

# denizen

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— THE ART OF —  
**LIVING WELL**

# THE PRECINCT

*Usually tasked with writing about the work of other designers and architects who are shaping the new Auckland, in this issue, we ask Nat Cheshire to share his own experiences of his involvement in the transformation of the Britomart precinct.*

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**130** years ago this place was a fortress-crowned headland: Point Britomart, named for a 10-gun British brig. Shortly, the city would carve it to pieces and throw them into the sea, forming a new foreshore for Auckland. Britomart traded its fort for a world of commerce; upon its soil the wharves heaved as the city worked and traded its way into existence. They called it a reclamation, as if the sea had been holding back what was rightfully ours.

13 years ago, Britomart was a decayed wreck. The city had used it, spent it, and abandoned it. Buildings once proudly erected and lavishly adorned now sagged under the weight of a century's alteration, vandalism and pigeon shit. The roll call of their progressive occupation is breathtaking, as they fall from the grace of high commerce to warrens of small-time traders, squatters and cheap take-out joints. The city's artists, ever visionary – and necessarily spendthrift – were amongst the last brave enough to live within these lilted walls. In the wasteland outside, buses filled tin lean-tos with diesel smoke, and the usual mix of hookers, dealers and petty criminals terrified the daylight out of us kids sneaking into subterranean spacie parlours.

13 months ago Britomart was a precinct of glimmering but isolated hopes. Roukai Lane was the very first thing I drew when we opened our practice, worked out over and over again in charcoal on a huge roll of butcher's paper, as Pip [Cheshire] and his new studio worked to draw a viable civic shape from the morass. Into the lane now opened A&M and Racket, a diptych operated by some kids from Christchurch, morphing

daily from café into restaurant, bar, nightclub and back again. Across the brick-paved square, The Northern Steamship Company and what is now The Quay Street Café held the Northern front in the first two buildings we converted. The Western flank was pinned by the tiny Smith Bar, holed up in Mercer & Mercer's conversion of the Levy Building. Between them stretched a web of brave retailers, spearheaded by Made boutique, working hard to convince the city that Britomart was worth a second chance.

Since then, we've scarcely slept. 1885 and Café Hanoi provided our practice with its first chance to venture inside the buildings we had converted, and design from the glassware up. They bulged from day one, and on the coat-tails of their success a vacant car park became the Britomart Country Club: a mash-up of the temporary and the historic, of shipping containers and polished marble. We punched holes in the old walls enfolding us, so by day we could see from Customs Street right through a city block and into Britomart Country Club's leafy sanctuary, and by night the revelers would be illuminated by the neighbouring boutique's glittering chandeliers. Across the square advertising agency Shine mustered architect and design duo Dorrington and Veneer to open the Tyler St Garage, Precinct and Ebisu triumvirate of eateries, and suddenly – it was late February now – the precinct hit its stride. By August, our practice was running nine concurrent building sites in Britomart, and the place was roaring. The projects differed wildly: we raced from huge, diaphanous black mesh retail boxes to a polychromatic carnival-bar-cum-Mexican-dive; from the shuttered high bistro space of District Dining to the rich timber and leather of the Nathan Club;



*“Bold and sophisticated, Britomart has become - in the words of its proud owner - the theatre of the city.”*

from re-crowning and redressing old Customs Street facades in green, gold and crimson to tearing open and sheathing in black the tired old Seafarers building; from fitting mahogany powder rooms inside a glittering silver shroud at the valet base to shaping a decadent parlour from Cafe Hanoi’s crumbling basement. Concurrently, the Australian architect Richard Johnson and his local collaborators Peddle Thorpe and Aitken were finishing the enormous East building. Its tenants worked day and night to kit-out their stores, and Dorrington and Veneer returned to slip a white shoebox into the trees for Kathryn Wilson.

Between iPhone and pencil, nail gun and cherry picker, we abandoned the shackles of architecture as planning for the action of others, and joined the action ourselves. We ran weekend shopping trips for glassware and perfumed candles, raced through dusky evenings planting ivy and interviewing wait-staff, and pushed through long nights building furniture on the ground - or bolting together a roof high above it. By day, we drew like crazy.

Almost everything opened at once. Hospitality – in its broadest sense - rehabilitated this place in a rush of parties that haven’t ever stopped. In these few city blocks, I can eat croissant straight from the oven, sit down for lunch at white linen, drink coffee alongside crumbling brick, dine at oiled oak, supper on marble, sip martini on the grass, swill champagne from crystal slippers and dance under hand-adzed hundred-year-old-jarrah. At each stop I am welcomed by gorgeous kids and gracious hosts, tempted by superb food and bespoke cocktails, and intoxicated by a series of beautiful and immersive environments. Bold and sophisticated, Britomart has become - in the words of its proud owner - the theatre of the city.

I have come to understand Britomart as a fulcrum in the life of this

city. The old Auckland was committed to razing the precinct’s heritage buildings, that we might start anew with a giant car park, of all things. Those same old buildings are now vital to the viability of this part of the city. Where once huge slabs of single use were to be slathered upon the site, now diversity reigns supreme. Where once the car was to take centre stage, now sits the very hub of our hopes for Auckland’s public transport network. In delivering us the first clear sign that this city might yet be something better, Britomart helped galvanize us into demanding that it must. Now, a Council of unprecedented power and size has drafted a spatial plan for a super-city in which heritage is treasured, pedestrians are celebrated, meaningful train loops established, and density and diversity actively supported. I only hope they know how to pay for this new city, and how – and this is key - eventually it might pay for itself.

I have also come to understand architecture itself as a fulcrum; a tipping point between the collective energies of the city’s sophisticated political, economic and operative players, and the hurling of their hopes and dreams into reality. That brief act, the determiner of civic form for decades hence, is a great responsibility. It is not carried alone. Britomart’s owners have a view of architecture here that is breathtaking in its breadth; their leasing and development team painstakingly craft the tenant mixes and business models that will empower and shape that architecture; their operator-tenants are invariably creative entrepreneurs themselves, with bold ideas for the use, form and emotion of the spaces they will occupy. Underpinning everything is a carefully documented urban vision: a formal agreement between city and owner to deliver of this old wasteland a great, new, sustainable core for Auckland.

Here is the fundamental lesson: Britomart is owned. It has not been sliced up, developed for short-term gain, and flicked on. The precinct

has a single owner, determined by competition, with a mandate from the council to develop these six and a half hectares of downtown space as a single, long-term economic holding. For one hundred years Cooper & Company has the opportunity to draw from that space the income that will balance the enormous capital expense of its transformation. Finally, at the turn of next century, the city gets it all back. For a dollar.

For the economics of development to work in these terms requires sustainability. Sustainability of this order is far-reaching: five-star green buildings and the adaptive re-use of existent building fabric aside, in order to remain viable and vital these nine city blocks need to return their owners and operators a great income over a long period of time. Leasing mixes need to remain beautifully composed, and operators sophisticated, busy and profitable. Buildings need to be exciting, well made, and flexible. Public space needs to be firm, rich, and lively. A finely weighted balance must be struck between glitterati shopping for the perfect pair of heels and children playing in the fountains. For at least one hundred years more Britomart will need to be developed, nurtured and encouraged in this way.

Achieving this will require a complex synergy of type and use. Britomart’s heritage carapace provides richness and depth, but costs a fortune to repurpose to the sophisticated demands of contemporary commerce. Its vacant central land provides the development opportunities to offset those costs, but would never be so enticing without that same ring of heritage-borne character. Similarly, hospitality has made a party of every evening, but needs strong retail to bolster its days and fill out its weekends, offices to pump people through during the week, and residents – temporary or permanent – to glue everything together. Britomart is a sophisticated ecology; nothing here happens in isolation.

From here, the goal is clear, and it is two-fold. Firstly, programmatic: that the next move be to redress the retail balance, and complete the depth of offering that will make the precinct a vibrant destination during the day. Secondly, spatial: that having delivered action to the street edge it now find opportunity beyond it, both on the streets and in the depth of our city blocks, eking out delights in basements, mezzanines, laneways, footpaths, upper floors and rooftops. The opportunity here is to shape the entire precinct as a continuous environment; a concentrated extension of the city, immersive and inspiring from the minute you cross Customs Street, slide up out of the train station, or toss your keys to the valet.

Globally, the search for the organic fills high culture and commerce alike: the Brit Awards’ live mash-up of Dizzee and Florence, the conflation of digital and analogue media, and the clashing of flavour profiles in the degustation of Adria and Meredith are all witness to our collective desire to reconcile the irreconcilable. Even as we return to indie-folk, artisan trading and the provenance of our tomatoes, we seem only to be redressing a balance in lives saturated by the instruments of technology.

Britomart is a precinct defined by these same delicious tensions. An extension of the desires of the city, it is an artfully balanced mix of culture and commerce, careful urban planning and bold private action, robust heritage and delicate futurism. This is the vanguard of our new Auckland: the better this place gets, the faster the city around it races to catch up. If Britomart is truly successful it will transform this city, intoxicating it with dreams of a bolder, richer future. Auckland will not be the same. I am delighted to fight for this.



# BRITOMART

*It's the undisputed destination of the moment for nightlife. But the Britomart precinct in downtown Auckland has also now come-of-age as a shopping destination, with more than 20 fashion, beauty and specialty boutiques clustered into four distinct retail zones.*

## CUSTOMS STREET EAST

Strung along the graceful historic façade of Customs Street East is a collection of beautiful, quirky designer fashion and streetwear boutiques, all in character heritage spaces. **Made** is a treasure trove of high-end local and international fashion labels, from DAY Birger et Mikkelsen, APC and Motel to Miss Crabb, Ingrid Starnes and Karen Walker. Made also stocks a mint collection of vintage handbags; for the whole retro ensemble, check out super-cute vintage boutique **Coucou** next door. **Storeroom** offers the best range of new and vintage designer jeans in town, including Swedish 'vintage revision' brand Neuw and an excellent selection of off-mainstream colours and cuts. **Laundromat Boutique** is the main New Zealand store for hipster streetwear label Federation, along with brands like Kr3w, Dr Denim, Converse and Kidrobot. And, if you're after a custom motorcycle, head to **Molotov** – they've also got New Zealand's best range of Deus ex Machina clothing, plus Huffer, Herschel bags and Rusty surfboards.

## SHOWCASE & CENTRAL

Located at the centre of the precinct, the Showcase is Britomart's newest retail development: two striking structures encased in elegant black mesh which glows after dark. Fashion gallery **Curate** is a showcase of its own for the very best of New Zealand high fashion, stocking 15 top designers including Cybèle, Sabatini, Stolen Girlfriends Club and Sylvester. Next door, art and design gallery **The Poi Room** offers beautiful original work by Kiwi painters, sculptors, ceramicists, jewellers and designers. Across the courtyard is the new flagship concept store for Apple retailer and all-round technology mecca **Yoobee**, and the first New Zealand store for Japanese cult sports shoe brand **Onitsuka Tiger**. Diagonally opposite outdoor store **Timberland** is the perfectly scaled 'Shoe Box', the first boutique for New Zealand shoe diva **Kathryn Wilson**, offering the full Kathryn Wilson and Miss Wilson ranges including limited edition styles.



Above: Curate fashion gallery in the Showcase

## TYLER STREET

Tyler Street, the narrow lane put firmly on the map by award-winning bar **Tyler Street Garage**, is also emerging as a funky new shopping zone. **The Concept Store** is a tiny shop selling nothing but the world-famous Havaianas jandals in every hue and pattern – along with quirky Havaianas gifts and accessories. **Co-Lab** is the new fashion destination for skaters and boarders of every kind, bringing together devotee labels Nike SB, Nike 6.0, Hurley and Converse for the first time in Australasia. Famous for its Marine Bean outdoor bean bag, patio furniture and luggage, **Coast New Zealand** also has its new Outdoor Room showroom here, with entrances on Tyler and Quay Streets. And the word is there's more top retail to come.



## ATRIUM ON TAKUTAI

This architecturally stunning shopping gallery occupies a nine-storey glassed-in space between two new office buildings. As well as New Zealand's largest 'green walls', the Atrium is home to a spree of local retailing firsts, including the only New Zealand boutique for iconic British fragrance brand **Jo Malone**. The **M.A.C Cosmetics Pro store** is the only source in the country of M.A.C's sought-after professional makeup ranges. Facing Takutai Square is the first Kiwi store for London fashion house **Ted Baker**, whose signature tailoring and playful detailing have inspired a dedicated fan base worldwide. **Nike Britomart**, the first store in New Zealand under the Nike name, showcases the superbrand's latest high-performance shoes and clothing. And if you like your designer sportswear, check out the showroom for new-to-these-shores Canadian lovemark **Lululemon Athletica**. The Atrium also houses new boutiques for beauty house **L'Occitane** and Swedish designer stationery label **Kikki K**.



Clockwise from top: Co-Lab on Tyler Street; City Farmers' Market at Britomart; Atrium on Takutai



## WEEKEND FARMERS' MARKET

*On Saturdays the office workers are gone and a laid-back weekend vibe takes over Britomart. Along with latte lovers and Les Mills gym goers, the precinct attracts market-goers drawn to the weekly City Farmers' Market, held Saturday mornings in its central open spaces. The freshest local produce, treats to eat on the spot and live music... it's all here.*

## introducing: Britomart valet parking

When you're seriously hitting the shops you don't want to mess around with parking. Britomart has its own valet parking service, with two drop-off points: in the centre of the precinct on Gore Street, and at Britomart Car Park on Britomart Place. Just pull up, swap your keys for a ticket from your friendly valet concierge and you're on your way. Honestly, it makes you feel like a million bucks. Or you can park the old-school way in one of 1200 covered bays at Britomart Car Park on Quay Street.

*Britomart's open for late shopping on Thursday nights.*

More about shopping, parking and hanging out at Britomart at [www.britomart.org](http://www.britomart.org)