

MALL CITY

Elisapeta Heta

In architecture graduate Elisapeta Heta's previous work *Mega Mall*, included in the exhibition *Rapid Change* at Te Tuhi, Auckland (and subsequently shown as part of the Public Good exhibition series at Ramp), two documentary video works were displayed side by side, presenting interviews on the subject of the proposed large scale extension of Westfield's St Lukes Mall in inner city Auckland. Pitching an interview with urban planner Peter Waetz alongside members of the St Lukes Community Association, the parallel works revealed the immense chasm that exists between the legal and technical complexity involved in the consent process and the personalised and emotional impact of proposed development on affected citizens.

Mega Mall highlights inequalities that can exist in processes when multinational corporate developers are pitted against local residents in expensive and complex legal proceedings. Members of the community association tell the story of their battle with Auckland Council and Westfield Developers. Westfield sought and were awarded plan changes to the District Plan by Auckland Council, converting surrounding residential areas into business zoning and making way for the size of the mall to double, becoming the single largest retail site in New Zealand and situated within a densely residential inner city suburb.

In a continuation of the *Mega Mall* work, *Mall City* at RAMP focuses Heta's attention on recent large scale mall developments within Hamilton City. The work considers the connection that these kinds of developments create within cities and surrounding public spaces, how we as a public interact with them and the impact suburban mall developments have on central business districts and existing urban planning design.

In many ways making criticism of 'big box - car park focused' mall development might seem like an easy shot - often poorly designed and cheaply built, plugging every possible formula to increase ways for customers to part with their hard earned cash. We are under no illusion about what these places exist for - profit. We are familiar with the widespread public complaint against the economic suburban drift as our shopping habits follow the free and easy access carparks to the city fringes, abandoning the CBD. And we've *all* complained about our displeasure with the mall experience - bright lights, air conditioning, identical offerings of multinational franchises and a headache that seems to develop instantly on entry. And yet here we all are. The irrefutable evidence is that we flock to these places, we literally can't get enough of them (the Base appears second on Hamilton's Wikipedia entry of listed tourist attractions). The mall is fast transforming from simply the option that provided us with previously unexperienced convenience, to a re-envisioned town centre, purchasable recreation offering a place to commune, to meet and relax and, importantly, to shop.

Mall City includes interviews with a Hamilton based architect, urban planner and landscape architect, as well as members of the public. The interviewees' responses reveal the range of voices invested in the design and planning of any development, public or private, and crucially reveal just how fragmented the overall development and design of a city is. How do we articulate and uphold a vision for how a city is designed and used against myriad political, commercial and environmental forces - against new governments, boom and bust periods and technological advancements that change the way people move from A to B and the modes with which we buy and sell? One binding element in the fragmented make up of the

city is clear – economics: how much things cost to produce, construct and make, and how much profit can be made from any given activity or development. Each stakeholder within a commercial development or public planning project is operating to a set of imperatives underpinned by the availability of resources. These restrictions affect the consumer in different ways, from the designless architecture of big box development, to decisions which mean parking is free at a shopping mall but costs us at the public hospital.

Threaded through all of the interviews in *Mall City* is the clear desire to live in spaces and places that allow for more opportunities for beauty and diversely rewarding experiences of public space.

Kim Paton

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With thanks to:

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