City profile

Auckland: Rescaled governance and post-suburban politics

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The nature and politics of urban development in Auckland have undergone rapid transformation following amalgamation of eight separate authorities in 2010. Institutions governing metropolitan planning and infrastructure provision were rescaled to form the Auckland 'Super City' Council in 2010, with an ambitious vision to become the world's most liveable city and ongoing political contestation between the local and central government. Amalgamation of Auckland's governance was conceived and imposed by the central government as part of a broader economic strategy for "competitive cities". However, Auckland Council's first strategic plan adopted a contrasting agenda, centred around the goal of "liveability". Auckland's recent developments illustrate the challenges of a distinctly post-suburban polity. The majority of employment is located in suburban areas and the city has variegated and overlapping patterns in spatial form generated through inconsistent infrastructure interventions across local and national authorities. Conflicting urban policy agenda at national and local scales shows a tension between the pursuit of economic development and provision for collective needs. The politics of post-suburban development create specific challenges for Auckland's governance. Liveability and economic competitiveness are treated as complementary terms in political rhetoric, however trade-offs emerge at a smaller spatial scales. Public concern over housing affordability and risks to the financial stability of New Zealand's economy have led to central government intervention and renegotiation of authority between different tiers of government for land use and infrastructure provision. Auckland's position as New Zealand's largest city and economic centre frequently blurs the distinction between issues of local and national significance. Auckland's governance challenges are not unique, however the current tensions are exacerbated by its dominance in a small and geographically-isolated nation.

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1. Background

Auckland has a population of 1.57 million across approximately 560 km² (Statistics New Zealand, 2015b). The region's geography is unusual: Auckland is centred on an isthmus, punctuated by approximately fifty volcanic cones with sheltered harbours to the east and west. 34% of New Zealand's population live in Auckland, and the city generates 35% of New Zealand's gross domestic product (Statistics New Zealand, 2015a, 2015b). Auckland's spatial form is relatively dispersed, with higher residential and employment density in the city centre, and lower-density residential and employment patterns extending from the city fringe to the urban periphery. Auckland has expanded far beyond the isthmus to the north and south, engulfing a number of historically-separate settlements.

Across Auckland's history, the region has experienced ongoing economic and social transformation. Auckland (formerly known as

Tāmaki-makau-rau) was historically a productive agricultural area, with access to two harbours and fertile soil due to the region's volcanic activity. In 1740 the indigenous Māori population was approximately 10,000, however tribal conflict meant that by 1826 there was no remaining residential settlement on the isthmus (Pownall, 2008). Following the arrival of European colonists, the city was selected as the capital of the New Zealand colony in 1841 (Bloomfield, 1967). Auckland's geographical advantage made it a favourable location for settlement during the early years of colonisation. New Zealand had limited inland transport infrastructure and sea transport was essential for trade between regions. Auckland grew quickly, as it was well-equipped to support trade with protected harbours on both coastlines and also served as the country's administrative centre. Despite the transfer of the capital city to Wellington in 1865, Auckland's population increased further to 12,500 by 1864, and 58,000 by 1881 (Bloomfield, 1973). By 2015 Auckland's population of 1.57 million dwarfed New Zealand's next largest city of Christchurch, with only 370,000 residents. Auckland's growth took place under fragmented governance and different jurisdictions

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competed aggressively to assert dominance over regional planning decisions and fundraising capabilities (Bush, 1990).

As a former British colony, New Zealand's population growth and changing ethnic composition has been heavily shaped by migration over the past 180 years. Immigration reform in the late 1980s led to even greater ethnic diversity, particularly in urban centres. Fig. 1 shows the components of population growth in Auckland between 1997–2015. Significant, but volatile, international in-migration contrasts with net domestic out-migration, which has heavily influenced Auckland's ethnic composition. Forty percent of Auckland's current residents were born outside New Zealand, and the city is more diverse than London and Los Angeles (Bruce, 2014).

Auckland's large variety of cultures include 213 different ethnic groups, and the largest urban population of indigenous Māori. Efforts by local institutions to support Auckland's diversity, including public celebrations around Matariki (Māori New Year), Chinese New Year and Diwali, have reinforced Auckland's identity as a cultural "melting pot" that brings benefits for all residents (Johnson & Moloughney, 2007). Auckland's Māori heritage and population have particular significance for governance and planning. A large share of New Zealand's Māori population migrated to urban centres over the 20th century, accompanied by policies which undermined social structures and cultural practices (Barcham, 1998). Currently, urban Māori experience poorer outcomes for education, housing quality, and health in New Zealand cities and urban governance faces a challenge to recognise the needs and heterogeneity across urban Māori populations (Gagné, 2016; Ryks, Pearson, & Waa, 2016).

1.1. Urban governance in New Zealand

The absence of an overarching urban policy in New Zealand has largely left urban issues to relevant sector-based policies around infrastructure provision, land use, and economic development (Zöllner, 2004). Over the 20th century local politics in Auckland were prone to dysfunction, "pork-barreling" and parochial interests (Bloomfield, 1973; Edgar, 2012). In the context of parochialism and political dysfunction, the preferred governance mechanism for much of the 20th century was the ad-hoc board: a specific-purpose entity to manage services or infrastructure facilities (Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, 2009). Given the demands of rapid growth, the efficiency of ad-hoc bodies to deliver infrastructure investments without requiring integrated planning or consensus across neighbouring jurisdictions made them a popular short-term measure. Over the longer term this resulted in a proliferation of separate governing bodies: by 1960 the region had 31 territorial authorities and 16 ad hoc bodies, creating an extremely difficult environment for
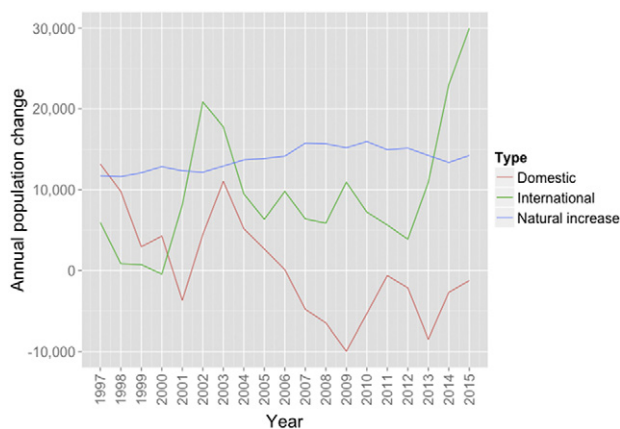
unified decision-making (Bush, 1972). Therefore Auckland's governance structure was driven by expedience, bowing under pressures to meet the immediate demands of growth rather than a unified long term vision. The governance and provision of region-wide infrastructure was repeatedly undermined by competition between jurisdictions. Major investments in water sources and reticulation systems, waste water treatment and transit provision were frequently contested and deferred (Harris, 2005; La Roche, 2011). Often, political consensus was only reached after the deterioration of infrastructure led to a major failure or crisis (Fitzmaurice, 2009).

The multitude of governing authorities was streamlined by reforms imposed by the central government. The passing of the Auckland Regional Authority Act in 1963 led to Auckland's first region-wide authority, and further amalgamation of 22 local authorities to seven in 1990 further reduced the number of institutions governing Auckland (Bush, 1990). Ongoing renegotiation and "hollowing out" of the authority of Auckland's regional agencies demonstrates the difficulty in maintaining stable political relationships at the regional scale (Memon, Davies, & Fookes, 2007).

2. Rescaled governance: Auckland's Super City project

Following extended periods of political fragmentation and failed attempts to reform governance in 1906, 1927, and 1964 (Edgar, 2012; Bloomfield, 1967; Bloomfield, 1973; Bush, 1972), four city councils, three district councils and one regional council were finally amalgamated to form a unitary authority in 2010.

Urban governance is a central instrument by which cities can re-orient themselves around global economic and political networks (Keil, 2000). Reconfiguration of governance reflects both the macro-economic logic or policies, and the actors and institutions which participate in local governance (Boudreau, Hamel, Jouve, & Keil, 2006). Restructuring of urban governance through amalgamation negotiates trade-offs between scale and efficiency, alongside imperatives for democratic representation and providing for the collective needs of urban populations. Auckland's amalgamation was evidently a product of national economic strategy to strengthen urban economies. However, emerging tensions and the implementation of new governance mechanisms reflect the contingent assemblages of actors participating in the city's governance, albeit with strong influence from the central government (Wetzstein, 2008).

Since 2000, the central government showed greater interest in Auckland's contribution to the national economy, as the region showed strong economic growth (Lewis & Murphy, 2015). The central government's initiative for "competitive cities" formed a key component of the economic agenda to support prosperity and future growth (Ministry for Local Government, 2009). Auckland was characterised as the "engine room" for New Zealand's economic growth (Ministry for Local Government, 2009). This shows the strategic role of Auckland for the central government, not primarily as a population centre, but a vehicle to support the national economic strategy. Governance reforms were justified by imperatives for international competitiveness, Auckland's significance to the national economy, and the desire to better serve interdependent needs for social, environmental, cultural and economic well-being (P. Salmon, Bazley, & Shand, 2009).

The conceptualisation of global cities as strategic units in their own right (World Bank, 2015) has influenced political discourse and expectations of how cities are organised, both economically and socially (Gupta, Pfeffer, Ros-Tonen, & Verrest, 2015; Sassen, 2005). While the geographic limits of Auckland's governance are bounded to 560 km^2, the scale across which governance networks are influenced, and have subsequent impacts, is much broader. Success in global liveability rankings has influenced Auckland's policy goals, and Auckland's diversity results in a large number of international

Fig. 1. Components of population growth in Auckland (Statistics New Zealand, 2015b).