

NAVIGATING TOMORROW'S TOWN CENTRES:
UNDERSTANDING REGENERATION ACTIVITIES IN NEW ZEALAND'S
REGIONAL TOWNS

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper presents a descriptive analysis of construction activities in New Zealand's regional town centres. Through exploratory analysis, the study aims to understand regeneration activities and assess whether these activities align with local government strategic plans and policy objectives.

Design/methodology/approach: The study utilises building consent (permit) data from thirty-three New Zealand regional town centres approved between January 2009 to January 2022, as a leading indicator for building activities. An exploratory analysis is conducted, capturing scope of building activity, identifying early trends, and assessing the flow-on impact of public building work.

Findings: The findings indicate that government investments in public buildings, aimed at preserving cultural heritage and improving amenities, have stimulated private investments. The residential sector, in particular, experienced significant growth, driven by a variety of projects including new builds, alterations, and conversions of existing structures. This period also saw a notable shift toward mixed-use developments, combining residential and commercial spaces. The rise in residential building activity aligns with strategic planning by territorial authorities to attract more residents to town centres.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the existing literature by using building consents as a measure of building activities to identify trends and assess policy effectiveness. The analysis confirms a positive relationship between public building work and private building work. It also identifies an emerging trend of residential developments in town centres, which is consistent with the strategic planning of territorial authorities.

Keywords: urban regeneration, building consent, adaptive reuse, mixed use, public spending, residential development

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Regional towns, which refer to towns located outside the major metropolitan areas, play a crucial role in serving their surrounding regions as key hubs of commerce, culture, and community activities. They are typically smaller in population compared to the main cities but are essential for the economic and social wellbeing of rural and semi-urban areas. Their town centres, representing the nation's rich heritage and vibrant spirit, have historically served as the vital hubs of their regions, providing essential retail and functional services in rural areas (Vaishar et al., 2016; Connelly et al., 2019). However, these town centres face growing challenges as economic shifts, population changes, and global market trends reshape their role and viability.

The situation in New Zealand mirrors the experiences of Western countries, as described by Powe (2012), who discusses the evolution of small towns in the UK facing economic decline after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Vacant storefronts and deteriorating heritage buildings highlight the changes in these communities, prompting a deep reflection on their future direction. Similar patterns can be observed in the United States, where many small towns have faced significant economic challenges due to industrial decline, shifts in manufacturing, and changes in retail landscapes, leading to the decline of Main Streets and historic downtown areas (Parkinson et al., 2015). In Europe, small towns in countries like Spain, Italy, and Germany have also experienced economic downturns, population declines, and challenges in preserving their cultural heritage (Chahardowli et al., 2020; Kabisch & Grossmann, 2013; Degen, 2018). These widespread issues highlight the common struggle of small towns across Western countries to adapt and revitalise in the face of economic and social changes.

In response, many regional town centres in New Zealand have initiated regeneration efforts aimed at revitalising their urban landscapes (Hills et al., 2020; Nel & Stevenson, 2014). These regeneration initiatives encompass a spectrum of strategies, from demolition for redevelopment to the adaptive reuse of historic buildings (Aigwi et al., 2020; McKibbin et al., 2019; Filippova & Noy, 2020).

Government initiatives have provided important support for these regeneration efforts. One of the most notable programs was the Provincial Growth Fund, launched in 2018, which allocated NZ\$3 billion to spur economic development in provincial regions through investments in infrastructure, innovation, and community projects (Connelly et al., 2019). However, this fund was not intended as a permanent solution, and it concluded in 2021. Its successor, the Regional Strategic Partnership Fund, has a smaller budget of NZ\$193.75 million, highlighting the shift toward more localised and sustainable long-term development solutions. In New Zealand, all construction work is regulated by comprehensive standards, with compliance with the building code being mandatory and obtaining a building consent is often necessary with the monitoring of consents managed by territorial authorities, such as city or district councils, according to the Building Act (New Zealand Government, 2004). Some low-risk building activities such as non-structural internal alterations to existing buildings are

exempt from this requirement. Although not every granted building consent results in actual construction, the act of applying for a building consent signifies a strong intent to proceed with the proposed work due to the associated costs of preparing consent documentation. Therefore, the issuance of a building consent serves as a reliable leading indicator of building activities.

In conclusion, this study seeks to understand regeneration activity through the lens of building consents, which serve as an effective measure of changes in the built environment. By addressing the gap in detailed analysis of these consents, valuable insights into building activity trends can be uncovered. Aligning these trends with government policy directions will further enrich discussions on urban regeneration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban regeneration has become a central theme in planning and development, especially in small towns that face economic and social challenges. The process involves revitalising obsolete areas, fostering economic growth, and addressing demographic shifts. This section reviews the evolution of urban regeneration in New Zealand, the challenges faced, and the strategies adopted in the context of small town centres.

Evolution of Urban Regeneration in New Zealand

Historically, New Zealand's urban development was shaped by Keynesian governance, with substantial state intervention in urban planning. During this period, the government played a significant role in urban development, ensuring equitable resource distribution and comprehensive planning (Nel, 2015). However, since the 1980s, New Zealand's governance shifted towards neoliberal policies, characterised by a reduction in state intervention and a greater reliance on market-driven development (Peet, 2012; Shone & Memon, 2008).

The neoliberal approach led to significant changes in urban regeneration practices, with local economic development agencies emerging to fill the gap left by reduced central government support (Haggerty et al., 2009; Lerner, 2000). These agencies became instrumental in facilitating local regeneration efforts, particularly in economically struggling regional areas (Ateljevic, 2009; Connelly et al., 2019). While this market-driven approach has spurred innovative strategies for regeneration, it has also highlighted the uneven capacity of smaller towns to attract investment and undertake large-scale redevelopment.

Challenges and Opportunities in New Zealand's Urban Regeneration

Small towns in New Zealand face distinct challenges in their regeneration efforts, such as geographic isolation, population decline, and economic disparities between rural and urban areas. These factors limit access to resources and economies of scale, complicating efforts to

achieve sustainable regeneration. Moreover, the decline of traditional industries and demographic changes, such as population aging and migration, exacerbate the challenges faced by regional towns (Nel, 2015).

Research shows that attracting newcomers and retaining existing populations is critical to the vitality of small towns. For instance, Wilson et al. (2020) highlight the importance of creating appealing environments for new residents, while MacKay and Perkins (2017) emphasise the need for tailored interventions that address the specific needs of each town. These findings suggest that regeneration strategies must be adaptable to the local context, with flexibility to accommodate varying economic and demographic conditions.

Community-driven initiatives have emerged as key drivers of successful regeneration in small towns. Nel and Stevenson (2014) argue that local entrepreneurship, supportive local governments, and community involvement are essential for economic revitalisation. These local actors often lead efforts to improve infrastructure, restore heritage buildings, and foster new economic opportunities, contributing to the long-term sustainability of regeneration projects (Campbell, 2019).

Perkins et al. (2019) and Perkins and MacKay (2022) further explore the role of local communities in heritage conservation and urban regeneration, showcasing how active engagement can balance the preservation of historical sites with modern adaptations. These studies emphasise the importance of community participation in shaping regeneration outcomes, ensuring that projects align with the needs and aspirations of the local population. In recent years, property-led regeneration has emerged as a popular strategy to stimulate economic growth in New Zealand's regional town centres. This approach emphasises the redevelopment of underutilised areas and the strategic use of existing assets, such as heritage buildings, to promote urban renewal (Dance et al., 2018; MacKay et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2019). A critical element of this strategy is adaptive reuse, which not only preserves the architectural heritage of these buildings but also integrates them into modern economic activities, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary urban settings (Aigwi et al., 2018).

Tourism has become a key driver of regeneration in many regional towns, particularly where traditional industries have declined. Ateljevic (2008) highlights the role of tourism entrepreneurship in promoting regional development, while Dance et al. (2018) demonstrate how improvements in tourism infrastructure can enhance regeneration efforts. By leveraging New Zealand's natural beauty and cultural heritage, tourism-driven regeneration attracts visitors, creates jobs, and stimulates local economies (Yeoman et al., 2015).

However, the rise of tourism can also present challenges for local communities. For instance, short-term rentals have disrupted housing markets in many small towns, leading to concerns about housing affordability and availability (Campbell et al., 2019). This indicates that while tourism offers significant economic benefits, its broader impacts on local communities must be carefully managed to ensure sustainable development.

Policy Frameworks and Legislative Support

Urban development in New Zealand is influenced by its regulatory and policy environment. Central government initiatives, such as the Provincial Growth Fund, provided critical financial support for regeneration projects between 2018 and 2021, particularly in provincial areas (Connelly et al., 2019). However, the cessation of this fund in 2021, replaced by the smaller Regional Strategic Partnership Fund, reflects a shift towards more localised solutions that rely less on central government funding.

Legislative frameworks, such as the Building Act 2004, ensure that construction activities associated with regeneration meet safety and sustainability standards (Nwadike & Wilkinson, 2021). Building consents, issued under this regulatory regime, serve as a leading indicator of regeneration activity, as they reflect a commitment to undertake new construction or redevelopment projects. While not all consents lead to completed projects, they provide valuable data for understanding the scale and nature of physical changes in small towns.

The Need for a Survey of Construction Projects in Small Towns

Despite the growing focus on urban regeneration, a notable gap remains in the specific documentation of construction projects executed as part of regeneration efforts in smaller towns. Without detailed data on the types of projects, their scale, and their geographic distribution, it is challenging to assess the full scope of regeneration efforts or compare planned developments with actual outcomes. In this context, my research addresses this gap by analysing building consents in New Zealand's regional town centres. These consents, used as a proxy for physical change, provide tangible metrics for understanding the scope and direction of regeneration efforts. This exploration offers insights that may have broader relevance to international urban regeneration practices, especially in other small towns that share similar challenges.

METHODS AND DATA

This study uses a comprehensive secondary data analysis to explore urban regeneration trends in New Zealand's regional town centres. Building consents serve as the main data source for understanding urban development patterns, while strategic local government plans provide context to evaluate the alignment between policy objectives and observed development activities.

Data Collection

Building Consents: Building consents are the primary data source for this study. Issued under the Building Act 2004, consents ensure all building activities comply with New Zealand's Building Code. Local government, known as Territorial Authorities, are responsible for

processing and approving consents, with records maintained by these councils. Territorial Authorities include city councils, which manage urban areas, and district councils, which govern rural or mixed urban-rural areas. For this town centre study, district councils are the primary focus.

Our data source for this study is the building consents records maintained by Territorial Authorities. These decentralised records are collected by BCI Central (2009-2022), a commercial database that compiles consents from all Territorial Authorities across New Zealand. Consents typically include information such as the site address, description of the work, issue date, project value, and floor area. While the descriptions are concise—for example, "new residential dwelling" or "convert upper floor to apartments"—the overall records provide a robust basis for analysing the scale, type, and timing of construction activities within town centres.

This research examines building consents in New Zealand from January 2009 to January 2022, based on the dataset available at the time of the study.

Local Government Strategic Plans: In addition to consent data, this study reviews strategic planning documents from Territorial Authorities to understand the policy contexts driving regeneration. In New Zealand, councils are mandated under the Local Government Act (New Zealand Government, 2002) to develop a long-term strategic plan, which is updated every three years. These documents outline land use, zoning regulations, and urban development frameworks, offering insights into how local policies direct resources and support regeneration efforts. In addition to long-term plans, some towns have separate town centre plans, which have also been collected for this study. Larger towns tend to have dedicated policy documents addressing town centre development, whereas smaller towns generally do not. Town centres with documented plans post-2018 were prioritised, but earlier plans were also reviewed where applicable.

Data Selection and Extraction

Selection of Towns: This study focuses on New Zealand towns outside metropolitan areas that have a defined town centre.

As of December 2022, New Zealand's population was estimated at 5.2 million. Statistics New Zealand's Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) framework classifies urban areas based on population size: major (100,000+), large (30,000–99,999), medium (10,000–29,999), and small (1,000–9,999). Major urban areas such as Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton, and Tauranga are excluded from this study.

Within the FUA framework, "urban cores" refer to the central areas of towns, typically with populations over 5,000. These cores represent the primary hubs of economic, social, and cultural activity, characterised by higher population density and significant commercial and

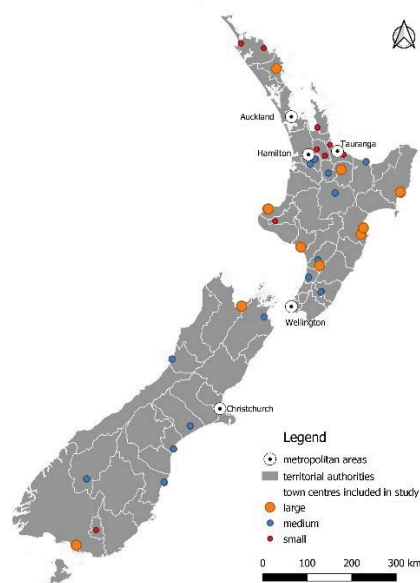
administrative functions. The concept helps distinguish the central, developed area of a town from its suburban or peripheral areas.

In smaller towns, the urban core is often synonymous with the town centre, where commercial and civic activities are concentrated. Some towns consist of clusters of commercial areas rather than a single distinct urban core, while others may be too small to have an urban core. The designation of an urban core depends not only on population but also on land use, economic activity, and functional importance. For this study, only towns with clearly defined urban cores were included, ensuring the focus remains on areas with distinct commercial activity.

Town Centre Boundaries: Town centre boundaries are extracted from local council documentation, ensuring that each town centre has clearly defined boundaries. Some council documents describe these boundaries by street names, while others provide maps; in the absence of these, zoning maps are utilised where available. Towns lacking documented boundaries are excluded from the study. Although there is variation in boundary definitions from town to town—some towns have narrowly defined centres that focus primarily on a small geographic area, while others have broader boundaries that encompass adjacent commercial and residential areas— we maintain consistency across time for analytical purposes. The specific documents for all towns included in the study are listed in Appendix 8.

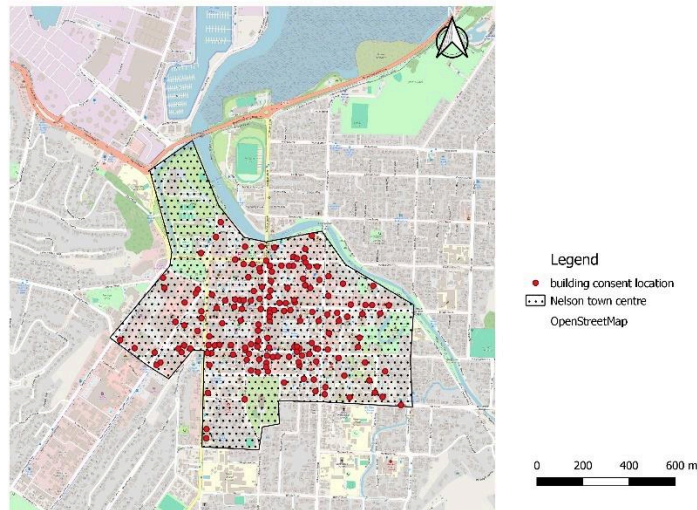
Based on this data selection approach, we identified 33 urban core areas outside metropolitan regions. The selected town centres are listed in Appendix 1, and their geographic distribution is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Map of New Zealand Showing 33 Town Centres Included in the Study



Data Extraction with QGIS layering: Building consent records within the studied geographical areas are extracted using QGIS for location matching. Each record in the building consent database typically includes the site address, a description of the permitted work, the issue date of the consent, project value, and floor area. With the address information, these records can be mapped as a layer. The boundaries of the thirty-three town centres are also drawn according to the council documents, creating a separate layer in QGIS. To extract building consents for addresses within the town centres, data extraction is performed by overlaying the town centre boundary maps with the building consent data. This process resulted in 7,083 building consents granted in the selected town centres during the period for which data are available, from January 2009 to January 2022. See Figure 2 for a visual representation: the town centre boundaries are indicated by solid black lines, while each red dot represents an approved building consent at an address within the town centre.

Figure 2: Selection of Building Consents Using a Joined Layer in QGIS (Nelson as an Example)



Data Processing

CPI Adjustment: Building consent values are presented in nominal terms. For the analysis of growth rates, CPI adjustments were applied to account for inflation. In the analysis without growth rates, nominal values are used to provide clearer and more straightforward illustrations. Annual CPI figures from Statistics New Zealand were used for these adjustments.

Categorisation of Building Works: Each building consent record typically includes the site address, description of the work, issue date, project value, and floor area. However, the description field lacks standardisation and can vary significantly—from generic terms like "alterations to commercial building" to more specific descriptions, such as "construction of thirteen 2- or 3-bedroom retirement villas."

To address this variability, consents are re-coded into standardised categories through keyword searches and systematic checks. Some descriptions may encompass multiple types of work, and categories are assigned based on the primary objective of the work. For example, a consent for a change of building use to apartments with seismic strengthening would be categorised under 'apartments' as the primary keyword and 'seismic strengthening' as the secondary keyword.

The categorisation relies on the researcher's interpretation of consent descriptions, which can introduce biases and limit the accuracy of the analysis. Therefore, these limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section begins with a review of council plans related to town centre planning, followed by an analysis of emerging trends from building consents to assess whether the policies are reflected in the developments.

Review of Council Plans in Relation to Town Centre Development

Council plans serve as crucial guiding documents that shape the physical, social, and economic fabric of urban areas. Only eleven towns have documented town centre plans in council long term strategic plans, reflecting the varying sizes of these centres and the priorities of local governments. Through a review of available council plans, policymakers' intentions to foster resilient and sustainable town centres were revealed. The following Table 1 summarises the key visions and objectives outlined in these plans. Appendix 7 provides a list of the sources (local government plans) for the information presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Local Government Plans on Town Centre Development

Town Centre	Visions and Objectives
Gisborne	A focus on communities; vibrant city and townships; sustainability, and Maori heritage
Hastings	A focus on community, inner city development and redevelopment, sustainability, Competitiveness of Hastings, attracting businesses back to the city centre, making inner-city living a desirable housing option
Invercargill	Streetscape and urban play, a focus on public amenities on arts, culture and sport, City with heart, streetscape, arts and culture, sustainability, preserve heritage, Urban play for residents and visitors
Napier	A vibrant and sustainable city for all, inner city residential development encouraged to fully utilise services, city living support vibrancy, Consultation found mixed opinion on council housing
Nelson	Destination Nelson, walkable Nelson, a blue-green heart, liveable centre, mixed use development, clever business, challenges: parking, climate
New Plymouth	A Green Coastal Centre and Good Urban Manners; People friendly buildings and spaces; A good mix of house types; Pedestrian precinct and public transport.
Palmerston North	Place making, sustainable, innovative and vibrant centre, Streets for people - take away cars, pedestrianising the centre, low vehicular speed, with green infrastructure, integrating arts and culture, keep retail and businesses inside the centre and provide housing choices
Rotorua	Resilience and vibrancy of communities, a focus on shortage of housing, safety and climate change. The 2018 LTP was about revitalise and grow business, the 2021 LTP is more about risk management, after suffering from the Covid-19
Whanganui	An active vibrant city centre to gather and spend time. that attracts business, residents and visitors, all strategies evolve around the smart little city, CBD to provide an attractive community focal point, reflects cultural identity, encourages community pride and contributes to the prosperity of the local economy.
Whangarei	A compact city to limit sprawl and preserve natural beauty. Unique geography contributes to sprawling, but plan aims to reactivate CBD as centre of commerce, trade, and urban living. Another case of pedestrianising the town centre
Cambridge	A vibrant town centre, wide tree lined streets, well defined town boundary, safe neighbourhood and diverse and inclusive community, convenient transport, walk and cycle, discourage long term parking, enhance natural and culture heritage, range of housing, meet needs of aging population (close to the centre with established services), intensity of accommodation, compact and mixed use

The review of council plans underscores the importance of crafting walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods that foster social interaction, environmental sustainability, and economic diversity. Key strategies include promoting compact and diverse development, enhancing pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, and fostering a sense of place through placemaking

initiatives. Additionally, several councils have incorporated provisions for town centre living and supporting facilities into councils' long-term strategic plans (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of Local Government Plan on Residential Development

Functional Area	Urban	Local Government plan on residential development		Plan introduced
		Inner city living	Type of development	
Gisborne		yes	infill and intensify, mixed use, medium density residential, convert upper floors to apartments	2021
Hastings		yes	medium density, mixed use, transient accommodation, retirement housing	2013
Invercargill		no	street design, "urban play to make you stay"	2021
Napier		yes	encourage CBD and CBD fringe development, infill and intensify. Urban plan to come	2021
Nelson		yes	mixed use, high density 6 storeys in the core, medium density 3 stories in surrounding areas	2018
New Plymouth		yes	medium density, affordable housing	2013
Palmerston North		yes	infill, increased density, mixed use, multi-units and apartments	2018
Rotorua		yes	town centre plan to come, 2 apartment buildings identified	2021
Whanganui		yes	reduce retail and redevelop with residential, conversion of upper floors of vacant commercial buildings to apartment	2016
Whangarei		yes	mixed use, medium to high density housing	2011
Cambridge		yes	Compact residential development; Mixed use on second floor and above	2010

The table highlights the policy direction toward medium to high-density residential developments across New Zealand's regional towns. Common strategies include infill development, apartment conversions, and the integration of residential spaces into town

centres. Many plans encourage converting upper floors of commercial buildings into apartments, as well as creating compact and affordable housing options. While some towns have more advanced plans, others are still in the early stages of residential development planning. Overall, there is a clear trend toward densifying urban areas and diversifying housing types to accommodate future growth.

Public Spending vs Private Spending

Government spending has played a catalyst role in shaping town centre development and revitalisation across New Zealand. Investments directed towards infrastructure, cultural heritage preservation, and public buildings have significantly contributed to the growth and transformation of town centres. Notably, government-owned buildings constitute a substantial portion (24%) of consented projects by value, further emphasising the government's influence in this domain.

One significant area of government investment has been the refurbishment and restoration of public buildings within town centres, encompassing structures such as museums, libraries, courthouses, and other civic assets. Additionally, government spending has extended to educational facilities, particularly tertiary-level institutions. Projects aimed at creating conducive learning environments and expanding student accommodations have been observed in urban areas. Through strategic allocation of funds, these projects have served dual purposes of preserving historical and cultural heritage while also enhancing the functionality of these buildings for contemporary use. A summary of public building works is provided in Appendix 2.

The spending on public buildings has a significant correlation with private building spending. Although a causal relationship was not established, preliminary analysis (Table 3) uncovered a 63% correlation between public and private spending in 33 towns. This moderate positive correlation, with a p-value of approximately 0.0000761, suggests that the relationship is statistically significant.

These initial exploratory findings indicate that public spending may inject confidence into the town, encouraging private investment as government policies intend to achieve. However, further rigorous research is needed to confirm these results and establish a clearer understanding of the potential causal mechanisms at play.

Table 3: Public building work vs. private building work (by total consent value in \$ 2009-2022)

	Public Building	Non-Public
count of towns	33	33
mean	\$ 14,455,768	\$ 46,342,841
std	\$ 20,271,808	\$ 52,174,450
min	\$ 100,000	\$ 340,000
25%	\$ 1,308,000	\$ 7,999,089
50%	\$ 3,261,544	\$ 25,786,797
75%	\$ 24,907,932	\$ 58,666,392
max	\$ 84,164,676	\$ 196,898,003
variance	4.10946E+14	2.72217E+15
standard deviation	20271808.3	52174449.9
coefficient of variation	1.402333583	1.125836234
correlation coefficient	0.633392393	
p-value	7.61E-05	

The Emerging Trend of Residential Driven Urban Regeneration

Between 2009 and 2021, the residential sector experienced significant growth, with an average annual growth rate of 41%, surpassing the commercial sector’s year-on-year growth rate of 6%. Table 4 details the category breakdowns and growth rates. The data shows a notable increase in the number of consent applications for new apartments and residential units, as well as their geographic distribution, reflecting the growth of town centre living in regional New Zealand. This surge in residential development includes new builds, conversions, and additions/alterations, offering diverse housing options such as terraced housing, apartments, and retirement villages. Notably, there has been a shift towards mixed-use developments, integrating residential and commercial spaces within town centres (Appendix 3). For instance, apartments have been introduced through infill developments in towns like Cambridge and Nelson, and through conversions of existing structures in New Plymouth, Whangarei, Whanganui, Gisborne, and Napier. This analysis highlights the rising influence of a residential-driven economy, with residential projects achieving a substantial annual growth rate of 41% over the twelve-year period on real dollar terms. Although these projects represent only 10% of total consented works by value, their growth signifies a new factor contributing to urban regeneration in regional towns.

Table 4: Building Consent by Type in 33 New Zealand Regional Town Centres (2009-2022)

Year	residential			commercial		
	total value*	y/y change	# of projects	total value*	y/y change	# of projects
2009	\$3,879,437		110	\$114,883,374		562
2010	\$7,899,567	104%	115	\$115,447,300	0%	570
2011	\$6,240,849	-21%	87	\$94,821,008	-18%	471
2012	\$4,397,424	-30%	106	\$101,484,845	7%	442
2013	\$14,139,379	222%	95	\$95,549,682	-6%	437
2014	\$15,736,186	11%	100	\$89,050,383	-7%	415
2015	\$6,825,577	-57%	90	\$97,668,191	10%	417
2016	\$19,837,068	191%	116	\$127,417,986	30%	418
2017	\$12,160,752	-39%	94	\$91,748,297	-28%	394
2018	\$15,497,486	27%	99	\$111,623,996	22%	413
2019	\$13,635,375	-12%	88	\$159,994,001	43%	369
2020	\$37,902,345	178%	89	\$239,716,753	50%	311
2021	\$7,902,241	-79%	70	\$159,108,459	-34%	250
Total	\$166,053,685		1259	\$1,598,514,274		5469
Average		41%			6%	

* The total value is adjusted for inflation to 2009 dollars, with the annual inflation rate calculated as the average of the four quarterly CPI rates for each year.

These findings underscore the increasing significance of residential development as a key driver of urban regeneration in regional town centres. The trend towards inner-city living aligns with urban planning strategies that emphasise business connectivity, residential appeal, and sustainability. The integration of residential complexes with large-format retail outlets in multifunctional buildings exemplifies this strategic direction.

While this study does not directly assess the effectiveness of residential-driven regeneration, the incorporation of provisions for town centre living in long-term strategic plans by local governments indicates a proactive approach to fostering sustainable urban environments. The strategies for new housing supply, encompassing both new builds and adaptive reuse, vary by town and are often influenced by local history and existing building stock, suggesting the need for further investigation into these relationships.

Town Centre Transformations

Between the study periods, particularly from 2015 to 2020, building consents indicate that New Zealand's town centres underwent significant transformations, characterised by the rise of large-format retail and mixed-use developments (see Appendices 4 and 5). These projects

have diversified town centres, integrating residential, commercial, and leisure spaces, contributing to the establishment of live-work-play environments.

A key driver of this transformation has been the emphasis on sustainable and compact urban development, as reflected in local council policies. Our analysis of building consent data reveals a growing trend toward medium-density accommodations, such as apartments and terraced houses, which align with urban planning objectives aimed at fostering walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods. This evolution supports social interaction and environmental sustainability while promoting economic diversity.

Additionally, the adaptive reuse of older buildings has become more common, often coupled with seismic strengthening measures to meet safety standards. Converting historic structures into modern residential units has emerged as a strategy that preserves architectural heritage while addressing the changing demands of town centre living. These adaptive reuse projects illustrate a practical approach to urban revitalisation, integrating older and newer structures to create functional spaces.

Overall, the observations from the analysis of building consents show that the policy direction is reflected in these developments. The alignment between local government initiatives and the trends in building consents indicates a concerted effort to address current and future community needs.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to understand regeneration activities in regional town centres through a comprehensive analysis of building consents. The findings reveal a strong correlation between public and private investments, suggesting that strategic public spending can significantly enhance private sector confidence and stimulate development. Notably, the analysis highlights key trends in residential development and mixed-use projects, which align closely with strategic urban planning objectives aimed at fostering vibrant and sustainable communities.

The review of council plans indicates a concerted effort by local governments to create walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods that prioritise social interaction and environmental sustainability. This alignment between local government policies and emerging trends in building activities underscores the effectiveness of these initiatives in guiding urban regeneration. As residential projects—involving adaptive reuse and infill developments—represent a substantial growth factor in town centres, they contribute not only to the diversification of housing options but also to the overall vitality of these areas. Ultimately, this explorative research highlights the interconnectedness of public and private investments in urban regeneration and points to areas for further study, such as the role of residential-driven regeneration and the influence of government policy on sustainable development.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of town centres by Functional Urban Area classification and geographic distribution

Functional Urban Area Name	Functional Urban Area Type	Region Name	North/South Island	Town Centre Plan	Urban Core Population in 2018
Ashburton	Medium	Canterbury	South	No	19284
Blenheim	Medium	Marlborough	South	No	26832
Cambridge	Medium	Waikato	North	Yes	18651
Feilding	Medium	Manawatu-Wanganui	North	No	15990
Gisborne	Large	Gisborne	North	Yes	34527
Gore	Small	Southland	South	No	7908
Greymouth	Medium	West Coast	South	No	7965
Hastings	Large	Hawke's Bay	North	Yes	44940
Invercargill	Large	Southland	South	Yes	47625
Kaitia	Small	Northland	North	No	5010
Katikati	Small	Bay of Plenty	North	No	5010
Kerikeri	Small	Northland	North	No	7164
Levin	Medium	Manawatu-Wanganui	North	No	17670
Masterton	Medium	Wellington	North	No	19818
Matamata	Small	Waikato	North	No	7806
Morrinsville	Small	Waikato	North	No	7758
Napier	Large	Hawke's Bay	North	Yes	62241
Nelson	Large	Nelson	South	Yes	48072
New Plymouth	Large	Taranaki	North	Yes	53988
Oamaru	Medium	Otago	South	No	13107
Palmerston North	Large	Manawatu-Wanganui	North	Yes	76236
Queenstown	Medium	Otago	South	No	13533
Rotorua	Large	Bay of Plenty	North	Yes	54204
Stratford	Small	Taranaki	North	No	5784
Taupo	Medium	Waikato	North	No	23622
Te Awamutu	Medium	Waikato	North	No	12195
Te Puke	Small	Bay of Plenty	North	No	8688
Thames	Small	Waikato	North	No	7293
Timaru	Medium	Canterbury	South	No	27501
Tokoroa	Medium	Waikato	North	No	13572
Whakatane	Medium	Bay of Plenty	North	No	15795
Whanganui	Large	Manawatu-Wanganui	North	Yes	39720
Whangarei	Large	Northland	North	Yes	50784

Appendix 2: Public building work as a % of total consented building work (by consent value in \$)

Name	public building \$	% total	size of town	Major buildings
Ashburton	\$ 51,485,271.00	50%	Medium	Civic Centre, Art Gallery & Museum
Blenheim	\$ 36,642,000.00	63%	Medium	Library & Art Gallery, Aquatic Centre
Cambridge	\$ 4,261,440.00	5%	Medium	classrooms
Feilding	\$ 1,945,000.00	9%	Medium	
Gisborne	\$ 26,989,000.00	23%	Large	Court House, War Memorial, Library
Gore	\$ 259,559.00	12%	Small	
Greymouth	\$ 4,321,000.00	50%	Medium	New Theatres
Hastings	\$ 55,133,699.00	50%	Large	Opera House repair, Police Station
Invercargill	\$ 84,164,676.00	30%	Large	Car Park, Court House, civil work
Kaitaia	\$ 100,000.00	3%	Small	
Kaikati	\$ 3,261,544.00	91%	Small	Library & Community Hub
Kerikeri	\$ 810,171.00	8%	Small	
Levin	\$ 5,065,000.00	33%	Medium	New Community & Culture Centre
Masterton	\$ 2,699,495.00	4%	Medium	
Matamata	\$ 2,186,100.00	9%	Small	
Morrinsville	\$ 1,308,000.00	5%	Small	
Napier	\$ 12,050,000.00	22%	Large	Museum revamp
Nelson	\$ 39,862,532.00	27%	Large	Court House, gallery, teaching facilities
New Plymouth	\$ 24,907,932.00	12%	Large	Art Gallery, Police Station
Oamaru	\$ 330,500.00	4%	Medium	
Palmerston North	\$ 14,177,244.00	15%	Large	General building maintenance
Queenstown	\$ 605,141.00	0%	Medium	
Rotorua	\$ 38,133,886.00	21%	Large	seismic strengthening & new children's health & library hub
Stratford	\$ 16,416,300.00	71%	Small	Swimming Pool
Taupo	\$ 2,571,801.00	6%	Medium	
Te Awamutu	\$ 9,840,500.00	21%	Medium	Library, Sports & Conference Centre
Te Puke	\$ 966,001.00	10%	Small	
Thames	\$ 2,935,750.00	27%	Small	Probation Centre, Hospital
Timaru	\$ 775,000.00	14%	Medium	

Tokoroa	\$ 2,555,000.00	61%	Medium	Court House
Whakatane	\$ 2,856,700.00	16%	Medium	Library & Exhibition Centre
Whanganui	\$ 26,470,087.00	46%	Large	Sarjeant Gallery, War Memorial, Museum
Whangarei	\$ 954,000.00	2%	Large	
Grand Total	\$ 477,040,329.00	24%		

Note: The list of towns represents a subset of the 33 towns being studied. Not every town has substantial public building developments, which is why some towns may not be mentioned in this specific table. This subset focuses on those with significant activity related to public buildings.

Appendix 3: Examples of major residential work in town

Row Labels	Example of a major project (quoted description)	Consented work value (\$)
Ashburton	new residential dwelling	\$ 1,802,844
Blenheim	apartment conversion	\$ 887,050
Cambridge	retirement village with apt, care homes, mixed used retail & apartment	\$ 38,494,380
Feilding	construction of 13 - 2 or 3 bdrm retirement villas	\$ 3,634,252
Gisborne	Erect two res apartment blocks	\$ 4,996,200
Invercargill	New commercial office, retail & apartment building	\$ 25,773,251
Kerikeri	new medium density dwellings	\$ 3,012,099
Levin	New commercial buildings construction of a new cafe & apartment over three levels	\$ 1,789,847
Masterton	Construct relocatable dwg relocated building (student housing)	\$ 3,173,832
Matamata	4 duplex units (8 dwgs)	\$ 3,706,301
Morrinsville	residential units	\$ 1,194,987
Napier	Alterations to create two separate apartments	\$ 2,311,637
Nelson	apartment buildings	\$ 27,408,559
New Plymouth	four storey res apartment block	\$ 41,641,152
Queenstown	adjoining townhouses	\$ 3,538,400
Rotorua	Convert upper floor to apartments	\$ 2,427,700
Te Awamutu	new dwelling	\$ 2,330,219
Te Puke	Multi unit dwg	\$ 3,266,674
Thames	convert bedrooms to offices & 2 apartments. Add steel deck between wings to provide exit	\$ 1,716,589
Whanganui	Up grade existing commercial building to 20 apartments	\$ 5,865,100
Whangarei	Alterations & additions to existing commercial building - apartments, reception, retail shops & basement car park	\$ 5,369,999

Appendix 4: New hotel/motel developments

Town	Hotel/Motel consent description	consent value (\$)
Cambridge	below ground services & structure for new retail & motel building	\$ 2,000,000
Invercargill	construct langlands hotel	\$ 24,500,000
Invercargill	New Invercargill Licensing Trust hotel project	\$ 7,000,000
Invercargill	New block of motel units, new commercial or industrial buildings / additions	\$ 100,000
Morrinsville	Add of 5 new units to motel	\$ 200,000
New Plymouth	Commercial - new hotel development. 100 rooms 3 storey building	\$ 14,000,000
New Plymouth	Light commercial - Hobson hotel development	\$ 14,000,000
New Plymouth	Non res - four level hotel	\$ 5,980,000
New Plymouth	Commercial - new motel construction	\$ 3,500,000
New Plymouth	Non res - construction of motel complex consisting of 23 units	\$ 1,900,000
Queenstown	Construct new 61 bdrm hotel	\$ 24,900,000
Queenstown	4 henry St - construction of a new 6 storey boutique hotel	\$ 8,116,000
Queenstown	Jucy backpackers/hotel	\$ 4,900,000
Queenstown	17 -19 man St - new hotel with 19 units including retail / commercial with basement car park & roof top restaurant	\$ 2,200,000
Taupo	To construct new two storey motel	\$ 650,000

Appendix 5: Large format retail (floor area over 1000m2)

Town	new large format shopping consent description	consent value (\$)
Cambridge	Block f - new commercial retail building	\$ 1,800,000
Gisborne	Erect new countdown supermarket including parking & pharmacy	\$ 9,500,000
Gisborne	Retail Store	\$ 4,000,000
Gisborne	5300m2 retail - shell only & siteworks	\$ 2,000,000
Gisborne	Warehouse stationery	\$ 2,000,000
Gisborne	New farm supplies store (farmlands)/outdoor yard/carparking & landscaping	\$ 1,100,000
Hastings	Redevelopment of site to include two storey retail building	\$ 6,000,000
Invercargill	Construct mall Esk / Tay streets (Invercargill Central)	\$ 45,000,000
Napier	Two storey retail store retail	\$ 3,500,000
Nelson	New rebel sports retail outlet.	\$ 1,400,000
Taupo	New 1238sqm retail development with parking & canopy	\$ 1,350,000
Te Awamutu	construction of new countdown supermarket & associated carpark	\$ 3,250,000
Whanganui	New 5700m2 retail building - (farmers development)	\$ 7,000,000
Whanganui	New 1,350m2 retail building. (stage 2)	\$ 2,200,000
Whanganui	Demolish existing building & construct new retail premises 1880m2	\$ 1,700,000

Appendix 6: Examples of mixed-use building

Town	Mixed use building	consent value (\$)
Ashburton	Two storey building with medical Centre & retail	\$ 2,900,000
Ashburton	Erect new commercial/retail building., ba0057/16	\$ 670,000
Blenheim	New retail/office building	\$ 900,000
Cambridge	construction of commercial retail on ground level & offices on level 2. Please note this building is part of a wider site development.	\$ 3,110,900
Cambridge	construct new 3 level mixed use development of carparking, retail, office space & 5 apartments	\$ 4,650,000
Cambridge	erect new 3 storey building with retail on ground floor & apartments on levels 2 & 3	\$ 4,500,000
Cambridge	Erect new 2 storied office & retail building	\$ 1,650,000
Cambridge	erect new retail/commercial 'barn' type building for retail	\$ 1,600,000
Cambridge	Erect new offices & apartment	\$ 1,000,000
Gisborne	Stage 1 - new two storey office/retail building 'structural consent only'	\$ 500,000
Invercargill	Department store & childcare facility	\$ 15,400,000
Invercargill	Construct veterinary clinic & retail outlet, new commercial or industrial buildings / additions	\$ 1,948,000
Invercargill	New commercial office, retail & apartment building (proposed 33 Dee St)	\$ 20,000,000
Levin	New commercial buildings construction of a new cafe & apartment over three levels with an internal lift & stairwell	\$ 410,000
Matamata	Retail/Commercial Bldg	\$ 420,000
Matamata	Retail/office	\$ 15,000
Morrinsville	New offices & workshop	\$ 3,215,000
Napier	New 3 x storey office/retail & carpark building commercial (bank, coffee bar, office, restaurant, serv stat)	\$ 2,700,000
Nelson	Retail & office building	\$ 750,000
Rotorua	New office & hospitality development	\$ 5,000,000
Rotorua	Bank & retail	\$ 2,500,000

Appendix 7: List of Local Government Plans on Town Centre Development

Gisborne:

Long-Term Plan 2018–2028, Gisborne District Council Te Kaunihera o Te Tairāwhiti, Adopted on 28 June 2018.

Hasting:

Long-Term Plan 2018–2028, Hasting District Council, 30 June 2018.

The Hastings City Centre Strategy A Collective Vision, Hasting District Council, September 2013.

Invercargill:

Long-Term Plan 2018–2028, Invercargill City Council, Adopted on 6 March 2018.

Napier:

Long-Term Plan 2021–2031, Napier City Council, Adopted on 30 June 2021.

Nelson:

Long-Term Plan 2018–2028, Nelson City Council, June 2018.

City Centre Programme Plan, Nelson City Council, August 2019.

New Plymouth:

Long-Term Plan 2018–2028, New Plymouth District Council, June 2018.

Palmerston North:

Long-Term Plan 2021–2031, Palmerston North City Council, Adopted on 7 July 2021.

City Centre Framework, Palmerston North City Council, August 2013.

Rotorua:

Long-Term Plan 2021–2031, Rotorua Lakes Council, June 2021.

Whanganui:

Long-Term Plan 2021–2031, Whanganui District Council, Adopted on 29 June 2022.

Whangarei:

Long-Term Plan 2021–2031, Whangarei District Council, 24 June 2021.

Making Great Places to Shape Our Future An Urban Design Strategy for Whangarei District, Whangarei District Council, Adopted on 9 March 2011.

Cambridge:

Cambridge Town Concept Plan Refresh, Waipa District Council, September 2019.

Cambridge Town Centre Plan, Waipa District Council, June 2010.

Appendix 8: Sources of town centre boundaries documentation

Town	Source	document date
Ashburton	Ashburton Town Centre Concept Plan	May-09
Blenheim	Blenheim Town Centre a Vision For the Future	Jul-09
Cambridge	Cambridge Town Concept Plan	Jun-10
Feilding	Council zoning map - inner business	retrieved 6/12/20
Gisborne	District Council zoning map - business	retrieved 6/9/21
Gore	Gore Planning Map	retrieved 9/9/21
Greymouth	Greymouth CBD Development Plan	Jul-19
Hastings	District Plan Zone Map	retrieved 8/9/21
Invercargill	District Plan Map - Business 1	retrieved 5/12/20
Kaitia	Far North District Plan - Zone Maps (Commercial)	retrieved 14/9/21
Katikati	Katikati Town Centre Plan 2010	2010
Kerikeri	Far North District Plan - Zone Maps (Commercial)	retrieved 14/9/21
Levin	Levin Town Centre Strategy	Nov-18
Masterton	Town Centre Strategy	Aug-18
Matamata	Matamata Piako District Plan - Zone Maps (Business)	retrieved 14/9/21
Morrinsville	Matamata Piako District Plan - Zone Maps (Business)	retrieved 14/9/21
Napier	Council zoning map - historical area and business	retrieved 9/9/21
Nelson	City Centre Programme Plan	16/08/2019
New Plymouth	New Plymouth Central Area Urban Design Framework	2013
Oamaru	Council zoning map -BH and B1 Zone	retrieved 19/9/21
Palmerston North	City Centre Framework	Aug-13
Queenstown	Queenstown Lake District Plan Maps (Town Centre Zone)	Jul-18
Rotorua	Rotorua Lake Council District Plan (City Centre)	Apr-16
Stratford	Stratford District Plan - Zone Maps (Business)	Jun-08
Taupo	Taupo District Plan Map - Pedestrian Precinct	retrieved 10/9/21
Te Awamutu	Te Awamutu & Kihikihi Town Concept Plan	Jun-10
Te Puke	Te Puke the Town Centre Plan	Mar-06
Thames	Thames Urban Development Strategy	Jun-13
Timaru	District Twon Centres Study 2016	2016
Tokoroa	South Waikato District Plan Maps (Business)	retrieved 11/9/21
Whakatane	Whakatane Town Vision Plan	May-08
Whanganui	District Council zoning map - Central Commercial	retrieved 6/8/21
Whangarei	Whangarei District Plan - Zone Maps (Business)	retrieved 6/9/21

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