



Homes. Land.
Community.

Auckland's Surprising About-Face on Density

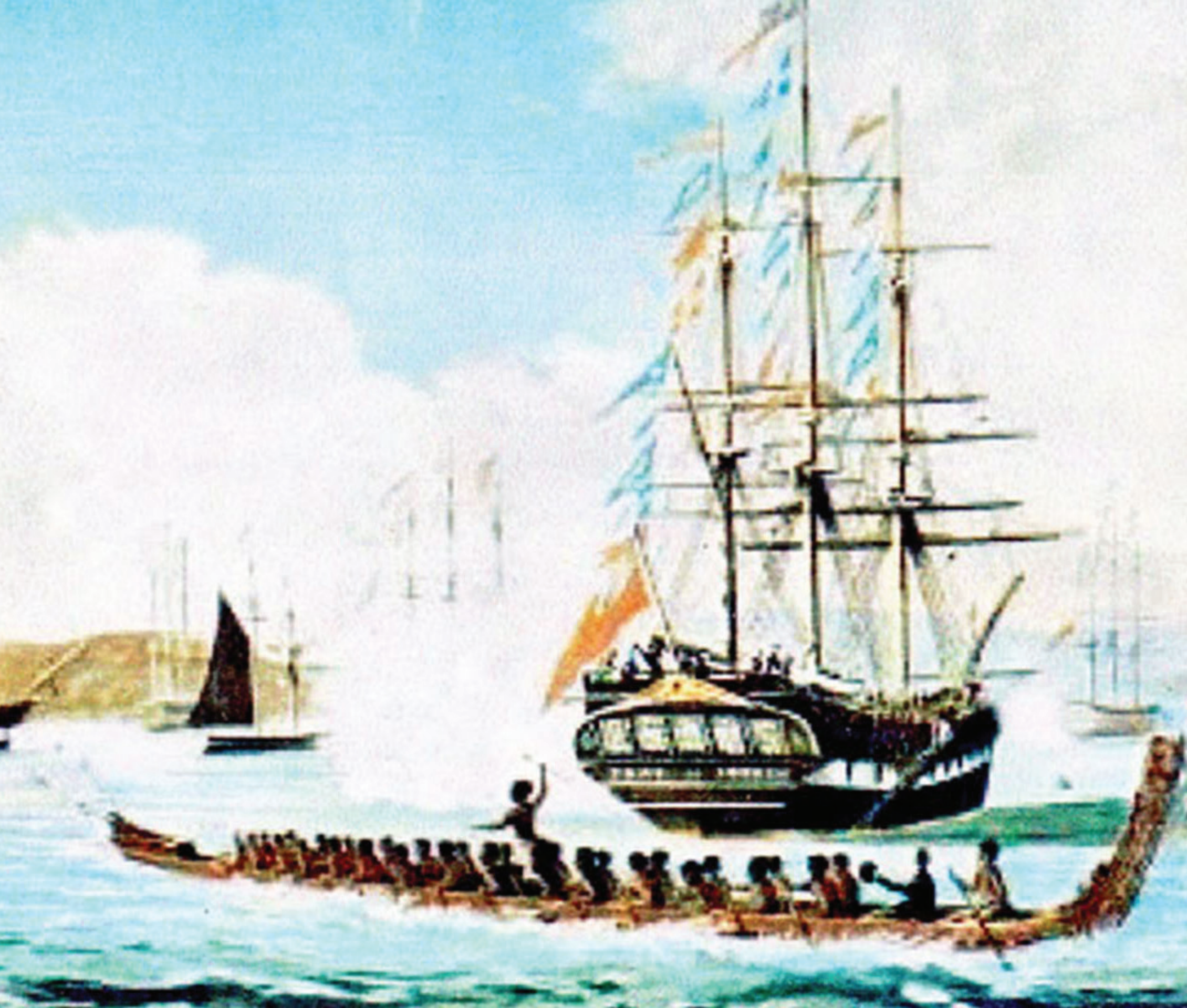
Mark Fraser

General Manager Precinct Renewal, HLC



In the 1840s

when Auckland's European forebears came to the nascent city they sought to escape the problems associated with city life at the time — the dirty air, dirty water and tightly-packed neighbourhoods that aided the spread of disease.



They wanted to escape density badly enough to get on a sailing ship and take a torturous six-week journey that presented an even higher and more immediate risk of death through disease or shipwreck, in order to find themselves a clean, green land and some wide open space.



This painting by Peter Siddell shows the kind of suburbs those early settlers' children and grandchildren were building by the 1880s. Here is the suburban dream; a kind of utopian ideal that Aucklanders have held tightly to for over a century and a half.



Housing styles have changed, but the detached house on the large site in the suburbs has remained the leading market driver of how we use our developable land. With the advent of the car and then the motorway system the suburban quarter acre section (1200m²) became the norm post WWII.



When we began to develop Hobsonville Point in 2011, with the property market still jittery and sluggish thanks to the Global Financial Crisis, we had an average section size of 330m². Our potential buyers struggled to get their heads around how small the section was and how close the neighbours were.



You can see in this aerial shot that every house has its own compact but private backyard. These houses were built to a zero lot line, meaning the house was built up to one of the lot boundaries allowing for access down the other side of the house.



These were the traditional Kiwi standalone homes

in a suburban context, but they used land a lot more efficiently than had been done before.



In 2012 we built the first terraced homes at Hobsonville Point. Our builder partners and the general market told us we were crazy and that the homes would never sell. There must've been eight early adopters looking for a house at Hobsonville Point because we sold this block before they were complete and within six months we were building the second block.



Terraces presented us an opportunity to meet some key goals: increase our supply of housing to the market, up our speed of delivery and keep prices as accessible as possible. But as we scaled up we found we had to educate the market to overcome resistance.



This is my first house

at Hobsonville Point, one of eight in the row. Buyers thought that living like this would be cramped and dark. We heard the words 'Coronation Street' repeatedly.



The builder took prospective buyers through my house. They were surprised when they got inside, making comments to the effect that, **‘it feels like a house’**. His pitch to them all was, “if one of the developers was prepared to buy one...”



In 2013 we decided to prod the market even harder into considering density in a suburban setting. **Brickworks was our first attempt** at apartments. At the time it was rare to non-existent to see developers offer apartments outside the central and city-fringe suburbs. With a price point well under \$500,000 they sold well, many to young people who were first home buyers.



In 2014 we decided to test if Kiwis would put quality and affordability ahead of size and created the Small Home Test Lab. Three architecturally designed homes were built on a single 180m² lot. In line with the suburban dream, these were all detached homes with their own private back yards but the largest of the homes (3-bedroom) measured only 80m².



Several thousand people toured the homes and the strong interest from the market encouraged our builder partners to extend their offer to include more compact homes to appeal to the growing number of one and two-person households in Auckland.



We kept experimenting. This is a three-storey product facing onto the Hobsonville Point's spine road or 'high street'. The ground floor contains a combined commercial and residential space, and the two floors above contain a separate two-bedroom home. This typology was designed for people who want to run a small business from home.



‘Walk-ups’ are a common typology in Europe and New York because they use land very efficiently. A ground floor single-level dwelling sits below a separate double-level dwelling on the second and third storeys. In 2015 this was so outlandish to Aucklanders that we offered to underwrite construction to get our builder partners to take them on. They all sold off the plan.



In some ways we are going back in time to before the war. Prior to cars and motorways becoming ubiquitous we did live more densely. Here's an image of Freemans Bay, developed in the late 1800s. The vast majority of lots are around the 200m² mark, also about the average at Hobsonville Point.



Here are some **pre-war apartment buildings** known colloquially as ‘flats’ – a typology that was common in city-fringe suburbs like Parnell and Mt Eden.



Okham Residential

is currently building Bernoulli Gardens at Hobsonville Point – five buildings of three storeys connected by gardens and pocket parks. Look familiar?



You can see from this render of planned development around Hobsonville Point's Marlborough Oval, that the cork has well and truly been eased out of the density bottle, at least in this neighbourhood. By Auckland suburban standards this level of density, while officially 'medium', is unprecedented. I for one, am excited for our city.



Auckland faces significant growing pains as we deal with an increasing population, a housing shortage, and rising construction costs. Thankfully we've done an 'about face' where density is concerned. I think the love for our unspoilt bush, coast and wide open spaces is also playing into our rapidly growing acceptance of the need to intensify rather than sprawl.



Urban planning research has proven that density can aid the establishment and maintenance of a strong community. However, density without attention to the quality of both housing and amenity will fail to build a community. Higher density must be balanced by high amenity.



Hobsonville Point residents live on a smaller piece of land but they take up more room than people in the post war suburbs. By that I mean that they inhabit the whole neighbourhood; they use the parks, the coastal walkway, the waterfront, the local shops. They walk more because everything is close by and they know their neighbours better because everyone lives closer together.