

Living Streets Aotearoa



Community Street Audit – Pilot Project June 7th 2005

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Living Streets Aotearoa is New Zealand's pedestrian advocacy group. Wellington City Councillor, Celia Wade Brown, founded the group in 2002. Celia modeled the organisation based on the group Living Streets operating in the United Kingdom.

Living Streets UK has developed a model for conducting community street audits and the methodology developed there has been trialed in this audit. Quite simply a diverse group of people is selected to make comments about a walking environment from their own experiences. The audit in effect is a customer feedback survey to aid council planners and engineers improve a street environment for people who use the space on foot, wheelchair or pushchair.

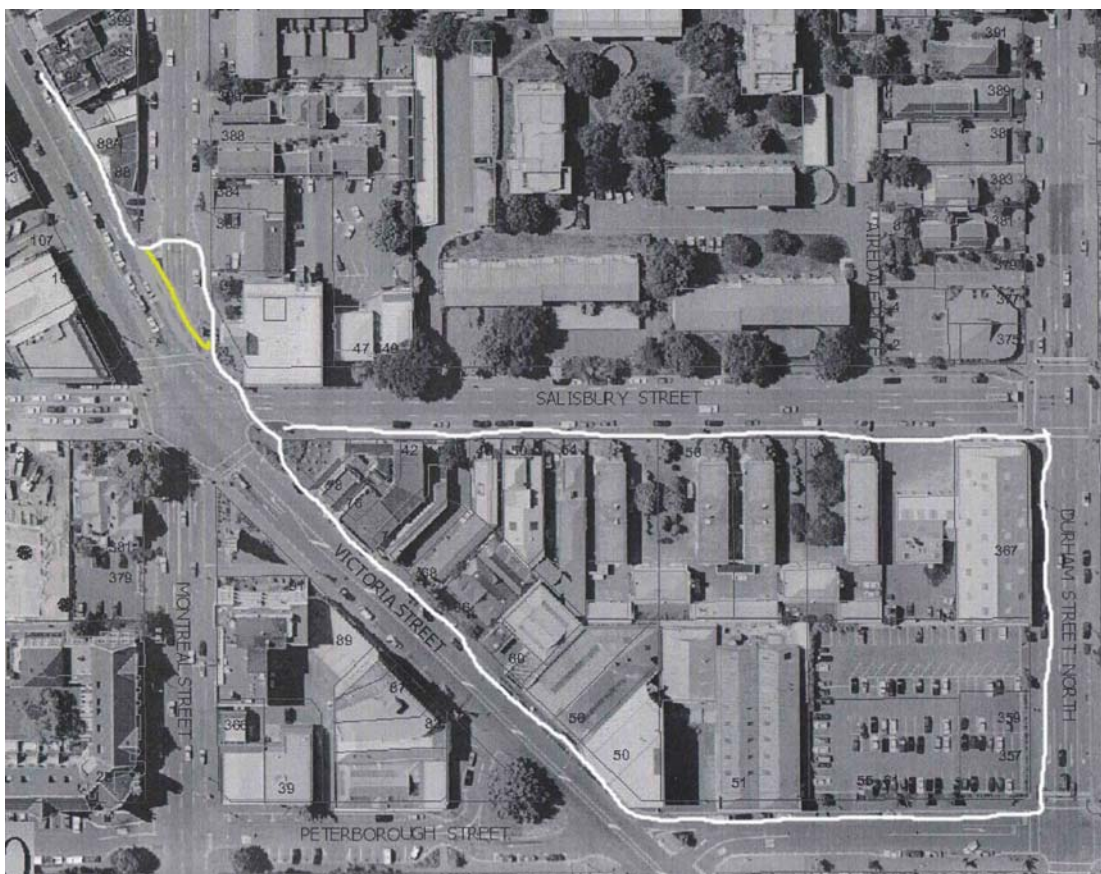
METHODOLOGY

This street audit was developed around the needs of a local resident Patricia Morrison. Patricia is an elderly resident without a car. She has to navigate these streets daily with her walking stick. I wanted the audit to assist in a practical way highlighting a real persons needs in this area.

I selected a diverse group of people to accompany us on the audit. I contacted people from the local Neighbourhood and Plunket Groups, from the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind, the Disabled Persons' Association and the Community Board. Eight people participated on the morning. A vision impaired walker, her mobility instructor, two people from the Victoria Precinct Neighbourhood group, one wheelchair user, an electronic wheelchair user, a mother and child and Patricia Morrison. Two observers accompanied us.

We all met at a local café in Victoria Street where I explained the process and met each other over a coffee. Our audit route was down Victoria Street to the Christchurch Casino and around the block to Durham Street and back via Salisbury Street to our starting position.

Our Route. White = route taken Yellow = where we wished we could walk



Outcomes

An unexpected outcome of the audit was how easy it was to get people to participate. I drafted a couple of letters to both locals and people with special needs. Every person or organisation I wrote to responded.

Interestingly all the participants enjoyed the morning. We began over coffee at the local café where I explained what we were doing and that I wanted both their good and bad feedback on the area we were examining. Everyone was given a folder if they wanted to take notes. Each contained a map and a series of things to look for as they walked around the streets. Most people elected just to tell me things as they walked around. People felt happy that they were being asked their opinions and really appreciated that morning tea was complimentary.

Another very pleasant outcome was all the participants including myself learnt about the difficulties less able people face as they try and navigate our streets. This in itself is a valuable tool, especially for planners and engineers who may need to see first hand the difficulties some people encounter on our streets.

Finally it was really interesting to get so much good feedback from the participants spanning improvements to engineering design, maintenance and design in general. Many of the recommendations made by the group would not cost significant sums of money to rectify but would have a considerable positive effect on the walking space.

I think an audit like this is an excellent way for councils to gather vital feedback from their residents on how streetscapes can be improved. A list of recommendations from the participant's suggestions is made at the end of the report.

The audit highlighted that if you design for the least abled the entire walking environment is better for the whole population.

What did we find?

From the minute we stepped out of the café and turned left into Victoria Street we encountered difficulties.

Sandwich boards and obstructions were all over the pavement. This made it particularly difficult for our vision-impaired person.



One participant made the comment that no wonder people go to the malls to shop. The area was noisy from traffic, not well maintained and not particularly attractive. Patricia commented how there used to be seats but they were all gone now. The surface of the pavement was not in good condition and was quite undulating. Large telecom covers that could have gone on the car parking area were over the footpath. Again another difficulty for our vision impaired lady.

Heading towards Montreal Street was the greatest challenge for everybody. We all wanted to walk straight ahead in Victoria Street but chains prevented us from going in the direction we wanted to be in. There was no signage or clear path to indicate where the footpath went. Our mobility instructor pointed out the chains were the wrong height and color for a visually impaired person to detect. They should be at a maximum height of 150mm from the ground. These chains were

much higher than that, meaning that a person with a cane could not locate them in time to avoid falling over them. A stronger color would also aid in their detection.



Chains prevent us from walking straight ahead.
Victoria/Montreal/
Salisbury Streets



We have to navigate through the antique store car park to cross Salisbury St to get back to Victoria St.

We had to navigate our way through what looked like a car park. There was no signage for the route direction. The antique shop on the corner seemed to be allowed to take the footpath as car parking for its business needs. For our visually impaired walker this area was quite difficult without assistance from a sighted person. There was no tactile paving for guidance and the chain fencing was too high for them to find before tripping over it.

Crossing the road was not easy at the designated crossing point. Blind left-hand turners came from Victoria Street. It was difficult for people who were slow to navigate the crossing point. The entire intersection needed to be realigned and left hand turns banned. One participant felt traffic movements should be altered and cars traveling north on Montreal should not be able to enter Victoria Street.



Left hand turners make road difficult to cross.



Poster tower impedes sight lines for wheelchair users.

This intersection was also incredibly difficult for our wheelchair users. A large poster bollard in the pavement blocked their sight lines. You can just see this in the photo.

Once over the intersection the street became more attractive. Flowerbeds added some color to the grey streets. Some shop fronts gave the street a good feel as well. Floor to ceiling glass frontages made the shops feel like they opened out onto the street and made the area more visually attractive.. The street felt a nicer place. The shops became part of the streetscape.



Two participants highlighted that roses should not be planted in any street reserves. They rightly pointed out that all the rubbish gets caught in the plants and it is difficult to get out without getting scratched.

We arrived at another chained intersection. This was Salisbury St. Our visually impaired walker pointed out a very interesting design defect. The arrow on the pedestrian lights should point in the direction of the crossing. This one doesn't and points the person into the centre of the intersection. Again there was no tactile paving for directions. For the rest of us the length of time that the green man flashed was really short. There was not enough time for people to get over the road easily.



When we looked to our left in Salisbury Street we found a terrible example of the path being obstructed by hand rails. This was particularly dangerous for the visually impaired.

As we continued to Peterborough Street similar problems were picked up. Undulating footpaths, patches and broken kerbs.

For our wheelchair users they were happy with the width of the paths. There was plenty of room for them to travel side by side.

A large raised garden bed was at the intersection of Peterborough and Victoria Streets. Everyone liked it. Gave some color to the street.

Whilst we didn't cross over the road to the casino we made some observations from the footpath. Signage was terrible. Small signs pointing to London etc were a waste of money. Trees that were planted in the middle of the footpath were also quite amusing. For our wheelchair users they appreciated the small island in the centre of the road but had great difficulty with the kerb cuts.



We headed east along Peterborough St. The car park for the casino was a problem for the walkers. There were multiple car movements as we tried to walk along the footpath. Several made the comment about how ugly the area was. We discussed how it would be better to have the car park made underground or to remove altogether and have car parks on the outskirts of Christchurch and people could be shuttled into the central areas.

Alongside the car park were overhanging trees. The branches were a problem for the visually impaired walker. Trees need to be trimmed regularly so that they don't cause injury to people. Patricia made another interesting comment at this point. The free shuttle bus travels along this route but only in the evening. For her travel needs and many others it would be a great idea to have the service operating day and night. This would reduce the walking distance into the central city for both herself and many other elderly residents who live in the vicinity.



Dangerous tree branches in Peterborough St.

We turned the corner into Durham Street and headed north. For a very central city area it was an extremely ugly area. Very gray and boring. Filled with car movements and not much else. One positive comment was the area was very well lit. Again there were no tactile pavers for directions and the kerb cuts were extremely difficult for our wheelchair users and the mother with the pushchair. The curb extensions were not located properly at the crossing. For a blind user when they find the light button they should be a body length from being able to move onto a smooth intersection. In this case they will trip because the kerb extension is in the wrong place. The photo also shows the pole is too far away from the road edge, it is quite difficult for this lady to reach.



We found evidence of pedestrian desire lines not being fulfilled in this area. The car park had no proper pedestrian connections from it to the street. People walked

through the flower beds. Someone had taken the initiative to place some pavers between the beds but they were not laid correctly and were impossible for a wheelchair user, a frail person or a mother with children to use. The remainder of the street was undulating. We think it has been a long time since the path has been re-surfaced.



Tactile paving was laid on the north west corner of the intersection of Salisbury St and Durham Street North. However although new, there were installation problems. The tiles were right on the road instead of being 300mm from the intersection. When visually impaired people find the tiles they need a little bit of space so they don't end up on the road space. The other problem with the tiles they didn't align with the intersection. They directed people into the oncoming cars and not the crossing point.



Glass and rubbish was continually mentioned as a problem for everyone. Patricia pointed out that there had been an accident weeks ago and that the glass had only been removed from the pedestrian crossing.

We turned the corner and headed west along the southern side of Salisbury Street. This street was more attractive. Green verges broke up the gray of the footpaths. This street wasn't too bad for the walkers. The main comment was over tree overhangs.

Our walk concluded when we reached Victoria Street. We summed up what we had seen. Many general comments were made at this point. On the route we took there were no seats, for mothers and older people they want to sit and rest at times. There were no toilets. Everyone commented that there were no pedestrian signs or maps for people new to the area. For an area promoted to tourists you would easily get lost if you didn't have your own map. Bus stops were lacking as well.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comments of this group of walkers the walking environment we audited could be improved significantly by:

- Ensuring that signboards are aligned to kerb edges, not all over the pavement. I would imagine this would not be terribly difficult to implement. Parking wardens could report areas where this is a problem and council staff could then educate/inform shop owners that boards should be aligned to the kerb.
- Undertaking more regular maintenance to ensure footpath surfaces are smooth.
- Putting utility covers on the road edge or covered with a smooth cover. Covers could be applied to existing utility points and new installations could be made roadside.
- Ensuring prickly plants don't form part of the street environment. Current inappropriate plants should be removed and replaced with more suitable varieties.
- Ensuring tactile paving is installed according to RTS 14. Council staff should be aware of RTS 14 and ensure contractors have sufficient knowledge to perform correct installations. As we found new installations are not being installed correctly.
- Making sure that entrances to car parks are clearly delineated to highlight that walkers have the right of way. Adequate pavement markings would solve this problem.
- Closer attention needs to be paid when installing traffic lights to ensure walk arrows align with the intersection for vision-impaired and that poles are at an appropriate distance from the kerb for vision impaired and wheelchair users. Again this is a matter of ensuring contracting staff is aware of RTS 14.
- There should be an immediate program to improve kerb cuts. Poor kerb cuts limit access for some people. An audit of poor kerb cuts should be undertaken now and improvements built into a forward works program.
- More seats should be installed. Seating should be provided every 200 metres in high foot traffic areas.

- Pedestrian signage and maps need to be developed for the entire area. Christchurch City needs to develop some uniform pedestrian map and signage standards. To my knowledge this has not happened.
- Trees should only be planted on footpaths at the road edge and when this is done branches should be trimmed regularly to ensure branches don't scratch people. Foliage on properties that overhangs the walking environment should be trimmed regularly if council owned and if privately owned, council should notify the owners to trim if there is a problem.
- Traffic light signals should have longer green cycles. People feel intimidated when the red man flashes almost immediately. This was particularly a problem heading south on Victoria Street and trying to cross Salisbury. There should be a review on how traffic signals for pedestrians work.
- Traffic flows on Montreal St should be changed. Traffic should not be able to head north on Victoria. One resident felt this would calm the street environment in Victoria Street.
- The left hand slip lane onto Montreal St from Victoria should be closed and direct pedestrian access established to cross the road.
- Traffic should be slower for the entire area. Now that council has more influence in setting local speed limits, a slower traffic speed of 30km should be implemented in this area.
- Encouraging businesses to open out onto the street more. Design guidelines should highlight the type of urban design that encourages people to use street environments more.
- Streets should be cleaned more often.
- Poster bollards should not be installed on intersection edges because they impede sight lines for some people.
- More public toilets should be installed.
- More green spaces could be created to soften the bitumen.
- Ugly car parks could be put underground or removed if outer parking areas are created.
- Improving bus access, especially increasing the hours of the free shuttle service.