



CaDDANZ

Capturing the Diversity Dividend
of Aotearoa/New Zealand

URBAN REGENERATION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IN NORTHCOTE

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Researching home, place, and community in Northcote

This document is part of a series of four project briefs (CaDDANZ briefs 8-11) which collate distinct but interrelated sets of key findings from a research project that examined how older adults of 65 years and above create and maintain a sense of home and community in the Auckland neighbourhood of Northcote.

This study forms part of a wider suite of projects within the MBIE-funded CaDDANZ research programme which collectively investigate facets of population change and diversity in a range of different contexts. Overall, CaDDANZ aims to develop greater understanding of how diversity affects society and how, in turn, institutions and communities can better respond to diversity.

This neighbourhood-based study sits within a growing body of social science scholarship that has recognised the importance of ‘the local’ because this is where diversity is lived and negotiated in everyday interactions. While much of the academic literature and policy discourses tend to focus on ethnicity and culture, we would like to stress that diversity is complex and multiply determined by a broad range of factors, including gender, age, ability and socio-economic status.

We selected Northcote¹ as a research site for a number of reasons. Situated on Auckland’s North Shore, Northcote is typical of Auckland’s suburban landscape insofar as it largely features standalone homes in a residential area serviced by a local town centre. Its resident population of approximately 8,000 can be described as diverse with respect to socio-economic and educational backgrounds, professions, age groups and ethnic profile but the demographic profile of the suburb has shifted over time and there is significant geographic variation in the area. Northcote is a medium-income suburb but median personal incomes range from approximately \$22,000 in Akoranga and Northcote Central to \$39,000 in Northcote South and Tuff Crater. These intra-neighbourhood discrepancies largely reflect the presence of a significant public housing tract and are also evident in neighbourhood deprivation scores which are 8 and 10 respectively for Akoranga and Northcote Central but only 3 for Northcote Tuff Crater and Northcote South. As housing has become less affordable, home ownership among Northcote residents has decreased from 56 per cent to 40 per cent between 2001 and 2018. Northcote’s population is age-diverse but there is a higher-than-average presence of residents aged 65 and over. In Akoranga, home to a large retirement village, the median age is 43.9 years and 56 per cent of the resident population are not part of the labour force. With respect to migrant populations and ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity, at the time of the last available Census in 2018, more than 43 per cent of all Northcote residents were overseas-born.

Inside this issue:

Researching home, place, and community in Northcote	1
The research design	2
The Northcote Development	3
Findings	3
“They don’t want to listen” - tokenistic	4
“The community will be lost” - the development’s effects	6
“Done for the looks” ? - design and built environment	7
Implications	8
References	9

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ISSN 2537-9844
(Print)

ISSN 2537-8805
(Online)

¹ For the purposes of this project Northcote comprises the Statistical Areas (SA2) of Akoranga, Northcote Tuff Crater, Northcote Central and Northcote South. See Figure 2 for details.



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Since the 1990s, Northcote has become home to a growing number of migrants from Asia. In 2018, 24 per cent of Northcote residents had been born in an Asian country. The share of residents who identify as 'Asian' has increased from just over 20 per cent in 2001 to 30 per cent in 2018. The largest ethnic group within the broad 'Asian' category were people identifying as Chinese, who made up 17 per cent of residents. This is also reflected in Northcote's language profile: Sinitic languages are prominent in most parts of Northcote. The suburb is also home to many Pasifika and Māori residents (nearly 10 per cent each). However, they are spread unevenly across Northcote with higher shares in those areas where public housing is situated.

Northcote is also currently undergoing a large-scale housing development programme and the revitalisation of the neighbourhood's town centre is scheduled to begin in 2021. Densification and a mixed housing approach (including public, affordable and market homes of varying sizes) will lead to significant population growth, a change in Northcote's demographic profile and a substantial transformation of the built environment.

Urban change, including population growth and the emergence of new kinds and expressions of diversity, raises important questions for policy makers, community service agencies, and local residents alike. These project briefs are designed to provide research findings related to the meanings and practices of community within neighbourhoods (CaDDANZ Brief 8), how people see difference and how diversity impacts residents' sense of home and community (CaDDANZ Brief 9), the significance of the local neighbourhood for the wellbeing of older adults (CaDDANZ Brief 10), and residents' perceptions and experiences of the Northcote Development (CaDDANZ Brief 11).



Figure 1 Northcote town centre



Figure 2 Northcote location



The research design

We designed a qualitative research project that employed multiple methods (semi-structured interviews, walk-along interviews, focus groups and visual methods) to better understand how older adult residents of Northcote generate and maintain a sense of home, place and community.

We engaged with each participant across five stages of the research. The first stage of individual interviews established residents' story of coming to live in Northcote, situating their life in the neighbourhood within their wider life story. The second research stage sought to better understand participants' sense and understanding of home, while the third explored their relationship to the local neighbourhood using walk-along interviews. The fourth stage of the research was a focus group with attention centred primarily on residents' ideas of what constitutes 'community'. The focus group also discussed residents' perceptions and experiences of the ongoing Northcote Development. The final research stage involved returning to participants' homes once more to talk about their experience of taking part in the project.

Sixteen people, aged between 65 and 89, took part. Out of these, 6 were between the ages of 65 and 75 and 8 were older than 75. Half the participants have a long-term history in Northcote, half are more recent arrivals in the neighbourhood, but not necessarily the country. Out of the 16 participants, 12 were women and 4 were men. Nine participants were born in New Zealand while the remaining participants arrived in New Zealand from China (4), South Korea (2) and the UK (1). Three participants identified as Māori. Five participants lived in owned family homes while 11 lived in public housing properties. Five participants lived in multigenerational family settings.

The Northcote Development

The Northcote Development comprises a large-scale housing development programme which is currently underway and the revitalisation of the neighbourhood's town centre, which is scheduled to begin in 2021. The housing redevelopment is conducted by Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities, the town centre revitalisation by Auckland Council's development arm, Panuku. As part of the housing development, approximately 350 public housing dwellings on Kāinga Ora-owned land have been demolished and will be replaced with up to 1500 new dwellings on the same land. The development follows a mixed housing approach, with approximately 400 homes retained for public housing tenants and 1,100 offered to private buyers as a mix of affordable and market homes. The planned town centre will include an additional 750 homes for the private market. Such intensification will result in rapid population growth of approximately 4500–5000 people over the coming years as well as a shift in Northcote's socio-economic and ethnic demographic make-up.

Alongside the housing redevelopment sits the planned regeneration of the neighbourhood's town centre. Known as Northcote Central, the area currently comprises a mix of 90 retail and food outlets, services and community organisations. Northcote Central reflects the neighbourhood's ethno-cultural and socio-economic make-up in that it caters to a low-income population and a large Asian migrant population, to the extent that it has been described as an ethnic precinct (Fichter, 2013; Spoonley & Meares, 2011). The Northcote Town Centre Benchmark Masterplan (Panuku Development Auckland, 2019) suggests a substantial transformation of the built environment.

Findings

Not surprisingly, the Northcote Development featured prominently in participants' reflections on the place of neighbourhood in making home and community. Even though the ongoing and proposed transformations of the neighbourhood affect some residents more directly than others (e.g. public housing residents vs. home owners), all participants were aware of the development, informed about progress and most of them actively sought out available information about the project.



All participants – whether long-term residents or more recent arrivals to the neighbourhood – displayed a strong place attachment but were not averse to change. Indeed, urban change was largely accepted. Given their life experience, the older adults who took part in this study had witnessed previous transformations of the neighbourhood, including the opening of the Harbour Bridge and the Northcote shopping centre in 1959 and, more recently, the migration-related diversification of the neighbourhood's population and the conversion of Northcote Central from the original town centre to a hub of Asian restaurants and supermarkets mixed with a smaller variety of shops and services. Nevertheless, participants were on the whole very critical of the Northcote Development. While they agreed that more and better housing was beneficial, they had serious reservations. These revolved around (1) a sense that decisions were imposed without knowledge of, or consultation with, the community, (2) concerns that the demographic changes to be expected as a result of the development will have a detrimental impact on community cohesion, and (3) age-specific concerns about design aspects of the development.

“They don't want to listen” – tokenistic community consultation

First and foremost, participants criticised the top down decision-making processes that, in their eyes, characterise the Northcote Development. Time and again, participants felt that decisions were presented to neighbourhood residents as a fait accompli without sufficient consultation or feedback processes.

They say ‘we are consulting’, and what they do is they put up what they want, and then you can go have a look at it. There are no words shared. There is no inclusion of us. (Māori, male)

Participants expressed anger and frustration at their lack of agency and power to be involved in determining the future of their community but there was also a sense of resignation. Phrases such as “you can make your protests but they don't want to listen” (Māori, male) and “I don't think anything we can do will alter that at all” (Pākehā, male) were common in interviews and focus groups.

Available channels for providing feedback and for finding information were often experienced as inaccessible. For instance, an online panel survey was found to be inadequately designed, making it difficult to complete. Similarly, the information displayed at the Northcote Information Centre that is dedicated to providing information about the Northcote Development lacked clarity for a lay audience. As one participant said:

There is a building at the entrance of the Northcote shopping centre, but it is quite hard to understand the plans and you need someone who knows a lot about planning to tell you about it. (Pākehā, female)

This sense of being shut out of decisions that affect the local community mirrors the participants' broader observation that, with administrative shifts from Northcote borough to North Shore City to the Auckland super city, Council has become increasingly “impersonal” and harder to communicate with. Importantly, Auckland Council is not just perceived as inaccessible but as indifferent to residents' concerns and suggestions. This experience of not being listened to may result in withdrawal from participatory processes:

The city has become so big and so impersonal that a lot of people, I think, feel as though it is not worth them saying what they think because no one is going to listen to them anyway. (Pākehā, female)

I saw at least three surveys that they sent out. I think one was transport, one was age concern and one was somewhere else and they ask all these questions about what's it like being elderly and what do you need and all the rest and you send them off but it doesn't make any difference because you never get any response from it, nothing changes so you wondered why you wasted your time really. (Pākehā, male)

With respect to the Northcote Development, the lack of consultation was of particular concern because participants felt that planners and decision-makers did not know the community and implemented changes with little regard for the neighbourhood's current residents. For instance, participants found it difficult to understand the rationale behind certain decisions and felt that processes that had been implemented in other development projects, such as Hobsonville, were simply transposed onto Northcote despite the difference in local conditions.

They are not understanding the people or what we want, they have these committees and so-called advisors. (Māori, male)

Stakeholders don't seem to be people who actually live in the area. (Māori, female)



Overall, there was a sense that the Northcote Development is not concerned with residents or community but primarily with generating profit.

They are learning from China. The government sells houses to make money. I don't think I like this idea of change. (Chinese migrant, female)

The way I see it at the moment, the government have said 'here is where we can get some land and we need to build x many number of houses, this is how we are going to build them' and they won't really listen to anybody else. They will build where they can sell the land, make the profit, sell the houses and they can say to the public, 'look how good we have done' and I don't think anything we can do will alter that at all. (Pākehā, male)

“We will just tell you this and you will do it.” - public housing residents’ perceptions

In the context of reflecting on community consultation, it is important to remember that housing intensification in Northcote primarily takes place on Kāinga Ora land which means public housing residents are directly affected by the housing redevelopment.

While a lack of consultation was noted by most participants in this study, many also felt that public housing residents were subject to paternalistic treatment. More specifically, participants felt that public housing residents were regarded as “dumb” and as easy to “control and manipulate” and to “bully”. There was a sense that Kāinga Ora tenants were deliberately left uninformed about their rights. For instance, participants noted that some fellow public housing residents had not been given a choice when asked to temporarily relocate. This contradicts Kāinga Ora’s Choice to Return policy, according to which residents’ preferences are prioritised if possible.

They [Pasifika tenants] were being told 'you have got to go.' So when they tried that on us I went to the other people and said 'what have you been told?' I said 'you don't have to, if you feel you don't want to, come to us and we will help you fight' and then I attended a meeting with the Hobsonville company and Council and they had what they called 'the focus group' for all of this area, and no tenants [were present] who are the very people involved! (Māori, female)

While they appreciated the benefits of increased housing, participants worried about “the social cost” of the Northcote Development. Relocation as well as imposed restrictions on living arrangements (see below) had reportedly caused residents undue stress, including serious stress-related health problems.

Regeneration of the Northcote town centre

While most of the criticism regarding a lack of consultation pertained to the housing development, there was also an indication that aspects of the planned regeneration of the town centre will draw opposition if residents are excluded from the decision-making process. Participants’ comments about the planned move of the library illustrate this. The Northcote library is a cornerstone of the neighbourhood that offers greatly appreciated services and plays an important role for enabling sociality and a sense of community for all residents but especially for older adults who increasingly rely on services and amenities that are available locally (Irvine et al., 2020).

Residents were clearly opposed to having the library moved to a new location. Most of the opposition resulted from residents’ sense of connection to the history and heritage of the existing building. Some long-term residents had worked with a well-known architect and raised funds to build it. They love the design and its location adjacent to the park. Their concerns about the planned move are therefore bound up with their story and memories of the library, which, they fear, will be eroded by a new and impersonal design.

Aligned with the theme of being excluded from decisions and unaware of the rationale for them, participants regarded moving the library as an unnecessary waste of resources. Some residents felt so strongly about the planned move that they indicated a willingness to become involved in civil disobedience:

P1: In fact, I told the girls at the library that if they ever get around to doing it I shall personally lie in front of the bulldozer because I think it is absolute madness. (Pākehā, female)

P2: It is! It is crazy! What a waste of building. (Pākehā, female)

P1: It has a lovely position there, it is central for people for parking and all those things, especially if they are going to intensify the housing around here with multilevel which it is zoned for right around here now, the library and the shopping centre is going to become even more of a focal point I think, which everyone needs. (Pākehā, female)



“The community will be lost” – the development’s effects on community

Having a strong community is extremely important for the Northcote residents we spoke to. People form the heart of community, and familiarity, conviviality and relations of care for each other are the building blocks of cohesion (Ran et al., 2020). Because the Northcote Development entails major transformations – i.e. population growth, demographic change as well as the transformation of the built environment – residents were concerned about its impacts on community cohesion, often expressed in the anticipation that “the community will be lost”. We highlight four aspects that emerged as central to participants’ experience. As is to be expected at this stage in the Northcote Development, residents’ concerns, for now, revolve primarily around the housing component of the development.

First, relocation is experienced as disrupting established ties amongst public housing residents. Even though community organisations (such as Kaipātiki Community Facilities Trust) offer assistance in connecting new neighbours, participants voiced concern over having to re-build relationships with new neighbours. Residents emphasised that building meaningful relationships takes time and effort. With reference to promotional material that claims strengthening the community is a key part of the Northcote Development, participants were adamant that community can only be made by people not planners and developers. Too much emphasis was put on housing and design (see Section 3) at the expense of considering the needs of current residents.

If you are a community, it gives you a better lifestyle, it is not the physical houses that you get, it is people. (Māori, female)

Second, residents expect the community to be negatively affected by the mixed housing approach which sees many large family dwellings replaced with smaller dwellings. While this approach is said to provide a mix of accommodation for different needs, participants were concerned that smaller dwellings were unable to accommodate the extended and intergenerational living arrangements common to the Māori and Pasifika families who make up a significant share of the public housing population. Running counter to Māori tikanga, such planning harmed whānau by “splitting them up” and “chang[ing] the whole social fabric of those families.”

So, they seek some interference with the cultures of the people living here where they have said ‘no, you can’t live like that anymore with your two grown children living at home, they have to get out.’ No, I find that abhorrent that they would interfere in the culture of a race. (Māori, male)

In addition, smaller dwellings were also seen as problematic for community cohesion because they do not encourage families to move to the area. Based on their own experiences, participants regarded children as important catalysts for community-building.

The third aspect also relates to the mixed housing approach. Residents (rightly) anticipate that the addition of market housing as well as the revitalisation of the Northcote town centre will attract higher income earners to the area and will lead to the gentrification of what some participants see as a working class neighbourhood that so far has catered for low income residents. They feel that the improvement narrative that has been promoted by developers to make the neighbourhood attractive or “desirable” to newcomers (see Terruhn, 2019) fails to recognise that current residents already find their neighbourhood desirable.

P1: I think you will find that because it has been called little Chicago and the Bronx — Tonar and Cadness Street way — that they are wanting to make it more desirable. (Māori, male)

P2: But it is a desirable suburb. (Pākeha, female)

P3: I think it is. (Māori, female)

Participants’ insistence that the suburb was already desirable reflects their social location and, indeed, they stressed that the neighbourhood was particularly attractive for low income residents (who make up a large share of the development area) because its shops were low cost and services were conveniently located in walking distance: As one resident said, “it was all in reach of poor people,” adding that the Northcote Development needed to be “more people focused rather than things, material things like better shops. I mean keep the shops run down if it provides all the things we need” (Māori, female).



Residents expect the influx of higher income residents to fragment the community, adding to concerns about development-related disruptions to existing community networks. For one, they think newcomers are primarily attracted to Northcote because of its proximity to other more affluent and attractive areas. They also expect that newcomers will send their children to out-of-zone schools.

P1: It is easy access to the city, to the north, it is location, location, location! It is easy access to everything, not so much with what is actually here, but it is easy access to that beyond here. (Pākehā, male)

P2: And the hospital. (Māori, male)

P3: And so that will not form a community. (Māori, female)

P4: No, it won't. (Pākehā, female)

P3: And this is why I am very interested in making sure that we are still a community because it is changed a bit but so we can still remain a community. (Māori, female)

The validity of this concern is bolstered by an analysis of the marketing of the development on hoardings and websites which routinely feature slogans such as “live close to the city and beaches” and contains frequent references to upmarket consumption and hospitality opportunities in close proximity to Northcote (Northcote Development, 2019).

Despite references to placemaking and community-building in the developer’s rhetoric, participants derided the idea that community can be built by outsiders as part of strategic place-making. For residents, community-making has been a continuous long-term effort. They realise that community-making practices change, but previous transformations have been gradual and incremental whereas the Northcote Development will change the neighbourhood rapidly. That such transformations have a detrimental impact on existing residents, especially those at risk of displacement, has also been found in research on similar developments in Auckland, such as the Tāmaki Regeneration (Gordon et al., 2017).

Last, but not least, the prospect of intensification was tied up with expectations of conflict. Noise from neighbours in close proximity, disagreements over on-street parking (in the absence of sufficient off-street parking) and tensions over competition for space and facilities were top of people’s minds.

“Done for the looks”? - design and built environment

According to relevant documentation such as the Unlock Northcote Framework Plan (2016a) and the Northcote High Level Project Plan (2016b), the Northcote Development is based on specific design principles, including Te Aranga Māori design, with a focus on building a sustainable, accessible, safe, and liveable neighbourhood. The participants of this study offered particular age-relevant reflections on the proposed design aspects of the Northcote Development as outlined below. Even though they saw some positives in the work that had been done so far, overall, they were sceptical about the extent to which planners had successfully considered people in their strategies.

It [the design] doesn't even work for ordinary people in some sense, it is done all for the money or it is done for the looks. That is how I feel about it anyway from my own experience. (Pākehā female)

Participants’ comments primarily related to (1) safety, (2) mobility and (3) the new public housing.

Safety

With respect to the prospect of rapid intensification, residents wondered whether planners had accounted for any needs for new infrastructure to accommodate newcomers. Beyond a concern over sufficient parking, participants pointed to a need for additional green and public spaces as living spaces shrink. While such spaces are part of the new design (such as the Te Ara Awataha Greenway and planned pocket parks), residents hoped planners had considered how to make these green spaces safe for residents to use.

Safety was also a theme in reflections about the prospect of the current parking lot on Lake Road being replaced with underground parking.

They are supposed to make an underground carpark, moving the library to Lake Road instead of where it is at the back, and altering the shopping centre all together, I don't know if I will go, I really prefer the library where it is and I don't like underground carparks, I feel they are horrible to park in, dangerous in fact. (Pākehā, female)



Mobility

As outlined in CaDDANZ Brief 10 (Irvine et al., 2020), age-related mobility restrictions affect older residents' use of the neighbourhood. Aspects that have been positively noted as easing the navigation of the built environment are wider footpaths. Residents not only thought about their own needs but, based on life experience, felt these would better accommodate different populations, including "all the school kids and mums with prams and toddlers and older people walking with their walkers and all that sort of thing" (Pākehā, male). At the same time, they were concerned that a shift from off-street to on-street parking made it more likely that residents would park their cars across footpaths, blocking pedestrians' way. In addition, participants felt that an easy design element that would enable them to make better use of Northcote Central was more and inclusive seating (e.g. seats of differing heights to cater to various needs).

Public Housing

Residents had noticed particular design flaws in the new housing that impeded safe access for older adults and others with limited mobility. Several participants pointed out that the new state homes had no bathroom near the downstairs living area, making it necessary to frequently ascend and descend stairs. Residents in new public homes had also noted other concerning design or material faults. One reported that rain water was entering the front door.

Lastly, participants felt that no longer having access to the gardening space they were accustomed to impacted on their sense of wellbeing and community. As we have discussed in other briefs in this series (see Irvine et al., 2020 and Ran et al., 2020), gardening is not only a source of personal joy and a way of staying active. Sharing knowledge and produce was also a way of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with others. Finding ways to be innovative with container gardening in limited outdoor space was a key response to this shift. However, residents also suggested that thought be given to establishing community gardens and planting edible rather than ornamental vegetation in the new green spaces of the neighbourhood.

Implications

Reflections on the Northcote Development were central in this research on older adults' practices of home and community. As one resident put it, "you can't avoid it because their decisions affect us, the community." The Northcote Development, and the way it is implemented, has a range of impacts on Northcote residents with important implications to consider.

Residents' sense of not being heard impacts inclusion and civic participation. Residents' extensive local knowledge can make a valuable contribution to planning neighbourhood development. While participants often hinted that they were unlikely to experience the finished redevelopment because of their advanced age, it was important to consider the wellbeing of people who will live to see the new Northcote. Given that Northcote is home to a substantial population of older adults and that population ageing more generally will become more pronounced, older adults' personal experience can add significant insights. Importantly, genuine efforts to value the insights of local residents (of any age) stands to foster a sense of inclusion, civic participation and, perhaps, greater identification with and enthusiasm for the Northcote Development.

In Northcote, as much as in other areas that are part of the Auckland Housing Programme, public housing residents are disproportionately affected by redevelopment. Public housing residents' concerns must be read in light of a large body of scholarship (Huse, 2016; Rose, 2004; Shaw, 2012) that warns that, contrary to appearances, mixed housing approaches do not benefit everyone equally but will lead to the direct and indirect displacement of public housing and other low income residents (especially tenants) in the neighbourhood. Direct displacement can take place during the development (when asked to relocate) and later on when rising property prices push low income residents out. Revitalisation programmes, such as the Northcote Development, also carry the risk of displacing low income residents indirectly through introducing new aesthetics and leisure opportunities that are geared towards new middle-class residents but are financially inaccessible to low income residents.

Finally, the findings raise important questions about cultural responsiveness and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations. Documents related to the Northcote Development highlight the importance of diversity as a strength of the community but practices and residents' perceptions suggest that the very people who make this community 'diverse' are not protected (Terruhn, 2019). Māori and Pasifika peoples make up 17 and 41 per cent of residents in the development area. As elsewhere, they are significantly overrepresented among public housing residents. This calls for greater consideration of the potentially detrimental impacts of urban regeneration on these populations and for provisions that protect both their right to stay and to protect the fabric of whanau.



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