

Paradoxically Urban

ANDREAS WESENER

Living in Paradox: A History of Urban Design across Kainga, Towns and Cities in New Zealand, Garth Falconer, Matakana: Blue Acres Press, 2015, ISBN: 978-0-473-30219-1 (paperback)

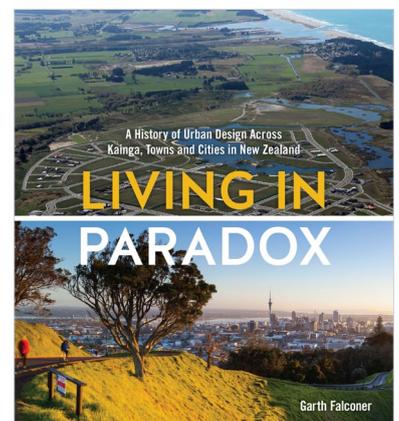
At more than 500 pages, it is a big book that Garth Falconer presents us with. This is hardly surprising considering that a comprehensive work on urban design history in New Zealand has been missing. Falconer's approach to the topic is well reflected in the book's title. The notion of 'paradox' echoes the challenges and tensions the author encountered while scratching off the thin layer of paradisiac veneer that has been wilfully and often strategically applied to this newest of New World countries. His critical deconstruction of utopian and social visions that accompanied the first settlements uncovers those exploitative and profit-driven processes that have dominated the comparably short but eventful history of urban development in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Falconer unveils the origins of deeply ingrained and romanticised preferences for Arcadian semi-rural lifestyles that have prevented any serious commitment to urbanity and created a strange bias towards the city that is noticeable today: 'New Zealand's preference for the middle landscape led to low-density residential neighbourhoods, non-urban cores and the erosion of the natural and rural landscape' (p 18). While the vast majority of New Zealanders live in urban areas, 'much of New Zealand has become an urban "anywhere", with little that is distinctive' (p 19).

Falconer explores the sociocultural background that flourished in relative geographical isolation and influenced the urban development of New Zealand through to today. His discussion helps the reader to grasp some of those typical anti-urban sentiments that seem odd from an outsider's perspective but are frequently encountered. Falconer's focus on specific inherent paradoxes that characterise historical and contemporary processes and products of town planning and urban design in New Zealand is therefore not only highly informative, but also particularly useful for readers who did not grow up in this country (like the author of this review) but try to make sense of the peculiarities they encounter.

The book includes 13 chapters and an introduction. Following a short discussion on the general geographical context, the book follows a fairly structured chronological order – starting with early Māori settlements and ending with Auckland's Unitary Plan – which seems appropriate for a historical work. However, each chapter has also a specific theme that informs the discussion

Andreas Wesener is Senior Lecturer in Urban Design, School of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design, PO Box 85084 Lincoln University, Christchurch 7647, Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand. Telephone: +64-3-423-0460 Email: Andreas.wesener@lincoln.ac.nz



and often breaks with the historical chronology, leaping in time and space to accommodate comparative considerations according to a topic or theme. For example, in chapter 1 ('Lies on the land'), the section 'Maximising land and tourism' covers swiftly a period that spans Prince Albert's visit to Rotorua's famous, and now destroyed, Pink and White Terraces in 1870, the 'New Zealand 100% pure' campaign and twenty-first century Middle Earth tourism. The next section goes on to discuss 'camp cities', again across decades and centuries.

While such an order can be useful with regard to clustering topics and themes, it also creates some repetition across the book and is confusing at times when the reader is looking for particular information, for example, about a place, event or process within its historical context. Likewise, information on specific New Zealand cities is spread throughout the book. For example, the founding of Christchurch is described in chapter 2 ('Getting connected') under the subheading 'Creating Christchurch', the 1877 map of the central city is found in chapter 3 ('Dreams at a distance'), the (early) architectural history is described in chapter 8 ('Three curious cities') and the city's twenty-first century history, including the 2010–2011 earthquakes, is found in chapter 12 ('Christchurch: Response and opportunities'). It is also odd that detailed descriptions of pre-European Māori settlements appear anti-chronologically following several sections on European colonial history (including ruminations on post-colonial theory), and quite late in the book, in chapter 5 ('Palisades and picket fences').

Another example is the history of town planning in New Zealand, which is told generally although not entirely chronologically in chapter 9 ('Shakers and movers'), whereas the biographies of some important figures in New Zealand town planning and architecture are found across the book. For example, William Mason's life and work are split between chapter 3 ('Dreams at a distance') and chapter 10 ('Shapers and interventionists'). The titles of chapters are catchy but not self-explaining and the reader needs the index to find subject-specific information. While the theme-oriented concept that structures the book enables comparison, it also leads to fragmentation and makes the search for interrelated information a time-consuming exercise.

The book covers a lot of ground, including topics from urban ecology to detailed biographical accounts of New Zealand's state architects and urban planners and their roles within the almighty Ministry of Works. Such a breadth of information is, on the one hand, useful for readers who are not familiar with the New Zealand context, or are new to urban design and her sister disciplines (architecture, planning and landscape architecture). On the other hand, those who have some familiarity with urban design concepts and best-practice precedents might not get much out of the sometimes overly descriptive smorgasbord of topics. Excursions into theory and urban design paradigms such as landscape urbanism remain rather short and often disconnected from New Zealand precedents.

Due to its mainly descriptive character, the book does not create much analytical content that is of direct use for scholars and practitioners. For example, it is quite common for historical urban design studies to apply urban morphological analysis – with the help of figure-ground maps – to illustrate and reflect on the historical spatial development and growth of cities. Analytical maps of major New Zealand cities such as Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch between the

1850s and the twenty-first century would be of direct use to scholars, planners and designers who need to understand the historical spatial development of cities before proposing new urban design or planning concepts.

Falconer is an active landscape architect practitioner. Not surprisingly, we find a considerable amount of his own work (and the work of his companies) in the book. This is sometimes refreshing and informative, but at times it is too much. For example, the author's own alternative urban design proposal for Christchurch's rebuild might be of interest to some readers. However, in the context of a book that covers broadly the entire history of urban design in New Zealand, Falconer's unrealised design proposals might be negligible. Likewise, lengthy details about the development of Auckland's latest planning framework, including many diagrammatic illustrations from Falconer's own design company (that are not always well explained), do not make the final chapter necessarily a page-turner.

On the up side, the book is generally well referenced as to be expected from a historical work, even if there are parts (for example, chapter 2 from page 64) that could have used additional sources to support the largely descriptive historical details. The book is also well illustrated. However, figures are not numbered (for example, figure 1), and have no direct link with the text. As a consequence, text and figures appear often detached or even unrelated. For example, the image of 'leaky homes' on page 94 does not seem to correspond with the surrounding text, which is about urban ecology in Christchurch.

For some of the above-mentioned reasons, the book does not meet all the high standards of a scholarly publication – however, it does not claim to be one. Written from a practitioner's perspective, it comprises a broad range of valuable historical information on urban development and design in New Zealand. In addition, it provides a laudable critical sociopolitical discussion that demystifies some of the most pertinent Kiwi myths (for example, the 'green image') by presenting us with an urban reality that has not been whitewashed or branded. It is a discussion that focuses on the many challenges and opportunities encountered by New Zealand towns and cities. One of Falconer's goals is 'to understand what the New Zealand City is and to design it and live in it with ease' (p 22). While the book does not provide all the answers, it is certainly a step towards a better understanding of urban development and design in Aotearoa New Zealand.