

# THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF DESIGN

JAMIE MACARTNEY

*Graduating from the BSCRIP in 2006, Jamie Macartney went back to work in New Zealand where he had spent a semester in 1994 with two classmates from CRP (see “Adventures in the Middle Kingdom” in Focus II, April 2005). He works as a planner and urban designer at Urbanism Plus in Auckland, one of New Zealand’s top planning/design firms, where he has been able to participate in several important projects (see also [www.urbanismplus.com](http://www.urbanismplus.com)).*

After graduating from college in June, 2006 I was faced with the age old question, “What to do now?” The choices seemed endless, unlike the end of high school when the choice was clear for most that the next four years would be spent in college. I studied abroad in the summer of 2004 in New Zealand and was itching to go back on a senior trip, but fell a little short in the funds department. My roommate and I decided to devise a plan that would allow us to get some work experience in the States before traveling to the South Pacific.

I researched Visas that would allow me to work odd jobs with little to no time commitments. New Zealand allows people between the ages of 18 and 30 a one-year visa (which can be extended) to live and work in the country.

An architecture firm I had previously worked for during school breaks in Southern California hired me for six months and put me on a team that handled large residential developments in Arizona. I worked under two planners that had extensive experience. The firm was mostly architects with a few planners scattered between different design teams.

## First Job

After a few months of working, I noticed that young planners were allowed to do a wider range of jobs than the architects of the same age. Most young architects could spend weeks doing “red-line” corrections on a set of plans that they had no part in designing, as opposed to the young planners that would work on mostly new projects. One aspect of residential subdivision design in California and Arizona, in my experience, was that getting the maximum yield efficiency (highest unit count) seemed to be an overriding consideration in design projects.

**Figure 1**

*Jamie in a recent photo.*



In my experiences with design training at Cal Poly, I was never given a piece of land and asked to max it out with as many homes as possible, but this felt like a reality that I had to deal with, working in the private sector. Classes at Cal Poly were more interested in Solar Gain, Neo-Traditional Development, Nodes, Edges, and things of that nature. In areas like California and Arizona, good urban design principles seemed to be fine as long as they help or at least don't hinder the overall business objective of a project. My immediate boss was an innovative designer and usually found ways to incorporate good principles as well as hit necessary unit counts. I learned that there is a delicate (and not always fair) balance between idealistic principles and the drivers of real world projects.

Due to my entry-level status/experience I was only asked to assist in a minimal amount of intellectual thinking during the design process. I found that, after six months of work, most of my time was spent as a part of a technical production line, utilizing programs such as AutoCAD and Photoshop --which, I should stress, are essential to anyone that wants to pursue a career in design. I was slowly gaining the knowledge to take a piece of land

and understand how a residential project could be developed; however, six months is not even close to enough time to comprehend the amount of thinking needed to understand the site design process. Within two weeks of finishing off my contract with the company, I was on a plane to New Zealand.

## New Zealand

New Zealand is located about 6,500 miles southwest of California, and is roughly the size of Colorado. The country is split between two main islands, and the total population is just over 4 million people, 2/3rds of which live on the North Island. I live in Auckland which is in the North Island and by far the largest city in the country with 1.3 million people. Auckland is known as the capital of the South Pacific because it contains more pacific islanders than any other city in the island region. New Zealanders are called Kiwis named after their national flightless bird. The two official languages are English and Maori, which is the language of the indigenous people that resided in New Zealand before Europeans arrived. The Maori word for New Zealand is Aotearoa which means 'Land of the Long White Cloud,' and is more than fitting for the climate. The Maori were said to have found Aotearoa around 800 A.D. in large ocean canoes they had been paddling throughout the South Pacific from eastern Polynesia

## Down Time

After arriving in the country I set about relaxing and readjusting to life outside of the United States. I thought that I would be able to spend about 3 months just sitting around and taking small trips before I joined the workforce. I lasted 2 weeks before I began to feel kind of worthless because this was the first time in my life that I could literally "hang out" and not do much for an entire year. During summer breaks from school there was always that feeling that in three months I would be back into a routine, and after college it was only a matter of time before I had to get a real job and start life. Now I was delaying that real life part for at least another year.

Setting up my curriculum vitae (CV) took a bit of time because the format seems to change from country to country. In the States I learned that it is best to keep a resume to one page when applying to jobs directly out of college, but in New Zealand the graduate CV is usually about 3-4 pages and can even include a self portrait. I had no real idea of which firms to apply at so I decided to spend a few days on the internet and hope that something would catch my eye. I found that the best way to get a company's attention was to first email my CV and then call the next day to make sure that it reached the correct people. After about three days, I had setup half a dozen interviews at various firms in the city.

## Job Application Process

I decided against applying for jobs in the public sector because I wanted a chance to partake in the initial design process as opposed to reviewing designs that had already gone through countless

**Figure 2**

*A general view of the city of Auckland and the downtown.  
(photo by the author)*



iterations (I later found the public sector does in fact lead some of New Zealand's biggest design schemes). Most of the companies that I interviewed with were architecture firms that were being pushed over into urban design by market demands. These firms had planners, but they would specifically deal with report writing or the statutory approval processes (both land-use and building)-not urban design. Since most of these firms were looking to start urban design teams, they were interested in a designer with extensive experience that would be able to run a team, which obviously put me out of the running because I was a recent graduate.

### **Planning vs. Urban Design**

During the interview process I realized that the definitions of a "planner" in the States and in New Zealand were different. In California, everyone in the planning and design field is usually referred to as a "planner." In New Zealand planners tend to specifically deal with the process and urban designers specifically deal with the outcomes. I also realized that the field of urban design in New Zealand was relatively young in comparison to the States. Most aspects of land subdivision in New Zealand seemed to be designed by surveyors and engineers with occasional architectural input. For this reason, planners in New Zealand were much more accustomed to engaging with others' designs through the statutory approval process as opposed to actually participating in creating a new design.

One of the main reasons that urban design come onto the scene later in New Zealand than in the States is because of the way land development has occurred. Until recently, low-density development patterns have flourished because of the abundance of available vacant land (and resultant low cost). As the country continues to grow and people are forced to live in closer proximity to one another, there has been more of a need for cohesive, integrated design and planning. In 2004, the Local Government Act was released, introducing an explicit directive towards sustainable development and strategic planning.

The most important statute that governs land development in New Zealand is the Resource Management Act (RMA), which is used to regulate access to natural and physical resources. Its underlying intention or goal is "sustainable management," which is different from "sustainable development." Introduced in 1991 and subsequently amended every few years, it replaced various previous legislation such as the Town and Country Planning Act and numerous individual documents dealing with specific issues, such as land use zonings. In order to develop land in New Zealand, people must abide by the RMA. Since its introduction, the RMA has proved to be relatively controversial, as its ambiguity affects both interpretation and implementation. I learned that a major part of good design is being able to realistically deliver it, so understanding the RMA is paramount in the design process within New Zealand.

### **Urbanismplus**

I finally found a firm of just under ten people that dealt specifically with urban design. The company is called Urbanismplus and is run by Kobus Mentz, a Zimbabwean urban designer/planner. There were two other designers when I arrived: Brad, a senior designer from South Africa, and Rodrigo, an associate designer from Chile. The remaining employees were all planners/designers from New Zealand with various graduate and post graduate qualifications. I began to realize that most of the Urban Designers in the country were foreign because Urban Design was still in its infancy stages in New Zealand. I later found that there were three different types of people that would call themselves "Urban Designers" in New Zealand:

- New Zealanders with a background in architecture, planning, or landscape architecture that have slowly moved into the field.
- International people who spent most of their time in planning but knew enough about design to get by as an urban designer in New Zealand based on the general lack of experience present in the specific field.
- Qualified urban designers, overwhelmingly foreign, that had experience and credentials in the design and development process, and could do more than produce quality renderings.

Most urban design companies in New Zealand have evolved from architectural, engineering, and or landscape architectural firms, which means that they usually have a biased outlook on urban design in general. Urbanismplus is one of the few companies that has dealt with only urban design from its conception, not having evolved from another type of development field. Kobus came to New Zealand 13 years prior to myself from the UK and began working as one of the country's original "qualified" urban designers. Kobus thus far has lived and worked on three different continents, and has an abundance of experience from both the UK and South Africa. I soon knew that I was in for the apprenticeship of my life working under someone with as much knowledge as Kobus.

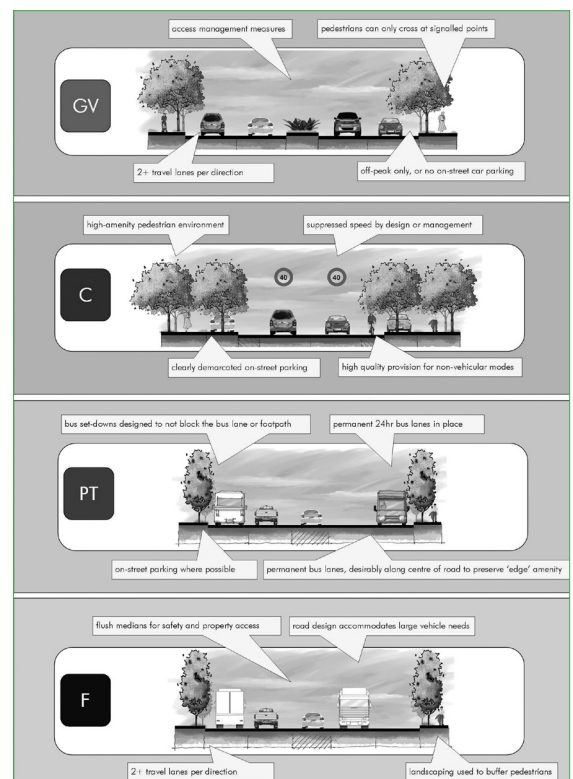
Urbanismplus has fewer than 10 people, and in a such a small company every employee is able to partake in the planning, design, and business sides of projects. In the States, most of the major companies are so large that there are entire departments dedicated to very specific facets of the job, and most entry-level personnel don't venture passed their job title. In less than one year, as an "urban planner," I was able to: write proposals, planning documents, fee schedules, design projects that dealt with a number of different land uses and spatial scales (not only residential or commercial); partake in facilitation of public workshops; manage my own projects; and bill clients. Another major difference from working at a larger firm is that Urbanismplus was strictly a value-based company. Meaning that all the projects and outputs of the company were done in accordance with a stringent set of principles that were uncompromising. This even entailed refusing projects that would cause a concession of our values. Over time, this has created a positive reputation for the company, putting out work only of the highest caliber, and has proved to be a good business model seeing that developers and cities alike want the approval stamp of Urbanismplus on their projects.

I will take many experiences away from my time in New Zealand, but there are a few that are particularly worth noting:

### Livable Arterials

- A strategic arterial street management for the next 30 years in Auckland City.
- Considerable pressure has been and will continue to be placed on the arterial network.
- Conventional approaches of merely widening the street cause a sterilization of the edges needed for employment, social contact, and other critical functions.

**Figure 3**  
*Illustration of the Livable Arterials project; Auckland, New Zealand. (used with permission from Urbanismplus)*





- Every kilometer of arterial streets was measured and analyzed to differentiate amenities (jobs, hospitals, parks, and so on).
- Not enough space to cater all is available; therefore, prioritization must be given.
- The process used urban design principles to develop a methodology to manage tension where different user groups exist, compete with, or complement one another.
- Four key emphases were developed: community, passenger transport, general vehicle, and freight.
- Every arterial was given an emphasis which was either brought about by necessity, desirability, or a compromise between different user groups.
- This project is now being implemented and is setting the tone for integrated transport and land use planning in the wider Auckland Region and New Zealand.

### Rugby World Cup (RWC)

- The RWC is the third most watched sporting event in the world right behind the Soccer World Cup and the Olympics.
- In 2011, the RWC will be coming to New Zealand many of the important games (one of which is the RWC final) will be held at the Eden Park Stadium in Auckland.
- The RWC will place significant pressures on the Auckland region (especially on the movement system) with a large influx of both domestic and international fans.
- Questions arose about possibly fast-tracking major transportation projects in the area, which would have come to fruition at some point anyway, that would benefit both the RWC fans and the city's greater transport needs.
- This project innovatively used urban design's emphasis on inclusive, integrated thinking in the context of strategic, leveraged transport projects.

**Figure 4**  
Urban design plan for  
the Eden Park Stadium;  
Auckland, New Zealand.  
(used with permission  
from Urbanismplus)



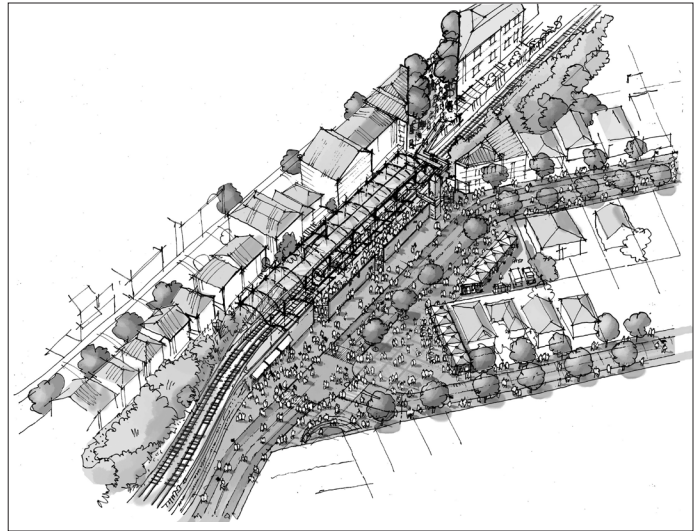
- The project developed in understanding of every aspect of the event, including transport interests taking into account long and short term growth, land use, community, open space, and other aspirations.
- It identified a range of transport initiatives that, if leveraged off the RWC, would offer substantial strategic advantages for Auckland residents not just in terms of transport efficiencies, but wider city development objectives. These include the re-designing of road and passenger transport infrastructure, as well as detailed street design upgrades. All of these are designed to maximize not only the efficiency

of transport at the RWC, but the overall advantage of the event to the City including economic capture and “spend,” legacy built environmental betterment, and presentation of the city to a potential global audience in the billions of people.

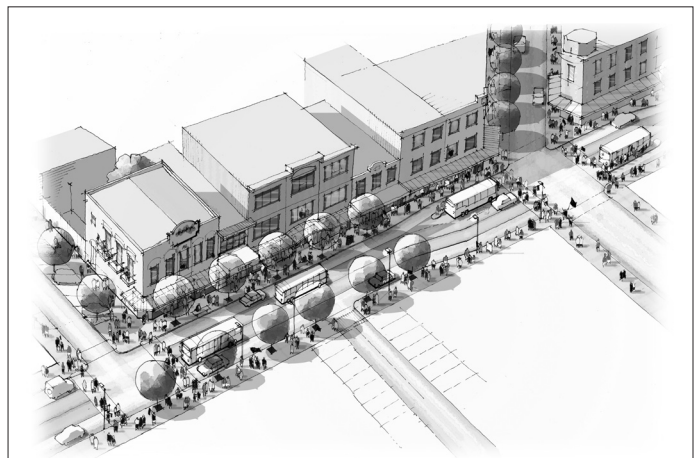
- At a simplistic level the project uses urban design to answer: (1) Where are we? (2) Where do we want to be? and (3) How can the RWC be an opportunity to help us move towards our goals?

### Preston Downs

- Preston Downs is a proposed sustainable subdivision project located in West Melton, a settlement located approximately 20 km south west of Christchurch, New Zealand.
- The project seeks to provide 290 residential lots at various densities with the intention of providing an array of housing typologies to enable a demographically varied community.
- The development pattern has been undertaken in a manner that is integrated to offer the best possible end outcome, by encompassing blue (water), green (open spaces), community, and cultural components.
- The project integrate and future-proof development aspirations of surrounding sites.
- Large areas of open space are provided, both to offer amenity for higher density housing and to act as storm water run-off areas.
- The street layout has been designed in a manner that maximizes solar gain through appropriate lot orientation.
- Reserve and open space areas have been designed to be low maintenance with high ecological value. This is to reduce the carbon footprint of the project and offset ongoing maintenance associated with traditional mown lawn areas
- Roads and reserves provide key view shafts to surrounding landscape features, both locally (key landscape features such as trees) and regionally (Southern Alps).
- Large external lots have been provided for both character reasons and to buffer the project to surrounding properties with greater landscaping opportunities.
- Provision has been made for a new community site and an array of exercise facilities throughout the development to encourage community use and interaction opportunities.



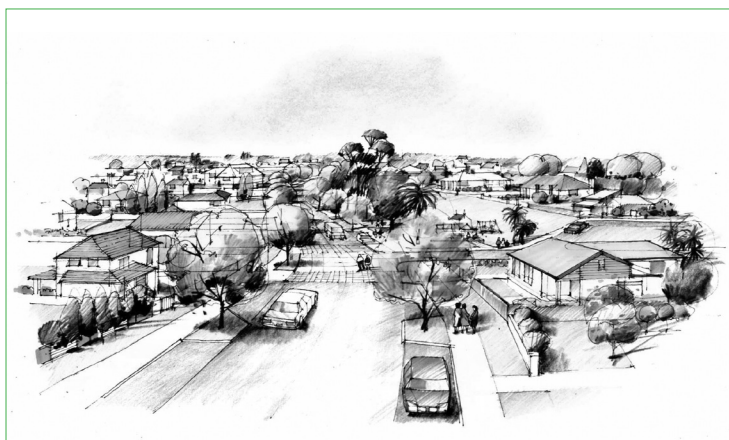
**Figure 5**  
The rail station for Eden Park Stadium; Auckland, New Zealand. (used with permission from Urbanismplus)



**Figure 6**  
A street in the Eden Park Stadium area; Auckland, New Zealand. (used with permission from Urbanismplus)

## Final Thought

Upon entering Cal Poly, I struggled to define urban planning and was unsure if this was the correct path for the next phase of my life. After college I was still undecided if I wanted to pursue a career in a field which I really of which could not fully understand the intricacies and terminology. Now it's been seven years and I have worked on different sides of the world. I still have yet to generate a definition, but each year I learn new things and with new experiences comes a greater understanding. I have come to the realization that the day I define "urban planning" will be the day that I no longer want to be in this field, because I will no longer be striving to learn.



**Figures 7 a, b & c**  
*Preston Downs residential development;  
Christchurch, New Zealand.  
(used with permission from Urbanismplus).*

