

Tweeting truth to power

KATHLEEN KINNEY, COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR, BOFFA MISKELL



Shared spaces, special interests and the online conversations shaping our cities and towns.

WHETHER IT'S SHAMING MOTORISTS who park in cycle lanes and across sidewalks, pointing out the design flaws in less-than-welcoming town centres, or singing the praises of shared spaces on a sunny day, you'll find it being discussed every day in 280 characters or less, accompanied by a photo.

Twitter has been embraced by individuals and groups keen to get their as-it-happens take on the world across to like-minded individuals and now, to civic groups and governmental agencies.

Speaking truth to power? That's so 20th century. Now it's tweeting truth to power – and 'power' is often obliged to engage in response.

Ludo Campbell-Reid, the Urban Design Champion for Auckland sees social media as a boon.

"It's helping connect citizens to their government. It keeps me in touch with the community I serve, and I'm able to share ideas with people from Auckland to Toronto to London to Barcelona."

Campbell-Reid's Twitter feed is a significant voice in the on-going conversation among urbanist groups like Greater Auckland, Bike Auckland, Women in Urbanism, Auckland Council and Auckland Transport and dozens more. From mutual high-fiving when it's good, to snarky critiques of shortcomings, these groups and individuals perform a daily dissection on the city's roads, shared spaces, and infrastructure projects.

Matt Lowrie of GreaterAuckland.com (formerly Transport Blog) says that Auckland is a perfect microcosm for this kind of engagement between people and government. He puts it down to a few, perfectly aligned factors.

"The CBD and surrounding areas are going through tremendous growth and some really important infrastructure decisions and projects are happening, so there's a lot to talk about.

"Established groups and individuals who've been involved in the conversation around urban design and neighbourhood growth for years are now leveraging social media very effectively.

"Then, with the creation of the Super City, there's now a more consolidated government collective, so it's easy to focus the message."

Being the target of that focused and unfiltered messaging can be daunting.

In early December, after weeks of vociferous kerfuffle on Twitter and caustic long-form pieces on The Spinoff blog, Auckland Transport pushed the pause button on a planned cycleway for Richmond Road in West Lynn.

But there are positive examples, too.

"When engagement works, it works really well," says Matt Lowrie. He gives O'Connell Street in Auckland as a prime example of the positive influence on-line debate can bring to bear.

"O'Connell Street is a fantastic result, and it's different to what was initially proposed for that street upgrade. But we debated the points; we said 'no, we could do it better, and here's why' and the plan changed.

"I think it's the best-designed street in Auckland. It's a shared space that works, and it looks great. It shows what can happen when advocates of good design come together."

It used to be that 'special interest groups' had dues-paying members with a clear agenda. They were business owners, or manufacturers' associations, or labour unions. They had the networking ability and the financial resources to make things happen. The lone individual could do little more than write a letter to the Editor of the local paper and hope for the best.

Blogs and social media open up the commentary. The cycling enthusiasts can claim the public's ear as effectively as the government agencies.

The likes of Campbell-Reid and Lowrie see this as a good thing.

"When segments of the community are left out of the discussion, the resulting place or design or outcome is usually poorer, because it's not catering for those disenfranchised groups," says Lowrie.

"The invisible bureaucrats of the past are now outed and held accountable," says Campbell-Reid. "They are forced to do better. The outcomes are changing, people are engaged in what's happening in the city around them and that's such a positive result."

But isn't all this social media stuff just 'an Auckland thing'? Definitely not.

Check out a December 7 post on GreaterAuckland.com:

"Greetings from Greater Tauranga. We are a newly formed group that aims to have an active voice in transport and land use planning for our city...." LGP



Boffa Miskell's design transformed O'Connell Street from an unattractive, traffic-oriented space into a popular destination for businesses and pedestrians.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CLAIRE HAMILTON/BOFFA MISKELL.