

Don't Fence Me In

High metal railings installed on the shared pedestrian-cyclist pathway across Ōrākei Basin have residents and local authorities stunned by the visual impact – and not in a positive way, as Wayne Thompson writes



Stephen Penny

“As I walked along the boardwalk beside the railway track, early yesterday morning, admiring the sun on the water and bush on the southern side of the basin, I came across a woman gasping and saying out loud, ‘this is insane, this is an eyesore, it can’t happen.’ I then realised she was referring to the beginning of the construction of a hideous new 1.4 metre metal ‘prison cell’ wall that looks ridiculous in this environment and obstructs the view. I agreed.”

*- Roy Champtaloup,
Remuera resident*

Costing \$4.9 million to widen for cyclists and pedestrians to share, the path along the railway line at Ōrākei Basin has been dubbed the “cattle race” or the “rat run” by some residents since June, when they first saw its shoulder-height steel safety barriers.

Built in 2010 by Auckland City Council Parks as part of a walkway round the volcanic feature of the basin, the boardwalk ran for 650m, was 2.5m wide and became popular with walkers and runners. However, once the cycling boom hit the city and the Government became interested, the boardwalk was bundled into a proposed 7km shared path between Glen Innes and Tamaki Dr. The boardwalk’s enlargement only six years after being built hinged on getting a slice of a \$200 million Urban Cycleway Programme delivered by Auckland Transport (AT) and NZ Transport Agency (NZTA). AT publicity promised the route would be an “amazing, scenic journey for people walking and on bikes, while minimising the effects on the environment and private property”.

On June 5, as the 1.4 metre-high grilles were being bolted onto the boardwalk for Stage 3 of the shared path, a shocked local resident demanded to meet representatives of Auckland Transport and Ōrākei Local Board in an attempt to get them to stop work and consider a design change.

Resident Roy Champtaloup raised the alarm. Living near the basin for 20 years, he says he loves being on the path with “children, pets, cyclists and watching the fish jump and the ducks swimming around.” Before he saw the new balustrading, he had thought the project to widen the popular boardwalk would not change the look of a mellowed timber structure that allowed views over the saltwater lake to a bushy park beyond. He assumed the original 1.2 metre-high wooden barrier and walkway materials would be reused in the enlarged structure.

When Champtaloup saw the cattle crate-like sides go up, he told *The Hobson* the design was over-the-top for safety, and a tasteless block to viewing such a “beautiful natural environment.”

The community was not consulted about changes in materials such as galvanised steel being used in a marine environment, because objections would have been raised well before work began, he says. “You are not allowed to use [galvanised steel] that close to the foreshore if you are building a house, because it will rust. Though the sides are only 200mm higher, the visual impact is massive as you walk in there. It’s like entering some rat run. We are grumpy that the local board was not aware of this and it’s slipped below the radar. You can understand this height of balustrade being used on the cycle path 50m above Spaghetti Junction, but not here. Imagine if they put up a 1.4 metre fence along Tamaki Dr. We just hope that sanity prevails.”

Champtaloup showed the work to Ōrākei Local Board chair Kit Parkinson, saying money was being wasted on ripping out existing 1.2m high wooden fences facing both the basin and railway lines, and replacing the wooden floor planks with a glass fibre, non-slip surface. Champtaloup headed overseas, arranging for a fellow resident, Paul Clarke, to attend a meeting the next day on the project site with Parkinson, Ōrākei ward councillor Desley Simpson, and an AT representative.

Parkinson’s predecessor as chairman, Colin Davis, said on August 4 last year that the board was “delighted to be partnering with Auckland Transport” on the urban cycleway programme, but Parkinson told *The Hobson* it was a poor partnership.

“It’s not what we were presented with a year-and-a-half ago. It’s a huge Government-funded engineering project, it’s like paint on a house; you look at it, not the structure underneath.”

Parkinson said the lack of communication between the NZTA and AT about what they were building on the shared path contrasted sharply with the free-flow of information between AT and the Ōrākei Local Board over the project to widen the intersection of Ngapiipi Rd and Tamaki Dr.

On June 7, the local board met and passed a motion asking the project team to stop all works on the handrail and replacing the boardwalk timber footplates until further consultation with the board. The board noted that AT is required under its statement of intent to Council to update the local board on projects such as the shared path project, including regular updates and communications on progress and changes.

Another Ōrākei leader who was surprised and disappointed was Desley Simpson. “When I heard about this I was upset,” she says. “The first thing I asked AT was ‘what updates have you given the local board on this project?’ And the answer was not one word on this subject.”

“I can’t believe that AT can co-fund such a significant investment, and didn’t see any need to communicate with the local board or its ward councillor to progress the design implementation in this Council term.”

Chair of the Ōrākei Local Board until her election to Council in October 2016, Simpson was also chair of the OLB’s forerunner, the Hobson Community Board, which had the original boardwalk built as an Auckland City Council Parks project for a walkway around the basin. The boardwalk opened in December 2010 after weathering controversies over fencing off the railway track, and the refusal of AT and Kiwirail to provide for boardwalk users to pass under Ōrākei Bridge and on to the station. That was, until the Hobson Community Board gave \$100,000 towards the foundations being widened to make room for a path. Simpson called for a rethink on the use of galvanised steel railing chosen without formal consultation. “It is going to rust and doesn’t match other networks around Hobson Bay. It is not a natural product in a volcanic feature in a natural environment.”

Local resident Paul Clarke is a director of Studio2 Architects who walks his dog at the basin, and says that moving aside for the ‘one or two cyclists’ has never been a problem. “But why are they doing a 1.4 metre high handrail in the unlikely event that a cyclist might catapult themselves off the bridge? If the metal handrail is going to cause a [rusting] problem in five or six years, why are they doing it? We should be designing something to last 50 years.”



Look Ma, no railings! Cyclists and pedestrians share a canal-side path in Shoreditch, London. Photo: Roy Champtaloup

“It’s like, c’mon, there is a whole lot of money potentially wasted here, let’s stop and get it right without any more cost, and get a fluency in the way we are dealing with infrastructure and the design and let’s try to use some Kiwi-made product. Let’s think about something that is environmentally-friendly and that meshes into the fabric of the community.”

Tim Duguid, chairman of Meadowbank and St Johns Residents Association, says the project team’s engagement with the community had been inadequate. “The residents association have never received any detailed drawings. Boardwalks and bridges are things that locals feel ownership of once they are built and they need to feel that they have had some appropriate input.”

Duguid says people will feel “cooped up” when they enter the boardwalk with a 1.4 metre-high fence either side. “That is ridiculous for that location. A nice thing about the boardwalk is when you come off the road onto it and all of a sudden there is no traffic.”

He preferred the example of the shared path at Westhaven, where the harbour fence is stainless steel with a wooden rail on top and horizontal stainless steel wire with open spaces, which is easy to see through. “I’m not aware of anyone falling off the path.”

Similarly, the footbridge over the railway line and Judges Bay at the Parnell Baths has low parts for people to enjoy the views. Likewise in Brisbane, shared path users can see the water via horizontal clears. “The basin is not such a high-profile marine environment and there is no need for it to be closed in the full height,” says Duguid.

Duguid says he is concerned that the project team’s choice of fence would be repeated in the building of the remaining two sections of the Tamaki Dr-Glen Innes shared path. Stage 4 of the path follows the eastern edge of Hobson Bay to the Ngapipi Rd intersection with Tamaki Dr, and Stage 2 goes over the railway and through Purewa Valley.

“I would like to see more community engagement on those parts’ fenced sections. You would want views across Hobson Bay and there will be bridges going across the railway and the valley up to Kohimarama and those bridges are going to be cool lookout points. You don’t want to be caged in and the kids not being able to see over the top and see the kingfishers diving.”

The Glen Innes to Tamaki shared path was first mooted in 2013 by Bike Auckland. The widened Section 3, the boardwalk, or “Broadwalk”, is two-and-a-half-times the width of a car. However, Bike Auckland unsuccessfully asked NZTA designers to make it half a metre wider than that in order to allow for an anticipated increase in eastern suburbs’ cyclists travelling at 25 km/h, and electric bike riders at 35 km/h. Bike Auckland also asked designers to put pedestrians to the water side and cyclists to the rail side. Cyclists will have to weave their way round sightseers because the lookout space at the half-way mark has been removed in the enlarged boardwalk.

“The design of the boardwalk is in keeping with the surrounding environment while ensuring it is safe for people walking and cycling,” says NZTA Senior Manager Project Delivery, Chris Hunt. “The side barriers will be 1.4m high to keep people riding bikes safe on the path in the event of a fall or collision. This is the standard for safe cycling infrastructure and it has been installed to existing standard, such as Austroads and Local Path Guidelines.

“Steel railings, topped with a wooden handrail, are being constructed as part of the boardwalk within Orakei Basin. These steel railings will be narrower than wooden ones, which will lighten the overall appearance of the boardwalk. The vertical railings are spaced at 100mm, with no cross bars, which is in line with the building code.”

At the time of going to print, the Orakei Local Board was waiting for a second meeting with NZTA and AT representatives on the project, following its motion that all work be halted. ■



Pathways built by the Orakei Local Board around inner Hobson Bay have the more aesthetically harmonious timber balustrading. Photos: Stephen Penny

The AT/NZTA installed railing across the Orakei Basin shared pedestrian/cycling path is galvanised steel 1.4m high, replacing 1.2m wooden railings

- The shared path at Westhaven and the Viaduct is 1.1m high
- On the Grafton Gully shared path, fencing ranges in height from 1.3m, to 1.8m alongside the Port exit of the motorway
- KiwiRail requires a fence of 1.2 to 1.8m between a pathway and a rail corridor