Six rules for housing design in the city

Practice | Words David Turner

Unitec lecturer David Turner says, “The more we build at higher densities the more these rules will be self-evident, and the sooner the market will recognise the differences between good housing…and the rest.”

Dr David Turner is a lecturer at the Unitec School of Architecture who has been teaching and practicing architecture in the UK and New Zealand for over 30 years. In addition to developing courses on environmentally sustainable construction, design economics and urban planning, he runs two elective courses on urban housing design. Here, he shares six things he thinks can set higher-density housing projects up for longevity and liveability.

Almost every discussion of housing amongst architects turns to a critique of design priorities in the speculative market – the product of an industry that supplies two-thirds or more of all housing in cities in New Zealand and Australia. These conversations become a litany of complaints about architecture-free house-building in the suburbs with their decoration-only louvres, their south-facing picture windows, their garages in the sunniest spot on the plan, and always the front door embellishments that provide “street appeal”.

Setting our conversations in context, we live in a world threatened by short-termism, architectural commodification, and celebrity politicians; we are engulfed by credible evidence of climate and environmental disaster, but these projects still see environmental issues as a low priority. New state and non-profit housing is often good unpretentious architecture, and some top-end private sector developments are very good, but the mass of housing for sale is cringeworthy from every point of view.

As a way to re-inform our approach to housing we would be wise to look more closely at the best overseas examples, particularly those that by longevity demonstrate real sustainability. Better than the housing we’re littering our cities with in New Zealand (and Australia), and better than the pseudo-historical pastiche dominating new housing in the United Kingdom.

What does design of housing involve for architects? And in what way does higher density housing differ from the suburban paradigm?

The idea that housing design can be trained into anyone with a good computer is a misconception. Housing involves drawing together multiple levels of knowledge and creativity – the ability to think simultaneously about space and function at several

IIS PAGE ...ıst manipulate the ...ɔs inside the house,
conceived as an individual part of an assembled whole.

This article proposes a short list of six design principles that are relevant to higher-density projects when the occupant-user is not known to the architect: the anonymous condition, the briefing vacuum, the design space in which predicting, guessing, and making abstract decisions, however thoughtful the approach, is the un-dodge-able circumstance of the architect.

Firstly, the house needs to provide:

1. A sense of **meaning of home**, represented symbolically: a place somewhere in the house that can be identified as the centre; a place of entry that defines private and secure occupation where we can choose to be separate from others; and a sense of identity. A house requires identity regardless of the status – tenant or owner – of the occupier.

2. **Adequate space** and equipment for cleaning, washing, maintaining, storing, protecting, acquiring, making, and disposing – providing practical solutions that answer every question raised by observable domestic routines. These ordinary functions of a house, well-planned, confirm the sense of house as a home.

3. To provide for **a car**, which is still a practical (in the short term) answer to mobility in low density New Zealand cities despite its clear contradictions in relation to the climate crisis. The car offers personal independence. A minimum level of car provision is necessary until other changes occur with the coming of electric cars, bikes, autonomous busses, and robo-cars – the technologies that will transform urban transportation.

Beyond the interior life of the house, there needs to be:

4. **Place identity**, or a design-based concept of 'place', expressed in sufficient detail or by sufficient spatial force to be readily identified by others. For New Zealand's city housing, there is an essential element of making reference to the natural landscape in a definition of place. Peter Beavan's Thorndon Mews in Wellington is an example of a place that registers in the conscious mind. The Maori world-view summarised in the Te Aranga Principles of a cultural landscape understands this definition in a spiritual combination of whakapapa – place names, and taiao, the connection to the natural environment.

5. **Group composition**, or the challenge of manipulating design to provide individuality within the mass, without neglecting the importance of the group as the over-riding architectural identity. This is a problematic area for a housing culture rooted in extreme suburban fragmentation. The purpose and value of composition is best illustrated by, (again) Thorndon Mews, or in Auckland, Andrew Patterson's group in Vermont Street, and the early phases of the Beaumont Quarter development by Studio Pacific Architecture. These are all schemes that establish a strong and coherent sense of composed building mass. None are the product of the mechanical copy-paste methods of computers.

6. More attention to **performance standards**, revisiting the assumption that meeting New Zealand Building Code standards is sufficient, when we know they are inadequate. Again, Te Aranga Principles can contribute. These include the ecologically-oriented concept of mauri, or environmental health, the response to the life essence of the wider "site" – to the air, the ground and the water. Our building practices need to be governed by respect for the relationship of house to its environment.

The context of urban housing is a design field formed by regulation, but also by theory rooted in precedent and experience. It is troubling that research studies show

IIS PAGE

…andards. The medium and …ell-being are measurable, as Philippa Howden-Chapman's research has demonstrated many times.

The familiar but lazy argument that buyers won't pay the extra cost of better quality is a feeble defence, particularly when the rest of the world is moving towards increasingly high standards.

The issue of context raises a seventh point, that of density. Density is complex, and much argued over in housing design theory. Leaving these sometimes arcane debates aside, housing designers need to know the basic rules of density: what is implicit at different points on the density scale for the relationship of house to public space, of house to car, interior space to private external space, and to achievable standards of privacy. In short, what constitutes amenity, and what can be realised by good design.

Good housing design is not accidental: it can always be read as an architect's understanding of the choices made and worked for in these key areas. Similar densities but different solutions are a characteristic of urban housing projects, sometimes the consequence of cost constraints but more often, where high standards are absent, the result of insufficient knowledge of the rules – in particular, those influenced or governed by density. The more we build at higher densities the more these rules will be self-evident, and the sooner the market will recognise the differences between good housing – housing as a durable investment as well as a liveable environment – and the rest.

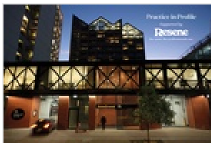
Words David Turner

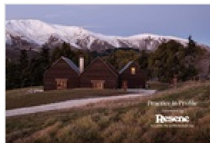
Posted 22 Aug 2019

Tags Housing, Practice

More practice

More ›

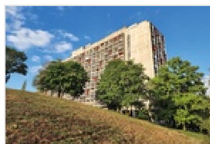

Genius loci


The beauty is in the detail

Revisiting the Aaltos

Haumi ē! Hui ē! Tāiki ē! Becoming great ancestors

Ashton Mitchell supports students of architecture at the University of Auckland

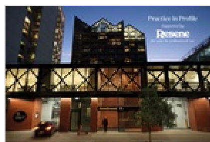

An artist and an architect return to Europe

The Shape of mid-density to come

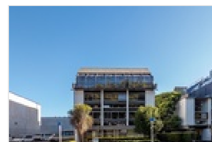
Pattersons

Most read

John Scott's Werry Francis House on the market


Genius loci

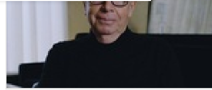
Exhibition on lost Athfield-designed church


Open Chch: Warren and Mahoney's early work opens to public

IIS PAGE

Co-what?: Alternative housing models

Wellington Architecture Awards 2023: Shortlist revealed


2023 Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate announced

Menopause: Taboo turned hot topic

Get the best delivered to your inbox

Your email address

SUBMIT

Follow us

Facebook
Twitter
RSS
Mobile site

AGM Publishing Limited

About us
Advertise
Contact
Contributors
Privacy policy
Terms of use

Copyright © 2023 AGM A Division of BCI Central