

# RETAIL STREET THEATRE

CUBA



Everything you ever wanted ..... and more

Can Wellington's most distinctive retail precinct clean up the vagrants, embrace property developers, and still be 'the coolest place in the world'?

**W**ellington's Cuba Street is unique among New Zealand's shopping districts. It's an anarchic collision of artists, tattooists, cafés, music stores, sex shops, fashion designers and convenience stores.

Cuba Street, especially in James Smiths Market and above the mall, has traditionally been an incubator for fashion designers opening their first store. Other retailers have been there for years, sticking with a successful retail

model while the street changes around them. These old hands include a traditional fruit and vegie store that supplies local restaurants and cafés by handcart, and New Zealand's only inner-city lawnmower specialist.

The street generates more passion than any other retail street in New Zealand. Any proposed developments, from repaving to the inner-city bypass, are closely scrutinised and debated. This includes retail developments. People care about Cuba Street and many local retailers have an interest

in keeping the mix diverse, tolerant and unique.

## VAGRANTS

The latest debate is about public drinking in Cuba Mall and nearby parks. Wellington banned public drinking from Thursday to Sunday, but the Mall has attracted a small and familiar band of down-and-out drinkers for years. Last summer, 113 local businesses petitioned Wellington City Council asking for a permanent liquor ban and increased policing. The

petition was led by local motelier Chris Gray, who moved to Wellington from rural Waikato four years ago. Chris says he and his wife have since witnessed many unsavoury incidents involving a range of bodily fluids. He believes retailers are fed up with sharing their Mall with the faction of swearing, fighting drinkers.

"I spoke to every business on Cuba Street and people are pretty sick of it all. I blame the police as much as anyone – they're not tough enough", says Gray. He would like to see more



**Left** Sights and sounds – it all happens on Cuba Street.

**Right** Cuba's ALC Headquarters.

**Opposite** Welcome to Cuba Street. The coolest place on the planet – for some.

community constables working in the inner city.

"There are night shelters provided so anyone sleeping in the street should be sent there. Why let these people dictate what they want to do and where they want to do it? I actually think the homeless should be moved to the front steps of Parliament." From 1 July, the drinking ban was extended so no public drinking is allowed in inner-city streets, parks or beaches at any time – partly because of Chris' petition. As the problem peaks in summer, it will be a few months before the ban is tested.

**The street generates more passion than any other retail street in New Zealand.**

Patrice Calder manages Leather Direct, selling fashion, leather jackets and biker clothing in Cuba Mall. Her store is right outside the area favoured by the drinkers. Patrice says her staff has been plagued with threatening and anti-social behaviour, and police are slow to respond. "I had to keep a cricket bat under the counter."

The store's stock of leather jackets appeals to thieves, she says, and her staff – all young women – often feel intimidated. "If it's not the drunks, it's the punks, and if it's not the punks it's the skinheads."

Patrice has noticed the tolerance for public drinking attracts other undesirables to the area, including drug dealers. "Sometimes you might see 15–16-year-olds hanging around with the homeless, sharing drinks, and that is so sad."

Chicago for Men looks a bit out of place in Cuba Mall. The suit specialist has been in the Mall since 1976. "This end of town was known for bell-bottoms and purple shirts and all the lads used to come here for their nightclubbing gear," says manager Deone Smith. Customers often ask why the store doesn't move north to Lambton Quay, but Deone says it has always been a part of the Mall. However, Deone says the public drinking can put off potential clientele. "A lot of our customers are business people or tourists and they don't like to see drinks out there. It's bad for Wellington, it's bad for Cuba Mall, and it's bad for business."

Deone suggests this end of town gets a raw deal when compared with Lambton Quay. "Look at (Lambton Quay's) Midland Park. It's very pleasant there – there's green space, trees, there's a water feature. There's none of that for us, just because it's Cuba Mall. The parks around here are just land left over from the bypass." Deone also says the public drinking would be stamped out quickly if it were happening at the Government end of town.

Perhaps the country's oldest retailer, Nelson Nunns says he has seen it all in

his 16 years on Cuba Street. "We had a man come in this morning dressed as a sheila – horrible!" About to turn 80, Nelson runs Ellmers Mower Centre 1982 Ltd. He stays in retailing because he enjoys it and enjoys meeting people. The business has recently expanded into motor scooters, which appeal to inner-city residents and students, and has the only mower repair centre in the central city.

While Nelson shares his block with three sex shops, a piercing specialist and hotels, there are very few lawns in the neighbourhood. Nelson says good service, good parking and easy motorway access keep the store in business.

**ARTISTS**

Cuba Street is close to Wellington's design and architecture schools and supports several art galleries. Art supplies stores are nearby and upper Cuba Street includes a self-service picture-framing business.

The street's newest retailer is next door to Nelson Nunns. It is Minerva, a textile gallery, bookstore and magazine business. Owner Anne Scott moved to Cuba Street in June after outgrowing a store in suburban Kilmorie. Anne says the local artistic community was one of the attractors. "Cuba Street has a very arty aspect and a lot of our customers are students – textile students, design



World famous in New Zealand – and elsewhere. The bucket fountain in Wellington's Cuba Street.

students, art, fashion, architecture, that sort of thing, and they all walk down the street."

While quilters form a small, specialised and scattered market, Anne says the store offers something that an internet store couldn't offer. "People still want to look at the books. We get a lot of customers who browse before buying a book, and the books are very visual, just gorgeous." Anne agrees with Nelson that upper Cuba Street offers good parking and access.

Manuela Kenel, owner of Flowers Manuela, says the creative community is both an inspiration and an important customer group. She has worked on Cuba Street for ten years. "I like the passion on this street, the fun of the area. You get all sorts of people walking



**Above** Guitars at Mojoes in Cuba Street.



**Middle** Even the cold of winter can't keep people from gravitating to Cuba Street.



**Right** Night lights illuminate the gracious architecture found in Cuba Street.

up and down it. It's nice to have a business that has that feel to it."

**I like the passion on this street, the fun of the area.**

The florist has a reputation for unusual and imaginative designs, and does a lot of work supplying local design and creative businesses with flowers for offices and clients.

With art displays, its own clothing range and an in-store tattooist, ALC Headquarters in Cuba Street is housed in one room. Owner Guy Coney has run a clothing design business near Cuba Street for nine years, and opened the brand HQ last year. "We sell into skate stores around the country and we wanted this store to be a little bit different." ALC HQ mixes its own skateboarding range with imported women's fashion. The themes are rockabilly, 1940s pin-up, and traditional sailor tattoos. While it's an unusual fashion mix, other Cuba Street stores like Eyeball Kicks and Iko Iko stock complementary pop culture ranges.

"In a small place like this you could be the bitterest of rivals, but I take the

approach that's pointless. We work with other people and talk so we can find unique brands and work together on advertising. We respect what each other does."

Guy believes the unique Cuba Street environment is an important resource. "When you walk up Cuba Street every single day you get influenced by what you see, the bands you see playing – it all goes into your next range. I would fight tooth and nail to keep it the way it is."

## MUSICIANS

Cuba Street also attracts musicians from around the country and overseas. It has had concert venues since they were called dance halls and today it features three musical instrument shops and two second-hand record stores.

Slow Boat Records is famous for its range of unusual and collectable CDs and vinyl. Owner Dennis O'Brien has been buying and selling since 1985, and says the second-hand side of the business gives a range that other music stores cannot match. "You never know what is going to come in next. I see records that I looked at when I was a teenager, buying them

from the Lamphouse for 17/6d." He is still waiting for the day a seller comes in with *Cry Baby* by Garnet Mimms and the Enchanters. "I couldn't afford it in 1963."

Dennis describes Cuba Street as, "the only area I'd like to be in. It does have its problems but we don't get them. The biggest problem we have is out-of-tune buskers."

Darren Watson's Mojo Sounds sells guitars, makes its own amps and leads, and does repairs and guitar lessons. Darren has been on Cuba Street for two years and loves it. "I've always loved Cuba Street. You just have to come here on a Saturday and Sunday to know why we're here. It's the variety; it's a lot of little businesses. We could be an internet business but I want to be here. We wouldn't be on Cuba Street if it wasn't the coolest place in the world."

## CHANGES

Property developers have faith in Cuba Street too. Recent retail developments include a new hotel/apartment complex. High-profile developer and sports impresario Terry Serepisos is planning to redevelop the old DEKA building in

Cuba Mall. Work is expected to start early next year, with new small- and medium-format stores to open in early 2010. Plans for a high-rise on the site are currently on hold, but the redevelopment will allow a tower to be built in the future. Cuba Street regulars will be keeping a close eye on any new development, as they have in the past.

Darren Watson says the variety of people walking past his shop help to make the area special. "Cuba Street is the one part of Wellington that's got some originality. Some people complain about weirdos but I don't have any problem. There's all kinds of people, there's some people with mental health issues, but that's life, get on with it."

Guy Coney agrees. "Cuba Street is what makes Wellington different to every other city in the country, and we've got to realise that we've got to protect it as much as we can." ■

By **Martin Craig**, a Wellington journalist and regular contributor to *NZRetail*. He has been around Cuba Street since 1964 and gets his tattoos done at Tattoo City in Cuba Mall.