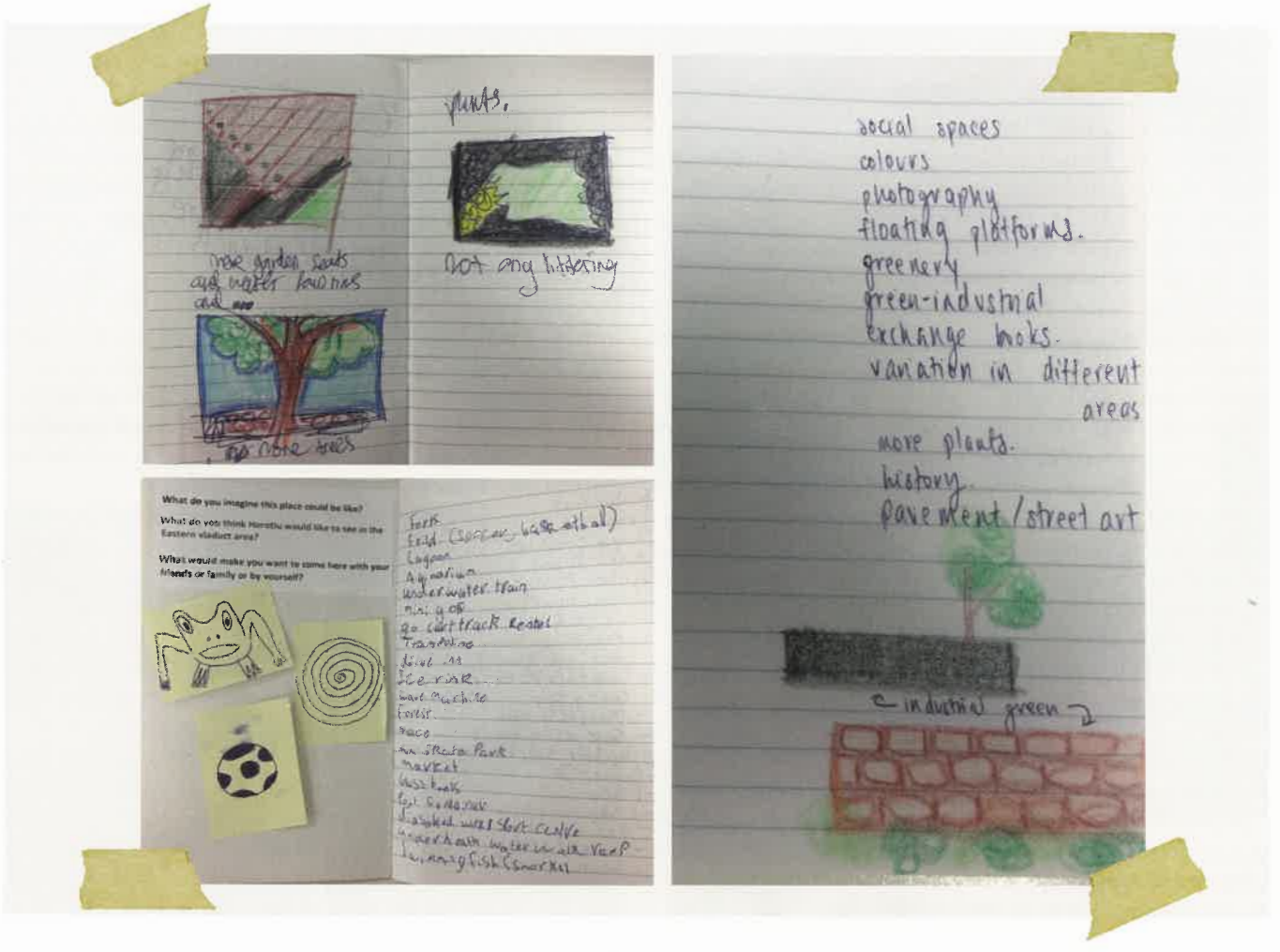
Building more playful towns and cities

Co-designing with children can better develop our towns and cities. It helps create more child-friendly spaces and delivers an environment that is more playful and accessible for all. Massey University researchers **Karen Witten** and **Penelope Carroll** outline their work to date with Boffa Miskell landscape architect Aynsley Cisaria.

Karen Witten

Penelope Carroll

Top: Exploring around the Eastern Viaduct. Learning about the Puhinui Stream ecosystem.



There's no denying that to thrive, our main towns and major cities must successfully densify. Yet, at present, these places are built to prioritise the movement of cars, not people... and especially not children. Our urban environments are not designed for pedestrian safety and this constrains children's play and mobility opportunities. Complicating this further is a default planning position that largely confines their use of the public realm to places such as playgrounds, skate parks and sports grounds.

Such restricted outdoor play, combined with the allure of the iPad, is confining children more and more to the domestic realm. This compromises the well-being of children and throws into question the social sustainability of our towns and cities.

As the Unitary Plan unfolds in Auckland/Tamaki Makaurau and private living and play space contract with increasing densification, playful public spaces become more important for children and adults.

So how do we build more child-friendly and sustainable towns and cities? Ones where the built environment creates thriving, connected and diverse communities?

Co-design with kids

Evidence shows that to make our cities more child-friendly we have much to gain by actively engaging children in the urban planning and design process.

By co-designing our cities with kids, we can develop more playful (and more accessible) places for everyone in the community. In the research, we have been surprised that the children have not only been thinking about what they would like, but they have also considered older people and younger kids and how the space could work for them.

The right for children to have spaces to play has been in place in Aotearoa New Zealand since 1993 when our country ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The country committed itself to acknowledging a raft of children's rights, including their right to play and move safely through the public realm, and to speak out and be heard on matters which affect them.

Children's right to be heard is being demonstrated through our current co-design project in Auckland – a collaboration with urban regeneration agency Panuku Development Auckland and mana whenua. The research involves two public space developments: the Eastern Viaduct renewal (downtown Auckland) and the regeneration of Puhinui Stream (South Auckland).

Council staff have talked to the participating children about the brief for each development and the importance of the children's involvement. Mana whenua narratives help orient the children to the historical and cultural significance of sites. Locating familiar local landmarks on aerial maps can be useful for spatial orientation before children go out to explore and evaluate, armed with cameras, pens and notebooks.

Interactions with fellow participants and researchers (in groups and one-on-one), taking photographs, writing down ideas, drawing and model-making have all helped elicit children's responses and ideas. These ideas – written, spoken, photographed, drawn and modelled – are then collated in a report for the designers to work with.

Regenerating the Puhinui Stream

As part of the Panuku-led redevelopment of Manukau, we began working in March this year on the Puhinui Stream regeneration with 24 nine to 13-year-olds at Wiri Central School. The Puhinui Stream is close to a number of higher density housing developments: some underway and others on the drawing board. The stream's open spaces, unloved for decades, are now in the spotlight as a potential recreational space for current and future residents and as a place to nurture urban biodiversity.

The work with the children at Wiri Central School has become a collaboration between the research team, teachers, local mana whenua and representatives from Panuku, The Southern Initiative and Healthy Families.

The research questions asked include, "What changes would the children like to see in their neighbourhoods? What would make them want to spend time by the Puhinui Stream? What changes would the taniwha Puhinui like to see?"

In the first of five workshops at the school, we explored a section of the stream. Some of the children had never been there. The stream currently has poor water quality and there is rubbish everywhere, but the children recognised its attraction as a peaceful place to be in nature.

To develop the children's capacity to meaningfully participate in a co-design process we realised they needed experiences of being in and around the stream and knowledge about to 'love our awa' – a by-line of the restoration project.

In subsequent workshops, the children explored more and less modified sections of the stream, learnt about the water cycle and what makes a healthy and unhealthy stream. They also learnt to identify native species and about the role trees can play in reducing pollutants and flooding. They also followed the stream to the Botanical Gardens and towards its source and saw and learnt about the role of green living roofs.

The co-design process is opening the children's eyes to why the whole environment needs to be better – for the fish, for the birds and for them. It has also given substance and context to a sense of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) that they want to come through in the design.

Engaging tamariki voices

In a previous research project, Kids in the City, we had worked with children living in nine different neighbourhoods across Auckland City. In that project, we identified the lack of public outdoor spaces for children to safely play and interact close to their homes.

> Suddenly a fence becomes a place to do hand-stands, a bridge becomes a running track.

The work also showed that children like to play anywhere and everywhere, including the street. Trips to and from school, the shops and other destinations, are often as much about play and hanging out with friends along the way as getting to the destination.

An important part of the co-design process is that children are not only heard, but feel they have been heard and their ideas taken seriously. We regularly check back with the children to make sure we, the researchers, have got it right. It is also crucial that designers and planners report back to the children, showing them where their ideas have been incorporated in a design – and, where they have not, explain why.

This reporting back part of the co-design process can be tricky as public space projects can take a long time from conception to completion. In light of this, the children are told how their ideas will contribute to making the city a better place for all people.

Futureproofing community well-being

The evidence base we are gathering clearly demonstrates that by giving children an opportunity to explore and experience a space/place and become familiar with its natural and material attributes, over time, builds children's confidence and agency being in a space and a sense of connection to place.

For adults, allowing children's imagination and story-telling to be peppered through the design of their urban environments helps inject cultural relevance, colour and playfulness into the built environment in ways they couldn't even dream of.

Suddenly a fence becomes a place to do hand-stands, a bridge becomes a running track or a wall becomes a canvas for

Online toolkit for urban designers and planners

Research has shown that local government urban designers and planners are keen to work with children but are often unsure of how to go about it. As a result, the team are currently creating an online resource for urban designers and planners. This will soon be freely available to anyone in the local government sector who wishes to utilise it in the future design and development of our towns and cities. For more info, go to www.buildingbetter.nz ■

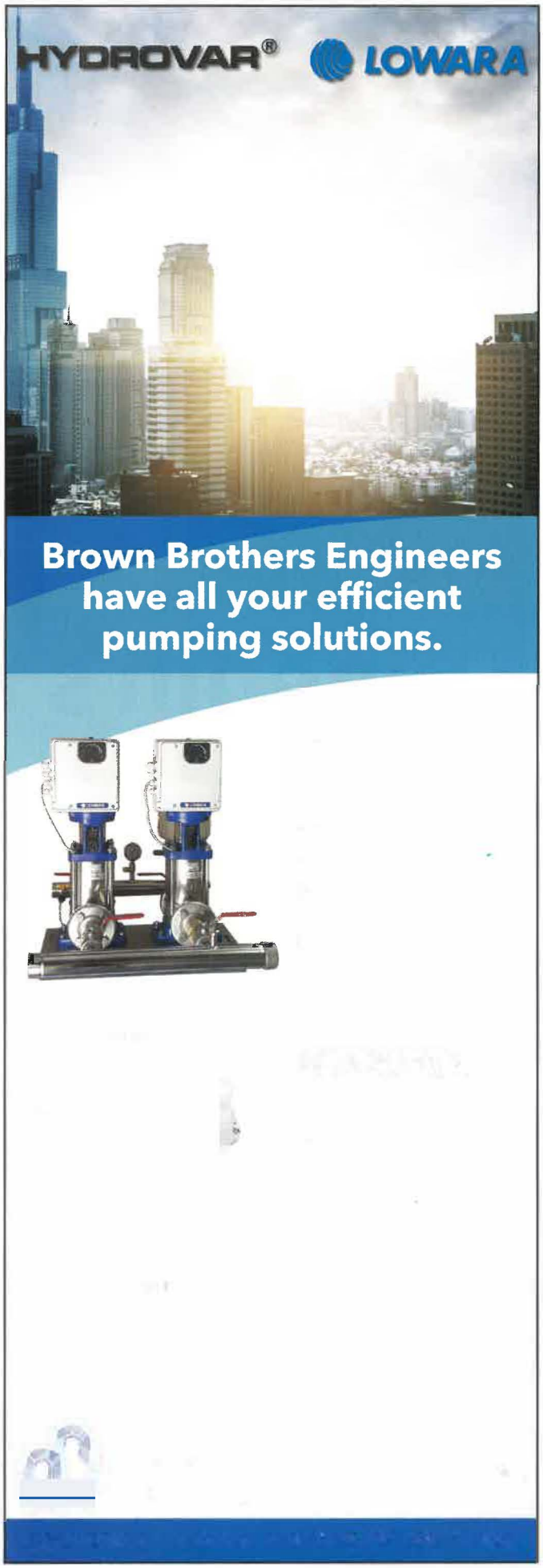
a bright, colourful mural.

The research shows co-designing with children can deliver playful public places in our cities that can be enjoyed by all citizens, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

Let's get children involved to create cities that make us smile. **LG**

• Karen Witten and Penelope Carroll are researchers at Massey University. The work featured in this article is part of the Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities (BBHTC) National Science Challenge. www.buildingbetter.nz

What children need most

To help children meaningfully contribute to the co-design of public space, provide them with the following:

- An opportunity to explore and experience a space/place and become familiar with its natural and material attributes. Over time this helps build children's confidence and agency being in a space and a sense of connection to place;
- An opportunity to learn about the history of place – mana whenua narratives and other relevant history can become resources for children's connection to place and for their design imaginations; and ecological understanding contributes to a sense of kaitiakitanga;
- Skilled adult facilitators who are genuinely interested in their views;
- A range of elicitation methods (eg. talking, drawing, photography, writing, modelling) which allow participants to access and express their views;
- Council staff/designers who value children's input;
- Processes/timeframes which allow their input to influence decision-making;
- Feedback from designers/councils that indicate the children's views have been listened to, taken seriously, and indicate how their input has contributed to decisions about public space development. Children may also learn that their co-design contributions to a project are nested within complex networks of institutions, development priorities, relationships and (perhaps) competing stakeholder imperatives. ■