

Survival or Decline in Local Shopping: A Wellington Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Local shopping for daily needs used to be the normal part of city life. In the early 1900s shopping areas naturally evolved at the suburban end of the new tram routes, attracted by the heavy foot traffic, imitating the growth of the CBD at the other end of the route. Local shopping was also an integral part of the design of large post-war suburbs built around the single income, single car households of the era.

Confronted with addressing the need for liveable sustainable cities and assisting climate change initiatives, the advantages of local shopping are again becoming apparent. Many of the older shopping areas have continued to evolve so they are now functioning successful urban villages, while many of those centres created in the 1950s and 1960s are under-tenanted, dilapidated and are peripheral to local lives.

This paper examines local shopping in the Wellington (New Zealand) metropolitan area, especially in the interconnected Wellington, Lower Hutt and Porirua cities to identify reasons for the success or failure of their local centres. The examination first examined the type of shopping offered in each centre, the number of vacant tenancies or closed shops, and the overall condition of the shopping area. The analysis also examines the role of factors such as transport, underpinning policies, and urban renewal support in the success or failure of centre.

KEYWORDS: local shopping, urban change processes, transport, land use

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper has its base in the urban morphologist view of cities; that they are ongoing entities that are used, added to, and modified by the present inhabitants. Two writers appear very relevant to the New Zealand setting. *Vance (1990)* links many changes in form to the

dominant transport mode and its capabilities. With each change from walking only, then trams, rapid transit, and finally cars, cities have been able to expand in size. But the change is not just in size, but in the location within the city framework of the key activities of industry, commerce, retail, recreation, and residential living. *Whitehand (1987)* gives more emphasis to both the economic component and the intertwining of land use and land value. *Whitehand (1987)* identified urban expansion occurring in a series of surges, linked not just to population growth but requiring a catalyst such as favourable availability of credit which underpinned the boom in the building cycle. He identifies the building cycles for residential buildings, commerce, and government/institutional buildings as being both offset and differing in intensity, but that within a boom cycle the development occurs not just in the new areas usually at the periphery, but across the city as changes in land value either intensify or reprioritise its use.

Collectively these two approaches form a powerful image of a successful and sustainable city. Rather than being one era's concept of the perfect city which is then locked in place, it is a city which has got its transport right and around which the components exist in a dynamic economic relationship with change and modification being an ongoing process so that it meets the inhabitants' needs.

We have applied this morphologist approach to this study of the suburban retail of the four cities of the Wellington metropolitan region, examining the role of transport in their formation, how they have been influenced by change including changes in transport, and the extent that they have become locked in a previous era or have been able to modify so that they continue to form an important role for their suburb, but also examining how some distinct aspect of geography or special circumstances have helped change these areas.

The study is focused on the suburban retail and largely excludes the central Business District or Central Retail District of each of the four component cities.

2. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE WELLINGTON METROPOLITAN REGION

Figure 1 shows, in outline, the four main cities of the metropolitan area together with their major suburbs. A geography of high hills/mountains and valleys with a southwest to northeast orientation define the shape of the metropolitan area. Two arms extend northwards from Wellington City, the first linking to Porirua then onwards to a cluster of coastal settlements on the Kapiti Coast. The second arm extends to the northeast, linking to the two cities of the Hutt River valley, then linking to the towns of the Wairarapa region.

Although all areas have an extensive history of Maori settlement, their role as a series of interconnected and interdependent settlements begins with the development of the Wellington-Wairarapa railway in 1878, and the slower development of the Wellington-Manawatu railway in 1880 to 1895. However though these many small settlements were connected by a steam-powered railway, suburban life, as we understand it, did not occur until the tram era beginning in Wellington in 1901. Wellington's suburb grew in the period 1900 to 1930; Lower Hutt and Upper Hutt, mainly from 1930 to 1960 but with some ongoing formation of additional suburbs about 1975; and Porirua from about 1955 to 1975. After an approximately 15 year hiatus, growth of the region occurred as inner city living and infill in Wellington, in Wellington's northern suburbs centred on Johnsonville, west and north of Upper Hutt, in Porirua around the Pauatahanui Harbour and further north along

the Kapiti coast, and in the peri-urban as lifestyle blocks stretching up to 100 kilometres north and northwest of the Wellington Central Business District.

These different eras of suburban development give distinct differences in how the suburbs developed and function. Wellington's suburbs are tram-based and reflect private development around public infrastructure. The Hutt valley suburbs are railway-based and Government planned, but from 1960 onwards changed into car-oriented privately developed suburbs (as did Wellington's northern suburbs). The Porirua basin, though with a few private sector outer suburbs, was primarily developed with the era when one car per household was the norm, but its Government planners laid it out so as to "avoid" the emerging problems of car congestion becoming evident elsewhere.

2.1 Wellington's suburbs

Wellington's original layout occupied the flat land adjacent Lambton Harbour with a surrounding green space several hundred metres wide on the surrounding hills (the Town Belt). With walking being the dominant transport mode, the Town Belt formed a natural barrier to expansion so that by 1900, 40,000 people lived in this small city area; which was both overcrowded, and, because of poor infrastructure, unhealthy. The city amalgamated with the adjacent rural council and established a publicly funded electric tram network into the areas beyond the Town Belt.

Yet while the transport infrastructure was publicly funded, the land development around it was not. *Humphris (2003)* reports a high level of land speculation accompanying the planning and building stages, but what is important is that the suburbs and local streets developed as a natural fit to these tram route arterials, the tram route being often a dedicated route that linked the suburb to the Central Business District.

The experience of North America and Australia, with the formation of tram systems influencing urban form, was repeated in Wellington, and New Zealand in general. The high levels of foot traffic associated with both ends of the route initiated the formation of a genuine Central Business District and local retail at the suburban end. The formation of distinct suburbs was aided by Wellington's geography with hills and green space forming natural boundaries and defining local catchments for the suburban retail. Even now the Wellington suburbs are only semi-contiguous.

The frequency of the tram service (departing every 10 to 15 minutes) and the tram service speed into the Central Business District (journey time of 20 to 30 minutes) appears to have set up a good symbiotic relationship between city and suburb. People shopped in both places and while food dominated suburban shops, food was also frequently purchased by those working in town: *White (1970)* showed in the 1960s, 30 percent of food shopping was conducted in the Central Business District, and more than 75 percent of those shopping in suburban areas also visited the Central Business District at least once per week.

Stewart (2005) gives a photo essay showing the suburbs of Wellington both at present and historically, and showing the nature of these suburban areas. The shops are mainly two storey buildings, each with an individual style, with retail at ground and residential living behind and above. Shopping is often based around intersections but along the tram route, and clustered at 10 to 30 shops. The shops are contiguous with the residential area, and this proximity, together with the tram stops and residences above shops, maintained a presence in the area at

night time.

2.2 Hutt Valley

The Hutt Valley development as suburbs occurred within the 1930s to 1960s as a Government development around railway based suburbs but continued from 1960 to about 1975 as private sector, car-based suburbs. Housing shortages and poor quality housing prompted the new Government of 1935-1938 to initiate an extensive Government house building programme. These houses were not targeted at the poor but for the "working man and his family" so that the suburbs provided good access to employment and were developed to cater for families.

The railway had been earlier shifted from the western to the more extensive flat land on the eastern side of the valley. Suburbs centred on railway stations at approximately 1 mile spacing so that a station was within a walkable distance. Retail centres were created at Waterloo, Epuni, Taita, and Naenae with the Naenae suburb being the most extensively planned around the most modern thinking of the time of garden cities and pedestrian precincts. Not only was the retail pre-planned, built by the Government then sold onto the private sector sometimes via an initial lease period, but the suburb was established complete with its needed community facilities, of schools, libraries, medical centres, and community halls. These suburbs were in part dormitory suburbs for Wellington, particularly for Government and office workers or for workers for the industrial areas in Petone, or the Gracefield, Seaview area of Lower Hutt, but for the larger centres the rest of the residents' lives should be catered for by their suburb.

The form of the shops was single-storey with multiple tenancies within buildings with long frontages. The parking, community buildings and green space made them remote from residential areas, and this separation together with the absence of upstairs residences made these centres dead zones at night (and at weekends prior to weekend shopping deregulation in the early 1980s).

From about 1960 onwards, the Government's suburb building in the Hutt Valley slowed with the private sector developing the suburbs of Wainuiomata and the Western Hills. By this stage car ownership was at 1 per household and public transport use was falling by 30 to 50 percent relative to its 1950 patronage. Retail was changing away from businesses that owned their modest premises to larger shopping centres built and rented out by usually financial institutions. Suburban retail either comprised such a shopping centre if it was sufficiently self-contained or (for example, the Western Hills suburbs) with a very basic number of shops, with the expectation that residents would shop in the new shopping centres located within Lower Hutt or Wellington City.

2.3 Porirua

Porirua was developed substantially in the period 1950 to about 1975 via its four main suburbs of Titahi Bay, Porirua East, Canons Creek, and Waitangirua as a Government development. It was partly preceded by the private sector development of Tawa and was succeeded, as in the Hutt Valley, with private sector development of high income suburbs of Papakowhai and Whitby from 1970 to the present time. This discussion is limited to the Government development phase around those four suburbs and the commercial centre.

In contrast to the Hutt Valley suburbs which were designed and built individually these retail

areas were designed to be an integrated system. Daily needs would be met by local retail with shopping centres having a half-mile catchment and shop density being about 95 residents per shop. The main retail centre (CBD) would have only specialised shops and cater solely for higher level purchases and services. With this function it was irrelevant that the CBD was isolated from residential areas and was surrounded by either a motorway or railway on one side and green space or industrial warehouse land on the other side.

Both suburban and CBD were to be built according to a similar form which was responding to the emergent problems in established cities of traffic congestion within the retail areas and modal mix problems. Retail would be configured around open pedestrian precincts with the shops serviced by rear access. The retail island would be surrounded by either car parking so that the shopper was less than 100 metres from their car, or by public transport stops, primarily buses as the railway was more distance. Space and shopping in the CBD would be quality space and sufficient for the population expected 30 years later. Development that could not fit would therefore relocate to the suburban centres boosting their growth and trade. Suburban shopping was designed as multi-tenanted single storey buildings while multi-storey and office buildings would be encouraged in the CBD. Mechanisms were in place to assist businesses until the population grew to self-supporting levels. Ultimate private ownership but with mechanisms for the Government to capture the gains of growth were also in place.

3. 2008 FIELD STUDY

We undertook an observational field study (2008) of the suburban shopping centres, focussing on those in Wellington and also on those in planned suburbs established in about 1940-1960 in Porirua and Hutt Valley. The study excluded the Central Business Districts except in a general sense.

The assessments made in this study included the following:

- Indicators of potential failure such as vacant shops, shops with security bars, shops with roller doors for night time protection, and the presence or otherwise of extensive graffiti. Other indicators were out-of-character shops, for example a fire extinguisher shop in one shopping group.
- Indications of successful adaptation to changes that have occurred in retail, such as:
 - How well have supermarkets been incorporated?
 - The uptake of shops left vacant by nationwide trends, such as closure of many bank and post office branches, closure of small hardware and garden stores with the growth of mega stores for these goods, and butchery and grocery stores being absorbed by supermarkets.
 - Opening of new stores and the uptake of new facilities such as boutique suburban cinemas, cafes and restaurants, craft and artist studios.

3.1 Findings of study

Porirua:

Lane (1966) reported that the vision for Porirua of strong local retail for daily needs and a high level retail of goods in a Central Retail District was already encountering problems in the 1960s, with stores under pressure from the Central Retail District, and the probable overprovision of suburban shopping. This field study confirms this trend. The general trend is for there to be either vacant premises or for out-of-character uses such as mower repair or fire

extinguisher sales. Roller doors or bars on shops for night time security are reasonably prevalent. Of the four major suburban clusters planned, Titahi Bay, Canons Creek, Porirua East, and Waitangirua, only Waitangirua appears in total decline with extensive graffiti, the former supermarket boarded up and roller doors on an eclectic collection of remaining stores. The remaining centres were still functioning with a preponderance of shops such as take-out food or bottle stores. Associated small clusters (3 to 5 shops) that had been placed to provide close half-mile retail was similarly functioning but not thriving with vacant stores common.

Because Porirua had been planned as an integrated centre, the Central Business District needs mention. A large super mall containing food courts, cinemas, supermarkets and both large and small national retail chains had been added at one end weakening the original centre often so that these are now second level shops, such as second hand or budget stores (\$2 shops). Civic buildings, such as a court house, library, and museum, had been pushed further out, together with additional supermarkets and a large box retail centre created in the land originally intended for industry and warehousing. The consequence is that while the original concept of pedestrian precincts remains in part, the temptation is to either drive to the different sections of the town, or the original pedestrian precinct concept is negated by the need for pedestrians to negotiate the heavily trafficked roads originally planned as ring roads that now divide this retail and civic area into its disparate sections.

Lower Hutt

The main suburbs examined here are Taita, Naenae, Waterloo, and Wainuiomata; which are highly planned suburbs. For the first two the pattern is similar to that described for Porirua. The shopping centres are still functioning, but it is evident that the centres are marginal commercially. Vacant shops, roller doors, security bars, and graffiti are common, especially in Taita. Naenae is more functional but its marginal nature is evident. Both the cinema and largest store are vacant and there are a number of lower level shops such as \$2 shops and second hand shops. Overall the centre appears little changed from the time of construction. Some shops have been refurbished and are individually attractive, but the overall sense is that users drive up, purchase, then go. New retail uses, such as cafes, restaurants, artist studios, or boutique cinemas that would encourage a more lingering presence are not evident.

Wainuiomata is a little different comprising both a large covered mall with some vacant tenancies adjoining a pedestrian precinct typical of the 1960s era which is functioning well and has some new uses such as cafes. Elsewhere however, the small cluster shops originally supporting locations throughout Wainuiomata are in a similar condition to those described earlier for Titahi bay in Porirua; that is, vacant shops and marginal businesses with little renewal.

The Waterloo shopping area stands out in stark contrast. It appears vibrant and successful. There are a range of shops providing services other than food and a number of new uses of restaurant and a café, and there is evidence of people lingering in the area. It is notable that this retail area is much more contiguous with adjacent housing as well as being an area with residents of much higher incomes.

Over the period from 1950 to 2008, there has been a marked change to the Lower Hutt Central Business District. Multiple supermarkets, large scale warehouse retail, and a mega mall have been added to this main retail area. Interestingly it is those suburban centres closest to the Lower Hutt Central Business District rather than those more distance that are

functioning well and incorporating new uses for the retail infrastructure already in place.

Wellington

The suburban centres here were mainly in south and eastern suburbs, and included Miramar, Seatoun, Kilbirnie, Hataitai, Island bay, Newtown, Brooklyn, Karori, and Aro Valley. In contrast to the Porirua and Lower Hutt suburbs these Wellington suburbs appear vibrant and successful and appear to have adapted well to ongoing changes. Supermarkets appear to have been well integrated into the shopping areas, new shops have been inserted into the fabric, but Stewart's photographs show the suburbs have retained much of their original character. New opportunities have been taken. Two suburbs have boutique cinemas, cafes and restaurants are evident, civic services such as libraries and public toilets have been included and artisan shops, antique shops, and artists' studios are evident in several of these suburbs. Council works have also upgraded external areas, such as pavements, plantings, and the like, to facilitate the village atmosphere. It is evident that people are lingering within the areas, in addition to the inevitable drive up – buy – and go associated with shops such as video stores or fast food outlets. Suburban residents associations are in existence.

3.2 Theories for the different performances between suburbs and conclusions

We have several hypotheses to explain the different performance of the different suburbs; hypotheses which will be tested in future stages of the work. These include transport, income of the suburb's demographic, the scale of additions, competition from other retail, and rigidities in the original design, and social change.

With transport, the Porirua and Lower Hutt suburbs were designed when car uptake was about 0.5 to 1.0 cars per household. As stated earlier, car use was anticipated with the design of retail areas attempting to mitigate the effects of car use with pedestrian precincts and extensive parking areas allowed for. Public transport use was also provided for, but noting that the public transport within each of the cities was much less developed than for Wellington. The original plans also assumed that one income per nuclear family households would continue. In practice, car use greatly increased so that about 50 percent of households now have two cars and only a few, 8 percent, have no cars. Within these suburbs, much shopping will be purchased while both workers are in town, purchasing as they leave work from the expansive retail available within the Central Business District, rather than at the local shops as they near home.

The economic demographic of these suburbs is also relevant. The two income household is the norm (excepting single adult households). While they started out as homes rented from the Government housing agency, many of the houses have passed into private ownership, but the income level of the residents necessitates two incomes to pay for the mortgage. For those houses remaining with Housing New Zealand, the nature of the tenant has changed. No longer are they a "home for the working man and his family" but for the lowest income groups in society, such as beneficiaries, single income families, and the like. These low income residents are those most likely to be using the local shopping so that budget shops, discount shops, second hand shops may appeal to the group, but both preclude re-investment in the centre, and exclude uses that may attract a higher income bracket to the centre in other circumstances.

Competition from other retail areas is relevant to the suburbs of Porirua and Lower Hutt. For both Porirua and Lower Hutt, large shopping centres now dominate the Central business District. In addition to attracting the spending of people working in the area, these large shopping centres draw in people from the suburbs weakening the suburban centre. They also draw in some Wellington residents.

The rigidity of the design is also a factor. With multi-tenanted single buildings, the improvement of just one premise is difficult, so that change or rebuilding cannot be incremental but needs to be a major reinvestment which as discussed is precluded by the low returns.

In Porirua the pedestrian precinct stems are bordered by car park areas that are accessed by a ring road. The form is too rigid to allow evolution; and additional retail, the mega mall or the mega centre, has located with either weak connections to the existing retail or located at distant locations in the warehousing area.

It is the antithesis of these issues in Porirua and Lower Hutt that helps explain the Wellington success.

First the public transport system continues to be highly used. Wellington favours public transport as it has not expanded beyond the original network. This helps maintain the high levels of foot traffic within the suburbs that assisted the creation of the original retail sections.

The income of the suburbs of Wellington is high. The large houses built originally for Wellington's middle and wealthy classes, when the suburbs were formed, attracted a strong gentrification, especially over the period 1975 to 2000. although many households are double income households, this is often career centred rather than a necessity so that Wellington has the highest average education levels and highest average income levels of all New Zealand cities. The gentrification of the suburbs is supported by the strong functional public transport system, as the ability to travel by public transport or walk the neighbourhood has strong appeal to the new residents. These are the people who will patronise cafes, restaurants, artisan studios, and such, which support the vibrancy of these neighbourhoods.

The private ownership of the individual shops has facilitated progressive renewal and upgrade. Older shops intersperse with new additions provide retail areas that are functional but with a sense of character.

The additions too have been in scale so that the suburbs are not out of balance. The supermarkets, added specially in the 1970s, are modest in size and coexist with the smaller local shops even though there has been a realignment of specialisations so that food shops outside of the supermarket meet particular niches such as organic or delicatessen needs.

Competition from mega centres is muted. They are either specialised, as in hardware or garden centre supplies, or are more distant in the Johnsonville, Porirua, or Lower Hutt area. A more recent addition in old industrial land in Rongotai so far appears to have little impact because they exclude food shops and the suburban shops have altered to provide many things, such as food or restaurants that are not provided in the mega centre which is in reality in competition with other mega centres not local retail.

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