of Review Panels, has been exposed to evaluative research, most of which is related to northern hemisphere countries, and in the context of North America, John Punter has been particularly active. His work includes evaluations of Review processes in Vancouver (Punter, 2003), and Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Irvine and San Diego (Punter, 1996). Punter (2007) also produced a comprehensive overview of Urban Design Review practices across North America and Western Europe, later updated by White (2015) for application in the UK.

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), responsible for setting up a national Design Review Panel system in the England, produced their own evaluation in a study aimed to address perceived shortcomings, to increase impact, and ensure that the Panels provide quality design advice (CABE, 2009). The key measure of success was the extent to which advice given by Review Panels is used by local authorities in making decisions on project approval applications. But as Paterson (2011) points out, “the claims of significant changes to schemes as a result of Review cannot be fully substantiated in the absence of a detailed monitoring system” (Paterson, 2011, p98). Indeed, Paterson (2011) produced an independent study of Urban Design Review, to counter the assertion that research commissioned by advocacy groups such as CABE lack of independent viewpoints.

Paterson (2011) interviewed key stakeholders: the developers, planning officers responsible for development approvals, and panellists. The aim was to establish the “place of Design Review in urban design guidance, as well as ways in which Design Review Panels might improve communications with users” (Paterson, 2011, 94). An earlier evaluation of Urban Design Review in Edinburgh was produced by Dawson and Higgins (2009), but largely focussed on the skills of the planning officers responsible for building development approvals, and how advice from the Review Panels enables them to make more informed decisions.

Despite strong advocacy for quality urban design outcomes in Australia and New Zealand (Ministry for the Environment, 2005; Commonwealth of Australia, 2011), there are very few evaluations of the Urban Design Review process and outcomes. An evaluation by the Auckland Council (2012b) usefully tracked Review Panel advice on eight case study development applications, to the implementation of actual design changes. The advice offered covered the following issues in descending order of frequency: façade design as seen from public streets; relationship to street and permeability; parking, traffic and landscape strategies; safety, pedestrian movement and building entrances; and building height. These issues encompass recognisable urban design principles that impact on the public realm. The Auckland Council also produced a promotional book on Urban Design Review, based on interviews with a range of stakeholders (Wood, 2014), but while expounding the values of good urban design, does not provide an objective evaluation of the process.

Noting “a lack of empirical research...that engages with how the building industry stakeholders experience and view the use of design review panels and design guides”, Moore et al (2015) produced a comprehensive evaluation for the Australian context. They interviewed building industry stakeholders in Melbourne and Sydney to understand the valued they saw in ‘best practice’ design guides and the use of Urban Design Review Panels. Responses varied according to stakeholder roles. Developers expressed the view Urban Design Reviews “generally a beneficial process because developers were able to receive expert advice”. Moreover, developers saw the process acting as a “double check over the design and provided them with more direction”. For architects, there view “gave their good design wider industry support and helped them find better outcomes on challenging development sites”, and for local authorities the review “ensured a higher quality of design outcome, particularly relating to design elements of the space around buildings”. Notwithstanding the positive comments, they nevertheless conclude that “further research is required to qualify the benefits of good design outcomes” (Moore et al, 2015).

Building on this research, we interviewed panellists serving on Urban Design Review Panels in Auckland, the Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC), and Cockburn City, Perth. This extends the study by Moore et al (2015) in the following ways. Firstly, the focus is on interviews with review panellists, and thus provides a different perspective to that of Moore, et al (2015) who interviewed developers and city officials. Secondly, it considers Urban Design Review related to master planned contexts.

## 5 Urban Design Review Panels composition and interviews

The Review Panels in Auckland are managed the City Council, and composed from representatives nominated by the professions of architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture, and the Property Council of New Zealand. The Council also has discretion to directly appoint panellists, such as those with urban design qualifications and knowledge. Review Panels appointed by the QLDC for the towns of Queenstown and Wanaka are composed in a similar way, except for the inclusion of a community representative. Cockburn Central is a 12ha master planned town centre development, centred on a railway station within the City of Cockburn, 23 km south of central Perth. The Urban Design Review Panel was created as part of the master planning process related to the construction of the a town centre involving a development agency partnership between the City and the State Government. The panellists are appointed by the development agency to represent key stakeholders, and includes architects and landscape architects. Here Design Review of commercial development on parcels of land is a mandatory statutory requirement.

Table 1 summarises the terms of reference used for Design Reviews in the three jurisdictions, and criteria that trigger a Review. In the case of Auckland and the QLDC only a small proportion of all development proposal are subject to Review<sup>2</sup>. Given its mandatory status in Cockburn Central, all proposals are reviewed.

Panellists were randomly invited for interviews from lists provided by Council staff in Auckland and the QLDC, and for Cockburn Central all current Panellists were invited, along with the development agency staff involved. Of 22Panellists invited, 21 responded and were interviewed. They are listed in table 2 below by profession.

**Table 2: Professional grouping of interviewees**

Panel City	Professional Grouping						Total
	Architects	Urban Planners	Landscape Architects	Property Developers	Urban Designers	Community members	
<b>Auckland</b>	2	1	2	1	0	0	6
<b>Queenstown</b>	5	0	1	0	1	1	8
<b>Cockburn Central</b>	5	2	0	0	0	0	7
<b>Total overall</b>	12	3	3	1	1	1	21

We aimed to ensure that professional backgrounds were aligned with their distribution across the Panel pools, to understand any differences of views expressed. Among those interviewed, architects had the largest representation, followed by urban planners and landscape architects, and distinctive to Queenstown, the community representative. Face-to-face interviews followed the non-standardised approach of Davidson and To lich (2003). This allows for a semi-structured approach, with open-ended questions to guide the interviewees into the relevant areas related to the research, as Forester (1999, 22) argues, by letting the interviewee “tell their story”.

**Table 1: Terms of Reference and ‘Triggers’ for Panels in Auckland, Queenstown and Cockburn Central.**

Panel Location	Terms of Reference	Triggers for Assessment
<b>Auckland</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mix of land uses</li> <li>• Building and site layout</li> <li>• bulk and massing of built form</li> <li>• public and personal safety</li> <li>• relationship and contribution to the public realm and the existing built form</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant applications within Auckland’s CBD and waterfront</li> <li>• Any transformational project</li> <li>• Large development near or within a town centre</li> <li>• High rise apartment, office building or larger mixed use development</li> <li>• Large scale residential development over 20 units</li> <li>• Major infrastructure projects</li> <li>• Master plans for any new Greenfield or brown field developments</li> <li>• Any locally significant development which officers believe would benefit from design review</li> <li>• Major scale Council and CCO project over 5 million</li> </ul>
<b>Queenstown</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town &amp; Neighbourhood Context</li> <li>• Site Context</li> <li>• Landscape</li> <li>• Pedestrian Experience</li> <li>• Access</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Environmental Sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the applicant’s request</li> <li>• Capital projects lodged by the council</li> <li>• Council initiated and private plan changes where urban design is a relevant issue</li> <li>• Discretionary and non-complying development proposals in town centres</li> <li>• Discretionary and non-complying high density and comprehensive residential developments</li> <li>• Subdivisions which have the potential to significantly affect the quality of the urban amenity</li> </ul>
<b>Cockburn Central</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interface with public realm</li> <li>• Mix and diversity of land uses</li> <li>• Site and surrounding context</li> <li>• Active edges</li> <li>• Built form design</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Architectural character</li> <li>• Environmental preference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All development proposals</li> </ul>

Panellists were interviewed using set questions clustered around the following topics related to Design Review: method and scope; terms of reference; authority and advice; and enhancing the built environment. Interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were carried out at a place of the interviewee’s choosing by at least one of the researchers, audio recorded and under protocols approved by the of the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. The transcribed audio recordings were analysed using Narrative Analysis to discover the key themes (Wiles et al, 2005), and findings are presented below under the topics identified above.

## 6 Interview Results

Outcomes to our interviews with Panellists are set out under question headings identified above, and selected direct anonymous quotations are included in italics.

### 6.1 Method and Scope

The Auckland, Queenstown and Waneka Panels provide advice for large scale projects triggered by criteria summarised in Table 1. The Review process and advice is confidential and non-statutory, but the subsequent or parallel formal development approval process is publically discoverable. The confidential nature of the Auckland and QLDC Review process was considered an advantage because it allowed for robust discussion, something that one panellist thought “may not have been possible in an open forum”. For Cockburn Central, the review is a statutory requirement and open to public but as reported, there was little or no public interest in the meetings.

In Auckland, Queenstown and Waneka, most applications involve a single review, usefully at an early design stage, with some projects being reviewed twice. Some Panellists considered the single review to be deficient, because there was no check to see if advice was applied. In Cockburn Central there is a requirement for three reviews as the design evolves. The ability to comment at the early stage of design was strongly advocated because this enabled significant design improvements to the quality of the urban design outcome. As one respondent suggested, when a deficient design was highly resolved “your only option is to write a recommendation heavily criticising the proposal, which only get people’s backs up and achieves nothing really”.

Panellists saw the scope of their advice being related to the urban design context of the proposal, rather than focused on the building design. However, there was disagreement over where the ‘urban design’ ended and architecture began, and how far their examination should “get into the architecture”. Interestingly, while all interviewees saw their role as one of engaging with urban design issues, one interviewee believed only architects could undertake this task. However, most Panellists expressed a preference multi-disciplinary representation.

The Queenstown and Waneka Panels include a ‘lay’ community representation, but their impact on the Review was considered by many professional Panellists to be minimal. As one Panellist suggested, “what value can they really add?” without necessary professional skills. Others saw this more positively, and that “once they got skilled up they were adding a community perspective to the design conversation”.

## 6.2 Terms of Reference

All three Panels have established terms of reference (Table 1), but there was variable understanding of how they should be applied to the Review process and guide the advice given. Indeed, it became apparent that many Panellists in Auckland, Queenstown and Waneka had trouble outlining the basic parameters when asked. In part, this arises from the implicit ambiguity of having specific terms of reference while also considering the Panel to be ‘experts’ offering independent professional advice. In the case of Cockburn Central, however, there was a much clearer understanding that the Town Centre Design Guidelines served as a clear point of reference for the Review. A number of the Queenstown and Waneka Panellists believed that they only referenced the terms of reference “when there was interest from the council officers” to do so. All Panellists believed that the value of the Urban Design Review was the ability to offer advice as professional experts, notwithstanding the existence of terms of reference.

A number of Panellists suggested that professional background and status alone does not translate into being effective Panellists able to provide clear advice and that being successful “requires a different skill set and you could not design the project for them”. As expressed by another, “just in the same vein as being an art critic, you may not be an artist, but you sure know a lot about what is good art”. Lack of necessary skills to understand what makes a good urban outcome was also extended to perceived lack of skills on the part of developer’s architects, with one Panellist suggesting “there is a certain level of skill required to design a quality high density apartment which all architects don’t have”.

Finally, in response to a question on the role of Panels, all saw this as working towards some kind of public interest or public good to improve the quality of the built environment. However, when asked if the general public was aware of the role and purpose of the Urban Design Review process, the responses were negative. Moreover, interviewees held a view that there was also little public knowledge of the existence of such Panels.

## 6.3 Authority and advice

While all Panellists were positive about the purpose of the Review process and the advice they offered on development proposals, those in Auckland, Queenstown and Waneka were less sure about the extent to which their advice led to design modifications, or the extent to which these were taken into account when formal development approval was considered. This they perceived to be potentially undermining of the process, and required some form of monitoring and feedback. This did not emerge as an issue for Panellists in Cockburn Central, because of its statutory nature, and given that the process required appropriate response to the advice received. However, despite the Cockburn Central Panel requiring reference to the established urban design guidelines, there is still discretion to offer advice at variance with this, where the Panel is of a view that a better design outcome was being achieved.

As expressed by a Panellist, “you can throw away the rules if you can achieve a better design outcome” while another stated “this prevents the design process becoming a tick box exercise”. The merits and demerits of making Urban Design Review compulsory was raised with all interviewed Panellists, and received mixed responses. The majority believed a statutory provision would impact on the Panel’s independence in providing professional advice, and turn them into a decision-making body, and a few questioned if Panellists had the skills and training to do this. All of the Auckland, Queenstown and Waneka interviewees believed that the statutory planning process would undermine their ‘expert’ status, and discourage innovative design solutions. A minority of interviewees who supported a statutory approach believed this would be more effective in improving the quality of the built environment, as it would “place urban design at the forefront of the planning process”. However, those in support of a statutory approach did question how this would work in practice, and what their relationship to the formal development approval process might be.

#### **6.4 Enhancing the built environment**

All Panellists interviewed believe that Urban Design Review was making a difference and improving the quality of the built environment, and that the process had raised the design quality bar. There were differing degrees of support for this view, with the strongest support coming from the Cockburn Central and Auckland Panellists. The Cockburn Central interviewees felt that their three-stage mandatory review process is what led to a high quality of design outcomes. As one Panellist said, “we would not have achieved these outcomes without the design review process or leaving it to the market to deliver”. In the case of the Queenstown and Waneka, the perceived ad hoc use of Design Review and wavering commitment and support for the process by elected city councillors, was expressed as an area of concern.

The majority of interviewees acknowledged that Design Review was an incremental process and that it took time for the benefits to be seen in the built outcomes. As one Auckland Panellist stated, “the Panel has come along way since its beginning and has really raised the design quality in Auckland.” Another suggested that “applicants will always raise the quality of their proposals when they know it’s coming to the Panel”. A similar sentiment was also expressed by a number of the Cockburn Central Panellists, that “you can track the design quality through time, as we raised our standards once the town centre started to take off”.

### **7 Discussion**

A number of issues arise, from the interviews we conducted among urban design panellists and from the review of other evaluation of the Urban Design Review process cited above. These issues are discussed under emerging themes, the first of which concerns the scope of the review, and a related issue concerning the expertise of Panellists. The terms of reference for the three Panels considered are essentially focussed on urban design issues arising from the development – such as street relationships, positions of entrances, and impact on the surroundings including the materiality of the architecture. But as Panellists interviewed observed, there was some disagreement on ‘boundaries’ between urban design and ‘architecture’, although all agreed that Panellists (as built environment ‘experts’) should be free to offer advice beyond any defined scope or terms of reference.

The issue of scope intersects with the matter of Panel expertise, and how they are constituted. Australian and New Zealand Panels follow the CABA practice of appointing “expert practitioners with current experience in design and development” (Design Council, 2013, 6; London, 2012; Wood, 2014). If the point of focus is on urban design issues, questions were raised about the compositions of Panels. Architects dominate all three of the Panels investigated in this study, and this is the same as that found in the UK by Paterson (2007), and in Edinburgh (Dawson and Higgins, 2009). Noteworthy from our findings is that very few Panellists identified as ‘urban designers’, and that urban planners are in a minority. Also characteristic of the New Zealand Panels is the composition based on nomination by the relevant built environment professions. Our interviewees commented that not all Panellists (irrespective of background) are able to provide helpful advice.

If Panellists are intended to be ‘experts’ in urban design with sufficient skill to communicate useful advice, the particular profession they represent may not be relevant. However, such a view is countered by Patterson (2015, 100) who reports that some UK Panellists (mostly planners) considered that there was an “insufficient balance of interests/professions on the Panels”, a view supported by Moore et al(2015), that Panels must have a “sufficient range of independent expertise”. We concur with the view that there is value in the independence of the review process as a Panel of built environment experts, and that professional expertise need not be linked to specific professions, but balanced with multi-disciplinary representation.

Another key theme emerging is what criteria are, or should be, deployed by Panels when giving advice? Despite the existence of clear terms of reference for all three Panels investigated, many Panellists were not aware of them, and others expressed the need for clearer criteria. Others argued that as an 'expert' professional Panel, fixed criteria may be unnecessary, if not an obstacle to innovative solutions is being supported. These issues parallel those found in the UK by Patterson (2011, 101) where a "majority of Panels use no criteria, preferring to reply on the value of experience alone". Moore et al's (2015) study is important because it also probed the extent to which Panels use design guidelines as points of reference in giving advice, an approach finding support in the development sector. But as Moore et al (2015) also points out, urban design Guidelines and Design Reviews serve different aims. As they argue, the former lifts "the bottom of the market and ensuing consistent minimum standards" while Urban Design Review offers an "understanding of the nuances presented by each development site...which remain within the general design intent scope". This suggests that the two approaches serve different purposes, a distinction also made by Carmona (2016) citing George's (1997) differentiation between first and second order urban design processes. The second order relates to the higher-level urban design principles that provide a framework for the first order design of buildings in that context. Carmona (2016, 724) extends this distinction by arguing that design governance operates in two ways: in an indirect form focussed on broader (second order) decision making frameworks within which better quality design outcomes are encouraged, supported by tools such as design guidelines, and direct methods (first order) intervention concerned with site specific issues. Although operating within a continuum of land use decision making (Carmona, 2016), Urban Design Review within this conceptualisation operates as a first order, direct form of design governance intervention. Exploring these relationships suggests a fruitful area for further research.

Where master plans prevail (such as in Cockburn Central), they provide a framework of urban design principles, as a context in which buildings are designed. In this case, the urban design review process involves checking for consistency with the framework, but also engaging with the design proposals as a Panel of built environment experts, who are able to offer independent advice as they do in more general development contexts (such as those in Auckland, Queenstown and Wanaka).

The final theme concerns a key question put to Panellist's interviewed: does urban design review enhance the quality of the built environment? Overwhelming, the answer given was positive and that it did result in improved built environment outcomes. This finding is consistent with other studies that extend to include the perspectives of developers, and local authority staff responsible for making decisions on development application (Dawson and Higgins, 2009; Peterson, 2011; Moore, et al, 2015). Despite this positive view of Urban Design Review outcomes, Panellists interviewed expressed concern about not being sure that the advice given was applied to the design following the Review, or if this was taken into account when proposals were considered for approval. Similar concerns were found by Patterson (2011) in their UK study where better monitoring of outcomes and feedback to Panellist was suggested.

Despite these consistent positive views about the value of the Urban Design Review process, the question about what evidence exists to demonstrate that such Review leads to improved built environment outcomes, remains largely unanswered. Moreover, given the insistence on the part of Panellists interviewed that Urban Design Review serves a public interest, there is no verification of this from a public perspective. Answers to these questions require a broader framework. As revealed from our interviews of Panellists in New Zealand, only a small proportion of development applications are subject to Review, and the situation is similar elsewhere. This is a reasonable approach, given that a great number of development applications will have little or no impact on the built environment (such as small scale building alterations). For this reason, cities have targeting those projects that are seen to have public interest, or are of sufficient scale to have an impact on the quality of the built environment. However, even among targeted projects, there is still little evidence that directly connects Urban Design Review to improvements in the built environment, apart from the very strong belief among stakeholders that it does.

We also asked Panellists interviewed whose interest Urban Design Review served, and overwhelmingly the answer was the 'public', although equally they acknowledged that there was no way in which they could judge if such an outcome was achieved.

Moreover, many expressed the view that the public generally were probably not aware of the existence or purpose of Urban Design Review. This mirrors Carmona's (2016, 720) comment that design governance is justified as an "apparitional public interest", although this may not be fully appreciated by a wider public. Moreover, as many of our interviewees pointed out, for Design Review to be effective, it also requires strong political support among elected officials, a point also underscored by Patterson (2011). While public understanding of Design Review may be deficient, the potential impact of development on the built environment does capture strong public interest. Indeed, strong public interest over perceived poor waterfront developments proposals in Auckland and Queenstown, gave rise to the establishment of Review systems in both these cities in the first place<sup>4</sup> (Wood, 2014). Given this strong public interest, cities promoting Urban Design Review could empower the process by better informing the public of its purpose and role. Also clear, is that the Review process requires strong and consistent political support to succeed.

Despite the above noted findings, evidence that demonstrates that Urban Design Review improved the built environment beyond what key stakeholders believe, remains a knowledge gap, a conclusion that Moore et al (2015) also come to in their Australian study. Such research requires an understanding of the contribution that Urban Design Review plays among other tools and changing development contexts. For example, in addition to Review, what part does the broader promotion of good urban design and design guides play in enhancing built environment outcomes? Moreover, in what way does the changing contexts in which development now occurs also contribute to better outcomes? This includes developers recognising that good design delivers economic benefits, and the different ways in which development procurement occurs, such as more cooperative partnerships between public and private stakeholders, and working more directly with communities.

Most current evaluations have focussed on the efficiency of the Design Review process, but what remains is a lack of evidence that connect more directly Urban Design Review processes to the enhancement of the built environment, and importantly, what part this plays among other enhancement tools.

## 8 Conclusions

Set in the context of design governance to achieve enhanced urban outcomes, we report on findings from interviews with Panellists serving on Design Review Panels in Auckland, Queenstown, Wanaka and Cockburn Central. Overwhelmingly, the Panellists interviewed hold the positive view that Design Review leads to an improvement of the built environment. These findings concur with other recent evaluations in Australia and the UK, where interviews with a wider range of stakeholders, including developers and city council officers responsible for development application approvals, also expressed positive outcomes for the built environment. Despite the positive views expressed by key stakeholders, there is little evidence to support the contention that the Design Review directly leads to an improvement of the built environment, other than the perceptions of key stakeholders. Given that Design Review is one of a number of tools, and that the development context is dynamic and changing, to understand the link between Design Review and the improvement of the built environment through the development approval process will also require an understanding of what role it plays among other tools and the complexities of the development context. Design Review for the greater part is a non-statutory process providing expert advice to the development sector, and being able to demonstrate that the direct and indirect costs involved are worthwhile suggests a focus for further research.

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## Notes

- 1 We use the term 'Urban Design Review' in this paper, commonly used in North America and New Zealand, while in the UK and Australia this is referred to as 'Design Review'. Both terms essentially refer to the same process and scope of interest to include advice on the building design and the impact on the associated public realm. For the sake of consistency, we refer to 'Urban Design Review' in this paper.
- 2 The Auckland Council Urban Design Panel Assistant and the Queenstown Lake District Council's Senior Planner indicated that the percentage of building applications subject to Urban Design Review is around one per cent of the total.

3 A Panellist interviewed in Queenstown explained how the proposed commercial development of the waterfront led to strong public interest, leading to the establishment by the QLDC of the Design Review system.

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