

Liveability

Good liveability in medium-density housing (MDH) in New Zealand contributes significantly to the comfort, wellbeing, security and satisfaction of residents, neighbours and wider communities. Understanding exactly what contributes to liveability can help developers and policy makers ensure that new developments meet the needs of residents and the wider urban community.



NEW ZEALAND IS MOVING to build more medium-density housing and neighbourhoods, a trend that is forecast to strengthen. Understanding what constitutes liveability in MDH (defined here as multi-dwelling units of up to 6 storeys) is therefore important.

BRANZ commissioned research to look at the liveability of the MDH we are building and how we can do better. The four phases were:

- a national and international literature review around MDH liveability
- a review of New Zealand legislation and regulation applicable to MDH
- focus groups with territorial authority staff who deal with MDH
- an MDH residents' survey looking at how they perceive liveability.

There is no single agreed definition of liveability. It is a measure of the personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) people experience from their environment and the way they live. There are objective and

subjective dimensions, and all are underpinned by the idea of making places more convenient for residents as they live their daily lives.

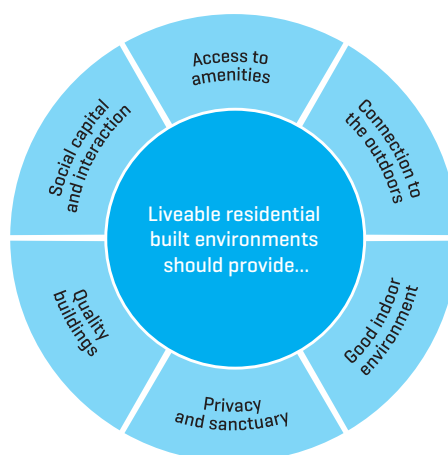


Figure 1. Six human requirements in the residential built environment.¹

¹ Based on Bennett, J. (2010). *New Zealand apartment living: Developing a liveability evaluation index* (Master's thesis). Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, p. 45.

Liveability is sometimes discussed in conjunction with wellbeing. Wellbeing generally refers to people (and typically focuses on physical and mental health), while liveability generally refers to place. In this way, liveability can be considered an important component of overall wellbeing.

Liveability relates not only to the quality and design of the dwellings themselves but, crucially, how dwellings are integrated into neighbourhoods and the wider city. It can be considered at the level of an individual home or a neighbourhood or on a wider urban scale.

Dwelling liveability

Dwelling liveability is commonly assessed in terms of:

- space – storage and entertaining spaces, shared spaces (and trade-offs between private and shared spaces, privacy and social interaction), socio-cultural understandings of space, layout of spaces

- amenity – natural light/daylight, ventilation and good indoor air quality, safety, privacy (acoustic and visual), ease of use (somewhere to hang washing to dry and to put rubbish and recycling), outlook, connection to the outdoors and outdoor spaces, access (lifts, emergency escape)
- quality – there is evidence that quality in design and construction is more important than apartment size
- building management and maintenance.

Neighbourhood liveability

Terms such as ‘quality of urban life’ typically refer to neighbourhood liveability – an understanding of how our neighbourhoods impact everyday experiences of place. This includes, for example, how convenient it is to walk from home to work, school, parks, shops and cafés with social interaction. As well as objective measures (short walking distances, the presence of shops and cafés), there are subjective elements such as a sense of belonging or community. It is these factors that residents trade off (in conjunction with affordability factors) when deciding where to live.

Research has found that both liveability and wellbeing in the home are intrinsically linked to a sense of wellbeing in the neighbourhood. Therefore, we cannot design homes in isolation from the neighbourhood at large. The quality of the social fabric of the neighbourhood is directly connected to the perceived liveability experienced by residents. Neighbourhood satisfaction is a core component of overall liveability.

Urban liveability

In practical terms, urban liveability can include efficient mass transit, bike lanes, being child-friendly and mixed-use city spaces. Socially, it involves access to participation in community life, sports events, farmers’ markets, festivals and so on. Shorter distances to the city centre, higher densities and mixed land uses positively contribute to social wellbeing. Liveability has also come to be associated with rankings of cities, although this is often designed to attract new skilled workers to a city rather than for the benefit of existing residents.

Economic, social and technological changes over the last 30 years have reshaped how people look at housing, preferred locations and lifestyles. Understanding urban liveability and how policy and strategy can impact it is a focus for local, regional and

national government. Towns and cities must be understood and planned as inter-connected systems if urban liveability is to be achieved. For example, housing must be considered alongside transport.

Liveability and New Zealand MDH

There is a need for more research into liveability in New Zealand MDH, in particular around how liveability can be better delivered in different housing types (apartments, terraced houses and so on).

More than 20 pieces of legislation include provisions relevant to dwelling liveability criteria (thermal insulation, natural lighting and so on), in particular building and planning legislation (and regulations under the legislation) such as the Building Act and the New Zealand Building Code. Unitary, district and city plans implemented under the Resource Management Act are also extremely important. Researchers identified which pieces of legislation and regulation have an impact on which liveability criteria in a liveability index (see BRANZ Study Report SR432).

There is no specific reference to ‘liveability’ in the regulatory framework and comparatively few references to MDH. However, cities such as Auckland and Christchurch that have updated their plans recently have generally addressed MDH liveability criteria.

Territorial authority focus groups

Focus groups were held with Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch local authority staff who deal with MDH through consenting and other processes. One 90-minute focus group of between five and seven participants was held at each city.

Some common points emerged from the discussions:

- Much of the regulatory framework that impacts housing liveability was developed when stand-alone dwellings were the norm and does not adequately provide for the delivery of quality MDH. MDH typologies require different considerations from stand-alone dwellings.
- Local authorities are limited in what they can require around liveability in MDH, being mostly restricted to checking Building Code compliance. Liveability may be addressed in strategies or design guides, but these cannot usually be enforced.
- There is relatively little in the Building Code to assist territorial authorities to regulate the quality of MDH. For example, there are no requirements for storage. (In the survey of MDH residents described below, 40% of respondents found their storage space either inadequate or only somewhat adequate.)

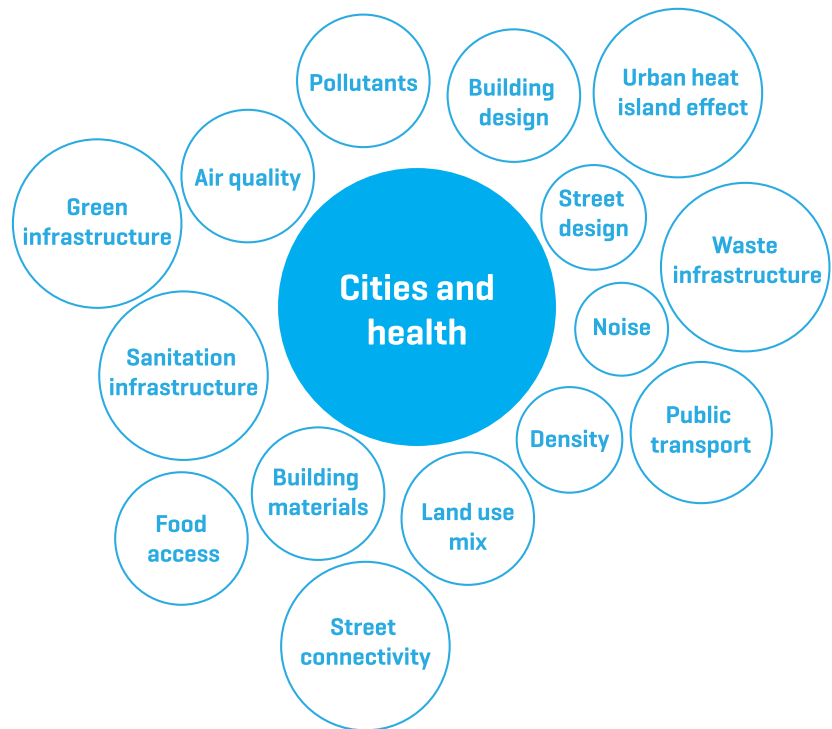


Figure 2. Physical urban environment factors impacting health and wellbeing. ²

² Based on Pineo, H. & Rydin, Y. (2018). *Cities, health & well-being*. London, UK: Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. p. 15.

- There is no consistent approach to ensuring that liveable MDH is delivered across the country.
- Government leadership and intervention supporting MDH liveability, such as a set of national standards, would be beneficial.
- The existing development industry was considered to be based on short-term thinking and the maximisation of profit, often to the detriment of MDH liveability.
- Developers find it easier to understand rules such as minimum unit size or minimum outdoor living space but have more difficulty dealing with more subjective considerations of residential amenity.
- There is little evidence that either territorial authorities or developers are sufficiently considering neighbourhood liveability alongside dwelling liveability. There is little understanding that high-quality MDH requires the appropriate amenities to be provided within the local neighbourhood.
- Housing delivery is often driven by historical trends as opposed to likely future demand.
- Where good quality is being delivered, it appears to be as a result of the developer's initiative (and perhaps market expectation) rather than the regulatory framework.

MDH residents' survey

A national online survey of MDH residents was completed by 500 people. Asked what term best described liveability, the most popular definition was 'the ease of living in a place'. Other answers covered being warm and dry, comfortable and feeling like home.

The majority were happy with their homes:

- 79% felt that their MDH dwelling was as liveable as a stand-alone home.
- 84% felt that the design of their dwelling suited their needs.
- 70% felt their dwelling was built to a high quality.

This is in line with other research that connects experience to positive perceptions of MDH – people are more likely to be happy with MDH if they have experienced living in it.

There was a clear difference between renters and owner-occupiers, however. Private rental tenants found their home more

difficult to keep warm or cool (71% versus 16.4% of owner-occupiers), and renters were less likely to say they get excellent or good natural light. Renters were more likely to view the build quality of their dwelling to be an issue and were more likely to find aspects of their unit size and storage needs not being met.

Asked what had the most impact on MDH liveability, natural light and thermal comfort were ranked highest. Three-quarters of respondents rated visual privacy as quite or very important, in particular "other people not seeing in my windows". Noise and hearing neighbours or the street were not significant concerns for respondents.

Quality and design were both ranked highly. Quality was frequently aligned to health, with comments such as "I have ongoing health needs, so quality is important to avoid further sickness and discomfort".

Asked to rank spaces in order of importance to liveability, the living room, kitchen and bedroom ranked highest, with bathrooms of mid-rank importance. Garages and entrance spaces ranked lowest.

A significant finding was that the location of a dwelling within a neighbourhood (neighbourhood liveability) was just as important as dwelling liveability. Responses about the importance of features within the home, such as kitchens, were balanced with responses about the value of location and access to neighbourhood amenities.

Conclusions

There is no commonly used definition of liveability in New Zealand. It would be useful to develop a common definition across the three scales from dwelling to urban liveability and, from that, a consistent method for evaluating the liveability of MDH for residents, neighbours and wider communities. This must include both objective and subjective measures to give a complete picture of liveability.

There are limits around how local authorities can support liveability in MDH developments. Their role is largely around checking compliance with the regulatory framework, which was put together chiefly for stand-alone houses.

MDH residents surveyed were generally happy with their homes. Natural light,

thermal comfort, quality and design rank as the most important liveability features. However, a strong correlation between dwelling liveability and neighbourhood liveability was found in both the residents' survey and the literature search. Services and amenities available in the neighbourhood are just as important to residents' satisfaction as features in their MDH building.

More information

Other information can be found in BRANZ Facts: Medium-density housing #1–11, the website www.mdh.org.nz and these BRANZ study reports:

- SR431 *Creating improved housing outcomes: Medium-density housing liveability and wellbeing literature review*
- SR432 *Creating improved housing outcomes: Liveable medium-density housing legislation and regulation review*
- SR433 *Creating improved housing outcomes: Liveable medium-density housing focus groups*
- SR434 *Creating improved housing outcomes: Liveable medium-density housing residents' survey*

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