



# WOOD FIRST

## CARVING OUT A FUTURE FOR COMMUNITIES

To what extent should a local authority lead its regional economy? **Jane Arnott** says Rotorua Lakes Council is doing just that and it's all consistent with a wider agenda for growth.

**R**egional development and a resilient ratepayer base are too important to be left to chance. Leading change and sustained growth requires vision and a framework that both promotes growth and supports those sectors that naturally occur. In this regard Rotorua Lakes Council is driving a tourism-inspired strategy that is outperforming many indicators while also recognising how the growth in tourism can foster construction and development in many related fields.

The business case for leveraging and marketing Rotorua's natural assets to tap into the high-end international demand for wellness and spa facilities made absolute sense.

Similarly, creating an expectation around the uptake of timber technologies and new materials – given the employment and investment profile of the immediate forestry and wood processing sectors – can be acknowledged as good governance.

According to mayor Steve Chadwick, "If we want our towns and cities to have

a meaningful connection to who we are as New Zealanders we need to be prepared to clarify what we want to see and feel in our urban landscapes. For us at Rotorua Lakes we wanted to navigate a means of being true to our timber history and to our economic development objectives."

On that basis, she says, attracting investment for quality tourism experiences or new manufacturing facilities has also

meant "walking the walk and talking the talk around timber".

Rotorua Lakes Council's subsequent decision to pass a Wood First policy sets a precedent. As a market intervention, through its facilitation and encouragement of wood as a preferred, sustainable building material for all projects in the district, it deliberately identifies timber in preference to concrete or steel.

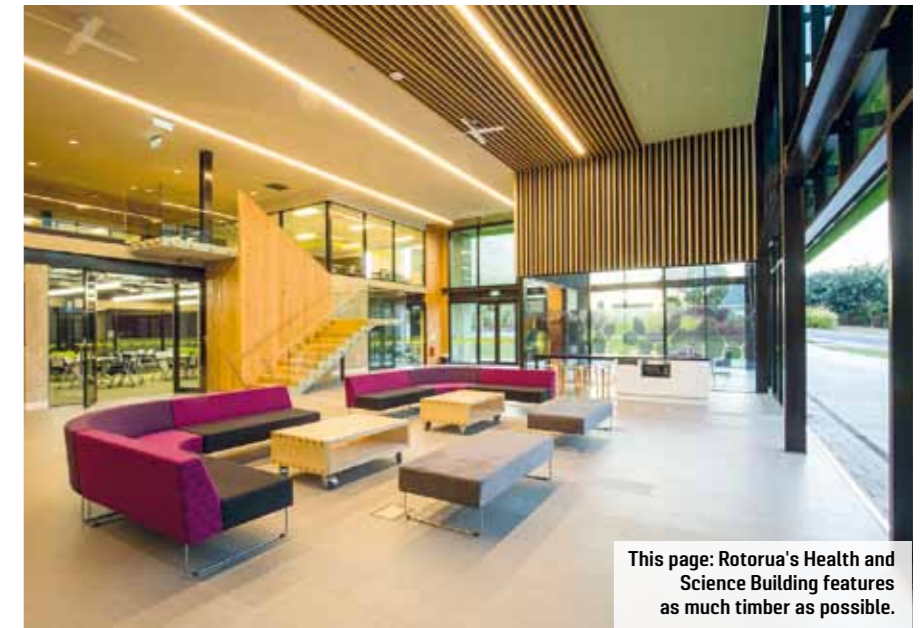


**Portia Mckenzie (Rotorua Lakes Council's inner city revitalisation, senior lead advisor, strategy), Aaron Donnelly (Donnelly Sawmillers) & Rotorua mayor Steve Chadwick.**



Timber-centric Waipa building.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF DARRYL CHURCH ARCHITECTURE.



This page: Rotorua's Health and Science Building features as much timber as possible.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DARRYL CHURCH ARCHITECTURE.

Free markets don't typically allow regulators to back or pick winners, which is how Wood First is perceived in central government circles where it falls on deaf ears despite successive industry attempts.

Even Red Stag Timber, New Zealand's largest sawmill on the cusp of a \$60 million expansion, was unable to persuade the government otherwise.

More recently, as new timber technologies are developed and New Zealand builds a world-first reputation in, for example, damage-resistant timber design, the rate at which uptake is evident even in construction-dense regions such as post-earthquake Canterbury is "depressingly low", according to Brian Stanley, resident of Rotorua and chair of the Wood Council and the Wood Processors and Manufacturers Association.

### ALL THINGS EQUAL?

The challenges faced by manufacturers and fabricators in having engineered timber broadly accepted as a valid structural material competing against concrete and steel have continued to undermine uptake in commercial and civic settings.

A common industry concern was that there was no level playing field when it came to professional knowledge and expertise – the "how" of building multi-storey commercial buildings in timber.

In simple terms, business professionals, whether they are property developers or

architects, cannot be compelled to learn about or master innovation and they don't do so without good reason.

Companies that have been successful in winning tenders that specify or reflect the Wood First policy include Ignite Architects and local architectural company Darryl Church.

Both highlight how the policy removes the constraints and provides purposeful exploration of new timber technologies that would not otherwise either be tabled or top-of-mind.

Rotorua Lakes Council is therefore driving home the value of being 'up to speed' in an industry which is dear to its historic heart and economy.

To further reinforce this, CCO Grow Rotorua, alongside central government and key timber industry organisations, is organising a May conference, 'Changing Perceptions of Engineered Timber for Construction'.

Rotorua Lakes Council has recognised that the impediments to the uptake of timber technology and new-engineered timbers were capable of being challenged through a policy framework that fundamentally incentivised learning.

### OVERSEAS

Wood First policies have been implemented in British Columbia and Japan. More recently, in Australia, the 2014 Latrobe City Council's Wood Encouragement Policy paved the way for the Australian Local Government

Association's late June 2015 resolution that supported the use and promotion of timber products by local government across Australia.

In New Zealand, however, the market forces argument has repeatedly trumped initiatives and lobbying designed to secure timber a stronger foothold in the psyche of developers and influencers.

As Pip Cheshire, president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, readily acknowledges, "There are many decision makers in the making of a new building and each in their own way can aid or hinder the adoption of a new technology such as wood-based structural systems."

Pip goes on to explain how concerns about risk can "inevitably beget a conservative reaction and new methodologies are set aside unless there is demonstrable evidence of the successful prior employment of the system or material".

Within this context Rotorua Lakes Council's determination to acknowledge the role it has in both supporting regional economies and influencing procurement around capital works is bold.

Mayor Chadwick made a key point when addressing the Property Council at a recent meeting in Rotorua. Her comment, "At my age and stage doing the right thing is what should drive us all," highlights her willingness to take on the steely issues.

Rotorua Lakes Council has unveiled many projects. All foster community

involvement and private sector partnership. The Te Arawa partnership and the investment that has been made possible is a model that is working and further supports the Wood First policy. New facilities at the Waiariki Institute of Technology are falling under Wood First and the new premises for the Accident Compensation Corporation by Rotorua developer Ray Cook (R+B Consultants) heralded the multi-storey use of cross laminated timber (CLT).

For Rotorua, the dynamic behind timber is also rooted in wanting the Destination Rotorua experience to be authentic.

Mayor Chadwick further clarifies this by adding, "Science and innovation form a major part of our economic base. Scion is a major ally to the forestry and wood processing sector and companies

like Lockwood, which revolutionised nail-free construction, and Abodo Wood or Verda which have led the way in thermally-treated.

"Now with Wood First in place we have Donelley Sawmillers agreeing to supply timber for all the wooden products used within the Inner City Revitalisation project at a reduced rate, while its marketing arm Abodo Wood will provide expert research and development consulting advice around how the design can be achieved. By our standards that is a terrific win-win.

"If we apply procurement processes to help orchestrate the most desirable outcomes from the perspective of the businesses that provide employment and undertake investment then we signal our stakeholder and governance relationship.

"We don't want our region to be

characterised by buildings that reflect neither our historic or cultural heritage nor the advances that have been made in terms of timber technology of which we can all be proud.

"Our Wood First policy is a unifying factor as we move forward embedding the increased uptake of timber. As part of our Agenda for Growth we anticipate enduring benefits that we hope will encourage other forestry and wood processing regions to emulate us." **LG**

• Jane Arnott is the former CE of NZ Wood and continues to support Wood First initiatives and champions. [Janerarnott@gmail.com](mailto:Janerarnott@gmail.com)

[www.localgovernmentmag.co.nz](http://www.localgovernmentmag.co.nz)  
For related articles go to our website.  
Search: Rotorua



**Represents  
New Zealand's  
Civil and General  
Contracting Industry**

**Civil Contractors New Zealand offers opportunities to work with Local Government on:**

- Procurement strategies and practices that support a healthy contracting industry;
- How to monitor contractors' health, safety and wellbeing processes;
- Forward work programmes that provide continuity of work to retain and develop contractor capability;
- Environmental and quality issues.

[www.civilcontractors.co.nz](http://www.civilcontractors.co.nz)