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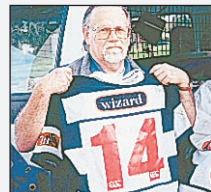


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CITY PEOPLE PROFILE: Alex Swney — Big heart in the city



PHOTO: AMANDA SNOW

He's passionate about the city he sees from atop his Vespa. AMANDA SNOW talks to Alex Swney, the voice of Auckland's Heart of the City.

ALEX SWNEY: Passionate about Auckland's potential.

Alex Swney's spacious inner-city office looks over the bustling main street he is so passionate about – although the stylishly dressed chief executive of Heart of the City sees Queen St for what it could be, as much as for how it is now.

"In one respect, I just love all the potential in front of us. But in another way I'm frustrated by the length of time it takes us to get there," says Swney.

He has made headlines in recent months for his push for more public spaces and no apartments on the Tank Farm headland development.

Auckland City, he says, is New Zealand's only chance to have a truly international city and needs to project its own unique character.

Take a walk up the Queen St

of tomorrow, as Swney visualises it, and you'll find yourself in a "world champion" South Pacific city that reflects both Polynesian and European history.

The streets will be planted with a mix of natives and exotics to recognise those cultures.

Heritage buildings will be featured with lighting and plaques, while footpaths will be widened to enhance the retail experience.

"All of our pedestrians are shoppers – if you get a car park in front of the shop you want to shop in, go buy a lotto ticket," says Swney.

Queen St will be book-ended by a cultural precinct around Aotea Square. Other boutique precincts off the main street will include dining experiences on the waterfront, gallery precincts and top New Zealand fashion on High St.

"When you're small you've got to run boutique-style operations," says Swney.

He believes the tide is coming back in for Queen St and other strip shopping environments, affected in the past by people flocking to shopping malls outside city centres.

But he says people want an open-air retail experience, where they can see the change of seasons, smell the coffee and touch the fabric, he says.

And this is where Queen St, with its heritage buildings and high street fashion, will come into its own.

"The mall response is to offer a sanitized version of this – look at Botany Downs. But they will never have the buskers on the corner, the community center, the bobby, the city mission," he says.

"You won't be able to go to the opera at the mall, or hop on a ferry to Devonport."

While Swney is passionate about the future of the city, he is also content with many aspects of the present.

He's a regular patron of the city's cafés and restaurants.

For breakfast with the kids, he recommends Bambina in Ponsonby. For special occasions: O'Connell St, Euro or Sole.

And for the best salad in town? Toss.

"But be sure to get the blue cheese dressing."

We're pretty advanced here in Auckland city. We need only twist a knob to heat up our ovens, little plastic switches turn on our lights, and when dinner is over, our toilets flush.

Flushing toilets aren't our invention though. Four thousand years ago in present day Pakistan, the great city of Mohenjo-Daro stood proudly on the Indus River.

Preceding the might of Rome by some 2000 years, the city boasted an incredibly complex plumbing system. In-house toilets, central sewers and channelled waste-water featured for the first time in civilisation.

Why? The trend of humans moving from traditional clan-based dwelling to large scale city dwelling was well under way.

But it was bringing with it some problems.

So many people cramming into a small area brought with them large amounts of pollution, and the cities' residents had to live beside it.

Diseases spread through the ever-building mountains of sewage were killing people in swathes. So the city of Mohenjo-Daro came up with a solution.

It seems common sense to us now. If sewage is killing people, then either get rid of it or learn to deal with it.

Why then, 4000 years later, are so many Aucklanders dying of something as preventable as car emissions?

While cars are an essential part of our lives, other countries around the world are showing that strict emissions rules are

From the editor...



enforceable and effective. With nearly 300 Aucklanders dying each year from traffic fumes, New Zealand's leadership is refusing to act.

This isn't environmental. It isn't about money, or business. It's about our people, dying by breathing. If our society has been set up for any reason, surely it is to assist us with living.

Refusing to police traffic emissions is assisting us with dying.

Perhaps the lack of public uproar in New Zealand comes from our "she'll be right" attitude. If pollution gets us, we'll take it on the chin.

That gnarly Kiwi attitude may work for some, but what about our mothers? Our children? Our partners? Not one of these deaths was deserved. Not one was through risky behav-

our, or foolishness.

Perhaps the cost of changing things is too big for politicians to be comfortable with. If more money needs to be spent on the family car's warrant of fitness, people are going to complain. And car owners are voters.

Understandable? Not really. If Mohenjo-Daro got around their silent killer, can't we do the same with ours?

Perhaps if every politician attended the funerals of each Auckland car-fume victim, perspectives would change. That's a funeral a day, five days a week.

Or, perhaps it is time for the voters to get vocal. If politicians do what they must to win votes, it is the voters that hold the power to solving this issue.

Craig Borley