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# **WAITARA: SENSES OF PLACE IN 1998**

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree  
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Denise Catherine Young

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates and describes “senses of place” as experienced by 13 long-term Pakeha residents of Waitara in 1998. The town of Waitara is located on the West Coast of the North Island in New Zealand, and at the 1996 census had a population of 6,507 people. On 15 December 1997, the town’s main employer, the AFFCO freezing works plant, was closed. The effect of this closure on the town of Waitara has been devastating. The town has gone from a ‘working town’ to one in which the majority of its working age population are now dependent on State support as their primary source of income.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how sense of place is affected by economic restructuring. This study uses a combination of secondary quantitative analysis, to situate Waitara within the broad patterns of global and national restructuring, and in-depth interviews to describe 13 individual experiences.

This research documents that economic restructuring does indeed change places. The closure of the freezing works plant has left the town marginalised and disconnected from national and global economies. But more importantly the findings of this study support Massey’s (1994) assertion that there is no universal sense of place. The identity of places, and therefore our ‘senses of place’, are constructed through our contact with the outside world. Consequently, an individual’s sense of place is unfixed, contested and multiple and changes in response to processes occurring on a local, national and global scale.

Finally, this study challenges planners to incorporate local knowledge into planning processes. To focus on a more people-centred style of planning, where the community is empowered to take a more direct role in local decision-making processes.

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## **Waitara: Senses of Place in 1998**

**Denise Catherine Young**

Abstract

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Places are important. As Hanson (1992, p582) states “ the idea that life is lived on the head of a pin, not anchored in space and time” is indeed science fiction. Place is the point at which human experience of the world occurs. To me Waitara is an important place. It is the place where I was born, where my mother was born and where my mother’s parents spent the majority of their lives. While I have not lived in Waitara since I was a young child, my affection for a place which I still think of as ‘home’ remains.

It has therefore greatly saddened me to observe, from the outside, the impact that rapid economic restructuring has had on the town of Waitara over the past ten years. Waitara is a single industry town. The economic well-being of the 6,507 people (the population as at the 1996 census) was still reliant to a large extent on the continuing prosperity of a much-contracted meat freezing works plant. The freezing works, which once employed 1,200 people at the peak of the season, through a series of wind downs and closures of individual chains was finally mothballed by Auckland Farmers’ Freezing Co-op (AFFCO), the plant’s owner, on 15 December 1997. On 10 November 1998 AFFCO announced that the plant would never re-open (National Radio, 1998). The impacts of the closure of the works on Waitara have been significant. The town has gone from a ‘working town’ to one in which the majority of its population are now reliant on state benefits as their primary source of income.

A number of previous studies of economic restructuring in New Zealand (Melser et al, 1982; Nicholls and Plesse, 1982; Britten et al, 1992; Peck, 1985; Conradson, 1994; Wilson, 1995 and Le Heron and Pawson, 1996) have documented the fact that restructuring does indeed change places. The devastating impacts of closure and economic recession are not unique to Waitara. There is no doubt that economic restructuring has left Waitara vulnerable to the entrenchment of long-term unemployment in a community more notable in the recent past for its stable and productive workforce. One question that remains is how restructuring affects the way in which long-term residents of Waitara view their town. The focus of this research is



on the human dimension of restructuring, as to how it ultimately affects our relationship and attachment to where we live, our “sense of place”. What are the elements which make up our attachment to a place? And how are these elements influenced by factors outside of our control, such as economic restructuring?

## 1.2 Relevance of Sense of Place to Planning

Recent planning theorists (Lucy, 1994; McLoughlin, 1994 and Sandercock, 1998) argue that strengthening the relationships of people with place should be a fundamental professional goal of planning in the 1990s. This view contrasts with that of other writers, such as Levy (1992, p81) who states that since the comprehensive plan lost its dominance the field of planning “does not seem to have any guiding principle or central paradigm”. Lucy (1994, p305) asserts that:

“planning does have a central principle. The central principle is healthy places nurture healthy people, and that public policies should aim at sustaining both healthy people and healthy places, not one or the other”.

McLoughlin (1994) pleads for planning to once again view itself as an interdisciplinary project aimed at achieving a rounded understanding of the places in which we live. He claims that planning should encompass sociological, economic, environmental and political perspectives without giving priority to any one of them.

Sandercock (1998, p204) argues for:

“An insurgent planning, one which is prepared to address issues of social, cultural and environmental justice in the cities and regions that are being shaped by these larger forces of economic and demographic mobility”.

Planning, Sandercock (1998) goes on to explain, needs an extended language to focus on the city of memory, the city of desire, and the city of spirit. She states that the question of a ‘planner’s knowledge’ is at the heart of planning epistemology. In particular, Sandercock (1998, p58) requires planners to ask themselves the following questions; What do I know? How do I know? What are my sources of knowledge? What is valid knowledge in planning? Who decides that? And who possesses knowledge that is relevant to planning?

Other planning theorists, Friedmann (1973, 1993), Healy (1992), and Forester (1989) also address the issues surrounding the source of planning knowledge. The question of different types of knowledge and its applicability to planning was first raised by Friedmann (1973) who questioned the growing polarity between knowledge processed by experts (whose knowledge was grounded in science-based, professional knowledge) and knowledge processed by actors (people). He claimed that the actors processed a great deal of experiential knowledge, which was not however acknowledged as having any validity in the planning process. Sandercock explained that “in the old model, [as alluded to by Friedmann, 1973] planning was concerned with making public decisions more rational,...Planning knowledge and expertise was thus grounded in positivist science” (Sandercock 1998, p204-205).

More recently, planning theorists have advocated the idea of planning as “communicative action”, which turns its back on the model of technical rationality and systematic analysis in favour of a more qualitative and interpretative mode of inquiry, seeking to understand the unique and the contextual, rather than arriving at general rules for practice (Healy, 1992 and Forester, 1989). They advocate a greater and more explicit reliance on practical wisdom. Planners must not only be able to hear words; they must also be able to listen carefully and critically to others. This study of sense of place is intended to contribute to this movement in planning towards a more interpretative conception of practice. It addresses both the substantive issues, by once again putting people and place at the heart of planning epistemology and issues of planning practice, by enabling people in their own words to describe the place in which they live.

This research is also an attempt to look beyond the regulatory constraints of the Resource Management Act 1991 (The Act), which places an understanding of sense of place, largely focused on an individual’s social connection to where they live, outside of the framework of sustainable resource management. Upton (1994, p2) writes:

“The Act is not about directing the wise use and development of resources in order to effectively promote and safeguard health, safety, convenience, and economic, cultural, and social welfare (to use the language of the Town and Country Planning Act).

Nor is it about balancing socio-economic aspirations and environmental outcomes. The Act is not designed as a social planning statute. I consider the Resource Management Act to be first and foremost an environmental statute.”

The singular focus of the Resource Management Act 1991 on the sustainability of the physical environment is further reinforced in the long title of the Act, which reads:

“An Act to restate and reform the law relating to the use of the land, air, and water”.

The proposed amendments to The Act reinforce its primary focus on the sustainable management of natural and physical resources (Ministry for the Environment, November 1998). In particular, it is proposed that the phrase “social and economic” be removed from the definition of environment in Section 2 of the Act. These amendments clearly limit The Act to the biophysical and physical environment.

McDermott (1998, p631) asserts that with the introduction of the Resource Management Act in 1991, planning in New Zealand was limited to the mediation of the environmental relations of production and consumption. Consequently, urban planning in New Zealand in 1998 largely ignores people, and in particular their sense of place, by focusing only on those elements of urban life, such as housing design, which are directly linked to resource use (Perkins and Memon 1993, p21). However, it is the assertion of this research that neighbourhoods, towns and cities are much more than houses. They are, when functioning well, the locations in which people find a positive sense of place (Perkins and Memon 1993, p22). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of the impact of economic restructuring on localities, such as Waitara, cannot be achieved by confining the debate and public process to environmental matters. People matter, and an understanding of “place” is important, for as Massey and Allen (1984, p5) point out “ a sense of place, a commitment to location and to established community, can be a strong element of people’s resistance to planners’ plans”.

To this end a people-centred focus for planning demands that planners move beyond the structures and constraints of the Resource Management Act. By building our understanding of place, this thesis aims to contribute to this broader concept of planning for the places that people know.

### **1.3 Thesis Aims and Objectives**

The main aim of this research is:

To investigate whether sense of place, as experienced by long-term residents of Waitara in 1998, has been changed or altered by economic restructuring.

Objectives:

1. To identify a framework in which to explore sense of place.
2. To describe the different elements which make up sense of place as experienced by long-term residents of Waitara in 1998.
3. To explore the impact of economic restructuring on Waitara at both a macro (community) and micro (individual) level.
4. To make suggestions as to how an understanding of sense of place can improve a 'planners' knowledge of the places for which we plan.

The main aim and objectives of this research are achieved through the use of a combination of methodologies. An analysis of secondary statistical data provides a broad picture as to how economic restructuring has impacted on Waitara and its people at a macro-level. In-depth interviews are used to explore the impacts of restructuring on individuals in the town and to describe the unique factors and processes which contribute to their various senses of place.

### **1.4 Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The balance of this chapter introduces Waitara, the site of the research. Chapter Two reviews the literature and theory of both sense of place and economic restructuring theory, in relation to its ability to provide a conceptual understanding of how place and sense of place are constructed. It outlines a theoretical framework on which the original research is based.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, research methods and techniques used in this research. It reviews the philosophies which informed the choice of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and outlines the overall research design.

The research is divided into two parts; a detailed 'macro'-level statistical phase, combined with a series of 'micro' in-depth interviews. The chapter examines the advantages and disadvantages of the research methods and techniques.

Chapter Four analyses census data and other secondary sources to identify some of the broad changes which have occurred in the social and economic structure of Waitara from 1986 to 1996. This chapter discusses the main agents of change and provides a broad economic and social context in which to situate an individual's experiences of sense of place of Waitara in 1998.

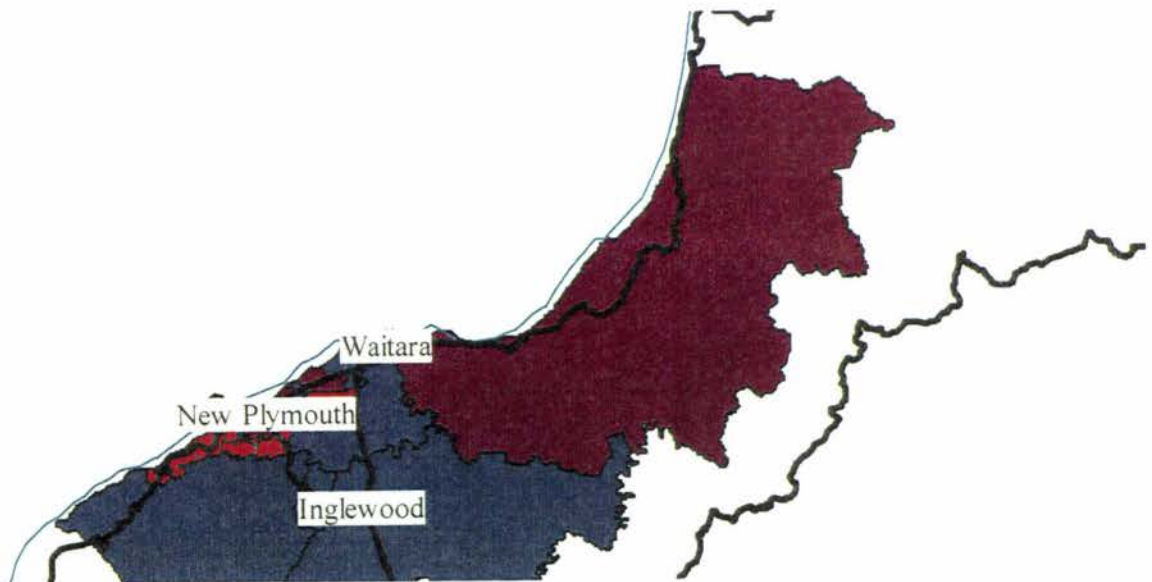
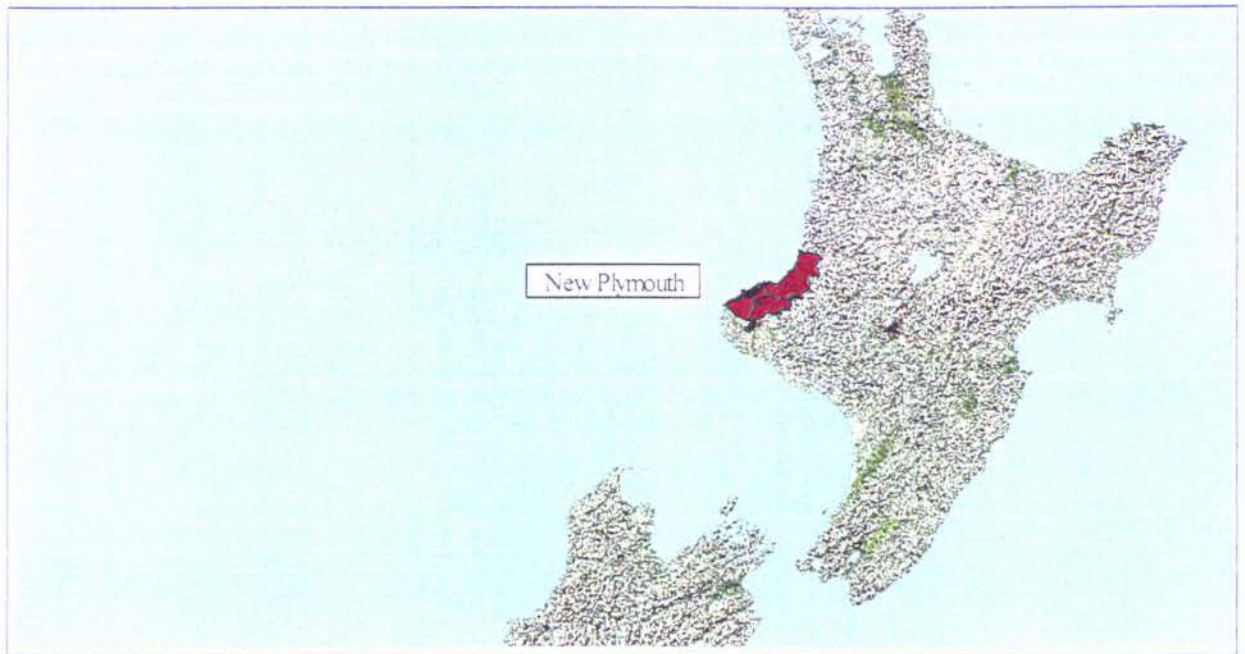
Chapter Five presents the findings of the in-depth research interviews and describes the effects of restructuring on long-term Pakeha residents of Waitara in 1998. This chapter also outlines the elements and processes which contribute to an individual respondent's sense of place.

The final chapter, through a process of synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, provides critical reflections in relation to theory and states the overall conclusions of the research.

## **1.5 Waitara: Present and Past**

The purpose of this section is to briefly describe the context in which this research is set. The township of Waitara is located at the mouth of the Waitara River on the West Coast of the North Island of New Zealand (Figure One). The demographic characteristics of Waitara's population are summarised in Table One.

Figure One: Location map of Waitara



Source: Super map - Statistics New Zealand 1997



**Table One: Waitara's key statistics at the 1996 census**

<b>Population:</b>	Waitara has a usually resident population of 6,507 people.
<b>Ethnicity:</b>	62 percent of usually resident population are Pakeha/ European, 32 percent are Maori, 0.6 percent are Pacific Island and 0.6 percent are Asian. Waitara's Maori population is significantly higher than that found in the New Zealand population of 14 percent.
<b>Education:</b>	Waitara's population has fewer educational qualifications, when compared to the total New Zealand population. Only 1 percent of Waitara's population aged 15 years and over hold a university qualification, compared to 8 percent in the total New Zealand population aged 15 years and over.
<b>Industry base:</b>	Waitara is characterised as a manufacturing town. The majority of the town's full-time labour force are employed in occupations associated with manufacturing, metal trades, processing and labouring.
<b>Personal Income:</b>	The personal income of the Waitara population is significantly less than the personal income of the total New Zealand population. 66 percent of Waitara's population aged 15 years and over earn under \$20,000 per annum. 51 percent of Waitara's population aged 15 years and over receive at least one form of government support. Of those households in Waitara receiving government support, 23 percent receive the unemployment benefit, compared to only 19 percent of the total New Zealand population who receive government support.

**Source:** Statistics New Zealand, 1996 census

While Waitara is only 16 kilometres north-east of New Plymouth, the town itself has a distinct character and history which contributes to a strong sense of local identity. The town is laid out in a classical grid subdivision pattern, which is modified only where it touches the foreshore or on the periphery of the town where there is more recent development. The streets are wide and its low-density development provides a feeling of openness. The town's central retail area comprises a traditional strip development and contains a significant number of buildings of heritage value (Holman 1995, p35). The wide streets, heritage buildings, and semi-rural nature of the town provide the visitor with a feeling that they have entered a place in which time has stood still.

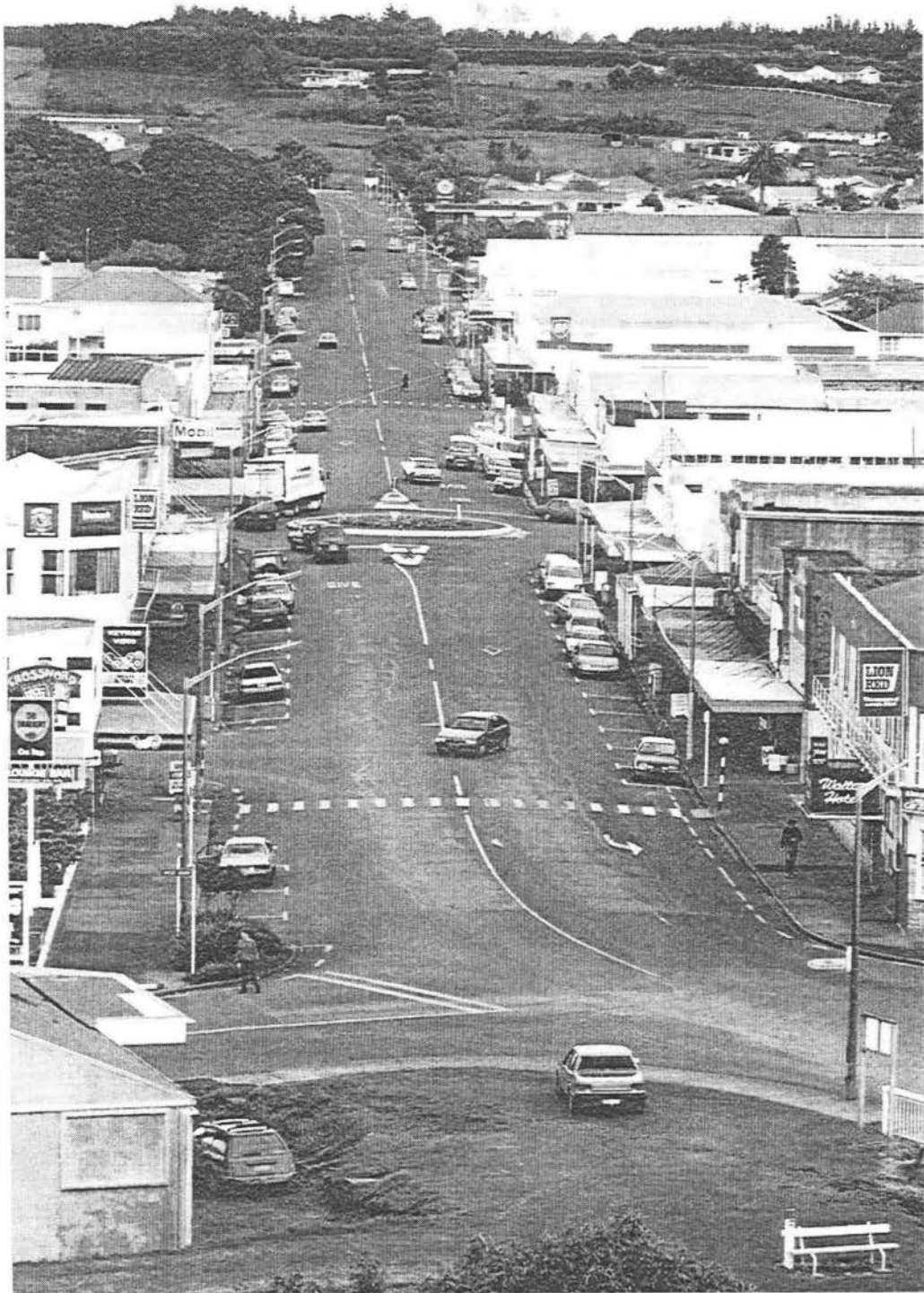


Figure Two: View of the main street of Waitara from Manukorihi lookout in 1995

Source: Taranaki Newspapers Ltd



Its location at the mouth of the Waitara River has frequently made Waitara an important site for both Maori and Pakeha. For more than 600 years, Maori people have occupied land adjacent to the River. Both the River and the coast provided early Maori with a valuable source of food. Physical evidence of Maori occupation and association with the land is still visible today. There are a number of pa sites and marae located along the Waitara river. These include the beautifully carved Owae marae, which is situated on Manukorihi hill above the township of Waitara and Pukerangiora Pa, which is located on a cliff top some 100m above the Waitara River. (Taranaki Catchment Commission and Regional Water Board 1986, p1).

European settlement began in 1841. By 1843 there were over 1,000 Europeans living in the greater Waitara area. However the occupation of land by the Pakeha created conflict between local Maori and the settlers. In 1860 this conflict escalated into the first Taranaki land war. In 1865 the purchase of the Waitara land was abandoned and the land was confiscated by the Crown (Waitangi Tribunal, 1996). Today physical evidence of the land wars remains. Buildings such as military blockhouses, early cottages for military personnel, and an early butcher's shop which served the British troops have been conserved and reflect the town's European early history.

By the end of the nineteenth century North Taranaki was at peace and the area was developing into a highly productive agricultural district. By 1885 Waitara had a large meat chilling factory and an active shipping trade (Alexander, 1979, p36). Waitara was the first port in Taranaki to engage in overseas trade when, in 1823, the barque *William Stoveld* anchored off the mouth of the river and began trading with the Maori. The port soon became busy, and with the development of the freezing works trade flourished. It was even suggested that the main settlement for Taranaki should be situated on the banks of the Waitara River (Wright 1989, p174).

In 1902 the British based company, Borthwicks CWS, purchased the meat chilling factory. Borthwicks owned and managed the factory until 1988. The plant, although it has been extensively re-built and expanded over the years, remains on its original site. It is sited very close to the centre of the town, the only meatworks in New Zealand to be in this kind of location (Holman, 1995).

Until the closure of the freezing works in December 1997 the rhythm of its activities dominated much of the life of the town. The hooters signalled to the townspeople the time for morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, and the end of the working day. The odours emitted from the works on a muggy day formed the butt of many jokes and were detested by many townspeople and visitors alike.

The dominance of the freezing works not only provided the town with a stable economic base, but also determined the main characteristics of the labour force. The loss of jobs experienced since the 1980's in New Zealand's manufacturing sector, and in particular the restructuring of the New Zealand export meat industry, have been felt unevenly within the town. There has been no new influx of industry to replace the freezing works. Waitara is facing a crisis of long-term unemployment.

In the early 1980's the construction of the two 'Think Big' energy projects in the areas surrounding Waitara provided the town's economy with a short-term boom, which masked the impact of a national economic recession. While the projects themselves did not provide any significant employment for local people, they did have a short-term beneficial effect on the town's retail sector. Between 1983 and 1986, 49 new businesses were opened in Waitara (Universal Business Directories).

The Think Big Projects also contributed to the development of new infrastructure in the town. In 1982, the Waitara bypass road was constructed. The bypass road re-aligned State Highway Three, so it no longer ran through the main street of Waitara. The trickle-down effects of the projects were however, short lived. The mature projects only required a minimum of staff to control their daily operations and this, combined with the fact that Waitara was no longer on the main highway, contributed to a decline in the town's retail sector. By 1987 the number of businesses closing in Waitara began to exceed the number of new businesses opening (Universal Business Directories). Waitara's economy was in decline.

Between 1986 and 1996 Waitara experienced a loss of 729 full-time jobs (Statistics New Zealand, 1997). However the population of Waitara has remained relatively stable in comparison to the number of jobs lost, with only a net population loss of 171 people within the same ten-year period (ibid). While Chapter Four provides a more detailed

statistical analysis of the impact of this job loss on the community of Waitara, the question remains as to why, with the closure of the freezing works, the town did not experience a much greater population loss.