

Lost City: Forgotten Plans for an Alternative Auckland

Chris Harris

Abstract

Sixty years ago an innovative state plan was produced for Auckland. Dated 1946, this plan featured nested circular railway loops in the central isthmus and a system of traffic calming based on greenways linking culs-de-sac to pedestrianised town centres. Closely similar ideas were to briefly recur in the 1970s. These ideas represent a permanent, somewhat underground, vision of an alternative Auckland. This vision has been overshadowed by a more familiar orthodoxy of a city too sprawling to plan. It is suggested that the latter has developed by way of a reaction to past planning activism by the New Zealand state. Exemplified by the 1946 plan, this state planning was based on a paradigm of public capture of land value gains in defined railway corridors. This alternative vision is profoundly relevant to Auckland's physical setting, more so than the continuing over-accommodation of the automobile. As population increases this may tip the balance in favour of Auckland's alternative vision.

Disclaimer:

This paper is based on my personal experiences, research and opinions, and does not purport to represent the views of any organisations that I am affiliated with

Introduction

Visitors to New Zealand often remark upon the strikingly different *genius loci* of each of New Zealand's four main cities. The town belts of Christchurch and Dunedin have been described as "examples, in some ways, of Victorian planning at its most remarkable" (Pevsner, 2003, p. 261). Wellington bears the mark of an excellent electrified suburban train system combined with electric trolley buses. And Auckland is often likened to the Los Angeles of New Zealand, an innately car-dependent metropolis. In 1956 the *Master Transportation Plan for Metropolitan Auckland* opined that

Auckland, when compared with similar or larger cities, has one of the lowest gross population densities in the World. This low density and "urban sprawl" adds to the cost and difficulties of public transport. The population living within reasonable walking distance of an inflexible transport service such as railways is very limited. This means that feeder bus services have to be used over extensive areas if the potential carrying capacity of a rail service is to be anywhere near as fully used.

With the growth of Auckland, pockets of higher density development will occur in the inner areas and development in the outer areas will consolidate, but these changes will not affect present densities enough to have any significant effect on urban transportation. Marked changes in the present trends of development would have to take place to raise the gross

density of the overall urban area above 5 or 6 persons per acre by 1975. (ARPA, 1956, pp. 30-31)

Forty-five years later not much had changed, apparently; according to the 2000 Auckland State Highway Strategy,

The overall residential population density of the Auckland urban area is under 300 people per square kilometre of land area. This is very low compared to large overseas cities which can typically have population densities of well over 1,000 residents per square kilometre... [The] growth strategy, which is expected to result in some increase in residential population densities, particularly within proposed “liveable communities,” will be supported by improved public passenger transport. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future Auckland’s land use patterns will continue to rely primarily on private road-based transport to provide a safe and efficient transport system. Furthermore, the topography of the region means that this road-based transport system will continue to be focused on a few major transport corridors, including the existing motorway corridors. (TNZ, 2000, p. 9)

Billions of dollars are thus invested on the basis of somewhat static images of the essential nature of each city: bicycles and buses for Christchurch, electric trains for Wellington, and motorways for Auckland. We will never get Cantabrians off their bicycles, Wellingtonians to abandon their trains, or Aucklanders out of their cars. Demand based economic forecasting confirms the wisdom of past practice in each city and recommends more of the same.

In more recent years, however, an academic minority has begun to ask whether the very great differences between each city have not been historically constructed. Obviously, there are intrinsic differences between Christchurch and the cities of the North Island, insofar as the first of these is a flat city on a plan. But by the same token, Wellington and Auckland have more in common with each other, as bottlenecked harbour cities. As the example of both Wellington and San Francisco show, this is a topography that favours public transport. So why not in Auckland? Is it possible that an image of Auckland that is in many ways inappropriate has constructed the car-dependent modern city, as a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Instructive in this regard is a map of Auckland in 1950 (Figure 1). Auckland, at that time, does not appear to be very sprawling at all. It is a tramway city with a roughly 50 per cent

journey to work share by tram; outlying suburbs are located on railway lines to the south and west. Did the framers of the Master Transportation Plan got a little ahead of themselves, perhaps? Was their vision indeed a self-fulfilling prophecy? And if so, was there an alternative vision of a future Auckland, that perhaps got shelved. And last but not least, did this vision have more in common with the way Wellington has turned out?

To answer this question in full we have to delve back in time to the 1940s, when state plans for Auckland and Wellington were similar and had not yet diverged in such a way as to favour rail for one city and roads for the other. Wellington's suburban railways were developed as part of a comprehensive scheme for the state development of new towns on the urban periphery. The model followed was almost identical to that recommended by Ebenezer Howard in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, in particular, the chapter on the 'social city' (Figure 2).

The New Zealand Government bought up large tracts of land in Porirua and the Hutt Valley, then rural, and used the development gains to pay for new railways and other amenities. In fact, this policy probably owed as much to New Zealand's own colonial experience as to any overseas theorist; New Zealand had used the capital gains on Crown lands to finance rural railways since Sir Julius Vogel first proposed the idea, in an organised way, in 1870. The essence of Vogelism was state land development, for a profit, in defined railway corridors. At the same time, some of the early towns, specifically Christchurch and Dunedin, had been well-planned, in a somewhat idealistic and geometrical way that was intended to prevent the emergence of Victorian slums.

It was perhaps inevitable in this context that idealistic town planning and the colonial public works tradition would come together in the form of a specifically urban Vogelism. This union of ideas took place in 1925 with the passage of the Hutt Valley Lands Settlement Act. Under the Act, 2.7 square kilometres of land in the Hutt Valley north of Wellington was

to be developed as a new town centre, rendered accessible by a new railway and with all development gains over the initial, rural value accruing to the state. The essence of this new Vogelism was state *suburban* development for a profit, in defined railway corridors. As the economist Laurence Evans put it in 1972, the state under urban Vogelism was “suburban developer and public transport co-ordinator” rolled into one (Evans, 1972).

During the 1930s and 1940s the idea of primary state responsibility for suburban colonisation became progressively more entrenched. Nearly half of all housing subdivision at the end of the 1940s was on public land. These developments were financed by state bank loans at 1 to 1.5 per cent interest, partly to reflate the economy after the Great Depression and partly because it was felt that such low interest rates could not lead to speculation, as long as the state dictated how the money was spent. New Zealand state houses of this era were respectable in appearance, if smallish; the target rental was ‘a day’s pay for a week’s occupation’ or in other words, about 15 per cent of the average wage.

It is difficult, today, to recall what deep inroads such policies made, for a time, into traditions of private homeownership and do-it-yourself that formed the other face of colonial experience in New Zealand, as much as in America or Australia. Not only did ‘urban Vogelism’ make obvious physical sense; state land banking also allowed interest rates to be kept much lower, by removing the speculative element from subdivision. According to one historian, “The [conservative] opposition could not see any way of criticising the policy effectively because they could not seem themselves what were the hidden disadvantages, if any” (Gustafson, 1986, pp. 198-9). It seemed as though the New Zealand government of the day had discovered a new way of organising cities, albeit one that had a lot in common with the ideas of Howard and other visionaries overseas.

This was the policy context in which Wellington’s suburban railways were developed. And it is at this point that we begin to discover some real traces of a path not taken in

Auckland. A legally binding plan, published in 1946, is shown here on three levels of detail, as Figures 3 to 5. Figure 3 shows the Auckland region as a whole, with cross- and full-hatching outside the already-developed tramway city. A distinctive feature of this plan is the provision made for nested circular railways in the Auckland CBD (the long-mooted Queen Street tunnel) and also around the already-developed city. Part of the outer railway ring had already been built, in the form of the semicircle through Glen Innes and Panmure. The outer circle was to be continued from Southdown through to Avondale where it was to join the Western railway line. All along the outer ring, state housing was to be built (fully hatched). In other parts of the region, private subdivision was to be allowed but the state was to keep fifty per cent of the capital gains on the underlying land. The actual extent of sprawl was to be contained; the idea of an urban growth boundary is as prominent in plans of that era as it is today.

Figure 4 shows the state housing area in Tamaki, in more detail. A feature of this plan is the network of off-road greenways, deliberately designed to allow off-road access to the town centre and its transport hub. The greenways were to be at least 22 metres wide, and to cross under the network of arterial roads at a lower grade. All, or nearly all, culs de sac are linked to the greenways. Traffic calming was explicitly part of the rationale of this system, the government's chief urban designer noting that "The exciting novelty of the motor car has worn off, and we are becoming aware of its problems" (Plishke, 1947, p. 67).¹ Figure 5 is a detailed view of the town centre, visible in outline in Figure 4. Although it might make the railway more accessible to have it in the middle of the town centre, the designer rejected this idea on the grounds that for public spaces to be lively, they had to be relatively enclosed and the space needed for a railway station (light rail not yet being invented) would ruin this effect.

Today, extensive state housing areas remain in Tamaki, Panmure and Mount Roskill, as traces of what was once planned. The eastern rail semicircle also exists. But these developments are run down, almost slums and not at all like what is shown in Figures 4 and 5, save here and there. The centre of gravity of Auckland's post-war suburban colonisation has clearly shifted outward toward suburbs that even the 1946 plan recognised would be more accessible by car; the idea of an urban growth boundary has clearly also long been absent in practice.

Toward the end of the 1940s opposition to the government's urban policy was rekindled. The government of the day was accused of crowding out private development and interfering with freedom (Figure 6). If we had to pick a single year in which a new urban policy became effective it would probably be 1953. In that year, the first section of motorway in Auckland was opened, the 1946 plan formally repealed along with its allegedly onerous taxes on private development, and the basis of transport infrastructure funding shifted to a new National Roads Fund. From now on motorists would pay for their own motorways every time they filled up at the pump. At the opening of the first section of motorway, the Minister of Transport told a *New Zealand Herald* journalist that, "My boy, the future of Auckland belongs with the motor-car" (in Stewart, 2002, p. 140). We may compare this with the sentiments of the 1940s or indeed Figure 6, in which the 'Wellington Express' lurks in the background.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ideas behind the old, pre-motorway plans began to be rediscovered or, in some cases, reinvented. Figure 7 shows the 1974 logo of the Auckland Rapid Transit project, popularly known as 'Robbie's Rapid Rail' after its champion, the long-serving Auckland City mayor Sir Dove-Myer Robinson. The logic of the scheme recalls the 1946 plan, with its emphasis on radial feeders and circular distributors in the isthmus. An attempt was also made to adopt a new corridor plan (Figure 8). The general themes of 1940s

planning were revived in a 1967 *Regional Master Plan* (RMP) by the newly created Auckland Regional Authority. The RMP recommended a policy of selective intensification, roughly 50% single unit dwellings, 20% medium density and 30% flats (to be not more than four storeys high). Land saved was to be invested in offroad greenways and other reserves. The RMP carried a gracenote on one volume by Finnish urbanist H. Von Hertgen, which read:

When we finally caught up we asked ourselves: What are we to do with our new affluence? We can't eat more. There is a limit to the automobiles and gadgets we really need. So I started to persuade my countrymen that we should build a beautiful and suitable environment for everyone. Good housing is not enough. We have to counteract the strains and tensions of urban life.

At this time the New Zealand Government also supported such measures, passing the 1974 Housing Corporation Act whereby state housing became an instrument of planning once more, and the 1974 New Zealand Superannuation Act whereby up to 8 per cent of wages and salaries would be used to acquire land on the urban fringe and other assets for public development purposes. As in the 1930s, the government was to some extent reacting not only against policies that were too favourable to the automobile, but also against the consequences of a more general lack of planning. One of these consequences was rampant property speculation in the early 1970s, which would be followed by a fall in inflation-adjusted house prices in the later 1970s and early 1980s that has been estimated at 36 per cent (Morgan, 2003; cf Bollard, 2003). Although 1970s inflation has been greatly condemned, it helped to cushion the impact of the housing crash. To some extent, the housing bubble of the early 1970s made subsequent inflation necessary, in addition to helping cause it. Along with the Housing Corporation Act and the New Zealand Superannuation Act, the government of the early 1970s therefore also tried to reintroduce capital gains taxation, last seen in 1953, as a way of calming the markets. As 1975, as in 1949, the election would be dominated by the

charge that the government's attempts to re-regulate the city amounted to a Soviet takeover by stealth.²

Robbie's Rapid Rail was duly cancelled by the New Zealand government in 1976 (NZ Herald, 1976), but, as late as 1980, the Auckland Regional Authority produced a Green City plan that featured greenways (Figure 9) and a revival of the circular railway concept (Figure 10). It seems that there is something perennial about these proposals for an alternative Auckland. Equally perennial however is the anti-planning backlash. With the still more radically free-market economic policy revolution that began in 1984, anyone who advocated planning and state land banking soon became as far out of step as they would have been in the early Cold War era. Radically anti-planning discourses last seen in 1953 or 1956 returned almost *verbatim*.

Today, the prospects for a revival of planning in Auckland seem excellent. A recent report has identified a looming shortfall of 100,000 medium-density apartment units. The logical thing for the state to do would be to acquire development rights in Auckland's often rather derelict railway corridors and construct the apartments, offering innovative rent-to-buy titles and underwriting a massive transit upgrade at the same time. The idea of greenways could also be pursued, perhaps in a form that added coastal walkways to the mix. If the reader mentally adds a coastal walkway from Waterview or Point Chevalier to the Auckland CBD to the greenways already in Figure 9, the merits of such an idea become obvious. A cycleway over the Auckland Harbour Bridge would connect these greenways to a system of parks that extends, already, as far as Wairau Road and the soon-to-be-built Westlake Busway Station.

When we factor in the more negative phenomena of motorway congestion, continuing population growth, instabilities in the speculative real estate market, global warming, oil shortage, and Auckland's obvious need for an aesthetic makeover, it seems inevitable that something like the 1946 plan will be rediscovered, complete with state land-banking or

corridor development. To sum up, the Auckland Plan of 1946 remains the best plan ever made for Auckland. Had it been followed through, we would now be teaching urban design to the Danes, and not the other way around. Although it is obscure, every plan made since either reacts against it or else rediscovers its principles. ‘So old is novelty’ with regard to town planning and urban design; much of what the latest international celebrity urbanist has to say, has been said before.

But at the same time, Auckland’s policy history shows that the car-taming urban regulation implicit in plans like those of 1946 is greatly feared, essentially as a threat to what has been described in the Australian context as a ‘national hobby’ of real estate speculation.

The fact that the New Zealand state was once very active in urban planning and the closely associated activities of land banking and housing development – as much as the governments of Sweden or Denmark, in fact – means that there is a legacy of extreme sensitivity about anything to do with ‘planning’ in the real sense of the word. In 1946, the New Zealand Government seemed to have discovered a new paradigm of urbanisation.

By 1956 a car-dependent form of suburbanisation had been imposed instead, not because we loved the car but because its deliberate accomodation destroyed the basis for a form of urban planning based on state land banking in railway corridors: *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* (Figure 11). The two essential options for future Auckland remain the same as in 1946-1956; what this means is that while we may turn to the 1946 plan for inspiration, we cannot expect that acceptance of its ideas will be easy or automatic. By the same token, to the extent that the current orthodoxy depends on an image of an ‘empty’ region with limitless terrestrial space, this is clearly no longer the case. As such, the fact that nature now imposes a corridor plan on Auckland, may finally tip the balance in favour of the alternative, and in fact original, vision of suburban Auckland.

Note

This paper is based on several recent and more heavily referenced publications by the author, specifically Harris (2005, 2006, forthcoming).

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Figures Follow

¹ Plishke, actually Plischke, was an Austrian émigré architect who became an urban designer in New Zealand government service; he was a less marginal figure than commonly supposed, and Figures 4 and 5 in this paper both appear in the 1949 official publication *State Housing in New Zealand*. Unfortunately Plischke’s career in government would suffer in the 1950s, much like that of his fellow-national Richard Neutra in 1950s Los Angeles; both returned to a purely architectural practice.

² See URL <http://www.elections.org.nz> and search for “Cossacks”.

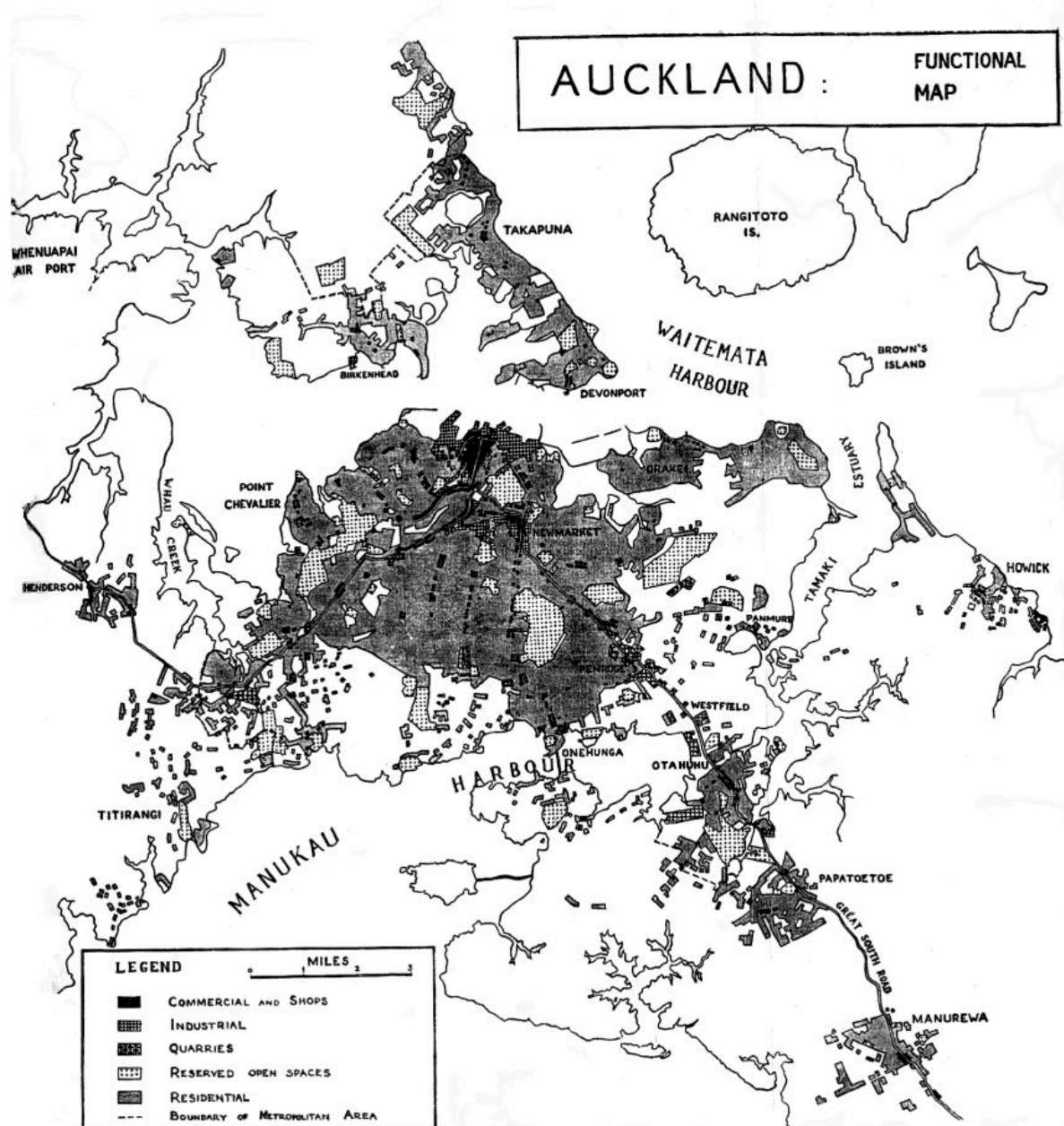


Figure 1: Auckland in 1950, from *New Zealand Geographical Society Record*, 9 (1950). Reproduced with permission of the New Zealand Geographical Society.

N^o 5.

— DIAGRAM —

ILLUSTRATING CORRECT PRINCIPLE
OF A CITY'S GROWTH - OPEN COUNTRY
EVER NEAR AT HAND, AND RAPID
COMMUNICATION BETWEEN OFF-SHOOTS.

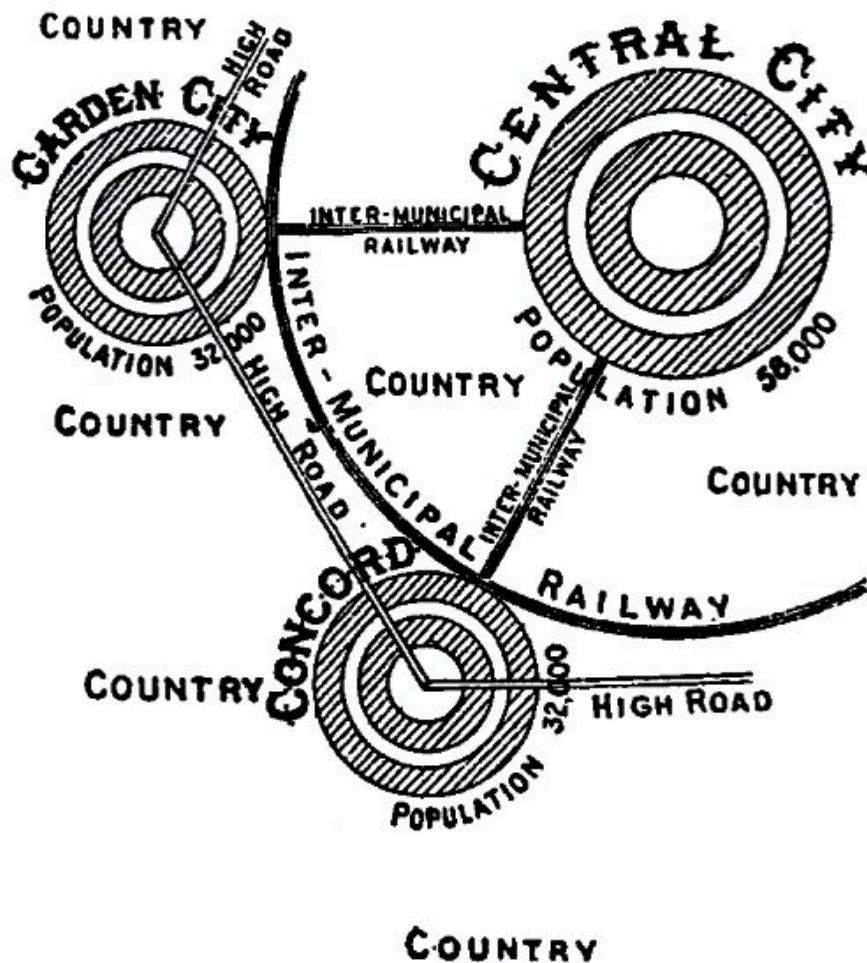


Figure 2: Ebenezer Howard's Social City Concept, from Howard (1945).

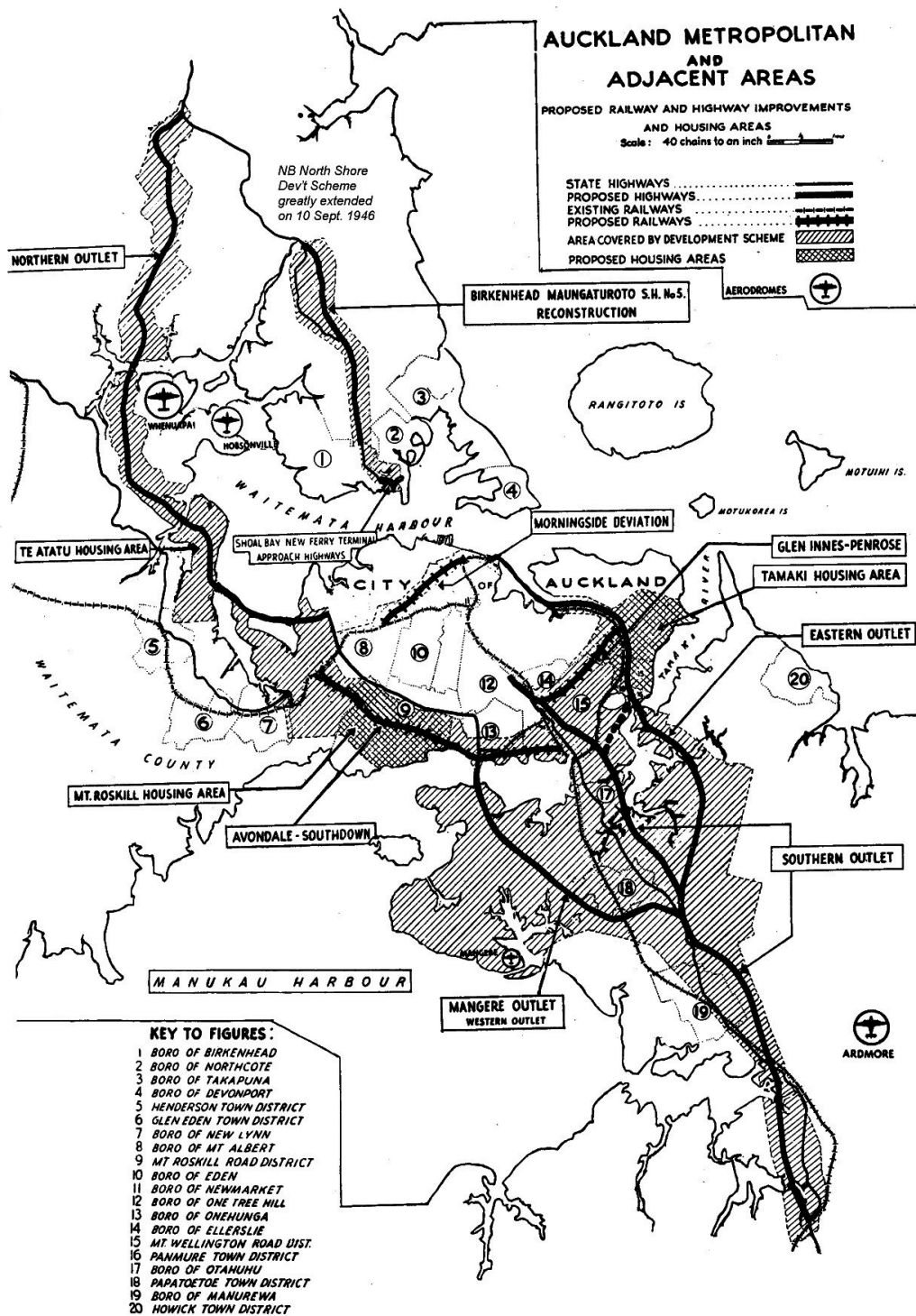


Figure 3: Statutory Regional Plan for Auckland, from MOW (1946).

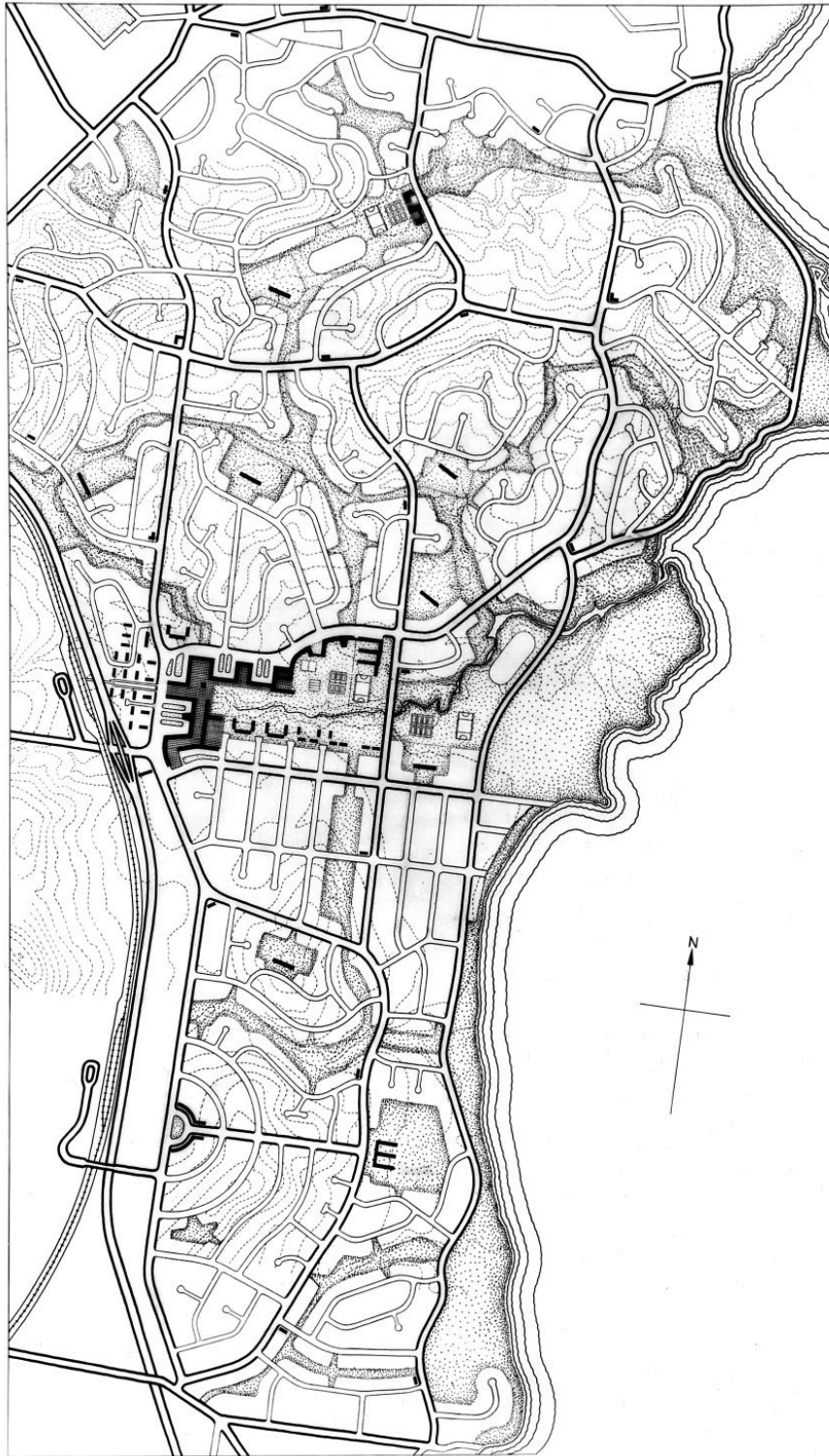
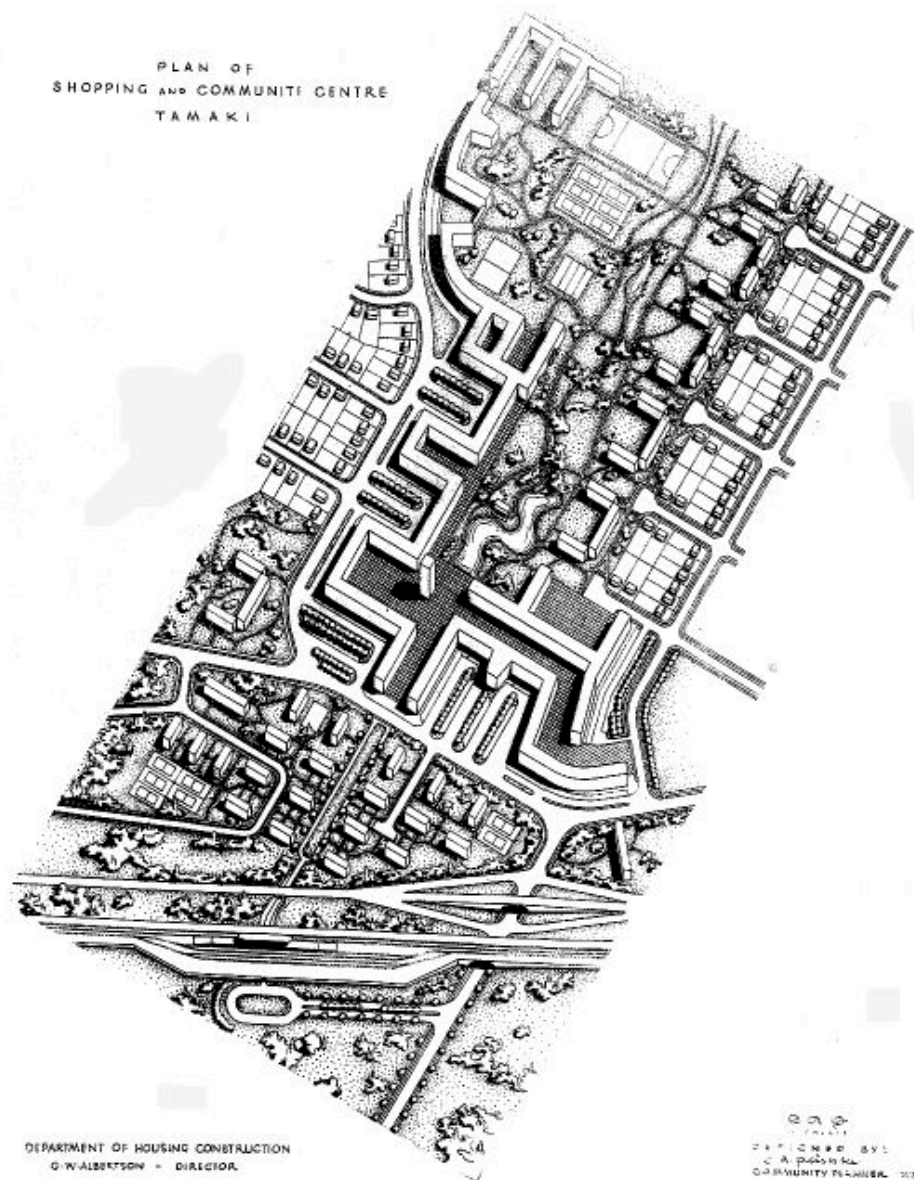


Figure 4: Structure Plan for the Tamaki Housing Area including Pedestrian Networks, reproduced in Firth and Wilson (1949). Reproduced here with permission of the Housing New Zealand Corporation.



- ① INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL
- ② GYMNASIUM
- ③ SPORTS GROUND
- ④ HEALTH SERVICE
- ⑤ COMMUNITY AND RECREATION CENTRE
- ⑥ PARKING
- ⑦ SHOPPING BUSINESS CENTRE
- ⑧ CINEMA
- ⑨ MUNICIPAL SQUARE
- ⑩ FLATS
- ⑪ MULTI-UNITS AND FLATS
- ⑫ RAILWAY STATION
- ⑬ HIGHWAY AND RAILWAY CROSSING
- ⑭ BOTANICAL GARDENS
- ⑮ MULTI-UNITS



Figure 5: Proposed town centre for Tamaki (Glen Innes), Auckland, showing intensification and pedestrianisation, reproduced in Firth and Wilson (1949). Reproduced here with permission of the Housing New Zealand Corporation.

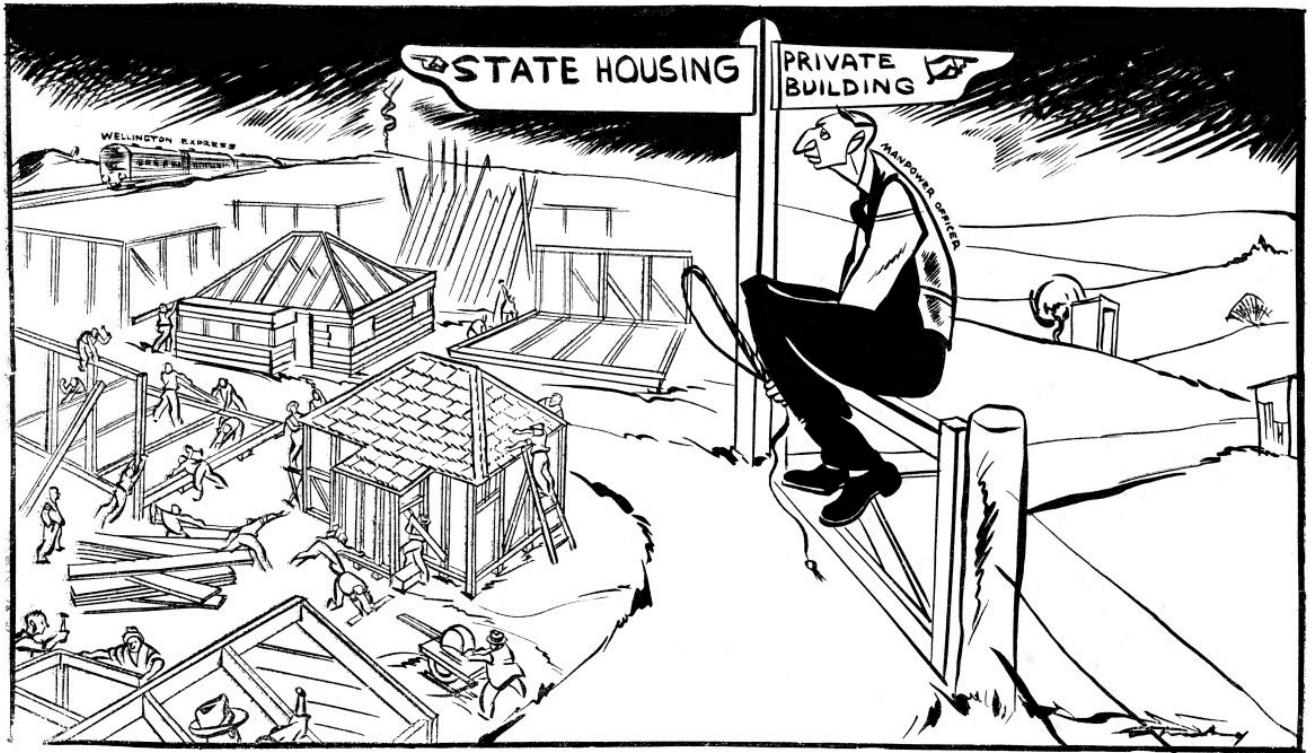


Figure 6: Anti-planning cartoon from *Building Progress*, May 1944, cartoonist unknown. Note 'Wellington Express' in background.

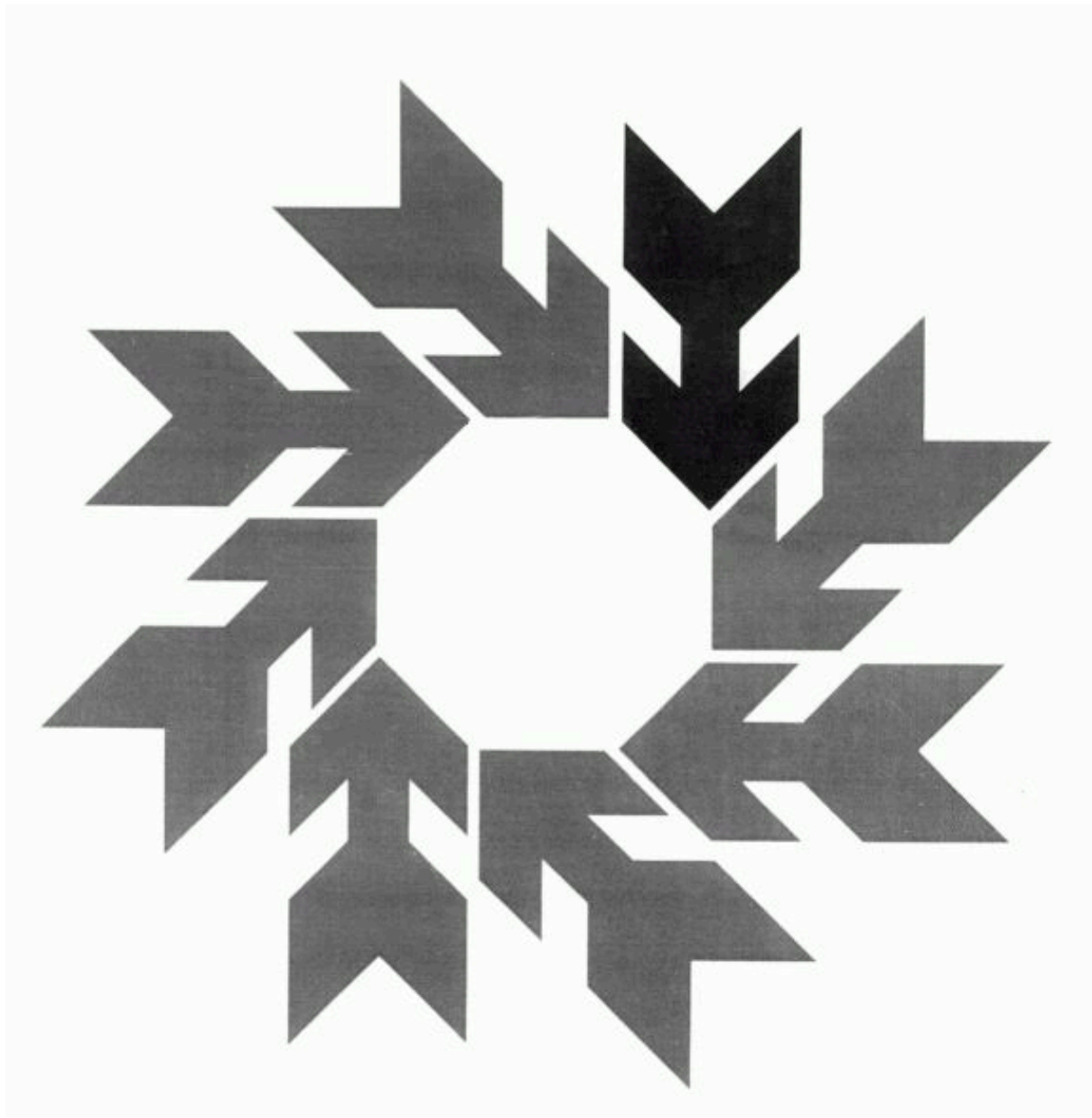


Figure 7: Auckland Rapid Transit Logo, from ART Directorate (1974). Reproduced with permission of the Auckland Regional Council.

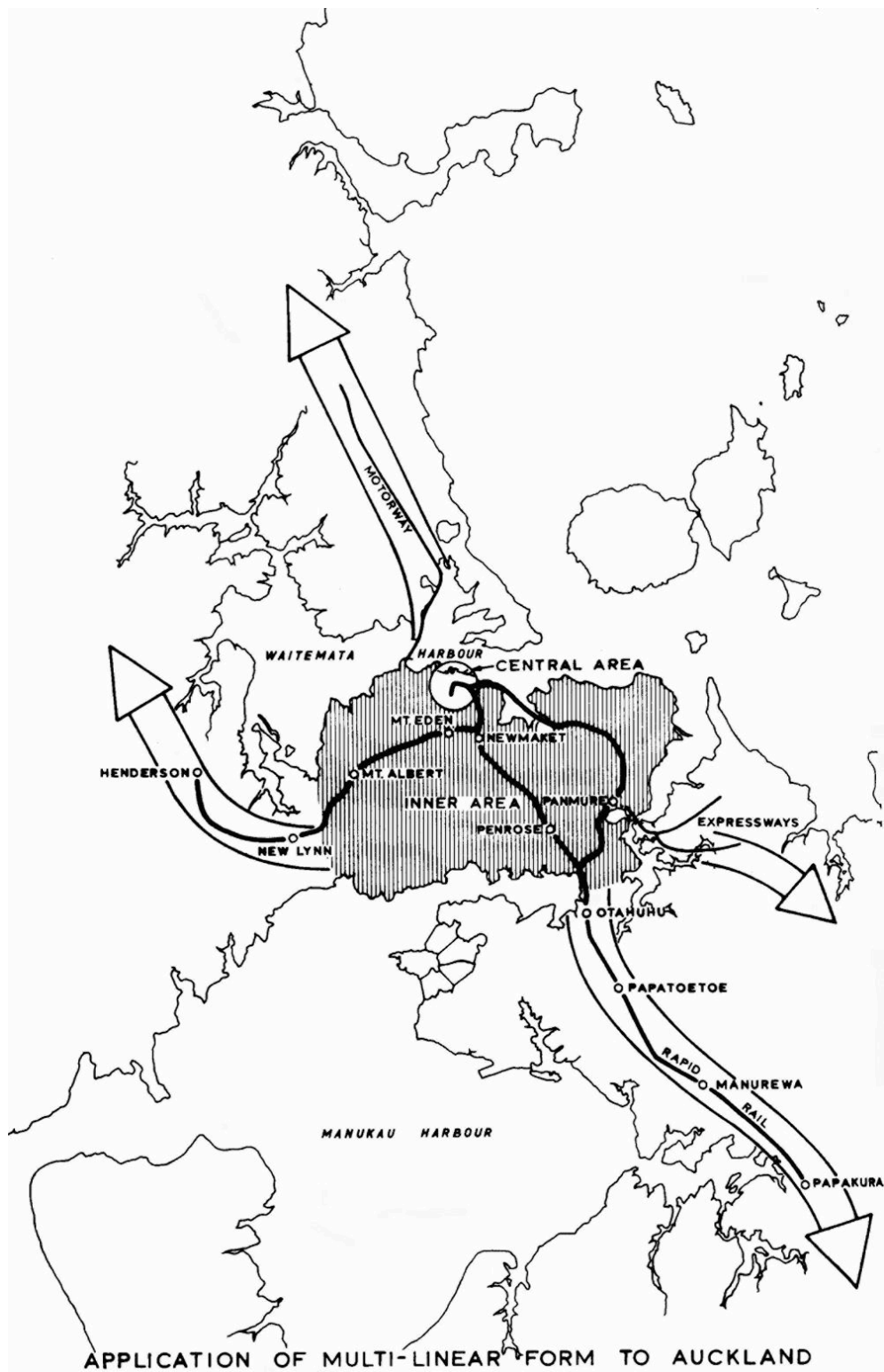


Figure 8: Auckland 'Multi-Linear Scheme', from Jones (1969). Reproduced with permission of the Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand and the Auckland Regional Council.



Figure 9: Greenways, in Johnson (1980). Reproduced with permission of the Auckland Regional Council.

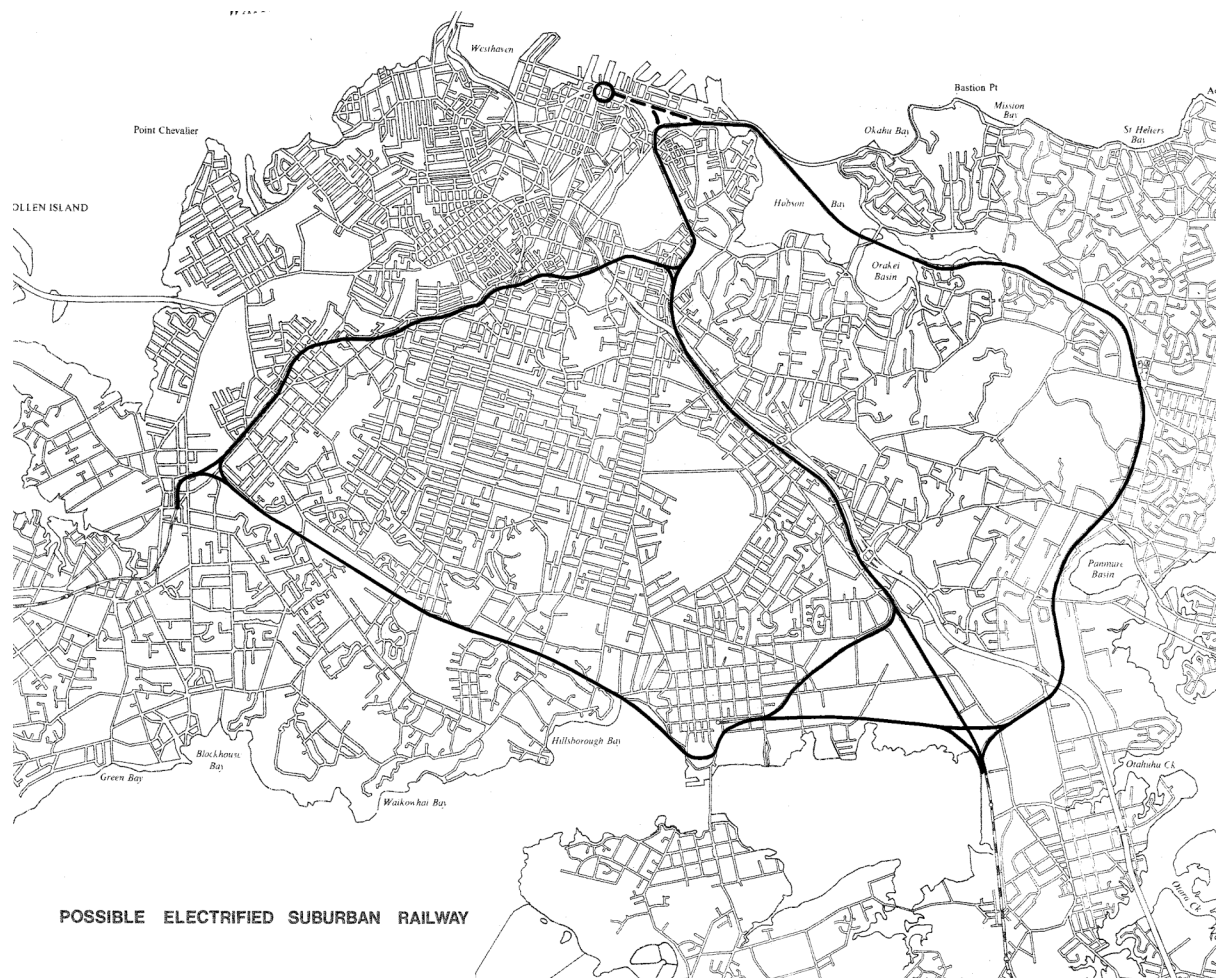


Figure 10: Possible Circle Railway, from Johnson (1980). Reproduced here with the permission of the Auckland Regional Council.



Figure 11: The End of *Laissez-Faire*? Local Street Scenes, early 2000s (author's photographs)