



Complete Streets application in Cuba Street, Palmerston North.

IMAGE COURTESY OF PALMERSTON NORTH CITY COUNCIL

# EVOLVING URBANSCAPES with 'Complete Streets'



Boffa Miskell principal **Cameron Martyn** has over 20 years of international experience in the delivery of 'Complete Streets' initiatives, including early involvement in national pilot schemes in London, to the most recent pandemic responses and application of State Design Guidance for Local Government clients in Melbourne.

**T**he way people live in and move around urban areas is always evolving. The many components that make up our towns and cities, including suburbs, neighbourhoods, streets, and the buildings that line them are part of a dynamic urban ecosystem shaped by many different social, economic, and environmental forces.

This constant change and evolution mean the way in which communities and Local Government make decisions around complex urban environments also needs to progress and respond.

While there are many positive and enjoyable benefits of population growth, more people living, working, and moving around in urban areas, coupled with the constraints of our infrastructure, means competition for space, congestion and crowding is likely to increase – particularly during peak times.

Although these outcomes are (sometimes) tolerated or considered a trade-off for living in a dynamic urban environment, pressure and overcrowding significantly impacts the form and function of places – access to services,



IMAGE COURTESY OF CYCLEHOOP.COM.

**Above: Parklet in Hammersmith and Fulham which won the Best Innovation category in the UK Healthy Streets Awards 2017.**

**Below: Complete Streets example from Wheaton, Illinois – the Downtown Plan identified strategic creation of new public spaces including the transformation of a section of angled parking into a permanent public plaza for outdoor dining and events.**



IMAGE COURTESY OF LAND8.COM.

jobs and homes can be challenging; air and noise pollution increases; physical and mental health is at risk; and liveability is decreased.

### A better integrated approach

Roads and streets are the lifeblood of local and regional economies and occupy a large proportion of any urban area. Aside from performing a critical functional role, streets equally provide an important contribution to the character of a place as well as foster business activity and community connections.

Increasing land use intensity brings a range of competing demands on public space, and there is a growing understanding that we need to consider how to restore a balance in the role of streets between movement requirements and their role as vibrant, diverse places where different users, with individual needs interact.

While population and economic growth demonstrates steady growth rates, public investment in a high-quality public realm must maintain pace with the emerging demand for climate-change response, changing demographics and social behaviours and better walking, cycling and public transport options.

This change in approach represents a paradigm shift in thinking and provides an opportunity to pursue a broader integrated planning process where public (road) space design responds to surrounding land use intensification and change, environmental indicators, and the aspirations of the community.

### The 'Complete Streets' concept

Complete Streets is the name given to this method of road space planning and design that has emerged over the past decade. The Complete Streets movement has stemmed from a

growing desire to better recognise streets as public spaces and holistically plan and design streets to support comfortable, well-functioning mobility while putting people first.

Popularised by the NACTO (National Association of City Transportation Officials) Guidelines in North America, this approach and other similar design guides have now been implemented in over 300 regions around the world. Many iterations of this concept exist from 'Complete' streets, 'Liveable' streets, 'Streets for all', 'Friendly' streets to 'Healthy streets'.

Each are based on the same premise of centring people's well-being and quality of life in all road interventions and projects. These initiatives understand that streets are the fabric of urban environments and directly shape the liveability, health, and prosperity of communities.

### Defining the difference

Connectivity and mobility are essential for cities and regions to thrive, most of our towns and cities have grown around the ability to be easily accessed by private vehicles, with ample road width and intersection capacity, plenty of car parking (often an over-supply) and direct pathways providing vehicle priority.

Complete Streets are underpinned by the belief that streets are for everyone. From an access and movement perspective, Complete Streets consider and balance the needs of all users including pedestrians, people who ride, take public transport and drive.

This approach does not seek to disenfranchise or disadvantage private vehicle users, but rather looks to adopt careful urban design and space planning within the road reserve to ensure that safe, convenient, and attractive travel options are available for all.

The role of vehicles in providing access and travel choice for some members of the community, for servicing, emergency response and public transport is still recognised



Above: Complete Streets considerations. Source: Movement and Place - Urban Road and Street Design Guide, Department of Transport, Victoria, Australia 2021.

as important to a well-functioning urban centre, but traffic engineering is no longer the primary, or only, design consideration.

## The Complete Streets look

Complete streets do not exist in isolation, they respond to and influence their land use and network context both present and future. As such, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions or interventions for good road and street design.

On complete streets the safety of all users is essential. They are places where everyone feels safe and comfortable and where road injuries and fatalities are minimised. Complete Streets incorporate measures to encourage safer road user behaviour and that reduce the likelihood, severity, and consequence of conflict between all users.

Designing roads and streets that cater to the elderly, children and people with mobility impairments benefits everyone. Improvements to wayfinding, walkability, access to public transport and providing opportunities for social interaction and civic participation are good for the wider community and fosters independence, social connection, safety, and comfort for all.

This approach also allows flexibility in planning for changes in urban mobility, and the best space and infrastructure response to emerging technologies such as electric scooters and bicycles, on-demand travel (such as Uber), last-mile delivery services, drones, and autonomous vehicles.

## Delivering the concept

Complete Streets planning can be incorporated at a range of scales from regional and structure plans to master planning and local neighbourhood plans.

The process starts with identifying the desired future role of each part of the road network through a Movement and Place assessment, which looks to balance aspirations around providing essential corridors for moving people and goods from A to B, and important public spaces where everyday life unfolds.

Classifying the street into a future 'type' then guides the appropriate design options and response. This will usually

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include a conversation with the community and exploring alternative street configurations, cross sections, and elements in the context of diverse neighbourhood character and image.

There are several examples of LGA's and roading authorities providing design guidance directly related to achieving Complete Streets and broader road network outcomes, including the Auckland Transport Urban Street and Road Design Guide and Waka Kotahi 'One Network Framework' planning approach.

Successful planning and delivery of Complete Streets requires a broad range of skills and expertise, which brings in transport and movement planning as a factor of urban design rather than an extension of transport engineering.

Transport planning expertise needs to be combined with strong urban design, land use planning and stakeholder engagement skills to guide and assist Local Government clients in creating great urban place and community outcomes.

## Complete Street experience learnings

The Covid public health and economic crisis has allowed and, in some instances, forced cities to experiment with the use of streets for temporary accommodation of recreation, events, dining, protest, school, and as spaces for the public to enjoy time outdoors. This has enabled an acceleration of the Complete Street approach and provided LGA's with valuable lessons in implementation.

While the Complete Streets approach is being rapidly embedded in public space and infrastructure planning across New Zealand, there are key lessons that can be learnt from local and overseas project experience to assist in successful project realisation.

Engaging and partnering with a range of stakeholders (government agencies, traders, sustainable transport advocates, community group and elected representatives, public transport operators etc) around identifying a shared vision, then agreeing on priorities for the allocation of space to effectively achieve the desired future outcomes within a complex urban, social, and political environment brings a range of challenges. **LG**