



CRL unlocks Midtown

As the \$5 billion City Rail Link mega-project nears completion, Auckland's Midtown precinct is getting a glow-up as we rethink what it means to live, work and play in the city.

Auckland's Midtown area has lived in the shadow of the now-glossy Downtown, Wynyard Quarter and Britomart precincts. But with Te Waihorotiu Station with entrances on Victoria Street and Wellesley Street forecast to be the busiest in the new City Rail Link (CRL) network, early movers are preparing to leverage the precinct's expected gains.

Midtown broadly encompasses the area containing Aotea Square, Auckland Town Hall, Civic Theatre, Auckland Art Gallery, SkyTower, two universities, the Federal, Elliott, High and Lorne Street laneway networks, green spaces like Myers and Albert Park, and Te Hā Noa Victoria Street – a purpose-designed green link with protected cycleway.

Te Waihorotiu Station has been built below Albert Street with its flagship entrance now occupying the former Griffiths Holdings building site on the

corner of Wellesley Street West and Mayoral Drive. Private sector investment shows at least 18 developments planned, under construction, or recently completed, within a five-minute walk of Te Waihorotiu Station.

Bayleys Auckland Metro senior director, Alan Haydock says the CRL opening in 2026 will help Auckland CBD get its mojo back, becoming a more globally attractive city.

“The CBD still has a post-Covid hangover and it's been a particularly tough market for commercial real estate lately with few CBD buildings sold, and recent Bayleys data showing 13-percent retail vacancy.

“Other metropolitan cities around the world have proven that greater connectivity and access bolsters land value appreciation and property demand around major transit hubs, so there's tangible value to be unlocked off the back of the CRL.

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ALAN HAYDOCK
SENIOR DIRECTOR BAYLEYS
AUCKLAND METRO

“I'm quietly upbeat about the potential waiting to be realised in Midtown. Functional and thoughtful development around the core stations will help take central Auckland to the next level.”

Haydock says currently, B and C-grade building market values do not align with remediation or repositioning costs, nor justify demolition and creation of future-proofed modern assets.

“Some of these buildings have suffered from retrenchment of the international student population, with language schools previously the biggest absorbers of secondary-grade assets. The student population is now returning, and we've seen Precinct commit to a student accommodation project at 256 Queen Street in Midtown which does signal confidence.

“The former police station building near Mayoral Drive is vacant and still

for sale, the future of the Sky World Entertainment Centre site in Queen Street is still uncertain, and other high-profile buildings are ripe for repositioning – including the stalwart Smith & Caughey's building.

“Additionally, the Government requires Auckland to provide more high-density housing within walking distance of rapid transit hubs so let's see what unfolds in Midtown. It will also be interesting to see how the Karangahape Road precinct evolves as intensification and zoning upside takes effect as a result of CRL accessibility.”

TICKET TO RIDE

The CRL is expected to deliver close to \$12 billion in economic benefits to the city, according to Council projections.

Auckland Council director resilience and infrastructure, Barry Potter says the CRL project will be handed over in 2026, but there's still a significant amount of work for CRL Ltd, Auckland Transport and KiwiRail to do before Aucklanders can ride through the tunnels.

“The collective focus is on ensuring safe, reliable train services when we make the switch to CRL at the centre of the rail network,” he explains. “That includes the testing and commissioning of systems, integration with the existing network, the Rail Network Rebuild and other upgrades, training of drivers and additional operational staff, emergency preparedness, testing to the new timetable, regulatory approvals and more.



Te Hā Noa Victoria Street – a purpose-designed green link with protected cycleway.
Photo credit: Jay Farnworth Auckland Council



Artist's impression of MRCB and RCP's reimagined heritage-listed Bledisloe House

“International experience shows this can be the most challenging and complex phase of a rail project and the further we get through that programme of work the more certainty we will have on opening timeframes.”

Potter says the initial timetable will allow for peak-hour capacity of 19,000 possible passengers per hour through the city centre, over 50-percent more than current network peak-hour capacity.

“Capacity will not be fully utilised upon opening, but it allows for growth in demand over subsequent years. CRL has been designed with a future-proofed capacity of 54,000 possible passengers per hour, enabling it to handle longer and more frequent trains as Auckland grows and as long-term investment is made in new trains, rail upgrades, and upgrades to other stations on the network.”

Data sourced by Auckland Council earlier this year shows a pipeline of around \$6.8 billion of private sector investment across the city centre, roughly evenly split between offshore and onshore investors. Around \$2.8 billion of that investment is located in the Queen Street Valley (Waihorotiu) precinct, which includes Midtown.

“This is a sign of the CRL’s impact, and Auckland Council is also making large investment in the Midtown area. Between last financial year (FY24) and FY34, Council has planned investment in the Waihorotiu precinct of over \$730 million, 64 percent of the total across all city centre precincts.”

Potter says while important to Auckland’s future, the CRL is not the only lever to drive Auckland forward and to make the urban realm more functional, vibrant, and attractive to residents and businesses.

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BARRY POTTER
AUCKLAND COUNCIL DIRECTOR
RESILIENCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

“Billions of dollars are being invested in improving the city’s ability to withstand major floods, Watercare’s Central Interceptor will vastly improve wastewater capacity, and other transport projects such as the Eastern Busway will help connect major employment and residential centres.

“It all adds up to a region that can grow with confidence, where the people who live here will have more time back from their commutes to do what they love, more money to invest in local business, and more affordable housing, showing that Auckland is a good long-term bet.”

ORCHESTRATED DEVELOPMENT

International property developer Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) along with New Zealand-owned development and project management company RCP, will deliver The Symphony Centre, a residential and commercial mixed-use development, above Te Waihorotiu Station at the corner of Wellesley Street and Mayoral Drive. It will also refurbish the neighbouring heritage-listed Bledisloe House, a building developed in the late 1950s for Auckland Council, with the complementary projects to be linked by vibrant, street-level activated public laneways.

Leading the wider precinct’s rejuvenation within the Aotea Arts Quarter will allow MRCB to deliver a best-of-city outcome says RCP head of development management, Boris Babic.

“MRCB brings extensive global experience as a leading master developer of transit-oriented developments (TODs), including the award-winning Kuala Lumpur Sentral in Malaysia. MRCB’s exposure to public-private partnerships gave it strong confidence in the transformative potential of the CRL and its impact on Auckland, making the scale of the Symphony Centre development worth pursuing.”

With Te Waihorotiu Station forecast to be the busiest in the CRL network by footfall, the midtown area has been largely overlooked by developers to date, with broader city development drifting towards the harbour, says Babic.

“Midtown features several unique heritage assets such as the Civic Theatre and Town Hall which are protected, will never be built out or demolished, and arguably have never had their identity embraced. This gave MRCB a rare opportunity to embed itself within the urban heart of the city, leveraging its international understanding of the economic upside available with a project of this scale.”

Significant investment has gone into the design narrative around The Symphony Centre to create an urban environment with a strong sense of place and cultural identity, where people will want to dwell and spend time rather than simply pass through, explains Babic.

“The building’s unique design, which has also been shaped by our requirement to not shade Aotea Square, will be recognisable against the Auckland skyline.

“The precinct will have through-links to Bledisloe Lane and Mayoral Drive, forming a small, interconnected hub that prioritises people, accessibility and foot traffic, unlocking commercial value for the retail and hospitality tenancies.”

RCP has commenced an early works package on Mayoral Drive ahead of main construction works forecast to commence in 2026. Babic says prospective tenants and buyers that ultimately value character, connectivity, and community should know they are investing into the future of Auckland – not its past.

“Look at the transformation of Wynyard Quarter which has evolved from a heavily industrialised shipyard into a globally recognised example of placemaking, and Britomart which has transitioned from a bus depot and car park into a vibrant destination for both workers and visitors.

“One of the key differences between those areas and the rejuvenation of the Aotea Arts Quarter is that we have incumbent infrastructure and buildings already in place which will hopefully speed up the process for engagement in the area and once the CRL opens, additional footfall can only bode well for new development and the rejuvenation of midtown.”

BEATING HEART

Heart of the City, the business association for Auckland’s city centre, says the CRL will make travel into the city faster and more convenient for many Aucklanders.

Heart of the City chief executive, Viv Beck adds that it’s how Aucklanders use the CRL and what happens next that will help shape the future of the city centre.

“The CRL is a key step towards making fast, reliable public transport more accessible and culturally embedded, as seen in global cities. After a decade of disruption, more foot traffic is vital to support businesses and attract investment, so it will be imperative to get Aucklanders travelling on the CRL from day one so patronage matches capacity.

“However, while the CRL is a vital part of the city centre’s future, it’s just one piece of a larger puzzle, and like other international cities, our city centre has opportunities and challenges that require a coordinated and multi-layered response.

“The latest *State of the City* report shows that the city centre has enormous potential, but it is also at a turning point. Real progress will require cohesive, urgent action between central and local government, and the private sector to leapfrog from where we are today.”

Beck says there are some encouraging signs, with new and refurbished hotels and buildings in the rejuvenated lower Albert Street bringing a lot more people to the area.

“Similarly, there is development around the new station entrances in Midtown, with projects like The Symphony Centre signalling long-term confidence, as well as significant development in student accommodation.

“Events, tourists, international students and more people living and working here all have a role to play, and will help encourage more investment and new businesses to open. Multi-modal access will remain important in the foreseeable future so the city centre is accessible to everyone.

“The opening of a permanent police station in Wellesley Street is a key milestone, increasing visibility and complementing existing safety initiatives, and supporting the city centre to be welcoming, safe and accessible.”

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VIV BECK
HEART OF THE CITY
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

BEDDING IN

A pipeline of new hotel developments is progressing in Auckland CBD, including the 322-room Radisson RED at 280 Queen Street in a repurposed mixed-use commercial building, the 231-room DoubleTree by Hilton at 92 Albert Street, lifestyle hotel TRIBE Auckland and hybrid hostel-hotel JO&JOE Auckland, under development in Fort Street.

These come hard on the heels of the recently opened IHG Hotel Indigo at 51 Albert Street, JW Marriott Auckland in the revamped Stamford Plaza building in Lower Albert Street, and Horizon by SkyCity within the established SkyCity precinct designed to leverage the New Zealand International Convention

Centre (NZICC) which, after much delay, will officially open early next year.

DESK TALK

Bayleys national director office leasing, Matt Lamb says Midtown is emerging as a desirable base for office occupiers, and this will be supercharged when the CRL opens.

“We’ve seen 50 Albert, a 12-level suburban campus-style building with 6-Star Green Star NZ Office Design v3 credentials on the former New Zealand Herald site, attract tenants including FNZ, Milford Asset Management, MYOB, Spark, Qantas, IWG - Spaces and UDC.

“Recently, four interconnected Midtown office buildings, including the former Finance Centre, have been bought by Australian-based Quattro Group demonstrating confidence in space with scale close to the new Te Waihorotiu Station.

“Quattro is behind the successful The Formerly by Alberts and the new acquisition will be transformed into The Exchange by Alberts, with more than 19,000sqm of premium office space for lease, on the site of Auckland’s original stock exchange.

“We’re going to witness some exciting change as occupiers recognise the virtues of the Midtown area off the back of the CRL, and its capacity to change the face of business in the city.”



Artist's impression of the new CRL Te Waihorotiu station which will be Auckland's busiest train station