

Rethinking Te Aro in the 1910s

James Jacob, Heritage New Zealand

ABSTRACT: Wellington's Te Aro neighbourhood is particularly notable for both its broad expanse of relatively flat land and for its rectilinear grid of streets and associated superblocks in a city otherwise known for its hills and irregular road system. Over the course of the nineteenth-century after the start of European settlement in 1840, the town acres within the superblocks of Te Aro were more intensively developed in myriad ways, resulting in a haphazard arrangement of worker dwellings, commercial premises, and industrial outfits aligned along largely private lanes and alleys. With the notable exception of the street grid, nearly all vestiges of this initial, Victorian-era development were progressively destroyed during the twentieth century.

Although most of the architectural and urban reinvention of Te Aro did not occur until the decades following World War II, acknowledgment of the major factors that would ultimately contribute to this process - traffic congestion, the low quality of the existing building stock, and a strong shift away from residential functions - became more and more emphasised during the 1910s. A writer for the *Evening Post* in 1913 imagined the neighbourhood just seven years in the future: "the dingy wooden boxes on Te Aro Flat will have given place to handsome warehouses and shops and factories ... The problem of traffic, already threatening trouble ... is certainly a task for the ablest engineer nowadays to suggest a way out" (Autos "The Future" p 3). This degree of optimism for rapid change was quickly tempered by the realities of world war and, in retrospect, the 1910s can be interpreted as a period of incubation for ideas about architecture urban planning in Te Aro that would only come to fruition later in the century.

In January 1913 as part of an exercise imagining Wellington just seven years in the future, a writer for the *Evening Post* also described some of the present character of the Te Aro neighbourhood. By 1920:

the dingy wooden boxes on Te Aro Flat will have given place to handsome warehouses and shops and factories - not the smoky, grimy places of to-day, but clean, bright places with machinery operated by electricity ... The problem of traffic, already threatening trouble, will have been surmounted.¹

As made evident in this passage, in 1913 "dingy wooden boxes" carpeted Te Aro; the phrase referred to the assortment of

predominantly modest vernacular worker dwellings that were in an increasingly poor condition. These houses lined both principal streets as well as irregular private lanes and alleys that were created as individual owners subdivided their original town acres.

If the low architectural and construction quality of the building stock and the incomprehensible patterns of subdivision were not enough for period commentators, the neighbourhood was also increasingly seen as being plagued with the "problem of traffic." Streets - even the arrow straight ones of Te Aro's rectilinear street grid - could no longer adequately cope with increased traffic.

Wellington's streets were laid-out in the early-Victorian decades when the nascent settlement numbered only a few thousand people and they moved principally on foot or in horse-drawn vehicles. By 1911, when Wellington was the focus of a region with a population of nearly 200,000, the streets could no longer accommodate the volume of traffic that was made all the more complicated by increasing numbers of motorised vehicles.²

In the end, the realities of such things as the costs of redevelopment, individual property rights, the embryonic state of modern,

² Statistics New Zealand "Results of a Census of the Dominion of New Zealand" np.

¹ Autos "The Future" p 3.

integrated urban planning, and the tragedies of, and preoccupation with, World War I tempered the optimism for rapid change exhibited by the *Evening Post* writer in 1913. Most of the architectural and urban reinvention of Te Aro would not occur until much later in the century. Still, the 1910s are an important period for documenting how aspects of the neighbourhood's urban character were becoming popularly codified as problematic, in particular three specific areas: buildings, functions, and roads.

Background

In considering the conundrum of urban development in Te Aro in 1964, British-born planner and architect Gordon Stephenson noted that, without taking into consideration its history, a planner "can only surmise that the development of Te Aro Flat got off to a bad start."³ Through history's lens, the assumption is both true and untrue. On paper, the area had auspicious beginnings with Wellington's original plan of 1840—it was notably flat and one of the few places where the generous, rational street grid made complete sense in an otherwise hilly locale.

³ Stephenson *Report on Town Planning for Wellington City* p 12.

That said, in addition to continued opposition by Māori residents on the south side of the harbour on account of deceit in land sales, the low-lying locale was not entirely advantageous for development of the sort envisioned by the European arrivals. Crisscrossed with streams and watercourses, the flat to rolling landscape of Te Aro was predominately swampy and thick with vegetation.⁴ Earthquakes in 1848 and 1855 raised some of the land, yet at the same time terminated aspirations for commercial development along a shipping canal and basin on the east side of Te Aro. Still, the neighbourhood prospered as a commercial node within the nascent town. It also grew over the course of the nineteenth century as the city's principal working-class residential neighbourhood, as town acres within the street grid's superblocks, became more intensively developed, but with no set scheme for subdivision.

Newspaper coverage of Te Aro in the late-nineteenth century and very early-twentieth century fell into two broad categories: articles that positively highlighted the march of urban progress and articles, both sympathetic as

⁴ Menzies "'Progress' v 'Preservation'" np.

well as often moralistic, about the unhealthy character and characters of a locale increasingly thought of as a slum. Among the former, coverage positioned new development as an indicator of prosperity and civic pride. These projects included reclamation, wharfs, and warehouses along the waterfront; commercial development—both wholesale and retail—in the blocks further back from the waterfront and along Cuba and Willis streets; and also large individual projects such as the Te Aro railway station, the Destructor, the Te Aro Baths, and the Te Aro branch of the Post Office. These elements of Te Aro were part of Wellington's continued modernisation, concept of itself for the future, and an integral part of civic boosterism. As expressed in the *Free Lance* in 1904 about the need for a post office in Te Aro:

in this highly-civilised city, travelling as it is towards municipal perfection, we should have all the conveniences which our proud position as the Empire City entitles us to.⁵

Removed from the waterfront and away from Cuba Street, Te Aro was not looking to the future and was mired in an insalubrious present. The neighbourhood often featured in

⁵ "A Te Aro Want" p 6.

articles highlighting the inadequacy of drains, sewers, and domestic sanitary arrangements in Wellington, which resulted in widespread disease. Typhoid killed 142 residents between 1889 and 1900, the end date not coincidentally a year following the completion of the first substantial, engineered sewerage system.⁶ Articles featuring public health concerns and investigations overlapped with the often sensational and classist journalism that depicted slum life to a bourgeois readership. As noted by historian Ben Schrader, such "representations were ... often contrived for readers' entertainment, to astonish and titillate."⁷ Whether scientific or sensational in origin and viewpoint, each actual or armchair venture into Te Aro familiarised Wellingtonians with the condition of the majority of the neighbourhood that existed beyond the civic and commercial zones. Often tainted and shaped by forms of prejudice, the information presented in newspapers about Te Aro tended to overlook the existence of an established community in favour of reporting on the more abstract problems of poverty and living conditions. In doing so, however, they also documented characteristics of Te Aro that

⁶ Schrader *The Big Smoke* pp 320, 322.

⁷ Schrader *The Big Smoke* p 340.

seemed increasingly out of line or thought to be an impediment to spreading the positive narrative of Wellington's continued growth and urban evolution.

Buildings

With notably more mixed-use areas at the northern and southern extents of Te Aro, and along Cuba and Willis streets, most of the neighbourhood in the 1910s contained the houses of the working poor and working class. Photographs indicate a range of house types present in Te Aro at the time—from early settler cottages, to rows of barrack-like worker cottages, to more substantial two-storey dwellings. Despite the near universality of detached houses, many of which were only a single-storey, the neighbourhood was exceedingly dense.

A 1912 article in the *New Zealand Times* described the eastern part of Te Aro:

Perhaps the most crowded area of Wellington is all that district bounded by Courtenay place, Kent terrace, Buckle street, and Taranaki street. Blind alleys abound, houses are huddled together promiscuously; backyards are scarce worth the name.⁸

⁸ "Wellington Slums" p 1.

The writer's consideration of the western part of the neighbourhood was no less dismal. Not far from St Peter's Church at the corner of Willis and Ghuznee streets was "an inconspicuous and nameless right-of-way" that featured a "dingy "dwelling," with four rooms and a scullery" and a "dirty confined backyard" with no greenery.⁹ To add insult to injury, "just at the back of the house was another similar dwelling, quite as squalid and cheerless." Elsewhere in Te Aro, pedestrians along what was probably Cuba Street

will notice what looks like passage-ways between buildings ... One of these small cul-de-sacs ... is almost overshadowed by a high brick warehouse ... Three small cottages are packed into this alley, with a cribbed backyard about the area of a table.¹⁰

The urban landscape throughout Te Aro in the 1910s, then, was crowded with small houses jammed in along roads, laneways, and alleys that were generally in poor condition, had very little outdoor space, and more generally lacked "cheerfulness."¹¹ As if the living situation could be any worse, many of the houses appear to have been overcrowded and the rents for them consumed a

⁹ "Wellington Slums" p 1.

¹⁰ "Wellington Slums" p 1.

¹¹ "Wellington Slums" p 1.

considerable amount of a weekly wage.

In absolute terms, Te Aro had become an archetypical slum according to period standards of the world's modern cities. Yet, the period perception of Te Aro's decrepitude was also relative and the neighbourhood seemed especially retrograde when viewed against the backdrop of contemporary development in central Wellington. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and further accelerating after the turn-of-the-twentieth century, Wellington found itself in the throes of reinvention as the comparatively small-scale timber buildings of the colonial city gave way to more substantial and ornate architect-designed edifices.¹² Large, solid, decorative, and modern these new buildings not only reinvented the neighbourhood adjacent to Te Aro, but similar buildings also began transforming the streetscape within Te Aro along Manners Street, Willis Street, Courtenay Place, and Cuba Street. A sense of the increased scale, architectural expression, and robust construction of the new commercial and civic buildings could only have been heightened when compared,

¹² Mew & Humphris *Raupo to Deco* pp 114-118, 140-150; see also: ""Moving Day"" p 4.

perhaps unfairly, to the aging, timber residential stock of Te Aro. A 1911 feature in the *Dominion* on the redevelopment of a property along Lambton Quay offers insight into how the contrast would have been perceived:

in the recently-demolished wooden buildings on Lambton Quay ... an old land-mark has been removed. The old buildings were planned ... in 1875, and when erected were considered a very valuable addition to the architecture of Lambton Quay. Long ago, however, time had marked them as buildings of a past age, and the growth of the city around them had dwarfed them almost to insignificance.¹³

It is not difficult to comprehend that this perspective could easily have been extrapolated to include the entirety of residential Te Aro.

Functions

The primary association of Te Aro with what a writer for the *Evening Post* described in 1918 as "rows and lanes of filthy huts not fit for human habitation" indicates that despite its commercial precincts and thoroughfares, the neighbourhood continued to be comprehended as a residential one.¹⁴ There

¹³ "Then and Now" p 5.

¹⁴ Searchlight "Congested Areas [letter to editor]" p 2.

was near total agreement that the housing stock of Te Aro was shockingly substandard by the 1910s, yet few proposals envisaged residential redevelopment as part of its future. An article in the *Evening Post* predicted in 1910:

Te Aro Flat is to be changed beyond present belief inside a dozen years ... Many acres of excellent building ground, in the heart of Greater Wellington, are now covered with houses of drab appearance. ... In twenty years ... the shop and office and warehouse area will have to be greatly expanded.¹⁵

Seven years later a writer in the *Dominion* decried the lack of children's play space in Te Aro and stated: "I am afraid it is useless to mention the need to our city councillors, as they would reply that in no time Te Aro will not be residential."¹⁶ Finally, regarding a proposed concept for redevelopment by the city engineer in 1919, an article in the *Evening Post* explained that the plan

would eliminate large portions of the Te Aro and Mount Cook districts, which are now regarded as neither healthy nor desirable from a residential point of view.¹⁷

Residential Te Aro seemed on the brink of

¹⁵ ""Moving Day"" p 4.

¹⁶ Imprimatur "Vivian Street Traffic" p 6.

¹⁷ "A Big Scheme: City Engineer's Proposals" p 8.

elimination in the 1910s. It was a large expanse of flat ground at the centre of a city very much lacking that particular asset and it was already expanding as a commercial or industrial centre in its northern portions and along the Cuba and Willis street spines. Furthermore, while Te Aro understandably became a vast neighbourhood of workers in the walking city of the nineteenth century, the tram network extending further out into the suburbs provided viable alternatives for the same demographic in the twentieth century. Reporting in 1919 during New Zealand's first Town-Planning Conference a writer for the *Evening Post* noted that a speaker used Haining Street as a case study for why it might not be logical to rehabilitate or rebuild certain areas understood to be slums if they "will [eventually] be absorbed into the industrial area."¹⁸ The journalist concluded that regardless of whether Haining Street, and more broadly Te Aro, became fully or partially industrial, the replanning of Te Aro could only occur in tandem with the planning of new suburban areas and transit links to them, both of which would be necessary to accommodate displaced workers from Te

¹⁸ "Better Homes, Better Placed" p 6.

Aro.¹⁹

Roads

Public discussions about the future of Te Aro frequently pondered the problem of traffic congestion. A 1908 article titled "Our City Traffic: Coping with Increased Congestion," explained:

Wellington's streets were made for a young town ... Now, the city, with its ever-growing, hustling traffic, has out-grown its streets. And the traffic cannot stop growing. And the streets do not grow with it ... Street widening looks like the only solution to the difficulty.²⁰

The challenge presented by road widening was two-pronged: it was expensive to compensate owners and required a level of urban planning that did not yet exist. At a September 1920 meeting of the city council,

Councillor P. Fraser ... advocated a comprehensive scheme for the improvement of Te Aro flat. He pointed out that large buildings were being erected in some streets which might have to be widened in the future, when the council might be called upon to pay a considerable amount in compensation.²¹

As a solution, the mayor proposed that the

¹⁹ "Better Homes, Better Placed" p 6.

²⁰ "Our City Traffic" p 6.

²¹ "Te Aro Flat" p 7.

council be given the authority to identify roads that should be widened and require that any new construction be built "back to the new alignment."²²

Proposals for Te Aro were not limited only to improving existing roads, but also included the creation of new ones. In 1919, the *Evening Post* reported on the rumoured plan by the city engineer to build "a wide thoroughfare from the city" through Te Aro to Mount Cook, which "would be an ornament to the city, and the alterations it would necessitate, would do away with many of the most objectionable quarters."²³ The idea for this boulevard lingered for many years, and was particularly alluring after the construction of the National War Memorial and the Dominion Museum began, yet in the end it came to nothing.

Concepts of road planning also began to move beyond isolated schemes and projects and came to see Te Aro as the centre of a traffic network at the same time it transitioned from residential to non-residential functions. In 1923, the *Evening Post* referred to Te Aro as "the body of the octopus, and all roads to the

²² "Te Aro Flat" p 7.

²³ "A Big Scheme" p 8.

outlying portions of the city would branch off from that body."²⁴ The increased pressure on the roads with the ownership of motor vehicles and the continued growth of the southern and eastern suburbs made such an outlook logical, but the broader conceptualisation of the issue might have also been an indicator that ideas of modern integrated urban planning were starting to take hold in New Zealand. In May 1919, the first New Zealand Town-Planning Conference convened in Wellington. Much of the conference ruminated on the idea that garden cities on the British model could be a panacea for social ills rather than aggressively focusing on how to improve the existing urban landscape in New Zealand.²⁵ Still, even with mixed outcomes, the event worked towards solidifying support for comprehensive urban planning discussed piecemeal during the 1910s and earlier, and culminating at this stage with the landmark passage of the Town Planning Act in 1926.

Closing

Even with increased awareness of modern planning principles, the unique difficulties in

bringing urban order to Wellington remained. As clearly set out by the *Dominion* in 1911:

without the expenditure of vast sums town-planning can scarcely receive much consideration where the town is already built - jammed, packed tight between hills and harbour - as in the case of Wellington ... Admitting then that Wellington city could only be replanned at enormous expense - by sweeping away blocks of dwelling-houses, and pushing the street lines back, the attention must be turned to the next best thing - to make the best and most of what we have.²⁶

This approach, a mixture of pragmatism and limited scope, stymied significant change in Te Aro's buildings, functions, and roads for another generation and, even then, the neighbourhood's ingrained urban identity remained contrarian to the implementation of planning theories. Central and historic Te Aro, described as early as 1913 as no longer the end of the line, but the "heart of our city," continues to, still, resist attempts to impose urban order.²⁷

²⁴ "City Development" p 10.

²⁵ Schrader *The Big Smoke* pp 347-349.

²⁶ Sylvius "The City Beautiful" p 9.

²⁷ Jenkinson "Yesterday - To-day - To-morrow [letter to editor]" p 2.

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