



# Brian Putt

An interest in social psychology, and a curiosity about what makes healthy, vibrant and well-functioning communities led Brian into a career in urban planning. *I thought that would be a good way of putting into practice the social psychology dimension that I had been interested in. In particular I had a strong interest in attitudinal surveying, which could have led onto a market research career, but it never did.*

Brian completed a BA degree in Commerce and Arts (majoring in History and Psychology) at Auckland University in 1971. *My parents thought I should be an accountant.* He then completed a further two years' postgraduate study in urban planning and commenced work with the Urban Renewal team at Auckland City Council in 1974.

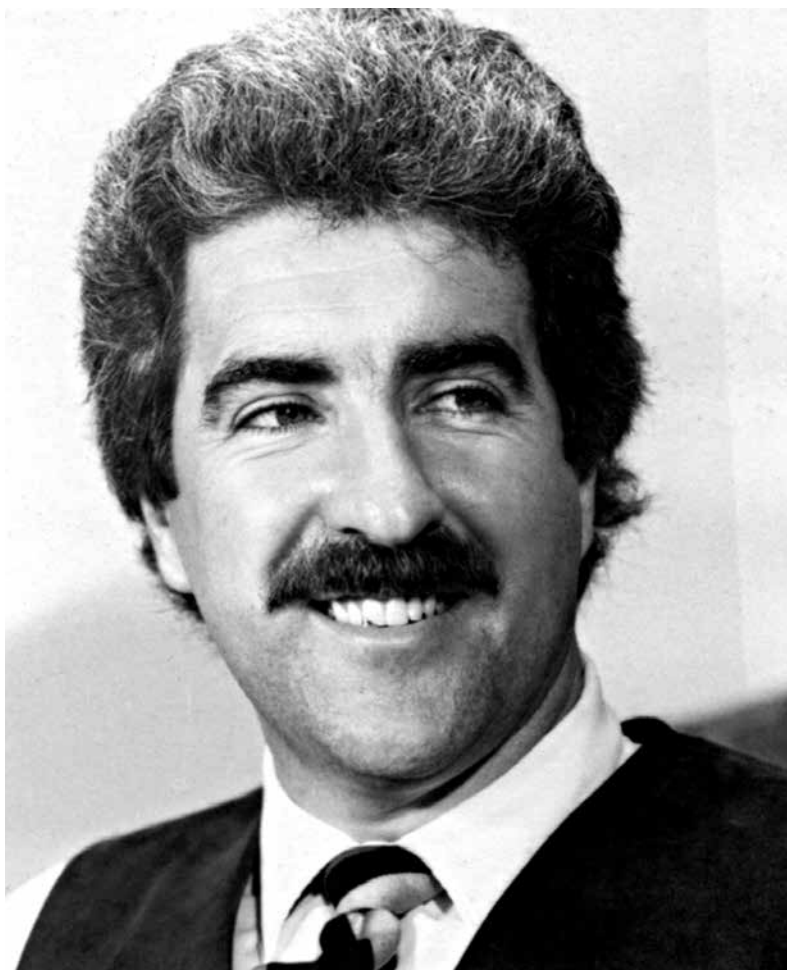
His work focused on a re-design of the urban slum that was Freemans Bay. The area had been due for clearance since the 1930s but little had been done, although residents were moved out to Glendowie into a new suburban housing area. The vision for quality inner city living in the 1970s consisted of new town houses and apartments.

Growing up in the eastern suburbs in the 1950s and '60s, Brian remembers seeing Auckland city grow from clusters of small inner-city communities into suburban enclaves connected to the city centre by tramways, bus routes, ferries, and eventually sprawling motorways. *It was very exciting bussing into town and then catching*

*a tram from Queen Street to visit my grandmother in Grey Lynn.* Tramways connected downtown Queen Street with Remuera Road, Meadowbank, Dominion Road, Manukau Road, Onehunga and Point Chevalier.

However, by the mid-1950s trolley buses were introduced to allow room on the roads for more cars, and the trams were removed. *Buses felt so modern in comparison. These automatic transmission Leyland buses that had a gigantic tiger on the front of them. They were very smart and had diesel engines. Trams were in the way, whereas trolley buses were just another car, really.*

Brian describes his childhood as very pleasant and moderately comfortable. His father had served in the Second World War and became the manager of the signs department for the national Automobile Association. Brought up Anglican, an involvement in the community was considered the norm, *part of daily life.* Brian's parents were involved with local groups and his father participated in cricket for many years.



*Brian in 1977*

*That sense of community service was just a really strong part of my upbringing.*

The suburban preference of the 1950s and '60s had been the measure by which planning authorities judged and presented the New Zealand ideal. Home ownership, was on the rise with the dream of owning a quarter-acre section. Housing loans with interest rates of 3 per cent were available from the State Advances Corporation. *This was all with a backdrop of a kind of utopian New Zealand that in a sense existed; in a period where there was a relative*

*level of equality across the country. The super-rich never raised their heads and the poor were looked after.*

Queen Street and Karangahape Road remained a draw card for the inner city. Arcades and department stores which held the allure of class and sophistication remained jewels in the city's crown: Victoria Arcade, Smith and Caughey, Queens Arcade, Milne and Choyce, Rendells and George Courts. But perhaps the most iconic of the age was the Farmers' Trading Company, with a free trolley bus departing from Wyndham Street. *The joy for kids of course was the amazing open air playground on the top floor. That was always a holiday treat.*

As the outlying suburbs grew, reliance on cars increased. Auckland city planners sought inspiration from the United States for a way to manage traffic flows, and connect communities by travelling around the city rather than through its centre. *Council had done a lot of research into what sort of city Auckland should grow into and not surprisingly the people who went overseas to look at these things as a group came back with wonderment about the 'joys of L.A'. So that's what we got.*

Built in the late 1960s, the Auckland City Council building was held up as a fine example of contemporary design. It was located in Greys Avenue, and was the tallest building in the city. *In 1973 when I started working there, it still felt very new, quite flash. Stunning views over the harbour. The sort of view you could only get at the time from the top of Mount Eden.*

Until 1989, Auckland was a collection of small boroughs. Auckland City stretched from the eastern suburbs, through some inner western suburbs to the coastline of Point Chevalier and Waterview, reaching as far as Avondale and stopping at the Whau River. The string of city boroughs that lay on the isthmus—Newmarket, Mount Eden, Mount Albert, Mount Roskill, Onehunga, New Lynn and Glen Eden—were absorbed into the city after local body amalgamation in 1989. Similarly North Shore absorbed Northcote, Birkenhead, Devonport and East

Coast Bays. Papakura remained an independent borough council until 2010.

Requirements of the national Town and Country Planning Board meant that it was mandatory for every borough council to have its own planner. In 1976, Brian took up the post with Mount Eden Borough Council. *No one wanted the job and so I took it. I was really quite junior then but thought, Oh, I'll put my hand up.* The move was a turning point in his career.

Brian met Jenny Gunn, a part-time community worker for Mount Eden borough. She was to become an inspirational figure. Brian took advantage of Jenny's experience and incorporated her approach to community consultation into his own work. *We were using the community development expertise to front community meetings in Freemans Bay, Ponsonby and Parnell.*

Joan Lardner-Rivlin, who was the community development advisor for the Auckland Regional Authority, had brought, along with others, new ideas and practices for working in community from their community work experience overseas. At this time, community development in New Zealand was not yet a theoretical practice, nor a concept that was often articulated as such. Auckland City Council *had a fledgling community development department* but borough councils were not in the practice of utilising community workers to inform town planning. A leading community development principle was that *communities know their own needs.* The notion of partnering with people who actually worked and lived in the communities in order to find the best solutions to planning problems, was novel and exciting. At the heart of this philosophy was the conviction that any change or development in community would not be sustainable if imposed from above. Rather, it needed to grow from the grassroots up. Brian recalls: *I made the connection in my mind between the professional*

*side of planning—that of imposing solutions on groups of people and onto communities—with the need to know what these communities actually needed, and what would actually function. That was a big missing link.*

Attitudinal surveying also came to the fore during this period. *I could often see that there were ways we could find out a bit more... we could meet with people.* Brian and other planners became involved in conversations between councils about creating a standard practice for community consultation. Various logistical and methodological questions arose. For example, *Do we hold a public meeting?* But there is only a certain type of person who goes to a public meeting. *Should we send out a questionnaire?* But only a certain kind of person responds to a questionnaire. *Perhaps we could do a household survey?* That was getting closer, but not

everyone was at home between 9am and 5pm, which didn't fit into the working hours of town planners. *Did this mean they had to work weekends, bring in extra helpers?*

Planners were now motivated to look at the form and function of communities; that is, how people interacted with the spaces where they lived and worked. Community consultation was a tool which could inform community planning in many ways, from finding out how people travelled within the city, their journey to work, where they went to socialise and where they went for recreational purposes, to other issues, such as what the rules were around spatial arrangements for housing. *We also didn't know much about the effects of single parents running households and trying to exist. There was no DPB until the mid-1970s.*

Before the 1970s, there had been no way of knowing what type of community facility, such as libraries and halls, people would actually use in the places where they lived, so it was left to the community itself to raise the issue and lobby local councillors

That sense of community service was just a really strong part of my upbringing.



Doing charitable aid—helping the poor make better people of themselves. That did not happen in Devonport, Northcote or Birkenhead, I can tell you!

for their provision. *Virtually all of that development, in my experience, either came from some sort of a community initiative which then translated into a political action, or just happened by pure chance.* Recreational activities and spaces to connect with others in neighbourhoods also became new ideas in community planning and led to a more active approach to the creation of parks, reserves and other recreational facilities. *There was no real formula for that kind of thing. How much open space per 100 people or per 1000 people?*

The national movement for free libraries in local communities was a good example of this type of change. Some boroughs made it a priority; others did not. For example, Mount Eden community still does not have its own library, whereas Northcote was the first place in New Zealand to have its library open on a Sunday. *Looking back at what were some of the early assumptions, I've now realised that those changes made have totally entered our collective psyche, and the way we function in our communities today.*

In 1974, Brian and his wife, Suzanne, settled in Northcote. Having a family meant they got involved in the local play group, the creation of a community crèche (with funding from the Northcote Borough Council), and the local residents' association. Northcote was a flourishing borough with a reliable source of income from the assets it owned: industrial land and the central shopping mall. This meant rates were low. Jean Sampson, the then mayor of Northcote, and her husband, Barney, became good friends. Jean Sampson was the first elected female mayor in New Zealand since the 1890s. In 1988 Brian became director of Metro Planning Ltd, and this along with his entrée into local body politics the following year became another turning point in his life. *I used to joke with these quite conservative people about the socialist action that their predecessors had taken in buying this Northcote Central land, developing important services and now, years later, reaping the benefits.*

In 1989 Northcote and Birkenhead councillors and mayors jointly put forward a strong ticket for election onto the newly amalgamated North Shore City Council. Northcote borough accounted for 50 per cent of the new council's portfolio of investments. The Northcote/Birkenhead ticket dominated the new city council, under the mayoralty of Ann Hartley. Brian was elected and held a financial planning portfolio.

The amalgamation brought a new challenge: how would a local authority conceive of community development practice across the whole of the North Shore? As Brian describes it, there was a mixed bag of practice and experience in each borough. Takapuna's way of working with community, for example, was all done with a very Victorian bourgeoisie, middle-class approach. *Doing charitable aid—helping the poor make better people of themselves. That did not happen in Devonport, Northcote or Birkenhead, I can tell you!*

As for other regions, East Coast Bays was considered out on a limb. The Bays had pockets of innovation, especially a history of purchasing foreshore land for parks and reserves still in existence today. *Glenfield had nothing! All it was expected to do was pour money into the coffers of Takapuna City Council through its industrial area. But it had bugger all!* says Brian.

What developed was a new format for community development which became known as the 'North Shore Model'. Strong political connections were made, first through Jenny Kirk, the Labour MP for Birkenhead, and later with National's Murray McCully. Brian describes both as being a good conduit for political connectivity with the Shore community.

It was during his time on Council that Brian became familiar with the work of North Shore Community and Social Services (NSCSS), then under the leadership of Catherine McClintock. *The Far from Fixed reports on social deprivation on the North Shore were seen as a tool for illuminating the fantasy of a homogenous society across the Shore.* In fact, there were pockets of poverty, dysfunctional behaviour, lack of housing and rising unemployment

in areas such as Birkdale, Northcote Central, parts of East Coast Bays and Belmont.

In 1992 the Team North Harbour group was not re-elected. Brian went on to chair the North Shore Employment Agency—later incorporated into Business Enterprise North Shore. He continued to coach Northcote soccer teams, and was on the board of trustees at Northcote College for seven years. Then in 2009, he received a call from Jenny Kirk saying that a woman by the name of Yvonne Powley was *shopping around* for someone to chair NSCSS, and to expect a phone call. NSCSS needed someone to assist with re-establishing its status in the community and its credibility with North Shore City Council. Brian took on the role and describes his work as being in two parts. First, in rebuilding its relationship with the Council, and second, in advocating for the wider not-for-profit sector on the Shore in response to the formation of Auckland City in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Advocating for the community involved arguing for the importance of the sub-regional community development work, and so lobbying for sub-regional cluster-funding for the sector.

Brian says that the amalgamation of the city's councils into one Auckland super city council created a *new political geography*. Grassroots community work at the sub-regional level was now recognised by the boundaries of local boards. *What we've (ANCAD) been able to do quite well is keep a North Shore focus around North Shore issues which are different to other parts of Auckland. I think that has been a single success for ANCAD, to keep these things alive and to serve this community to the best of our ability.*

It was through NSCSS that Brian became involved with the Birkdale-Birkenhead Community Project in 2010. The project was lacking leadership and good governance and the trust needed to rationalise some of its activities and review its financial feasibility. Two pre school centres were transferred to the new Auckland Council.

Brian continues to chair ANCAD and is a member of COMET Auckland (formerly known as the City of Manukau Education Trust), an educational mentoring programme working in areas of financial and oral literacy. COMET works with local communities to ensure that occupational training and trade-related educational opportunities are supported in marginalised communities across Auckland.

In 2014, Brian celebrated four 40-year anniversaries: the opening of the BBCP, the 40th annual general meeting for ANCAD, forty years since he moved to Northcote and forty years since he started work as an urban planner with Auckland Council. At ANCAD's 40th AGM Brian reflected on the struggles that many community groups have in order to survive.

*We're always worried about funding, having enough for a quorum, and all that sort of thing. It was a good opportunity to celebrate the existence of the community strength that sits behind these things. You can stand back after 40 years and think, God will provide—something will turn up, and it does! We carry on because there's huge strength in the community we're part of. And we're lucky on the Shore that our communities have that strength—a lot don't.*

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<sup>1</sup> NSCSS rebranded in 2014 as Auckland North Community and Development Inc. (ANCAD)

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