



THE BROADSHEET OF THE AUCKLAND BRANCH OF THE NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

**BLOCK**

## **You want a landscape? Take a drive in the country.** **James Mooney gets stuck into 'Mrkusich: The Art of Transformation'**

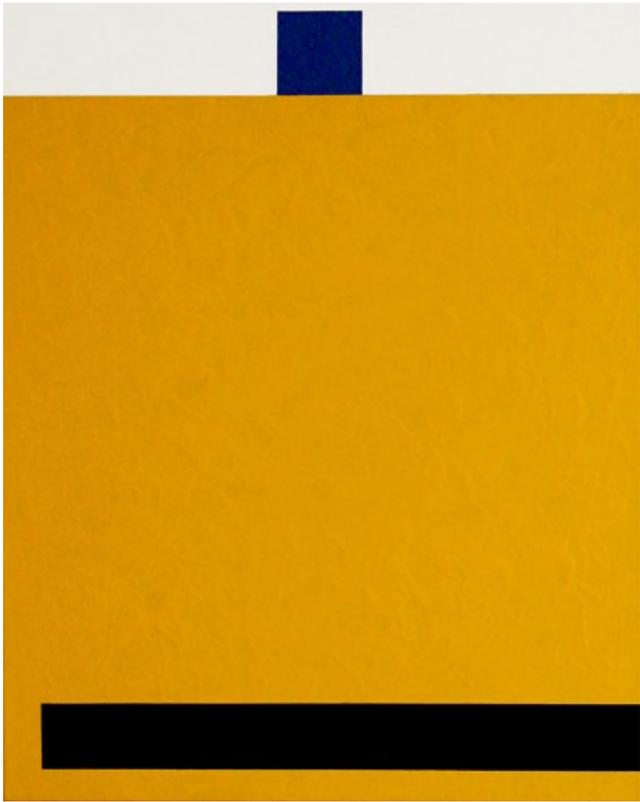
Several years ago, while passing time rummaging through one of the local second hand bookstores, I came across a copy of small paperback on the work of Milan Mrkusich tucked away amid the dusty tomes on the creations of the old masters. Published in 1972, the catalogue accompanied the first of two retrospectives on Mrkusich's work at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Over the years I'd made an effort to catch the artist's shows at Sue Crockford Gallery but I'd never before, or since, come across any publications on Mrkusich. That was until the publication this year of 'Mrkusich: The Art of Transformation' by Alan Wright and Edward Hanfling on the Auckland University Press. At the time of print Mrkusich, now in his eighties, is an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to painting and an inaugural Arts Foundation of New Zealand Icon acknowledging a career that now spans over 62 years. In answer to the question of why it's taken so long; Wright and Hanfling say it "has a lot to do with the absence of obvious messages in his painting. They have proved impervious to the dominant ways in which artworks are 'read' in the New Zealand context".

Born in 1925, in Dargaville, Mrkusich was a contemporary of several other, perhaps better known, artists including Colin McCahon, Ralph Hotere and Gordon Walters. In 1949 he had his first solo show at an enlightened Auckland School of Architecture and in that same year established Brenner Associates together with Desmond Mullen and Stephen Jelichich. Strongly influenced by the Bauhaus the trio set out to provide a service able to solve any design problem with the conviction that "good design in every facet of the environment could enhance life, not just materially but also spiritually". Accordingly, over the ensuing nine years, the young Mrkusich involved himself in all manner of creative endeavours including house design, product display and colour consulting. But it was painting that would come to preoccupy him, from the symbolic works of the 1960s up to the pure abstractions of the 1970s and beyond. Unlike many of his contemporaries he was to turn his back on local content in favour of a more international modernism seen as "opposed to the rural regionalist ethos of New Zealand, where true New Zealand blokes might wield paintbrushes like pitchforks, and respond to the landscape directly and honestly." On such matters Mrkusich was quite clear; "You want a landscape? Take a drive in the country" he advised readers of the *Woman's Weekly*.

'Mrkusich: The Art of Transformation' features a detail of one of the 'Diagram' works of the 1960s on the hardcover's dust jacket. Spanning 230-odd pages the layout is clear and well thought out with the first half devoted to the 11 chapters of text and the second half to the wonderful colour plates of the selected works, a chronology, exhibition history and a thorough bibliography. Explanatory diagrams, photographs and images of additional works are generously dispersed throughout the text

and the inclusion of a number of gallery shots assists greatly in an appreciation of the paintings' size and relative scale as well as the artist's or curator's intentions as to the works' display. An appreciation of the subtle surfaces and colouration of the paintings is assisted by the excellent photography and reproduction on white satin paper stock. As you'd expect there are plenty of references to artists and artworks both local and overseas which flesh out the artistic context within which Mrkusich was working. Unfortunately only one of the works referred to is illustrated which leaves one relying either on the writers description or on one's knowledge of the works in question which all seems rather a big ask for an introductory text on a visual subject. Similarly I was a little disappointed that none of the local artists referred to appear to have been interviewed, in particular those for whom Mrkusich is touted as an influence such as Stephen Bambury or Ron Left.

*Continued on inside front cover...*



*Chromatic Series I, Yellow; 2003, 762 x 612mm, acrylic-vinyl on linen  
Courtesy of Sue Crockford gallery*

Continued from front cover...

In the preface we are told that the study seeks to “accommodate those who are looking for a broad introduction”. Wright and Hanfling do not claim this as a comprehensive study but rather a foundation “for those demanding a closer inspection and grittier level of discussion”. Further on they clarify their intention to provide an art historical account rather than a critical interpretation or explanation. Perhaps it is one of the challenges of a purely art historical account, eschewing criticism, to produce an engaging or absorbing text and I have to say that whilst the text is historically thorough it can, at times, be a little dull. The authors assert that “content has often been ignored in explanations of Mrkusich’s work in favour of form” which somewhat explains the recurring insistence on meaning or content in the work above all else. Representative of this is the discussion of the recent ‘Chinese Elements’ works wherein the authors provide what they themselves describe as a “dry decoding” of the works focused on the reference to “ideas found in Chinese texts of the fourth and third centuries BC”. One suspects, however, that there is more to these works and in particular one might argue that the book fails generally to adequately locate the works historically within an art theoretical framework. As Peter Leech points out, in ‘the Architecture of the Painted Surface’, it is Mrkusich’s grasp of or engagement with modernist painting and theory that sets him apart. The artist’s response to the key tenet of Clement Greenberg’s highly influential 1960 text ‘Modernist Painting’, that painting should “acknowledge the ‘flatness’ of the painting support”, is only briefly addressed although one might argue that it is Mrkusich’s encounter with Greenberg’s theories that would form the basis of an ongoing interest in the theoretical issues around modernist painting.

Mrkusich’s ongoing engagement with various aspects of the ‘designed’ environment are touched on throughout the book from his early work with Brenner Associates to his recent design for the glass spandrels at Te Papa; from Douglas Lloyd Jenkins’ suggestion that Mrkusich’s house “may have been New Zealand’s first modernist ‘integrated interior’” to Giles Reid’s observation, about the paintings hung in Mrkusich’s house, that the “wall’s presence is explored rather than being cast in the usual role of passive background”. In the final chapter this leads to one of the more intriguing passages in which the authors delve into a brief discussion of “the mediocrity and shoddiness that abounds in New Zealand’s urban spaces”. In this context the authors promote Mrkusich’s works as “demonstrations or exemplars for progress...They retain something of that concern with the architectural that can be traced back to Mrkusich’s years with Brenner Associates”. “Mrkusich’s paintings,” we are told, “often have a part-by-part kind of fracture that parallels the approach to urban design in New Zealand.” Even given the discussions of the artist’s wider involvement in ‘design’ there is little to prepare one for such an explicit connection between the paintings and the built environment although such speculation points to fertile grounds for further research; after all the history of modern art abounds with such all encompassing utopian visions. Furthermore it begs the question as to Mrkusich’s disavowal of local content.

In the end it’s a little frustrating and somewhat ironic that after 62 years, a lifetime’s work, we have only an ‘introduction’, however, it must be said that Wright, Hanfling, the publishers and those who assisted in the publication should be acknowledged for creating an important foundation. Certainly the book provides an indispensable reference for those seeking to better acquaint themselves with the works and offers much food for thought. In the meantime, if you want to see the real thing, I recommend a visit to the gallery. If you want a landscape, take a drive. JM

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## Shigeru Ban is Coming!

Thursday 17th September 2009  
As part of the UoA’s Fast Forward public lecture series

Shigeru Ban should need little advertising - since his experiments with paper construction in the 90’s Ban has been one of the global heavyweights of architecture, producing work that is socially, culturally, technologically and spatially inventive and extraordinary. More details to follow closer to the date.

## Have You Been Dallying in the Leafy Suburbs?

Writer Jenny Carlyon, who, along with Diana Morrow, wrote *Urban Village* (about Ponsonby) is writing a book about Remuera and Meadowbank. There is to be a section on architecture - including the significant houses of the last century, and the authors would also like to include contemporary work. They would like to talk to architects who have done work in the area with the possibility of including examples in the book. Please email Jenny if you have a completed project that you consider suitable for consideration. [jenny@carlyons.co.nz](mailto:jenny@carlyons.co.nz)



# Is Privacy the Devil of Modernism's Legacy?

## Aaron Sills Reviews Riken Yamamoto's Auckland Lecture

There was an interesting paradox in Riken Yamamoto's lecture held at the Maidment Theatre the other night. On the one hand was a view that 20th century Modernism had led to a society of separateness - families or individuals isolated from each other. He spoke of an earlier time when the social and physical structures of the Japanese village avoided this isolation. So far so New Urbanist you might think. On the other hand he contended architects have the responsibility to propose new and innovative ways of living, and then to deliver environments that facilitate these.

So while there may have been a hint of nostalgia in ideas of a golden past of social inclusiveness Mr Yamamoto's own work certainly did not follow the nostalgic practice of making new houses to look like they are straight out of a small 19th century New England town, as the likes of DPZ et al. are sometimes accused of.

No, his was a more diagrammatic than stylistic rendering of community - e.g. if you want to encourage interaction between occupants of a house and the occupants of the street outside, just bring the rooms to the edge of the site and make big walls of frameless glass facing the outside world. This was the scenario with the "Dragon Lilly House" where a number of U-shaped rooms were placed with their open ends facing out towards the edges of the corner site, leaving a hard-surfaced interstitial common space in the centre of the house that may have been more suited to 5 year-olds riding their scooters than adult habitation.



Dragon Lilly's House: Should you too live like this?

Yamamoto's use of glass to disappear the barriers between citizens continued in projects such as Shinonome Canal Court where the SOHO (small office/home office) units all had glass walls and doors to the access corridors. To my (admittedly western and slightly prudish) way of thinking this made more sense for the people who utilised the front room as a workroom or office than for those who furnished it with television and couch from where they could wave to their neighbours, either across the corridor or walking past a few centimetres away. Also having glass

walls between living and bathroom made these ideal for the voyeur. I can only guess that the Japanese culture, with its history of living in houses partitioned by shoji screens, must be immune to the need for physical controls of privacy.

The question, of course, is whether glass walls facilitate, or just represent, openness? There is something about fixed planes of glass that makes them less connecting and less absent than they might appear in a photo - maybe because you can't easily hold a conversation through them.

Another use of glass that I slightly struggled with was on the Yokosuka Museum where it formed a (seemingly flat) roof. This glass membrane served to protect an inner skin of white-painted steel from the salt winds of its maritime setting. The museum itself seemed to have a beautiful light and spatially interesting interior, and there was a certain poetic logic to the use of shipbuilding technology for an institution that overlooked a strait frequented by many ships. In a way that is reminiscent of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart the building is integrated into its landscape so that citizens of the area are able to walk across the roof and down through the building without having to buy a entry ticket. This also gives the opportunity to admire the glass roof that was not particularly apparent from the interior.

From glass roofs to grass roofs (not so very different when said in a Japanese accent) - the placing of public parks on the roof of buildings was another theme that figured in the work of Yamamoto. The Fussa City Hall and Namics Techno Core projects both featured grassy knolls atop single level buildings with further tower and 'mushroom' building elements protruding through. This allowed Yamamoto to have his cake and eat it too with active street frontages for the entire block while still allowing a Modernist towers-in-a-park composition. The curvaceous results were fun and, at least in the City Hall project, the public were allowed to use the rooftop as they liked. With grass and paving painted onto what was probably a relatively thin roof there seemed to be little desire for trees.

Before Riken Yamamoto began his presentation Andrew Barrie introduced him by pointing out the changing demographic trends in Japan that see the average household size around two persons (so therefore a significant number of single occupancies) and insufficient procreation by the population to maintain the population size. He pointed out that Yamamoto was not simply a stylist but engaged at a deeper level through interrogation of the social and anthropological context within which he built. Yamamoto himself chose to end his presentation with a challenge to the architects through innovation in living environments. On TV last night there was a short item marking the 90th birthday of the Bauhaus design school. I can't help wondering if people back then felt similarly bewildered about ideas such as open-plan living as I felt listening to Yamamoto-san explain how giving your neighbours a good gander into your living room is going to help combat social isolation. AS



The Gutenberg Bible, Johannes Gutenberg, c1455 (enlargement).

## PRINT DESIGN CLASSICS #13

Johannes Gutenberg, born c1398 in Germany, made one of the most important technical advances in history when he invented a system for mechanical printing. The system combined a process for mass-producing metal moveable type with the use of oil-based ink and a wooden printing press, similar to the screw olive and wine presses of the period.

Up until this time the method of book production in Europe was the handwritten manuscript.

The Gutenberg Bible was one of the first books printed in Europe. It is believed that 180 copies were produced - 135 on paper and 45 on vellum.

The black text was printed in ink and in most cases the rubrics (the headings) were later added by hand, as was illuminated decoration - the amount of which presumably depended on how much each buyer could afford.

Despite being an early example of the process it is notable for the high quality of its ink, paper (imported from Italy) and printing. The design was simply two columns of justified type set in a heavy blackletter style font with a large margin.

Gutenberg's invention did not make him rich, but it laid the foundation for the commercial mass production of books affordable to more.



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# The Fine Print

## Combined Excerpts from the Reports to NZIA Auckland Branch meeting of July 2009.

CHAIR'S REPORT: Christina van Bohemen

### *NZIA Auckland Awards:*

Mario Madayag agreed to be convenor. Jury includes Kevin Brewer, Daniel Marshall, Melanie Lochore and the lay juror is Ludo Campbell Reid.

### *Plan Change 163:*

ACC has issued draft plans for the Residential 2 lots to be included in the non demolition rule. Jeremy Salmond reassessed streets where objections to the 2008 maps were made. NZIA representatives still have some concerns and met with Jeremy and Penny Pirrit on Friday. Work is on going and we have to made a formal response to ACC

### *Queens Wharf:*

Meeting with Alex Swney, (Heart of the City) who has concerns about the speed and direction of possible development scenarios, and wants to see discussion and visualization of the possibilities. HoC would support a competition or exposition.

GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION PORTFOLIO: Sarah MacKenzie & James Pearce

### *CV/Interview Workshop for Graduates:*

Intended as an opportunity for graduates currently preparing/looking to improve the quality of their CVs and/or learn more about interview preparation. Patrick Clifford (Architectus) and Nick Moyes (Jasmax) imparted sound advice and oft amusing anecdotes.

### *"The Grad" Graduate Website:*

The new graduate website "The Grad" has now been launched and is found at [www.thegrad.net.nz](http://www.thegrad.net.nz). The website offers a range of facilities for graduates including information on the Graduate Development Program and NZRAB registration. The "Whats Hot" section offers graduate members the chance to upload and share images and links. The site also contains a Forum where graduate members can post questions and have them answered by designated practicing moderators.

UOA STUDENT REPORT: Angus Muir, Jordan Saunders

The new degree structure came into play and students are now in full swing. Within the next few weeks architecture students are also going to have access to a new student centre on the lower floor of the Architecture school. It will be a home base for students and accommodate facilities such as printing, photocopying and student help.

UOA SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING: Uwe Rieger

The School of Architecture and Planning is currently preparing the start of next semester. There are four points to highlight:

1. The School is in the process of reviewing the applications and preparing a shortlist for the five advertised positions on Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor level.
2. UoA, AUT and Unitec will run a coordinated design studio `transformers`, ending with an Architecture Convoy and a public event at the former bus depot in Wellesley/Nelson Street for Architecture Week 16.10.09
3. From 1 July 09 Andrew Barrie has officially taken his position as Professor of Architecture at the School of Architecture and Planning.
4. This semester the school will pick up the public lecture series Fast Forward again. Start will be 17.09.09 with a lecture by Shigeru Ban. A detailed program will be available soon.

PRACTICE ISSUES GROUP: Richard Goldie and Charissa Snijders

A large turn-out of people attended the PI Insurance Presentation and the topic provided a lively discussion. Richard Harris to meet with DBH Chief Architect to discuss some of the issues raised.

EVENTS PORTFOLIO: Rose Minee

Auckland Architecture Events calendar is being updated and uploaded onto the website twice monthly and is also being emailed out with events broadcast.

HERITAGE PORTFOLIO: Adam Wild

### *Reviving Old Havana - Isabel Maria Leon Candelario:*

Held at AUT on the 25th of June, this talk examined the process of conserving Havana's built form through the process afforded by a state run vision. Perhaps a sign of the Super City to come?!

### *26th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians:*

The theme was 'Cultural Crossroads'. Keynote lectures were presented by Prof. Roberto Segre, Chair of DOCOMOMO Rio de Janeiro; Assoc Prof Paul Walker, co-author of Looking for the Local (VUP, 2000) and now of the University of Melbourne; and award-winning Japanese architect Riken Yamamoto. The conference has left a programme of associated events well worth attending. See The Brief and the Gus Fisher website for details. Included amongst other events now running are the following: New Zealand Architecture in Perspective: 150 Years of Architectural Drawing and From Perfumery to Radio Station: The Evolution of an Auckland Architectural Practice. Gus Fisher Gallery, The Kenneth Myers Centre, 74 Shortland St, Auckland.

### *ICOMOS Australia Polar Heritage Committee:*

The International Polar Heritage Committee is an ICOMOS International Scientific Committee focussing on conservation and management of heritage places in the Arctic and Antarctic. The Australian IPHC has four expert members and I have written to them promoting the idea of closer links between the NZ and Australian ICOMOS committees. There are a few ICOMOS NZ members with Antarctic heritage experience in NZ and a number of other scientific disciplines outside the ICOMOS network here who could (and do) bring value and experience.

SPONSORSHIP PORTFOLIO: Stephen Martin Architectural Profiles and MetroGlasstech have promised joint sponsorship funds for an On the Boards evening in late July or early August.

UNITEC REPORT: Tony Van Raat

Trenta Case opened again in the premises of the Municipality of Rome Urban Centre XI in Garbatella, the NZ Ambassador presiding along with invited local architectural luminaries inc Alberto Gatti, a fascinating old master who did the urban plan for Rome in '62. All went well and the Comune of Tivoli is funding us again in September. This will probably be the last show as we've run out of money. Some local architects have asked if I think there'd be any interest in a 2 (?) week long course on conservation they could run here in July/August 2010. It would be English language, of course, run in a tiny village in the Appenines about 1 hour from Florence staying on site. Minimum 12 people with many site visits. These people are experts and a good bunch. Alternate trips to other major architecture works of all periods, modern included.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES GROUP: Megan Rule

Lessons from BREEAM presentation by Hugh Byrd on Tuesday 9 June well attended.

In the UK the British Research Establishment first introduced EDS standards evaluation tools to reduce energy consumption in buildings during the early 1990s. Further building type tools, including preconstruction and post occupation phases have since been added. The EDS tools are relatively expensive at \$5000 entry + annual fee + software fee and mainly used by mechanical engineers in the UK. As planning and building codes have increased performance requirements the cost benefits of investing in BREEAM ratings have become less attractive except to a minority. Priorities have now shifted from building envelope, thermal and air leakage performance, to energy generation.

Three tertiary case study projects in UK dating between 1990s and 2006 were reviewed. An "exceptional" (Greenstar 6) rating is achieved in the most recent building. All glazing/cladding has thermal breaks. Quality double glazing is able to achieve similar performance to triple glazing. There is onsite stormwater treatment, automation and energy production via turbine and solar panels with future capacity built in to the latest project. The buildings are achieving 25%+ energy savings.

Peak oil production is anticipated by the International Energy Authority to occur within a decade, shifting renewable energy sources to a priority status. In NZ 48% of energy (including vehicle) is oil based of which 98% is imported. 30% of NZ energy is renewable hydro or wind energy. Some green promoted energies or systems are currently offering false economies. Biofuel requires more energy to produce than it provides. Shallow green roofs may not sustain plant life and use excess water. Indoor plants require sufficient high levels of light to thrive. Excess power generation is dumped during off peak times. Micro building energies (wind, water & solar) on smart grid systems (electronically monitored) offer the greatest potential to efficiently produce and manage future energy generation and needs to be driven from a government level.

## **EXCERPTS FROM THE NZIA AUCKLAND BRANCH'S SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON AUCKLAND GOVERNANCE**

Prepared by the NZIA Auckland Urban Issues Group

### *The Importance of Quality Urban Design*

The Royal Commission report makes comment that to achieve more integrated planning solutions, Auckland must have a connected and systemic approach to thinking about urban design for the city. That requires improved coordination and cooperation between central and local government and the private sector, and it requires good design that considers how to get the best social, environmental, cultural and economic benefits from future development. The UIG stresses the importance of quality urban design. If Auckland is to prosper, and become one of the world's most desirable places to live and work, Auckland's governance structure must encourage and make possible quality urban design. Over the last decade there has been an increasing understanding and appreciation of urban design and its significance in shaping Auckland's future. It is the discipline of urban design that considers social, cultural, environmental and economic aspects of our urban environment in order to make meaningful connections between people and places. It looks to facilitate the creation of a vision for an area and then deploy the necessary skills and resources to realise that vision.

### *Limited Urban Design Expertise*

The importance of a quality urban environment to the success of cities has been recognised internationally. This has resulted in global competition for skilled urban designers and capacity in this area remains a scarce resource, both within Councils and in commercial practice. While there are many good urban designers in Auckland, the new governance structure must ensure they are well-deployed and not isolated in silos within the Auckland Council.

### *City Centre*

The UIG supports the main thrust of the governance reform to

have a single identity for Auckland, and we consider a strong emphasis on the city centre is vital to achieving this. Successful and memorable cities have a highly legible and identifiable heart. The look and feel of the city centre will be the image of Auckland that tourists and visitors retain in their minds, and it will be important in giving a sense of identity to Auckland's citizens, even for those who rarely visit it. While Auckland is often viewed as a very de-centralised city with numerous outlying nodes, that is a product of a transport system with a heavy car emphasis over the last 50 years and the city's fragmented governance arrangements. This trend is likely to change over the next 50 years with more unified governance and increasing emphasis on public transport. The UIG believes the city centre requires dedicated attention of a local governance body to coordinate development of the CBD and the waterfront. While the Royal Commission's recommendation may not be the only solution to this need, the idea that the city centre is simply a part of a neighbouring residential ward is not a suitable governance arrangement. Well resourced and committed governance of the city centre is important to the overall success of the one city plan and should be considered as one of regional and national importance.

### *Urban Design within Auckland's Governance Structure*

For Auckland to achieve better engagement with communities and connection with people urban design issues must together be considered regionally and locally. The Royal Commission proposes a region wide spatial plan that would provide the overarching framework for the promotion of good urban growth and development for Auckland. At local level urban design development addressing aspects such as local roads, civic facilities and public open spaces would work within this framework with particular focus on local character, identity, diversity and creating a sense of place. The required number of community boards and their assigned roles and responsibilities should be determined by the level of performance required to support the best urban design outcomes possible. To be effective, the UIG believes each board must: Have the permanent membership of Councillors to facilitate quality communication from community board through to Auckland Council; represent a physical area or district that can support staff and financial resources to administer performance in delivering high quality urban design outcomes; have the ability to represent and influence the local community needs such as land use, parks, local roads, public transport and infrastructure. The UIG considers that achieving quality urban design outcomes at local level board level would be inefficient and unsustainable with 20-30 community boards as proposed by Central Government. The Royal Commission proposed model of six Local Councils would suggest a stronger and more effective community engagement mechanism to deliver the essential urban design outcomes for Auckland.

### *Vision Groups within Auckland's Governance Structure*

The UIG believes that the design and maintenance of a long term Vision for Auckland is at the heart of the exercise to improve the Governance of the city. We believe that any organisational structure will only be successful if it promotes the idea that the city be designed in all its multi-faceted aspects - an organic and ongoing process, constantly changing, and will need to be clearly articulated, updated and maintained. The UIG proposes that a Vision Group be established, composed of "experts in their field". They would have a wide degree of empowerment to establish direction and intention. They would not be responsible for implementation, which would be achieved by officers of the Council. The significance of such a group within the structure is the focus that it would bring upon the importance of design and vision, and the affirmation that Auckland believes in clear statements about the future and the directions it intends to follow. The group would be charged with clarifying and elucidating the design of the city, in ways that can be understood by all members of the public. This is extremely important as a counter to the current situation, whereby such design that does exist is contained in complex word-pictures buried deep within documents such as local authority policy frameworks and scheme plans. The group would assist the Mayor, the Council, local bodies (be they Community Boards or Local Councils) and the public to appreciate, contribute to, and work within, the overall vision for the city.