

Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects Position Paper
REPLACEMENT PLAN CHANGE FOR PROPOSED PLAN CHANGE 78 - INTENSIFICATION

TITLE: Smarter Density for Auckland's Future

Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects
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Auckland is at a pivotal moment in its planning for growth. The current decision before Auckland Council– whether to continue with Plan Change 78 (PC78) or to withdraw and replace it with an updated intensification plan – will shape the city's housing, infrastructure and liveability for decades to come.

The Institute supports a replacement plan. We believe it better aligns with the realities Auckland faces: the urgent need to build more homes in the right places, the necessity of stronger natural hazard protections, and the opportunity to create a more affordable, sustainable, and resilient city. While public conversations often focus on fears of blanket high-rises, what is really at stake is how we can achieve the right balance of density and housing types. A replacement plan provides a chance to deliver a mix of housing types and scales that add up to smarter, more liveable neighbourhoods.

Our position builds on recent submissions to the Governments' [Going for Housing Growth](#) programme and our long-standing advocacy for smarter density, affordability, and quality design. We urge Auckland Council to adopt a replacement plan that strengthens resilience while enabling compact growth that is affordable, well-designed and future-ready.

Building in Before Building Out

The starting point for any credible housing plan must be a commitment to “build-in first.” Auckland already has enormous untapped housing capacity within its urban footprint. By intensifying in areas with transport, social and services infrastructure, we can deliver more housing at lower long-term cost to ratepayers and communities.

Peripheral sprawl is not only expensive to service, it also risks entrenching car dependency, higher carbon emissions, and fragmented neighbourhoods. Rates and maintenance costs for outlying developments far exceed the revenue they generate, leaving Councils and communities to bear the long-term burden. Compact growth, by contrast, leverages existing investment in services and social infrastructure, roads and public transport. It is the more affordable and sustainable path forward.

We also recognise that heritage protection is a consideration. Heritage protections need to be reviewed with a balanced lens, as not every pre-1940 villa can or should be preserved untouched. Safeguards should focus on what is genuinely significant, while allowing intensification where it makes sense – particularly around town centres, rapid transit and jobs.

PC78 has significant issues as written. Not only does it permit blanket three-storey development, including in flood zones, it also falls short of providing the level of density Auckland needs to meet demand. The replacement plan offers the chance to correct these weaknesses by enabling higher densities where they make sense – around centres, rapid transit and jobs – while embedding stronger hazard provisions that ensure resilience and public safety.

Smarter Density, Not Just More Density

Auckland has long struggled with a ‘fear of heights’. While most international cities consider mid- to high-rise housing around transit centres to be normal, Auckland has been more timid in adopting this model. Only 8% of New Zealanders live in apartments, compared with an OECD average of around 35% – a stark reminder of how far behind we lag in embracing higher-density living. This adds weight to the need for a bolder yet context-sensitive approach that emphasises good design over simple height limits.

There is a misconception in the public debate that intensification means every street will become lined with 15-storey towers, but this is not the case. Not all existing housing stock or precincts warrant blanket protection, and overly rigid rules can block much-needed homes. A more balanced approach is to protect what is genuinely significant, while enabling adaptive reuse and sensitive integration of heritage into higher-density neighbourhoods. Auckland will benefit from a balanced mix of housing typologies that create density in ways appropriate to different contexts and social situations.

Apartments have a clear role near transit hubs and centres, where they can deliver scale and affordability. But they are only part of the picture. Terraced townhouses, duplexes, and perimeter block housing provide medium-density options that integrate seamlessly into existing suburbs. Partitioning existing houses and adaptive reuse of underutilised commercial buildings can deliver new homes quickly and affordably with lower carbon impact and minimal disruption.

International examples illustrate this well. [Vancouver’s planning framework](#) – often called ‘Vancouverism’ – combines vertical living with adaptive reuse and generous open space. It shows how higher-density neighbourhoods can be liveable and resilient when design and placemaking are prioritised. Auckland’s current policy reforms and government directives to increase housing stock

specifically around CRL stations align closely with this model, which ties infrastructure investment to enabling urban density and mixed-use development.



Artist's impressions of Vancouver's planning framework in action

Leveraging international transit-oriented development models like Vancouver's can help ensure Auckland's densification maximises its major public transport investments and delivers housing capacity where it's most justified. It is worth noting that in Canada, developments are encouraged to step back after six storeys before rising into slender point towers, maintaining light, sightlines and street-level amenity while accommodating significantly more housing supply.

In addition to apartments, there is also a role for other housing typologies to improve density and contribute to thriving communities. The plan also recognises a mix of medium-scale and low-impact approaches: townhouses and terrace housing can be delivered quickly and at scale, bridging the gap between apartments and standalone homes while fitting neatly into existing suburbs.

[Carlsberg City in Copenhagen](#) offers another example of density designed for liveability. Its perimeter block housing model creates narrow streets and enclosed courtyards that are adjusted to maximise sunlight, airflow and community space. Buildings step in height to draw daylight into courtyards and streets, with rooftop terraces and mixed residential and commercial uses integrated at ground level. This approach shows how compact, human-scaled urban form can deliver substantial density while supporting strong neighbourhood character and quality of life.



Carlsberg City Masterplan, Copenhagen, C.F. Moeller

These typologies can be further optimised through the use of zero lot lines, enabling development across multiple properties. There is also potential to adapt existing houses by partitioning larger homes and/or adding backyard infill dwellings. These solutions offer cost-effective, low-disruption options that make better use of established land and infrastructure. Together, they provide a flexible, affordable and efficient pathway to increase housing supply while preserving neighbourhood character.

We are working closely with others in the sector to show how this can be achieved. [Patrick Kelly's Bluefields model](#) demonstrates how state housing areas can be incrementally redeveloped to deliver more homes while retaining community character. By pairing gentle density with fast-track approvals for compliant dwellings, excluding heritage or sensitive sites from blanket intensification, and prioritising shared green space, good orientation, and landscape retention, the Bluefields model delivers more choice for both homeowners and tenants. It is a clear example of how New Zealand could enable high-quality, medium-density housing that works for people and place.

The award-winning Pocket Houses show how compact, affordable dwellings can be added to suburban sites, maximising land use and affordability. They also demonstrate that small-scale homes, when well designed, can be highly liveable – offering comfort, amenity and community connection all with a modest footprint comparable to a two-car garage.



Pocket Houses at Avenue Road, Ōtāhuhu, Dorrington Atcheson Architects. Images: Simon Wilson

Community Lane in Avondale designed by Architectus for Kāinga Ora also shows what density done well looks like. On a site that once held 50 single-storey units, the project has delivered 236 apartments across six to eight storeys, carefully oriented around retained trees, communal courtyards and a new public lane. It demonstrates that higher density can be generous and dignified, providing affordable homes while strengthening social connection and liveability. Together, these examples show that density is not a blunt instrument, but a design-led and context-sensitive strategy that balances different housing modes to create better neighbourhoods.



Community Lane in Avondale, Architectus. Images: Simon Devitt

Master Planning and Community Engagement

One of the most important lessons from past planning is that blanket rules do not deliver nuanced, place-based outcomes. The replacement plan must be supported by strong master planning and community engagement to ensure new housing is integrated with transport, green spaces, schools and amenities.

Well-prepared precinct and neighbourhood plans give certainty to both developers and residents. They reduce conflict by addressing design, infrastructure and urban form issues early, and they enable communities to see how growth will benefit them. Master planning ensures that density supports liveability, not undermines it.

Effective master planning also requires working in genuine partnership with tangata whenua. All zoning and urban development proposals should be explicitly aligned with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and viewed through a te ao Māori lens. This means genuine partnership with iwi and hapū in decision-making, safeguarding Māori interests in land, housing and cultural infrastructure, and ensuring Māori voices shape the planning and implementation of growth areas. Embedding mātauranga Māori and iwi-led perspectives in growth areas will ensure planning decisions reflect kaitiakitanga, cultural identity, and long-term resilience.

As world renowned architect and urbanist Jan Gehl famously said, *"First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works."* This principle reminds us that successful urban environments must begin with people and their needs – not only regulations and buildings.

Good density requires well thought-out design. There is a real opportunity for Auckland Council to draw on the expertise of professional bodies such as The Institute, ensuring design leadership is embedded in precinct and neighbourhood planning. Our members work across communities, infrastructure and housing, and are ready to support the Council and planners to ensure design leadership is embedded in precinct and neighbourhood planning. By bringing practical expertise and a collaborative approach, they can help translate growth targets into liveable, resilient communities.

Why This Matters

This debate is not just about meeting housing targets. It is about what kind of city Auckland will be in 30 years. Without smarter density, we risk higher housing costs, fragmented communities, and worsening climate and infrastructure challenges. With a design-led, compact growth approach,

Auckland can both maintain its special character and become more affordable, more resilient, and more vibrant.

International and local experience shows that early collaboration across the housing and urban development system adds long-term value – reducing risk, improving affordability, and creating neighbourhoods that endure. From architects and planners to builders, engineers, developers, tangata whenua, iwi partners and local communities, everyone has a role to play in coordinating complexity, managing risk, and focusing on whole-of-life outcomes. Strengthening this collaboration will ensure that every public dollar and private investment delivers the best possible return for communities.

Conclusion

Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects urges Auckland Council to adopt the replacement for Plan Change 78. The replacement plan is an opportunity to:

- Enable more homes and amenity in the right places – compact, transit-oriented, and affordable.
- Embed stronger hazard protections in flood zones, to improve resilience and safeguard people and communities.
- Promote a mix of housing typologies – from apartments to townhouses to incremental infill – that respond to context and changing societal needs.
- Integrate growth with master planning and community engagement, ensuring density supports walkability and liveability.

The Council's decision is about creating a city that future generations will be proud to call home. The Institute stands ready to work with Auckland Council, Government, tangata whenua and communities to deliver smarter density and more affordable housing for Tāmaki Makaurau.