

# AUCKLAND SPECIAL CHARACTER AREAS CONTINUED...



## John Burns Character Coalition

*"Auckland's Special Character Areas encompass a rare gem in global urbanism, a taonga - a collection of documented and protected timber architecture from the 19th and 20th centuries unrivalled worldwide in scale and quality."*

This is the conclusion from a comprehensive world-wide survey commissioned by the Auckland Branch of the New Zealand Founders Society and carried out last year by Joshua Howie, a postgraduate student at the University of Auckland (Masters in Architecture and Heritage Conservation).

His report is available at [www.charactercoalition.org.nz/aucklands-special-character-areas](http://www.charactercoalition.org.nz/aucklands-special-character-areas) and has also been summarised by Auckland Council in its 2024 publication "Auckland's Heritage Counts" at: <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/arts-culture-heritage/heritage/docsheritagecountssummaries/auckland-heritage-counts-2024-annual-summary.pdf>

The report reviews the literature on Auckland's Special Character Areas (SCAs), identifies their advantages and importance, and compares them with international instances of similar urban fabric.

Auckland's SCAs are a planning overlay mechanism which, together with zoning the land of properties in a SCA as single house zone, Auckland Council has used for over forty years to retain and manage areas in Auckland to preserve them for their heritage and other character values. The current Auckland Unitary Plan describes these values as being areas of "collective and cohesive values, importance, relevance and interest"; identifies these areas; and provides them with both zoning and overlay protection from demolition or development that would detract from, or destroy, those values.



Contemporary Auckland is well-known for its 'old' timber architecture and urban fabric. This fabric comprises the cottage, villa, transitional villa and bungalow typologies constructed in the first layers of Auckland's urbanism beginning with initial suburban expansion in the 1870s (in the form of walking suburbs) and concluding around 1940 as the impact of World War II on New Zealand increased (these later layers enabled by the tram network and later, automobiles). These typologies feature prominently within the SCA system, contributing 71% of the total buildings within Auckland's SCAs, concentrated in SCAs in its older suburbs closer to the CBD, such as Ponsonby, Freemans Bay, Grey Lynn, Kingsland, Mt Eden, Parnell and Remuera, and Devonport and Birkenhead with their ferry access.



Villas along O'Neil St, Ponsonby - Special Character - Residential: Isthmus A. Photo / Auckland SCA Report

Auckland's has fifty SCAs which encompass not only those types of buildings but a broad variety of eras, styles, materials and building uses from the city's history. However, they cover only a small part of Auckland. In the Unitary Plan there are a total of 21,280 property parcels in the SCA overlay, covering a total land area of 14.8 km<sup>2</sup> (occupying just fewer than 2.6% of the city's urbanised area, and 0.3% of the Auckland Unitary Authority's total land area).

The report identifies the economic, social and environmental benefits of SCAs to Auckland.

In previous studies, Auckland's SCAs have been consistently found to positively impact both property values and sale prices, suggesting that special character amenity and its preservation are attractive to home buyers.

A Council study found that houses located within SCAs had a 4.3% price premium over non-SCA houses sold in Auckland over a 10-year period between 2006 and 2016 (all else being equal).

A recent example of this dynamic in action can be seen in the advertisement for the sale of a character house, a 1930s Art Deco-Spanish Mission-style property, which is in a street in the Balmoral East SCA.

The real estate agent is quoted as saying *"one of the great things about the address was the house was in a single house zone, which meant the neighbours were too. There's a real protection from the development that's going on in Auckland with townhouses etcetera, and also the properties either side are really beautiful character properties so you're amongst the very best company in Mt Eden."* (This house is featured in the below article titled: 'Absolute Legend': Iconic Mount Eden Garden for Sale)

*"The house can be extended out the back and renovated but it can't be removed and will remain in keeping with the heritage area that is Marsden Avenue",* he continued to say.

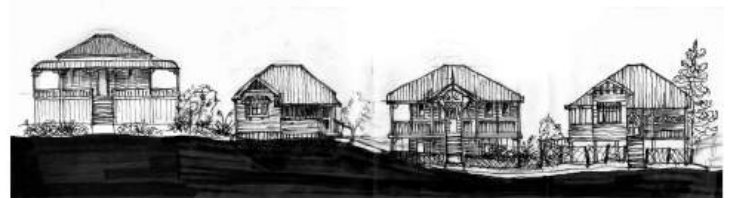
There are social benefits too. A London study found *"green and peaceful residential environments"* to be a desirable feature consistently listed by residents in every conservation area they studied, *"no matter their location, level of deprivation or property premium."* There are some common traits associated with conservation areas overseas that apply to Auckland's SCAs too. Streetscape, green space, and consistent character all provide a sense of calm that many people surveyed attested to.

The environmental benefits are shown in a survey by Preservation Green Lab of the US National Trust for Historic Preservation, which found that building reuse *"almost always yields fewer environmental impacts than new construction when comparing buildings of similar size and functionality."* In the US cities of Portland, Oregon and Chicago, Illinois, they found reused single family homes had reduced climate change impacts when compared to equivalent new builds, by 7% and 10% respectively.

In preparing his report, Joshua Howie began his investigation broadly, by looking into urban settlements across the world that he knew contained areas of timber urban fabric, ornate or otherwise, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He contacted heritage or local government representatives, as well as members of local independent historic or architecture societies, from those cities which faced similar architectural and urban selection pressures to Auckland during the late 19th and early 20th century.

In total, he contacted 27 people for 19 different urban areas, ranging from the remote colonial settlements of Jamestown, Saint Helena (United Kingdom) and Kingston, Norfolk Island (Australia), the Caribbean timber urbanism of Paramaribo, Suriname and Belize City, Belize, the urban character of San Francisco, New England and the Midwestern United States, timber vernacular in north-eastern Europe centred around the Baltic in Vilnius and Riga, as well as from cities in Australia and the United Kingdom.

In this extensive survey of urban areas with fabric of a similar age, density and materiality to Auckland's SCAs, he found no direct equivalent anywhere in the world.



Drawn comparison of streetscapes: Brisbane (top) Auckland (middle) and Melbourne (bottom). Drawn by Joshua Howie (Report author), 2024.

The closest comparisons he found were in Australia. However, there are clear regional differences on either side of the Tasman. While local kauri timber is the dominant construction material for these buildings in New Zealand, Australia has far more material variation in its houses, favouring stone and brick masonry during this era. There are two notable exceptions which share identifiably similar design language to Auckland's special character and timber construction: Brisbane and Melbourne. He also identified two areas of the US with timber architecture and similarities to Auckland's special character in Chicago and New Orleans

While the character of Brisbane and Auckland share similar architectural details, materiality, and

age, Brisbane is far more varied, with lower quality of character retained. Although timber defines the special character of Auckland, and plays an undeniable role in Brisbane, it generally took a backseat to brick and stone masonry throughout greater Melbourne during this era. Across the central suburbs, what are essentially rows of brick villas can be identified, with timber buildings dotted throughout, resulting in few true comparisons to Auckland's uninterrupted timber urban character.



A row of late Victorian villas along Albany Rd, in Ponsonby, Auckland. Note the overarching consistency. Google Earth. n.d. Streetview looking east from Albany Road in Ponsonby, Auckland. *Photo / Auckland SCA Report*



**TOP:** Queenslanders in the central Brisbane suburb of New Farm. *Photo / Auckland SCA Report*  
**BOTTOM:** A row of Queenslanders along Welsby St, in New Farm, Brisbane, showing the varied urban character. *Photo / Auckland SCA Report*

In the USA, Chicago's collection of Victorian and Edwardian timber workers' cottages is similar to Auckland's vernacular timber architecture of the same era. However, the continued existence of Chicago's timber cottages is not guaranteed. Currently there are no character or heritage overlay mechanisms that acknowledge this kind of urban character, and their numbers are in steady decline as the city is redeveloped.

Long and narrow in plan, these houses are characterised by their lack of corridors, instead comprising compact rooms placed in series.

Unfortunately this unique urban character is even less documented than Chicago's workers' cottages, and they have no special character or heritage protection either, so their survival is uncertain

The conclusion is that Auckland is unrivalled in the scale and consistency of its areas of ornate timber colonial architecture, even when compared to Brisbane and Melbourne and cities in the USA.

Furthermore, this architecture and its streetscapes

are in and of themselves endemic to Auckland and entirely unique globally, making Auckland's special character areas a taonga and their preservation essential.

Unfortunately, some of these areas are now under threat from proposed change to the Unitary Plan, forced upon Auckland Council by Central Government legislation in 2021. This proposes removing the SCA overlay protection by about two-thirds, slashing the number of properties to be included in SCAs from over 21,000 to about 14,000.

While the ostensible reason for this is to increase opportunities for urban intensification, Auckland already has enough residential capacity for the foreseeable future without destroying its SCAs. The lack of affordable housing in Auckland is of course of concern, but it is caused by a lack of houses, not a shortage of land upon which to build them. The unnecessary destruction of these SCA's would be a major loss to Auckland and regret to generations to come.

The Character Coalition is one of many individual Aucklanders and groups such as residents associations and heritage societies that have made submissions opposing the removal of SCA's.

These submissions are due to be heard by a Hearing Panel later this year, and this report will provide valuable (and it is to be hoped persuasive) information to the Panel about the importance of Auckland's SCA's on a world scale and the need to ensure they are retained and protected from destruction.

