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The Challenge of Planning
for Urban Residential Environments under the
Resource Management Act 1991

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Joanna Margaret Ross

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Abstract:

Planning for urban areas is a process of proactively and creatively providing for the future physical form of an urban area, including its design, development and subsequent use, through the development and implementation of policy and other measures seeking to ensure quality environmental, economic and social outcomes. Yet in New Zealand, the legislation enabling such intervention, the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), makes no reference to the term urban or any of the elements of the urban environment.

This thesis proposes that there is a remit, and indeed a requirement, under the RMA to sustainably manage the built form, and that this should be sought through anticipatory policies in district plans. The extent to which elements of urban planning are currently being provided for in operative district plans was examined using content analysis as a research method – i.e. a word count of specific words/phrases relating to urban elements from which inferences could be drawn. The results indicated that elements of urban planning are being provided for in district plan provisions to a greater or lesser extent, although in most instances were not within its ‘power house’, i.e. the objectives and policies. Further interpretive analysis of actual district plan text suggests that references to urban elements lacked specificity. The results also showed that few associations existed between the various urban elements examined, and that there were no clear causal factors for high urban element word counts.

This paper concludes that planners can confidently provide for elements of urban planning in district plans. In doing so their legacy will be district plans that are more strategic, and therefore in alignment with the purpose of the RMA – the sustainable management of natural and physical resources – as opposed to the prevailing view that they should take a more retrospective perspective, seeking only to avoid, remedy or mitigate the adverse effects of activities on the environment.

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