The Origins of Urban Sprawl in New Zealand

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This paper locates the origins of New Zealand’s low-density urban settlement pattern or sprawl in capitalist social relations and the cultural practices of the first settlers during the 1840s and 1850s. While the grid plans of towns conveyed notions of order and regularity, the commercial imperative to maximise the profit-making potential of urban land created an uneven and sprawling settlement pattern. Settlers’ ambition for homeownership and preference for a stand-alone dwelling on its own section further reinforced the low-density urbanism and challenged metropolitan conventions about what constituted a town. Meanwhile, the primacy given to private property rights created an aesthetically diverse built environment that reflected the individualist ethos of settler society. These three attributes: low-density settlement, the stand-alone dwelling, and an eclectic built environment have defined New Zealand’s cities ever since. The paper suggests that present urban consolidation debates need to be better historically contextualised to acknowledge that urban sprawl has long been central to most New Zealanders’ sense of place and wellbeing. Future cities can be denser but still reference the best aspects of sprawl.

Introduction

During early 2010s urban planning assumed an importance in Auckland public discourse not seen since its council’s proposal to pump the city’s untreated sewerage straight into the Hauraki Gulf in the 1950s. (Bush, 1971, pp434-37) This time the issue was the City Council’s Draft Unitary Plan and its proposal to limit urban sprawl by promoting urban consolidation, specifically by allowing higher housing densities within existing boundaries and restricting new suburbs at the city’s edge. Many Aucklanders were alarmed by the proposal and feared if it went ahead medium- or high-rise apartment blocks would overshadow their suburban villas and bungalows. Critics argued urban consolidation was unnecessary. ‘It’s not what Aucklanders want,’ asserted planning consultant Phil McDermott. There was still plenty of space for the city to expand towards the north and south, he
claimed. But Mayor Len Brown was unrepentant. He said he had no time for urban sprawl and ‘all the global data’ showed urban consolidation was the best way forward for Auckland. (ONE News, 2013)

What has been striking about the debate so far is the extent to which it is has been devoid of historical context. There was general recognition of the importance of the stand-alone house on a quarter-acre suburban section in defining New Zealand urban life, but little discussion about why this is the case or how it came to pass. Whereas the urban consolidationists argue this ideal has had its day and its time more city dwellers embraced modern European- and Asian-style apartment living, their opponents argue the ideal continues to resonate with most New Zealanders and is still how they want to live. This paper is an attempt to fill in some of the missing context and so begin to explain why is low-density living is so deeply embedded in the New Zealand psyche.

A capitalist enterprise

As in most other 19th century settler societies New Zealand towns were products of capitalist social relations. The Edward Gibbon Wakefield-backed New Zealand Company founded four (Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin) of New Zealand’s five colonial cities. The Company’s primary motivation was to expand its business interests and turn a profit. (Broad, 1892, p3) The fundamental commodity was land: buying it cheaply from its Maori owners and selling it at an inflated price to investors and colonists, the difference being used to fund settlements and deliver a return. As with other British colonising ventures since the 17th century land was sold as a package comprising a small town allotment and a large country allotment. The scheme’s “bait”, as historian Michael Turnbull idiomatically put it, was the town plot. (Turnbull, 1959, p18) Urban land was more densely settled than rural land and so commanded higher prices; early buyers could therefore expect to make substantial gains on the unearned increment. This prospect attracted both settlers and absentee investors to buy into Wakefield’s ventures. Accordingly, all the land packages for the Company’s first settlement (Wellington) went on the London market in mid-1839 were quickly picked up. (Burns, 1989, pp106-07) Buyers were more than willing to gamble on unbought and unseen plots of land on the basis of a potential huge return on an imaginary city; the Company came away with a very tangible £100,000 return. In contrast, land in Auckland was sold on-site rather than in London and at auction rather than for a fixed price. The sales process followed the Australian pattern where town and country lands were sold separately to limit supply and inflate prices. The first 116 town allotments were sold in April 1841, attracting speculators from around the country and Australia. The expectation had been that land would sell for between £120-£250 per acre, but in the end the sales total reached £24,275 17 s 9 d, or an average of £595 per acre, putting Auckland’s land prices on par with those in London and Liverpool. (Terry, 1843, pp131-39) Governor Hobson was delighted.

The Grid Plan

A pivotal tool in the capitalist production of colonial space was the grid plan. All of New Zealand’s colonial towns were laid out on grids of various combinations. The grid had many abstract attributes that commended it to town founders. It was simple to survey and lay out; imposed instant order on the landscape (turning ‘topography into geometry’); could be extended at a future date (it was future-orientated), and enabled space to be easily commodified (a rectangular plot could be subdivided exactly in two, and two again). (Short, 2006, p10) Moreover, as Giselle Byrnes has pointed
out, the grid ‘was useful in translating the land into a blueprint for colonisation’. (Byrnes, 2001, p57)

Once the land was geometrically configured those living on it, including indigenous populations, could be brought into line too. On the other hand, the grid was criticised for its monotonous form and ignoring the contours of the land; survey lines ran over hills rather than around them, making for some very steep streets. (Brown-May, 1998, pp9-10).

It is worth briefly examining the grid plans of three cities – Wellington, Auckland, and Christchurch – because they underscore, to employ Lefebvrian spatial theory, how conceived spaces of planners resulted in perceived spaces that privileged capitalist social relations. Wellington was the first town to be laid out, in 1840. The New Zealand Company surveyor, William Mein Smith, had been told to

make ample reserves for all public purposes; such as a cemetery, a market-place, wharfage, and probable public buildings, a botanical garden, a park and extensive boulevards. It is, indeed, desirable that the whole outside of the town, inland, should be separated from the country sections by a broad belt of land which you will declare that the company intends to public property, on condition that no buildings be ever erected upon it. (New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator, 21 Aug 1839, p3)

The brief providing for public infrastructure like buildings, boulevards and parks was typical of the British Grand Model. More unusual was the inclusion of a green- or town-belt. (Home, 1997, p14) It had first been implemented in Colonel William Light’s 1837 plan for Adelaide, where parklands for public recreation encircled the town. In an age where modern cities lacked recreational space and pollutants often cast a poisonous pall, the reserves were intended as places of healthy retreat and reinvigoration. A further motivation was to maintain town land values by creating a barrier to urban sprawl. Smith’s plan comprised a matrix of small, interconnected grids so placed to maximise the use of level land. (Wakefield, 1955, p149) Missing was the promised public space. As with their counterparts in other settler societies, Wellington’s settler capitalists thought giving prime urban land over to public use was a waste of a profit-making resource; the marketplace, park and extensive boulevards were never built.

Surveyor General Felton Mathew was the creator of Auckland’s plan. Mathew made some attempt to accommodate the lie of the land by placing a circus on the summit of Rangipuke (Albert Park), from which ran a series of quadrants and crescents. (These elements had become fashionable in the 18th century Neo-Renaissance town planning tradition, of which John Wood the Elder’s plan for Bath was an exemplar.) Over the rest of the town he applied a standard grid plan, its uniformity relieved only by the provision of two public squares on Hobson Street. Accordingly, the plan shows a town of two halves: a curvilinear eastern half and a linear western half. It is an awkward arrangement that makes little attempt to link the government and commercial sides of the town. We can only surmise this was deliberate. In referencing the gracious circuses and crescents of Bath, the government side carried a cultural cache that the other side lacked; it was probably Mathew’s way of signalling the primacy of government over commerce in the settlement. Reaction to the plan ranged from bemusement to outright hostility. Alexander Majoribanks explained how it ‘was designed apparently for a magnificent metropolis, one fourth of it being covered with what appears to be a spider’s web, consisting of circular streets, circuses, crescents, and an infinite number of radiations.’ (Majoribanks, 1846, p41) Critics lambasted it for departing from the proven economic benefits of the grid. In the end Mathew’s grand design was undone by commercial imperatives which, as in Wellington, had no
tolerance for amenities like public squares (the Hobson Street squares came to nought) let alone artifices like circuses and crescents. When the navvies began their work only a few threads of Mathew’s cobweb were etched into the landscape.

Joseph Thomas laid down Christchurch’s grid in 1850. Its unrelenting geometry is relieved only by the meander of the Otakaro River and two diagonal streets, which were to connect the town to Ferry Road and Papanui Bush respectively. Still, the plan had generous provision for public reserves and squares. This included the 165-hectare Hagley Park, a large central square (Cathedral Square), two smaller squares (Cranmer and Latimer Squares), and a spacious market place (Victoria Square). Collective sentiment was ostensibly stronger in Christchurch than in the other towns because all its reserves were realized; its city builders were apparently willing forgo short-term capital gain for long-term public benefit. There was at least one unexpected element to the plan: it was half its promised 1,000-acre size. This was because land orders were undersubscribed and demand could be met within a reduced footprint. (Lyttelton Times, 11 Nov 1854, p2) To make up the difference another 500 acres of town reserve land was laid out in a belt surrounding three sides of the settlement – the fourth side was Hagley Park. This became a land bank the Association could progressively sell, at urban prices, as Christchurch expanded and demand for new town sections increased. (Morrison, 1948, pp13-14) Thomas still delivered the requisite 1,000 allotments by cutting their size from a half to a quarter-acre. The quarter-acre section was to become the archetypal residential allotment in New Zealand towns and cities.

The three examples underscore how town plans were central to the production of urban space. Although planners included ample provision for public space like squares and parks, these were sacrificed to commercial imperatives. Only Christchurch succeeded in bucking the trend in a significant way. The legacy of this beginning was that Auckland and Wellington, in particular, lacked organized public space to foster civic life – a deficit late 20th century planners tried to overcome through council provision of little urban parks and civic squares.

These were not the only consequences. The tendency of absentee and long-term investors to sit on their land and wait for its value to rise meant the task of developing urban infrastructure fell on settler communities. As early as 1842 the unfairness of this burden led Wellington capitalists to call for absentee landowners to contribute to its cost. ‘You absentes’, protested one landowner, ‘are content to sit by the fire-side and speculate upon the advance which will take place … at our expense.’ (Letters, 1843, pp23-24) The complainant suggested British absenteeees form a loan and trust company to help fund public infrastructure – as had happened in Adelaide – but the proposal found no sponsor, leaving the settler community to continue to shoulder the expense. Settler capitalists in Nelson considered absenteeism ‘the evil of new settlements.’ (Nelson Examiner, 7 May 1842, p34) Essentially the absentee landowners were sleeping investors, who provided start up capital but played no active role, mirroring the arrangements in other capitalist enterprises. Still, the alternative of a highly centralised town-founding model in the Grand Manner would have placed constraints on private property rights and hence individual wealth creation. Settlers might grumble about sacrifices they made that benefitted others, but few doubted the capitalist model was the best way to deliver prosperity.
An ill-defined sprawl

The prevalence of speculators in New Zealand towns helped to shape its early urbanism. This included an irregular and dispersed settlement pattern. Rather than a continuous line of buildings along uniform streets, townscapes were characterised by single or clusters of buildings with intervening empty spaces. The order promised by the grid was missing; instead towns had a muddled, haphazard appearance. (Terry, 1843, p143) Conversely, the necessity of short-term speculators for quick capital gain encouraged the subdivision of land into tiny allotments serviced by narrow lanes. These were then sold or leased to mechanics and labourers. Having observed this process in Auckland, one critic warned in 1842 of future slums. ‘Miserable lanes will usurp the place of streets, blind alleys will be as common as Deptford … and hovels will be packed as closely as St Giles.’ (Land', 1842, p1) It proved prophetic. Only 25 years later the congested Chancery Lane and neighbouring alleys had become the city’s slum.

Colonial urbanism

Even so, low-density urbanism remained the norm. This is highlighted in a panoramic view of Christchurch taken by Dr Alfred Barker from the tower of the new completed Canterbury Provincial Council Buildings, circa 1859. It shows the extent of the town and highlights the low-density and sprawling nature of early New Zealand urbanism, characterised by built-up areas – in this case along Colombo Street between Armagh and Gloucester streets and at the western end of High Street – with either empty space or small groups of buildings in between. Some condemned the settlement pattern. In 1853 the travel writer Warren Adams described Christchurch’s ‘straggling and irregular’ appearance as ‘decidedly ugly’ and proclaimed the more compact Lyttelton far prettier. Adams, 1853, p33) Others were more complimentary. William Parr told his brother that Christchurch was ‘well laid out with good wide streets, some of them without any houses in. But you must not think it a small town. There are somewhere about 400 houses and some of them very nice ones too.’ (Parr, 1859) Yet the straggling nature of towns raised logistical issues, not least of which was their defence. A government official examining how towns might be secured against Maori attack concluded that that the manner in which they had been built made their ‘defence impossible’. He continued: ‘Houses, generally of weatherboards, are as built as wide apart, and scattered over as great an extent of open land, as is compatible with their being considered collection of dwellings (in other words, a town or village) at all.’ (‘Further’, 1863, p. 8) Whereas European towns were usually tightly built up, and traditionally contained within defensive walls, the sprawling, haphazard expanse of New Zealand urbanism defied traditional expectations of what a town constituted.

New Zealand’s sprawling urbanism followed that of Australia’s. In laying out Sydney in 1788 Governor Phillip promoted the stand-alone house on an individual section and a cultivated garden. The garden was often an important element in household economies, allowing families to self-provision with fresh vegetables and fruit and so gain a degree of independence. Hobart too was characterised by single houses on their own plots with gardens. As one historian has observed, ‘Australia’s founders anticipated a sprawl of homes and gardens rather than a clumping of terraces and alleys.’ (Davison, 1995, p43) New Zealand was quick to follow the same path. In 1842 a Wellington printer recorded how ‘[e]very person seems to have an inclination to build houses and fence in their ground … Brick and wooden houses are springing up on ground that appeared deserted; gardens fenced in and cultivated.’ (Letters, 1842, p8) Historians have located the origins of
this settlement pattern in the countryside. Erik Olssen has written: ‘The ubiquity of the owner-occupied single-unit house on its own often quite large section transposed into the urban environment the possibilities for independence once assumed to be the exclusive preserve of yeoman farmers.’ (Olssen, 2011, p253) Within this paradigm the colonial town can be viewed as a web of small smallholdings and an overt expression of anti-urban sentiment. It was certainly a refutation of the cheek by jowl urbanism that characterised large European towns and cities, where most buildings were packed together and sections or plots were either non-existent or small. It was also a rebuff to the class-defined housing typology of urban Britain: row and tenement housing for workers, terrace or semi-detached housing for the middle classes, and stand-alone villas on suburban plots for the capitalist elite. (Toomath, 1996, p73) Further, by the time of New Zealand’s colonisation row and tenement housing was becoming associated with the overcrowding and squalor of industrial city slums, giving them an Old World taint that few wanted replicated in the New. Aside from a few examples of row and terrace housing in Christchurch and Dunedin, medium-density housing was virtually unknown in New Zealand until the early 20th century. This aspect was to differentiate New Zealand’s cities from their Australian counterparts, whose larger populations and the need to be within walking distance of city workplaces generated higher inner city housing densities, leading to streets of terrace housing in places like Sydney and Melbourne. Yet opposition to aspects of metropolitan urbanism did not necessarily make colonial society anti-urban. Rather it signalled an ambition to create more spacious and modern cities that would offer most settlers a better quality of life than in Britain. Understood this way, the single-unit house on its own section referenced the suburban villas, in parkland settings, of London and Manchester’s emerging capitalist elite.

The reality was that New Zealand developed a hybrid urbanism, incorporating both country and city elements. The large section with a fecund garden referenced the self-provisioning smallholder; the higher population density suggested the propinquity and the sociability of big city life. We would now refer to this morphology as suburban, but in New Zealand the term originally referred to smallholding size allotments on town peripheries, as in Nelson and Dunedin. Urban was the town. Yet the sprawling and shapeless nature of colonial towns showed that ‘urban’ had different meanings in colonial New Zealand from what it had in Britain.

**Homeownership**

This included homeownership. Official data on city housing tenure was not collected in New Zealand until the 1916 Census so it’s difficult to ascertain the extent to which city dwellers owned their own home. But qualitative evidence suggests the proportion was significantly higher than in Britain where less than ten per cent of homes were owner occupied. (Olssen, 2011, p.312 and Dennis, 1986, p142) Within Victorian society homeownership was equated with greater level of independence and respectability than renting. Before universal male suffrage house ownership conferred the right to vote, increasing the owner’s social status and self-respect and lessening the obligation of deference. As historians have noted the prospect of homeownership was a strong factor in the decision of working people to emigrate. Graeme Davison has written: “the only real prospect of freehold ownership for most British working men was in the colonies.” He notes that Australian immigrant letters home often spoke of the desire for homeownership, its association with independence, and to their success in realising it. (Davison, 2000, p9) This was true for many New Zealand immigrants
too, among them Dunedin resident J. F. Blackwood, his wife Elizabeth and their four children. In a letter home to his parents in 1861 the general hand spoke of his success in building his Maitland Street home:

We have now got into out own new house. It has been a strugle [sic] to get it up but we are now into it at a cost of upwards of Seventy £. That is one of the great comforts of a Colonist that altho [sic] the life be a little rugged you have your own dwelling and piece of Ground a thing almost out of the power of any working man in the home country. (Blackwood, 1861)

Blackwood acknowledges it had taken some effort to get his house up, but this was outweighed by his sense of achievement of owning his own home and section, something he recognises was beyond him back in Scotland. That he and his family moved into his own home only four years after arriving in New Zealand highlights the importance some working class settlers placed on becoming owner-occupiers. If the pervasiveness of homeownership and the move to a common housing type in New Zealand was a nod in the direction of New World egalitarianism it did not negate the importance of class-consciousness. Working people might rightly luxuriate in the fact they lived in a stand-alone house on its own plot with a garden, but they also knew the larger house with the more spacious garden further up the street usually belonged to people who were above them in the social hierarchy. It was a feature of colonial urbanism that rich and poor often lived in the same streets. Spatial segregation became more pronounced in the 20th century with increased suburbanisation.

**Eclecticism**

The last defining feature of colonial urbanism was its eclecticism. Rather than streets of buildings of a similar design and/or scale, as was common in European cities, buildings in New Zealand’s streets were a hotchpotch of different heights and designs. As early as 1842 Wellington was described as a scattered village of 1,100 town acres ‘on which everyone has built as suited his tastes and means.’ *(Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, 12 Jul 1842, p. 2)* A decade later, George Earp observed of Auckland that ‘[u]niformity in the town has been set at defiance, ever one building according to his means or fancy.’ *(Earp, 1852, p48)* William Swainson agreed and asserted ‘the only approach to uniformity is in the material: with a few exceptions, all are of wood.’ *(New Zealander, 12 May 1852, p3)* The eclecticism was a result of the laissez-faire political economy of New World societies, which promoted individualism and the primacy of private property rights. Accordingly, property owners were largely free to construct what they liked, the size and style of buildings reflecting their wealth, power and aesthetic taste. So in contrast to the standardized British row house or the common building style of cities like Bath, which conveyed collective urban identities, the divergent sizes and designs of houses and buildings in urban New Zealand expressed the diverse identities of their owners. Even in residential streets, houses of a common style were often distinguished by different architectural treatments or additions. Few were exactly alike. Twentieth century critics were to condemn this aspect of New Zealand’s urbanism. For instance, in 1947 the Modernist architect Ernst Plischke characterised the New Zealand town as ‘a haphazard collection of all sorts of buildings and most of the styles of the last two thousand years...strung along a road, without regard to the size of character of the neighbouring buildings or the appearance of the street.’ *(Plishke, 1947, p. 52)* Such criticism eventually led to controls on the size and bulk of buildings but largely stopping short of regulating for style. To restrict property owners from constructing a building of their own image would have rubbed against the cultural grain.
Interestingly, in 2012 the government Productivity Commission identified the predominance of bespoke houses as an important element in making New Zealand houses among the most expensive to build in the world. Even new homebuyers who chose a dwelling from a building company pattern book often made changes to the design to reflect their individual needs and taste. (*Dominion Post*, 27 Oct 2012, p. A2)

**Conclusion**

From this brief survey, we can see that capitalist social relations and settlers’ cultural practices were instrumental in shaping New Zealand’s early urbanism. It was characterised by three main elements: a sprawling, ill-defined settlement pattern, stand-alone cottages on their own sections (many of which were owner-occupied), and a stylistically eclectic built environment. This template became ubiquitous in New Zealand’s colonial towns and cities thereafter, underscoring how ‘being urban’ was redefined in the colonial context.

So if sprawl characterised New Zealand urbanism from the beginning is urban consolidation too great a change to be accepted by most New Zealanders? I don’t want to debate the merits or otherwise of urban consolidation other than to say I’m generally supportive of it, but it seems to me that proponents of consolidation have often underestimated how far sprawl is embedded in the national psyche. The opportunity to live in a stand-alone house on its own plot of ground has long been central to New Zealanders’ sense of place and wellbeing. In fact, a 2011 international survey about the hopes and fears of people aged 18-35 revealed the greatest fear among the New Zealand cohort was the prospect of living in a city apartment. The reason given for the fear was that it would limit their access to outdoor pursuits. New Zealand was unique among the 20 countries in the survey in raising apartment living as a fear, underscoring the cultural importance of low-density living arrangements to most New Zealanders. (Hallet, 2011) There is a degree of arrogance in the argument that city dwellers will flock to apartment living because ‘all the global data’ supports it and what is good for the city is ultimately good for them. While many of them will take to high- or low-rise apartment living, many more will want to remain grounded and connected to the soil. Developing a new urbanism that allows for this while also reigning in the worst effects of sprawl is a pivotal challenge for city builders in the 21st century.

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