

NEIGHBOURHOODS FOR LIFE

A lot of time and money is spent making our homes liveable, but more thought needs to go into designing neighbourhoods that work well for all our population.

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The Lifetime Design Foundation of New Zealand recently announced that Generation Homes, Greenstone Group, GJ Gardiner (Rodney), CJ Davies Architect and Summerset Retirement Villages have become establishment members of the Foundation and are committed to building dwellings that work for the whole population. That means homes that provide for:

- families with young children moving safely in and out of their homes and environment
- older people successfully remaining at home as they age and being able to participate in their wider community
- people with disabilities finding useable and adaptable products so everyday life is made easier.

Waitakere City Council has also become an establishment member, reflecting a commitment to ensure that planning and consent processes support the building of lifetime design dwellings.

Lifetime design needed

A commitment to lifetime design cannot come soon enough. New Zealand homes have been notoriously poor in providing for people of all ages, stages and capacities. Older people and those with disabilities invest considerable amounts of money into modifying their homes to make them liveable. So, too, do all New Zealanders through the Health Vote and through ACC levies.

A significant proportion of public and private funding for house modifications is spent on basic adaptations (such as widening doors and installing wet area showers). Such modifications could more easily and cost-effectively be built into all new and renovated homes, as they are relatively expensive to do retrospectively. Householders complain that it

is often difficult to get modifications done in a timely manner and at an acceptable quality.

It is estimated that about one in five people in New Zealand has a disability. Most live in ordinary houses in ordinary neighbourhoods. Disability increases with age, and over half of older people report having one. The 2006 census reports 510,000 New Zealanders are aged 65 years or over. By 2061, Statistics New Zealand estimates that New Zealand will have 1.44 million older people. So as our population ages, more and more people are likely to have problems with mobility.

Hence developers and builders with foresight see lifetime design as a way of contributing to the value and functionality of New Zealand's housing stock into the future and getting a competitive edge in the market now.

Is changing our homes enough?

Clearly, the answer is no. The problem of poor neighbourhood environments is

recognised internationally as a major barrier to older people and those with temporary or ongoing disabilities. If people are to function well in their neighbourhoods, it is imperative they do not end up isolated in inaccessible homes because the neighbourhood's built environment is lacking.

Accessibility problems are not confined to older people. The proportion of the population with some impairment to mobility is likely to increase with higher survival rates for those with congenital impairment or impairment acquired through injury or illness. And any parent knows that managing the paraphernalia of babies and young children imposes real problems of mobility and accessibility.

Unsustainable neighbourhoods

Neighbourhoods that trap people into their homes are ones where:

- footpaths are not walkable
- roads are difficult or dangerous to cross →



Mixed uses like parks and outdoor cafés bring life to a neighbourhood. (Photo: Beacon Pathway Ltd.)

- shops, amenities and facilities are not located on easy and quick routes
- subdivisions have lots of cul-de-sacs
- steps and levels are introduced to 'add interest' to the streetscape without consideration for wheelchairs, prams, crutches or guide sticks
- vegetation and signage interrupt the walk space
- everything looks the same.

Such neighbourhoods make people car dependent and exclude those unable to drive – many disabled and older people and all children. Neighbourhoods such as these are not sustainable environmentally, socially or

economically and act against independence. They do not encourage the casual interactions on the street, in the shops and at the parks that are so necessary for people's social attachment and sense of place.

Neighbourhood Sustainability Framework

New Zealand is only now beginning to think about the sustainability of the neighbourhood built environment. The Neighbourhood Sustainability Framework being developed by Beacon Pathway Ltd provides tools to assess neighbourhood sustainability in relation to a specific goal and six domains (see Figure 1).

Some local authorities have started to develop specifications for accessible neighbourhoods. For instance, Waitakere City Council is part of the Beacon Pathway Ltd research consortium and has been an active participant in the development of the Neighbourhood Sustainability Framework. Manukau City Council has guidelines for disability-accessible streets and public spaces.

The Lifetime Design Foundation also sees itself as moving from house design to identifying the crucial conditions that need to be met for lifetime design at the neighbourhood level.

Neighbourhoods for life

In the United Kingdom, Oxford Brookes University has demonstrated that good neighbourhood design acts to keep older people functioning in their communities longer, more safely and with higher levels of independence (even older people with dementia). The latter lose the ability to easily 'read' outdoor environments, but outdoor environments can be developed to allow them to operate effectively. The key is:

- simple street layouts with gentle curves
 - T-junctions, not cul-de-sacs or crossroads
 - wide pavements made of 'plain, smooth' paving
 - buildings that act as markers by having a variety of architectural styles and features.
- 'Neighbourhoods for life' can be built. Like houses, accessible neighbourhoods are more likely to be achieved if they are well designed before they are built. Neighbourhoods, like dwellings, can be renovated, retrofitted and modified, but well designed neighbourhoods are more likely to be resilient and adaptable, and the cost of modification to meet changing needs is likely to be lower, if the built environment is designed to provide for the range of people that live in them. Like homes, neighbourhoods, too, need to meet the principles of lifetime design – usability, adaptability, accessibility, inclusion and lifetime value.

For further information, go to www.lifetimedesign.org.nz, www.beaconpathway.co.nz, www.chranz.co.nz or www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/be/oisd/sue/wise/. ■

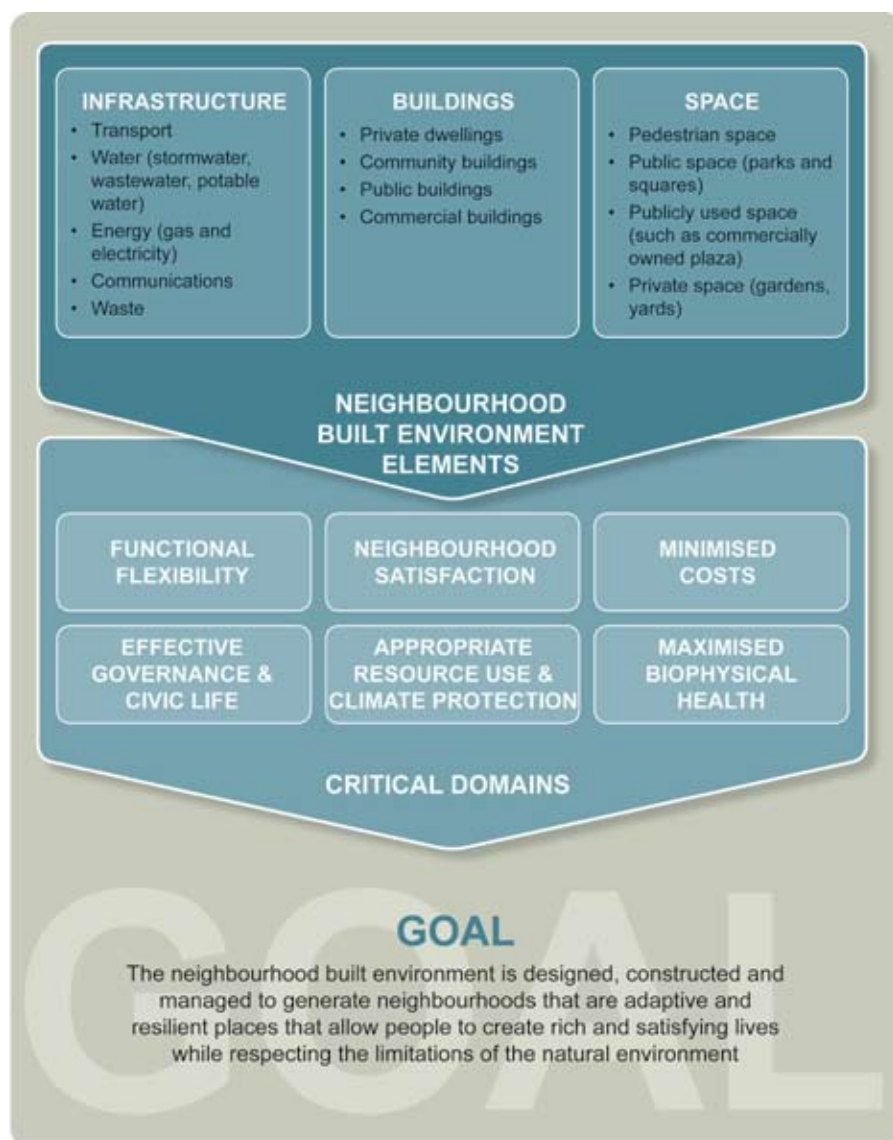


Figure 1: The Beacon Neighbourhood Sustainability Framework.