

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND¹

Māori Settlement

The Auckland Isthmus has been occupied by Māori for several hundred years and a number of iwi groups have exploited the rich volcanic soils and marine resources in the harbours on both coasts. The Isthmus also boasted a valuable portage at Ōtāhuhu where canoes could be dragged across a short stretch of land separating the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean, and area also offered access to the hinterland through the Awaroa Creek leading into the Waikato River (Stone 2002: 2). However, by the 1820s, warfare across the region had taken on a new dimension with the introduction of muskets, and raiding parties had resulted in much of the central Auckland isthmus being abandoned. By the late 1830s, though, the European presence in New Zealand had grown significantly and a group of Tāmaki chiefs encouraged the first Governor of New Zealand, Captain William Hobson, to choose Tāmaki-Makau-Rau (or Tamaki of a hundred lovers) as the site of the capital of the new colony (Stone 2002: 3).

European Settlement

With the decision to move the capital from Russell (Kororāreka) to Auckland in 1840, the initial defence for the town of Auckland was provided by Fort Britomart (on a former headland to the east of the present day Britomart railway station), replacing an earlier abandoned pā there. This site became the headquarters of the imperial military forces in New Zealand and barracks were built to house the small contingent of troops.

To the west of Point Britomart was a small bay, initially named Store Bay, later Commercial Bay, and it was to become the main harbour for the city (Stone 2002:26). The shallow mudflats that typify the coastline of the Waitematā, however, provided poor anchorage for a growing capital and development of the area was quickly deemed essential.

Felton Matthew, as acting Surveyor General, created a design for Auckland City in 1841 which included the areas between Freemans Bay and Commercial Bay, based on a rectilinear grid and a plan to reclaim the shallow Waitematā harbour, but his plan underwent significant modification to adapt to the topography. Properties were progressively sold by the Crown, although some sections and lots were retained in Crown ownership for purposes of defence, hospitals, schools, reserves and development of the foreshore.

The dual factors of the need for improved harbour facilities and the high value of land in the centre of town drove the reclamation of the foreshore area and in 1859 the process was under way. In less than 50 years, more than 50 hectares had been added to downtown Auckland, with smaller reclamations continuing in the 20th century. The first major reclamation between Fore (Fort) Street and what was to become Customs Street started in 1859 and was finished by the mid-1860s. Freemans Bay reclamations started in the 1880s and the Victoria Park area had been reclaimed by 1901.

The physical changes created by the reclamations changed the social and economic nature of the Freemans Bay area. Māori storehouses had been located in the Freemans Bay area during the 1840s and 1850s but progressively itinerant workers were moving in and setting up homes (Matthews and Matthews 2004:9). Over time, industrial infrastructure expanded

¹ The historical background is adapted from Bickler and Clough (2007) and Burnett and Macready (2016)

along the foreshore and a clutter of sheds and factories mixed with poor housing in the lower areas. As Matthews and Matthews (2004:9) describe it:

‘The area around Hardinge, Drake, Sale, Scotland and Middle Streets were amongst the least desirable areas in Auckland. Meanwhile the vicinity of Sale, Vernon and Centre Streets became a centre of prostitution.’

Conditions along Nelson Street appear to have been somewhat better. The historic plans show that by 1866, a variety of houses had been built along Nelson, Wellesley and Cook Streets (Figure 6). A close-up of Stephen’s 1886 Bird’s eye view of Auckland shows additional street-front housing with a line of houses along the western side of Nelson Street (Figure 7). The 1908 city plan shows additional street-front housing at the southwest corner of Nelson Street and Union Street (Figure 8, Figure 9), with further development between 1908 and 1918 shown shaded in orange on the plan. A close examination of the plan shows a slope present in the middle of Nelson Street between the Union Street and Cook Street intersections, dividing the street into an upper (east) and lower (west) street level. A post and rail fence lined the upper edge of the slope, with a brick or stone wall along a section of the base. A staircase is present partway along the street, providing access from what was Riordan Lane (Figure 10).

By 1940, an aerial view (Figure 11) shows a mix of commercial/industrial and smaller buildings on the eastern side of the project area, with what is likely to be the same large commercial building at the southern corner that was present by 1918 (Figure 9). This appears to have been a wooden building. This aerial image also illustrates changes to the street layout at the southern end of the Nelson Street project area. When compared with earlier historic maps (Figure 9-Figure 10), the original junction of Nelson Street, Union Street, and Wellington Street was reconfigured, resulting in a simplified intersection between Union Street and Nelson Street, while Wellington Street was realigned further to the northwest.

During the 1950s, Auckland City Council set about a street widening project in this portion of Nelson Street. Initial works in 1954 saw the formation of kerbing along the eastern side of the street and the construction of a retaining wall at the foot of the slope (Figure 12 and Figure 13). The following year a second, temporary, retaining wall was constructed to assist with the formation of a viaduct (Figure 14). The viaduct was built to facilitate the road expansion, and served as a foundation for the widened roadway (Figure 15 and Figure 16).

The 1959 aerial (Figure 17) shows little change along the eastern side of Nelson Street, with the building on street frontage at the southern corner still in place, suggesting that the road had not been significantly widened on the eastern side. By the 1990s the construction of the SH1 motorway to the southeast has resulted in substantial changes to the street system south of the project area, with the building on the corner now removed (Figure 18). Subsequent aerials show that during the 21st century almost all the buildings along the eastern side of Nelson Street replaced by those present today.

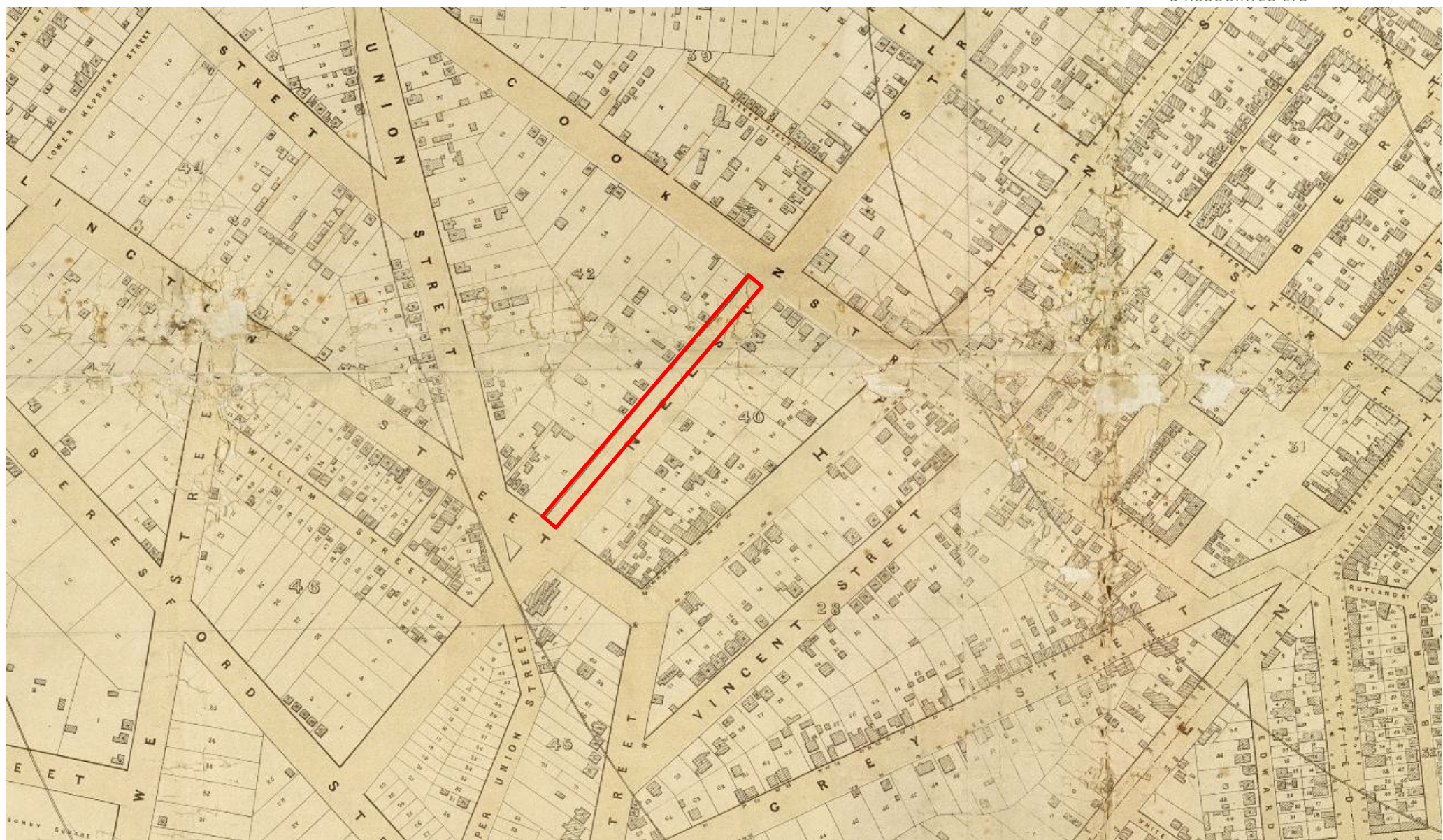


Figure 6. View of project area (red outline) and buildings in 1866 (Vercoe and Harding 1866. Auckland Public Library NZ Map 18)

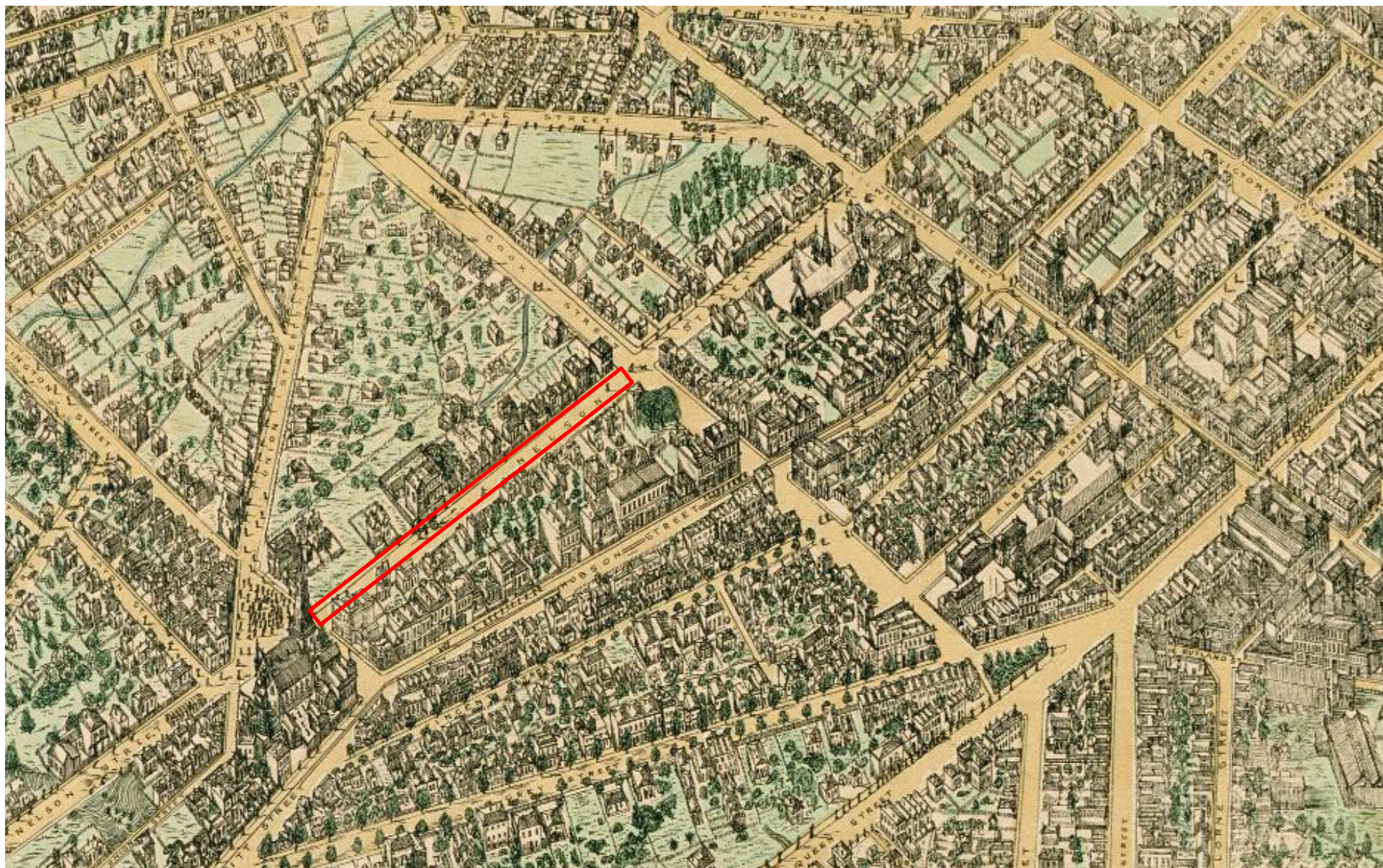


Figure 7. Close-up of Stephen's 1886 Bird's eye view of Auckland (Auckland City Libraries NZ Map Number 4544) (project area outlined in red)

August 2025

Extract from- Nelson Street Laneway Upgrade - Archaeological Assessment



Figure 8. 1908 plan showing the development of the southern end of Nelson Street (source: ACC 014-F11)



Figure 9. 1908 plan showing the development of the southern end of Nelson Street near the junction with Union Street (previously Wellington Street) (source: ACC 014-G11)



Figure 10. Close-up of 1908 plan showing the two road levels at the southern end of Nelson Street (source: ACC 014-F11)



Figure 11. 1940 aerial view showing commercial and other buildings along the eastern side of the project area, with arrow indicating the Nelson Street/Union Street (previously Wellington Street) intersection (source: Auckland Council GeoMaps)



Figure 12. Photograph, dated 1954, with a view facing southwest, showing the construction of a retaining wall during the widening of Nelson Street (source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-01344)



Figure 13. Photo, dated 1954, facing south showing the kerbing construction on the eastern side of Nelson Street (source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-01410)



Figure 14. Photo, dated 1955, looking northeast, showing the construction of a temporary retaining wall for the viaduct during the widening of Nelson Street (source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-01757)



Figure 15. Photo facing northeast showing the viaduct on the newly widened Nelson Street, dated 1956 (source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-02041)



Figure 16. Photo, dated 1956, facing south showing the street widening project in Nelson Street, Auckland, nearing completion (source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-02199)



Figure 17. 1959 aerial view showing buildings along the eastern side of Nelson Street (source: Auckland Council GeoMaps)

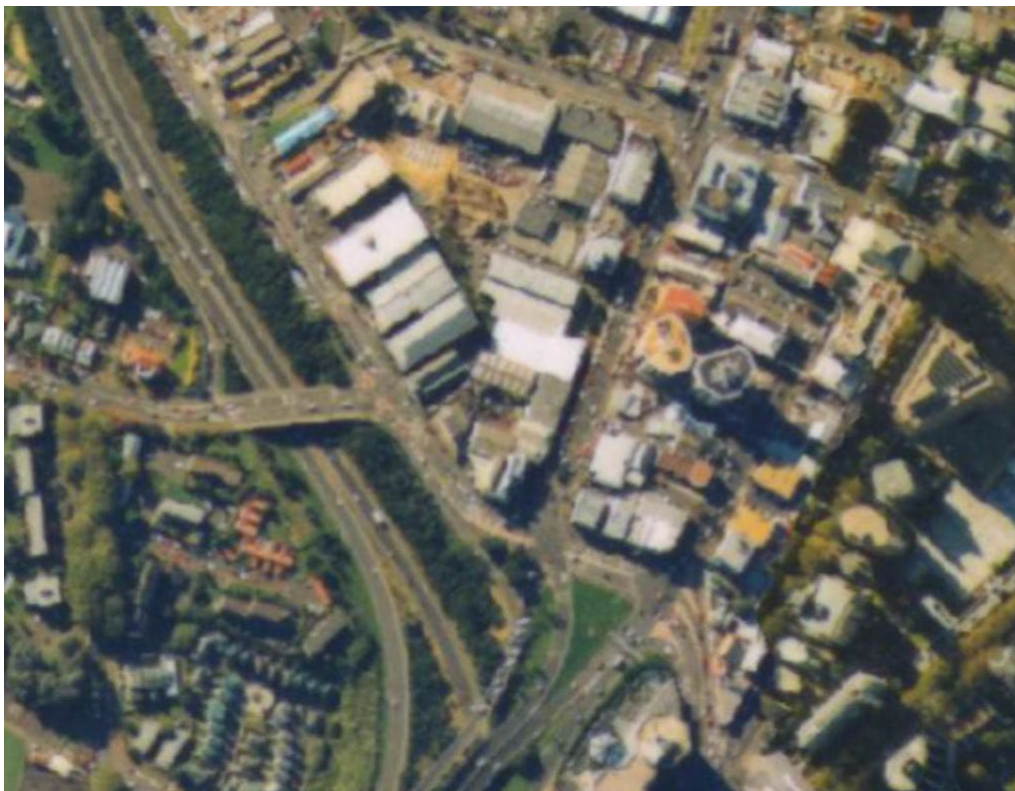


Figure 18. 1996 aerial showing buildings along the eastern side of Nelson Street, and reconfiguration of city streets south of the Nelson Street/Union Street intersection following the construction of SH1 (source: Auckland Council GeoMaps)