The Ekistic Grid and scoping criteria for defining local identity variables

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Introduction

An Ekistics meeting where discussion focuses on "Globalization and Local Identity" provides an opportunity for further thinking about the subject with which we deal in this paper, and the usefulness of the Ekistic Grid for that task. The reason for this is because one of the first questions that come to mind with regard to "Globalization and Local Identity" is "What makes up 'local identity'?" What criteria can one use when looking at a local neighborhood and separate those things that contribute to its local identity and those that do not? This presumes that some things in a neighborhood may be found elsewhere in its city-wide context. For New Zealand this could mean a common form of domestic architecture, reflecting its colonial past and located in residential areas of similar age, for example 1860+ (fig. 1).

The same question can be asked on influences in the neighborhood from globalization. The most obvious example in the New Zealand setting is the international fast food brands, such as *McDonalds*, *Kentucky Fried Chicken* (or KFC), and *Pizza Hut*. All of these brands have a distinctive architectural style that takes no account of any sense of "local identity."

The Ekistic Grid is introduced into this problem because at recent annual meetings of the World Society for Ekistics (WSE) there have been questions asked about the grid and Ekistic methodology generally. This has suggested merit in research which re-visits the area of Ekistic Methodology.[1]

Some of the feedback from WSE members questions the usefulness of the Ekistic Grid and this paper sets out to test that proposition. This is being done by asking the question "Can the Ekistic Grid usefully provide the basis for an exercise that systematically identifies local identity variables as part of addressing the question 'Is there a local identity for a given neighborhood or town?' "

Research approach

Since the context for this research is the combination of
- Applying the Ekistic Grid and
- Answering the question "What makes up 'local identity'?" which comes to mind with regard to "Globalization and Local Identity" ...
the methodology works with both of these aspects.
- In the first place it focuses on the diagrammatical representation of the Ekistic Grid (fig. 2).

Fig. 1: Early Settler's Cottage circa 1860 in Auckland, New Zealand.

Fig. 2: Ekistic Grid.

Community Class	i	ii	iii	I	II	III	IV
	Anthropos	Room	House	House Group	Small Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood	Small Polis (Small Town)
Population	1	2	4	40	250	1.5T	9T
NATURE							
ANTHROPOS							
SOCIETY							
SHELLS							
NETWORKS							
SYNTHESIS: HUMAN SETTLEMENTS							

*Number of persons
T = thousands

Fig. 3: The Elements and Community Scale selected for the study.

Fig. 4: Onehunga circa 1848.
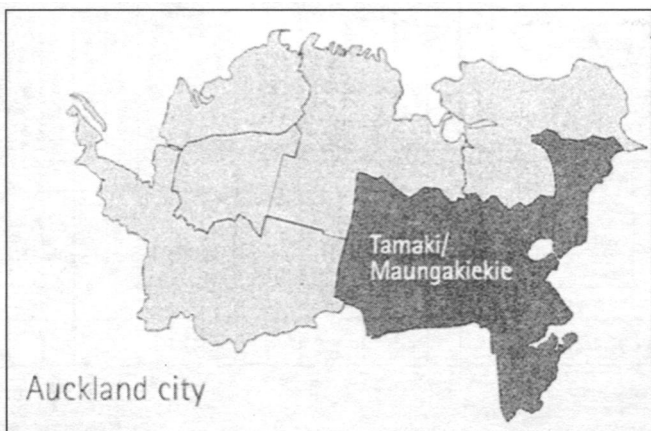
Fig. 5: Tamaki/Maungakiekie Ward.

• In the second place it works with the selected local neighborhood to identify specific examples of the natural and built environments which could be considered a contribution to the neighborhood's local identity.

At this stage of the research it is assumed that a neighborhood has elements that could be considered a feature of that place.

To implement this approach the following steps were followed:

● **First,** the grid illustrated in figure 2 was adapted to suit the tasks that follow. This meant adopting the Y axis of the matrix and selecting those units of space that could apply to the local area of study, i.e. Community Scale from "Anthropos" to "Small Town" (fig. 3).

● The **second** step has been to undertake a field study of the selected neighborhood. In this case the neighborhood is part of the old Borough of Onehunga (fig. 4). Until 1989 it was an autonomous borough but it is now merged into the Auckland City Ward structure and forms just a small (but historic) western part of the Tamaki/Maungakiekie Ward (fig. 5). The Population Census area best approximating Onehunga had around 5,000 inhabitants in 2001. The average household size is approximately 2.5 persons. It has a higher proportion of Maori and Pacific Island peoples (35 percent) than Auckland City (22 percent), while its median personal income is around NZ$22,000 (US$14,903), very similar to Auckland City. (New Zealand overall is NZ$18,500 or US$12,532).

The field study is a street-by-street photographic reconnaissance with the purpose of identifying those parts of the neighborhood and town (buildings, landscapes, iconic features, personalities) that would form a collage of "potential local identity."

● The **third** step has been to relate each photographic image to the framework provided by the Ekistic Grid, according to the appropriate Ekistic Element and the Community Scale.

● The **fourth** step has been to interpret each photograph in order to place it at the appropriate intersection of Ekistic Element and Community Class – in our case NATURE/Neighborhood (fig. 6).

From this initial placement exercise, a collage of photos by Ekistic Elements and Community Classes could be prepared. This collage was then able to be used in a further step as the basis of interviews within the local community.

This further step focused on the following questions:

• Is there a local identity for Onehunga which can be seen in its natural and built environment?
• If "Yes" how would you describe this identity?
• If "No" why do you think there is no visible local identity?
• [Referring to a collage of photos of Onehunga]
- Can you identify any of these photos with Onehunga?
- [If a "Yes" respondent] Do any of these images capture the identity you have described?

Analysis[2]

The aspects to be identified through the questions above include:

• Whether Onehunga residents have an image of the natural and built environments of Onehunga which can be called its local identity. Related questions are:
- Does this identity help them relate the image to photographs of Onehunga?
- Do they see some photographs as likely to be in more than one part of Auckland?

• If they are able to describe this local identity:
- What do they use as descriptors?
- What descriptors relate to which Ekistic Elements? Are some elements more useful in an analysis of local identity than others?

Community Class	i	ii	iii	I	II	III	IV
	Anthropos	Room	House	House Group	Small Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood	Small Polis (Small Town)
Population	1	2	4	40	250	1.5T	9T
NATURE							
ANTHROPOS							
SOCIETY							
SHELLS							
NETWORKS							
SYNTHESIS: HUMAN SETTLEMENTS							

Photograph of study area.

Fig. 6: Location of study area in the Ekistic Grid at intersection of NATURE/Neighborhood within the Ekistic Grid.

- Do they associate the descriptors with some part of Onehunga? Is there any sense of a unit of space (e.g. neighborhood) in this association?
- If they are unable to identify a local identity for Onehunga:
- What are the reasons that explain this?
- Can these be related to the Ekistic Elements? In what way?

Overall the analysis should help provide answers to the following:

- What does this tell us about a process for identifying local identity?
- What does this tell us about the Ekistic Grid?

Results

● **What does this tell us about a process for identifying local identity?** The answers to the first interview question on a local identity for Onehunga based on its natural and built environment were mixed. Some people with long-standing associations with the area felt that there was an Onehunga identity. More recent arrivals to the area were less expressive; there seemed to be a recognition that there was a commercial identity (due in part to the major discount outlet called DRESS SMART, fig. 7), but from an architectural perspective it was not distinguishable from other parts of the Auckland Isthmus, such as Kingsland. The mixed nature of Onehunga's housing was acknowledged by both groups.

By focusing the enquiry on identity based on the area's natural and built environment, it was felt that relevant social dimensions were being left out. One person mentioned the fact that they had not been in Onehunga when their children were at school; and that this made a difference to their identification with Onehunga. Others who had had a long association with the place, some with relatives buried in the St Peter's Church graveyard in the late 1800s, also recognized the influence on their identification with the area, and what this meant to its identity, of social matters. They mentioned the importance of peo-
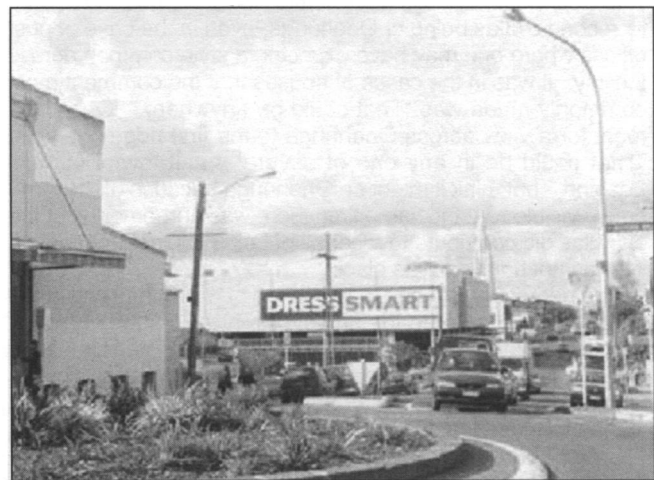

Fig. 7: Onehunga – View from the main street east to DRESS SMART.

ple to the question of local identity. Whether a place had a cosmopolitan air was mentioned, as was the association of Onehunga some years previously with Pacific Island people.

One insightful respondent mentioned the importance of Synergy, where the natural, built and social environments had the effect of combining into something greater than the individual aspects. Another spoke very firmly about the old houses and their role in forming local identity, saying: "If they were demolished I would be upset!" There was also a sense that some people did feel that Onehunga was different to other suburbs in Auckland, although others did not. Further research is needed to clarify this impression.

Some of the people interviewed walk regularly around the western half of Onehunga, as they put it "To the Onehunga Mall and back" which refers to the main street, and they felt that they had more of a sense of place where they walked. Alongside this, Onehunga was identified as "Not having a uniqueness" but this was qualified by the statement, "But can't say that any suburb has that unless it has been sold in the way Ponsonby has." This suggests a recognition of the media's role, in promoting an image of an area, and so giving it a public identity; Ponsonby has a jet-set and coffee drinking ("latté fraternity") identity, while Remuera was mentioned too as an area with an identity shaped by large houses with extensive gardens (and wealthy residents). Other instances of reminiscences of childhood days included stories of "well-off" relatives who lived 5 km or so from Onehunga seeing it as a poor area, and the Onehunga cousins "living in Timbuktu!" This remains today as a common image for many people living elsewhere in the Auckland region.

The account above answers question 3 (reasons for no visible local identity) by the reference to lack of uniqueness. This confirms the author's hypothesis that, because many of the suburbs were built at similar times as "villages," and when using the older houses as a measure of identity, it is hard to distinguish one area from another through using housing style. Where people were able to describe the identity they recognized it was the combination of landmarks like current and former public buildings (e.g. post offices and libraries) and the churches. Some people acknowledged the place played by the natural environment by mentioning the ridge-lines, views of nearby volcanoes like One Tree Hill and Mangere Mountain (figs. 8 and 9), and the public parklands. (These two examples are on the boundaries of Onehunga). Landmark vegetation was also acknowledged as important to identity; the iconic place of tall Norfolk Pines growing across Onehunga is one example.

When referring to the collage of photographs, it did not seem to matter whether you were an old-standing resident or one who was recent. Public architecture and churches were readily recognized as being of Onehunga, even in the case of post offices where one may have expected a style common across the city. It was in the cases of houses that the comment most commonly made was "That could be anywhere." One comment for a view across Onehunga to the first ridge-line was, "That could be in any one of several small towns in New Zealand – but think it might be Onehunga because of the large house visible." At the same time there was agreement that the old villas did contribute to a sense of being in Onehunga, even if it was not unique to the place.

One person questioned the absence of recent housing in the photographs used with the survey, such as in figure 10, suggesting it slanted the question of identity to the historic image of Onehunga. This person was keen to compare house prices in Onehunga and elsewhere as part of his answers, suggesting that he included that factor in his thinking of local identity.

Current building practice in Onehunga continues the situation discussed earlier with reference to the similar time of early suburban development. Today most parts of the Auckland
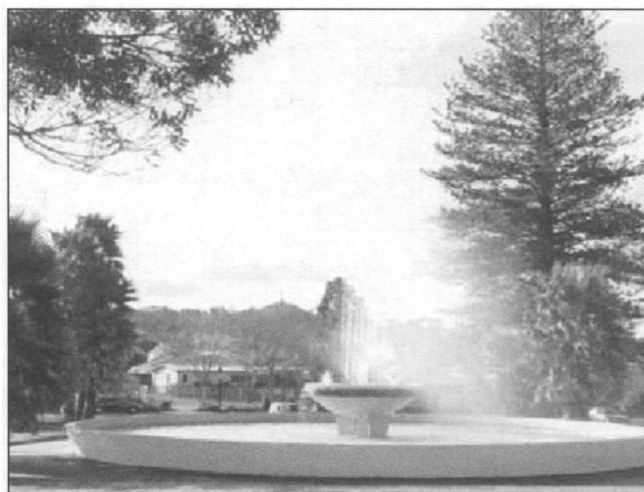

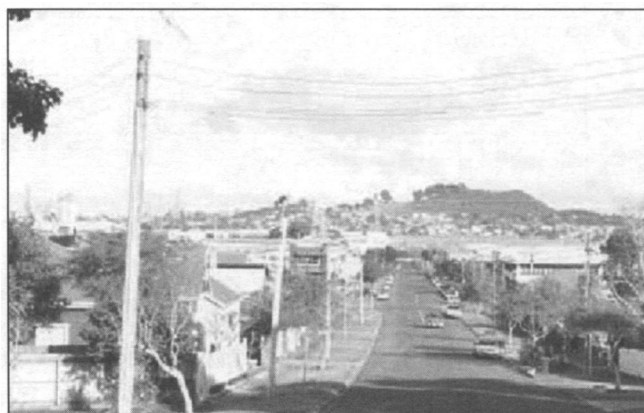**Fig. 8:** Jellicoe Park with One Tree Hill on the skyline, and examples of the iconic Norfolk Pines.

Fig. 9: View south from residential to light industry and with Mt. Mangere (ancient Maori fortified Pa) and the Manukau Harbour.
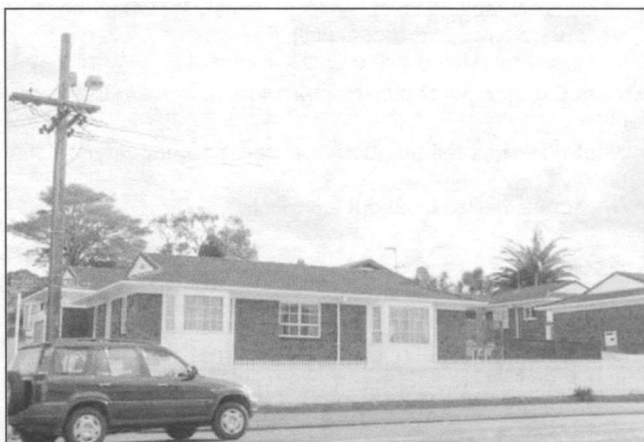

Fig. 10: Recently built multi-units on an original large site in Onehunga.

Isthmus are seeing the removal of old houses on large lots (fig. 11), and their replacement with more intensive development. Figure 11 shows an area where the original homestead has been retained but nine lots of 500 sq.m have been placed on the balance of the land. (The lot size was determined by the City Plan zoning).
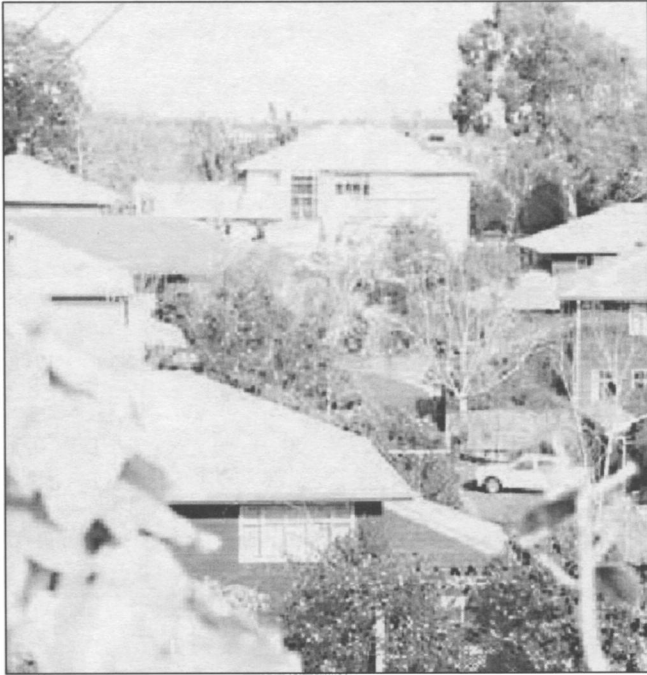
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Fig. 11: Walnut Grove at Pleasant Street, Onehunga, built 1990-1995 – Glimpse of Manukau Harbour on skyline.

● *What does this tell us about the Ekistic Grid?* The question underlying this project and stated in the Introduction can be repeated; namely,

*"Can the Ekistic Grid usefully provide the basis for an exercise that **systematically** identifies local identity variables as part of addressing the question: 'Is there a local identity for a given neighborhood or town?' "*

To answer the headline question about the Ekistic Grid we need to look at the following aspects of methodology:

● **Structured analysis:** In this study, by working with the Ekistic Grid, it was possible to proceed with a method that applied a structured analytical framework that ensured all elements of a human settlement were included. For example, in the case of the photograph montage used in the survey, because of the five ekistic elements in the grid it was possible to include, in a systematic way, photographs that covered NATURE, ANTHROPOS, SOCIETY, SHELLS, and NETWORKS, as illustrated in figure 12.

It is argued that without the Ekistic Grid, or an equivalent, the likelihood of a random selection of examples not representative of the whole settlement situation would have occurred.

● **Consideration of units of space:** The units of space in the Ekistic Grid (Community Classes from I to IV) [Anthropos to Small Polis/Town] also helped as a reminder that local scale might be an explanatory variable. For example, when walking through Onehunga looking for potential indicators of local identity it was helpful to be reminded to include the unit of the individual person (Anthropos). On this basis the funky street furniture was included (fig. 13a). Similarly, the unit "House group" reminded me to include the photographs in figures 10 and 11, above and figure 13b. And the "Small Neighborhood" unit triggered the recognition of the Norfolk Pine and related bush in the community class II area centered on Pleasant, Symonds, and Forbes Streets on the western side of Onehunga (fig. 6).
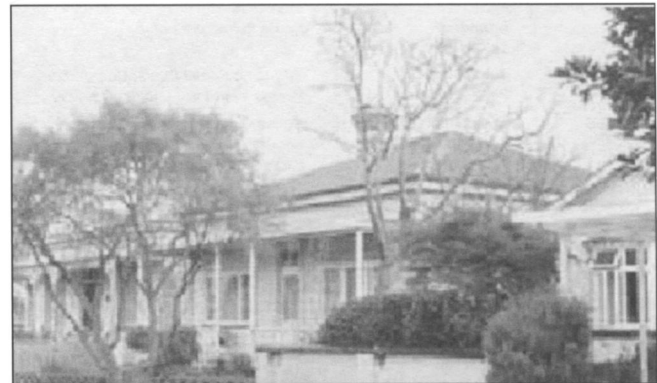

Fig. 13a: Funky street furniture in Onehunga.

Fig. 13b: House group built c.1860-1870s in Onehunga.

● **Administering the questionnaire:** Having the components of the Ekistic Grid in mind helped with the conversation held with the local people who were interviewed. At times I was
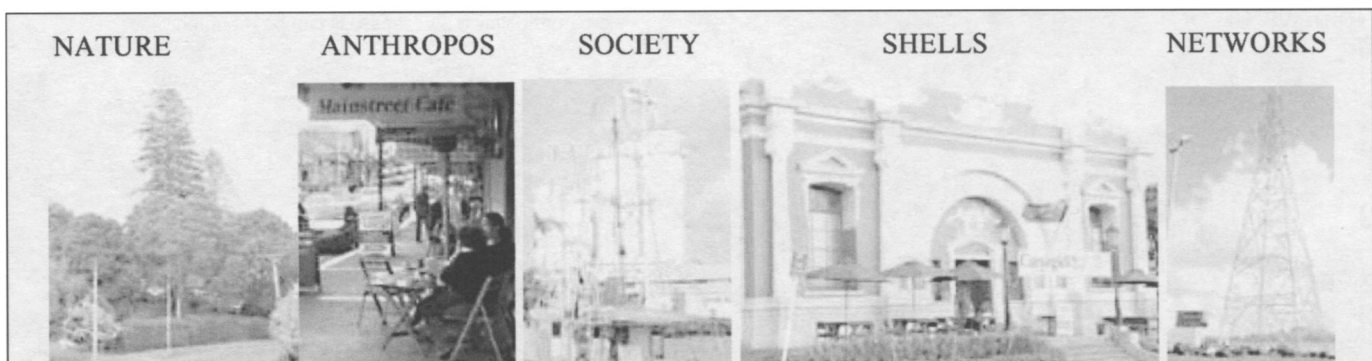

NATURE   ANTHROPOS   SOCIETY   SHELLS   NETWORKS

Fig. 12: Photographs selected on the basis of their inclusion in one of the Ekistic Elements.

helped in deciding when to prompt and about what. For example, when discussing the sameness of housing across Auckland, the distinction in the grid between "House Group," "Small Neighborhood" and "Neighborhood" enabled me to check whether it helped to think at the scale of "House Group" or "Small Neighborhood" (e.g. as described above for figure 11) rather than Onehunga as a whole (i.e. "Small Polis/Town, or Community Class IV). Alternatively, one respondent thinking about his childhood home and the view across Onehunga, reminded me that here was someone relating to the place as a whole, that is the small town viewed from a vantage point. This thought was reinforced by the framework I was carrying in my head. The resulting photograph stimulated in this way is illustrated by figure 14.

● **Descriptors:** The question here is whether the survey respondents used language which could be used as a descriptor to which images could be attached. This descriptor could later be used to build a picture of local identity. Furthermore, there is the question whether the language used could be said to equate with the keywords used in the Ekistic Elements or Units of Space.

Most of the language used did not equate with the Ekistic Elements. Some did line up with the Units of Space as in "Neighborhood" and "Town" (but not the Greek words, e.g. Polis). However there were words used which fitted in at a secondary level within a keyword like NATURE.

These can be illustrated as follows:

NATURE	Natural Landscape	*Ridge lines; coastal plains*
	Openspace	*Parks; Gardens; Reserves*
ANTHROPOS	Person	*Individual*
	Attitudes}	*Perceptions; prejudices*
	Values }	
SOCIETY	Population	*Ethnicity; Social Class; Occupation*
	People	*Pacific Islanders; Locals; Outsiders*
SHELLS	Residential Buildings	*Houses; Apartments or Flats*
	Commercial Buildings	*Shops; Offices; Warehouses*
	Industrial Buildings	*Factories; Storage; Power stations*
NETWORKS	Roads	*Streets; Motorway*
	Footpaths (Sidewalks)	
	Energy	*Electricity supply; gas supply*
	Wireless	*Mobile phone towers; microwave towers*

In conclusion, this question of language which can be used as descriptors suggests that it depends on whether the person is familiar with the Ekistic ideas or not, and can work with the keywords as they stand, or they are unfamiliar – certainly a layperson – when everyday language is appropriate. This suggests that, when working at the community level some translation of terms is appropriate. As this study has found, if the person making the enquiry is working at the highest (keyword) level it is possible to connect the everyday language to the framework – and to go back and forth between the keywords the enquirer is using in his/her head, and the layperson. This begs the question whether the Ekistic Grid should be changed to better reflect the everyday use of language; this debate needs to be held within WSE.

Fig. 14: View South-east showing the commercial/industrial image of Onehunga.

Conclusion

The study has provided an answer to the two questions posed at the beginning.

• Firstly, it is possible to apply the process described when wanting to establish a local identity for a place.
• Secondly, it is possible to apply the Ekistic Grid and its components as an integral part of the local identity-finding process.

This does not mean that other methods and frameworks would not have achieved a similar result. But it does demonstrate a continuing benefit for us in WSE talking about Ekistics with others.

The study also raises several important questions which apply to the future of the Ekistic Grid which need to be examined by the WSE. These are being asked in the context of the current research at the University of Auckland by Sharmila Jagadisan. It is hoped that through this paper and the other one by Jagadisan and Fookes at this conference, ideas will be stimulated and will contribute to the on-going Ekistic methodology project.

Notes

1. Sharmila Jagadisan is writing her Ph.D at the Ekistics Research Unit-Auckland (University of Auckland's Planning Department) on the subject "Critique of Ekistic Methodology." Her email is sharmila.jagadisan@creative.auckland.ac.nz.
2. This is a small pilot study which has used residents of Onehunga known to the author. It is intended to provide an indicative impression around which a wider study can be mounted.