
Aiming for a better public realm: How effective are contemporary design review methods

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Design review aims to improve the quality of urban settings, principally by seeking to positively influence the design of individual buildings during the planning approval stages of development. Design review systems were first set up in New Zealand in the mid-1990s in Wellington and have been controversial from the outset. Criticism of design review, generally undertaken in conjunction with proactive design guidance, has come principally from the side of the development team. Designers and architects consider design review to be an affront to their professional judgement while land owners/developers are prone to resist any attempts by local government to interfere with their assumed rights to dispose of their land as only they determine best. The aims of design review are laudable; even if it is not set up to secure the best possible design outcome then at least the process should be able to prevent the worst outrages so as to ensure the visual quality of streetscapes.

The question that must be asked however is, “does design review really achieve what it sets out to do?” After outlining a brief lineage of design review practices leading up to establishment of the first such regime in New Zealand, the paper goes on to discuss the effectiveness of design review. Basing the discussion on literature sources as well as a recent case study looking at public perceptions of a street in Wellington, the paper outlines the key positive attributes of design review as well as those issues that are problematic. Following this discussion the paper speculates over how design review could be made to work more effectively in Wellington.

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