



TAUPŌ TOWN CENTRE TRANSFORMATION

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Taupō is one of the North Island's most-visited destinations for New Zealanders and international tourists. Playing host to dozens of events each year, and with a relatively small local population compared to the influx of visitors, ad hoc development of the town centre had focussed on providing accommodation and lacked a cohesive plan. Additionally, State Hwy 1 passed right through the heart of the town.

The East Taupō Arterial (ETA) Bypass, in 2010, redirected freight and through-traffic away from the lakefront. This was the catalyst for the Taupō Town Centre Transformation project, which reimagined the town centre as a place that celebrated local history, was people-centric, and better connected with the world-class landscape.

"The majority of heavy transport uses the ETA," says Taupō District Council's Andy Taylor. "But there was still a four-lane highway running through the town and along the lakefront adjacent to our retail and hospitality areas. This meant that the Tongariro Domain was cut off from the town for pedestrians, the lakefront had cars running through it, and the best spot in town was noisy and dangerous – not exactly conducive to events."

Rerouting cross-town traffic has reconnected the CBD with the Tongariro Domain and lakefront, while the addition of a wide shared-use pathway on Tongariro Street is safer for cyclists and pedestrians, and links through to the Great Lake Pathway.

These changes mean the CBD is now more adaptable and user-friendly for events and an influx of tourists.

"The main problems to solve [on the site] were the rerouting of traffic and how that new traffic flow would work, as well as striking the right balance between car parking and supporting walkability with public pedestrian- and cycle-friendly spaces," says Andy. "Importantly, we wanted to address the lack of visibility of mana whenua and include strong elements representing our iwi partners."

Landscape architect Blair Clinch of Boffa Miskell says, "Our design response is based on solutions and amenities that quickly transform to serve a range of events. For example, the new roundabout at Te Heuheu Street and Storey Place provides effective traffic management and flow during events, along with the ability to close-off southward traffic to the lakefront if needed."

The improved pedestrian connection between the town centre, lakefront and Domain allows for the creation of an event precinct with expansive lawn and seating areas for spectator and supporter viewing. The lakefront shared path can provide bidirectional movement for race events and a wider traffic-free zone that can serve as an event start-finish line, gathering and awards zone.

The transformation also highlights the identity of local iwi Ngāti Tuwharetoa, which had very little evidence before.

The design team worked with local artist Kingi Pitiroi to ensure that Taupō's unique heritage is embedded into

public spaces in a way that made stories accessible for locals and visitors alike and supports the overall desire for a strong and cohesive connection between the open spaces and the hospitality businesses along the waterfront.

"There was early engagement with iwi from the inception of the project, on the part of Council," says Blair. "Once the design team got involved, it became a collaborative exploration of how the cultural heritage, associations and storytelling could be a fundamental influence on the entire town centre transformation... and not just an embellishment."

Heritage and culture are embedded within the new design, emphasising the connections that the tangata (local people) have to the whenua (place). A large Atea space with sculptural installations at the centre of Lake Terrace, traditionally carved pou, mauri stones and other features, will shine a light on the importance of Taupō and the strong values and associations held by Ngāti Tuwharetoa iwi to the whenua (land), maunga (local mountains), roto (Lake Taupō) and awa (Waikato River) and tributaries. This will add a deeper dimension to the Taupō Town Centre transformation.

"The Atea is a place for people to enjoy, while also providing Ngāti Tuwharetoa, a place to use for iwi-specific ceremonies," says Andy.

The central Atea space includes references to the tributaries that feed Lake Taupō, with the cultural design features representative of the historical

and enduring associations with the waters of Lake Taupō, its tributaries and the Waikato River mouth. The alignment of the Atea space provides a strong visual connection to Lake Taupō and the maunga beyond.

Council sought input from the various event organisers and engaged with stakeholders in all major events that the project directly impacted – from the Cycle Challenge and Iron Man through to the Taupō Christmas Parade.

The Taupō Town Centre transformation has addressed many of the long-standing concerns of residents, who were often inconvenienced by the logistics of large-scale events. It's also brought improvements to walking and shopping opportunities, and enjoying the hospitality of their own town. A new playground, wider and higher-quality footpaths, additional dining spaces for cafes and restaurants and new amenity planting are all a part of the project.

"Taupō has to serve the adventure tourism industry, which is central to the economy, but it also has to be a pleasant place for its residents," says Blair.

"Being adaptable and dynamic was the main design driver. We were always trying to find a balance between



different needs, from pedestrians and parking, day-to-day use and big events and celebrating the amazing scenery, while looking after the practical aspects of moving people around and through a town," Blair adds.

"Most New Zealand towns still have car-centric designs instead of being focussed on people. The Taupō Town Centre transformation aims to make sure we have a pedestrian-friendly, safe and economically vibrant business

district, and hosting events in the heart of our town is a very important part of that," says Andy.

"We can keep the day-to-day town centre services and businesses functioning for locals during events, as the traffic is now routed around the CBD. While some residents do find the large events challenging, we very much recognise their importance to our town, and we love to welcome visitors here." ■

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