



*The brief: to build a tropical-inspired landscape on top of an exposed and sometimes windswept fourth floor of Newmarket's new shopping centre ...*

*Because of how busy Newmarket is, the trees had to be brought in during the night. A 70-tonne crane was positioned and lifted them from street level up the four stories and into place*

**Des Snell reports**



## Building a tropical rainforest landscape – four stories up

**N**EXT TIME you're in Auckland it is worth taking a walk through the re-developed Westfield shopping mall at 277 Broadway Newmarket, and up to its rooftop garden and restaurant area.

The landscaping there was the work of a design team at Boffa Miskell landscape architects in Auckland and a team from the Westfield client, Scentre Group.

The planting was done by Natural Habitats who are also in charge of its ongoing maintenance.

The brief was to provide a lush tropical-inspired landscape on the roof of the complex, in an area

surrounded by restaurants and cafes and with a childrens' play space.

Adding more challenge to the project, the designers say, was the desire by tenants to tweak the public spaces surrounding their tenancies and also the five-month drought in Auckland that coincided with the opening of the mall in 2019.

The design teams used 3D

modelling to test ideas and predict the effects of sun on plants at different times of the day and year. Extensive use was also made of workshops to arrive at the final plant selections.

The rooftop site itself, being several stories high, is a challenging one.

Some areas being cocooned by buildings can get very hot while others are very exposed to wind and rain and still others are in wind tunnels.

So the plants selected had to be hardy and the different environ-



*Below: one of several areas where shoppers can rest and watch the world go by*



ments largely dictated what could be planted where. The client was also keen to use NZ natives and exotics rather than true sub-tropicals.

Ironically, some of the plants that ended up being used, like the Chatham Island forget-me-nots (*Myosotidium hortensia*) are from the colder parts of New Zealand and are anything but tropical but in the tight planting among

other subjects on the rooftop they do give the tropical look the client wanted.

Natural Habitat's Maintenance Manager, Matt Mowbray, said getting the wide variety of plants properly hardened off was one of the challenges, especially with those coming from nurseries. "There they will have been in a nice environment, nice shady areas, so they needed to be hard-







ened off before we planted them so they didn't get too much shock."

The plants were brought on site near the end of the mall's construction period and left in their containers to acclimatise, but dust can be a problem in situations like that, said Matt.

"This is a problem with all construction sites; the amount of dust floating around gets on the plants and cuts down their photosynthesis. So there was a lot of cleaning to be done."

When planting time came more than 500 cubic metres of growing media was brought up to the rooftop to fill the many raised garden beds. Natural Habitats has a policy of planting in beds rather than pots where possible.

"You wouldn't get those plants to last long if they were just in pots," said Matt.

"Nearly everything we do, even interior, we don't plant in pots; we actually try to provide good soil for plants to grow in, then they can get to their true size and form."

#### **Trees were a year in preparation**

The bigger specimen trees, including two big magnolias and several nikaus (also Chatham Island forms) were provided by Specimen Tree Landscapes in Auckland. They were more than a year in preparation.

"We sourced the trees from an open-ground situation," said Specimen's owner Jeff Fell, "up-

lifted them and containerised them, stored them and got them established, then worked with Natural Habitats to get them lifted and put in place."

Because of how busy Newmarket is, the trees had to be brought in during the night. A 70-tonne crane was positioned and lifted them from street level up the four stories and into place.

Jeff Fell makes it sound like just another day at the office – "It all went pretty well," he says, "it was quite intense, a long night but a good night."

It may have been the challenges and complexity of the project that brought them so tightly together, but the major players in

this project even two years after its completion, are still quick to praise one another.

"The Scentre Group's team had a great vision of what they wanted to achieve and we all enjoyed working with them to bring that whole landscape to life," said Anysley Carise of Boffa Miskell.

And of Natural Habitats she says: "When it actually came to plant supply and procurement, they did as much as they could to match the original plan, but had to make some substitutions. Which is fine.

"They did an amazing job. And this happens on every project. Often landscape design plans are produced a year or two or more

out from when the project is going to go in the ground and so not always is everything there at the time. Natural Habitats did a great job with the implementation of the plan."

Of the big trees she says: "The trees, palms and ferns were all prepared a year in advance to get them ready for their new environment. Those nikaus were prepared especially for that site by Specimen Trees and they did a great job. Jeff was a real pleasure to work with."

Natural Habitat's Commercial Manager, Tom McCarthy, said; "The number of people involved on the project required clear communication to ensure we

could operate smoothly with our client and other trades to complete the project on time.

"Thankfully, Scentre Group were a hands-on client and worked closely with us to ensure a smooth on-site build amongst other contractors completing works."

And Jeff Fell, a man of few words said: "It was good working in with Natural Habitats."

A final word from Anysley Carise on creating a tropical landscape from temperate region plants: "Aren't we lucky we have such a fabulous diversity in our native plants?"

"Hopefully what we did at 277 will encourage more people to try something different."

*Below left: they might come from a chilly home, but Chatham Islands forget-me-nots do have a tropical look*

*More than 500 cubic metres of growing media were needed to fill the many raised garden beds. Pic, below centre, shows one of the beds taking shape during construction and, below right, finally planted up*

