

# THE DEPARTURE OF A K ROAD ICON

## WHY THE CLOSURE OF URGE BAR IS PROBABLY MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN YOU MAY HAVE FIRST IMAGINED

BY BEVAN MORGAN

### MOVING MEN

If you were walking along Karangahape Road on the last day of February this year, you may not have given a second look to the men filing in and out of number 490, carrying bits and pieces of the building's interior with them. As the assorted men carried out bar essentials like furniture, lighting rigs, and fridges, it would have looked to any detached observer to be just another retail exodus, or perhaps even a renovation — the kind that happens all the time in a sprawling city centre like Auckland's.

But this quiet event on a seemingly random Saturday afternoon was of far more significance than most of the people who were stuck in traffic along the iconic street would have imagined. As the men shuffled in and out of the space carrying equipment, there was no real indication that what was happening was actually a highly symbolic marker of a massive evolution in the social and economic dynamics of Auckland's gay scene. But in reality, this is exactly what it was.

490 K Road wasn't just a regular bar in the city. It was the site of one of Auckland's most popular and notoriously enjoyable gay institutions — Urge. And unfortunately, those volunteer moving men weren't retrofitting the institution, or moving the equipment to a new business site. They were evacuating

the building and closing its doors for the last time, signalling the end of a 17 year era for one of Auckland's most lively and unique community spots.

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### THE BIRTH OF URGE

While Karangahape Road has become just another gentrified and commercial shopping zone in Central Auckland, it obviously wasn't always this way. In the late 1990s, K Road still had a reputation for being one of the seedier and livelier areas of a central city that had only just started on its journey to becoming an unofficial servant of SkyCity. Despite considerable gentrification and colossal white washing over

the previous couple of decades, the 1990s was a world away from 2015. The Internet was in its infancy, prostitution was illegal, and homophobia was pretty rampant, so K Road was something of a melting pot of counter culture figures, and a place for those in Auckland who didn't define themselves by the success of their rugby team. It was in this context that Urge would make its grand opening, firmly cementing its imprint on this part of Auckland.

At the time, there were quite a few gay bars around such as Staircase, Flesh, and Hydrant. But the end of K Road that Urge would call home was deserted, and this outlying location became an appropriate spot for an outlying club like Urge. “Nothing was there. In those first days when we opened, only the old Pink Pussycat was up the road and all those buildings were pretty derelict. So it was out on its own in quite a seedy part of K Road”, owner Paul Heard explains. “It was originally run more as what you'd call a leather bar, you know — a masculine dance based place. And at that stage there were a lot of gay men in New Zealand who had come back from overseas. Many were coming back with HIV. Thankfully, the drugs were getting better and they are still with us today. But it was always that space that everybody was scared of, especially the younger ones. It always had this kind of mystery about it”. This is how Heard describes the earliest incarnation of the club in those heady early times.

Heard is well-known in the Auckland gay community not just for his work with Urge, but also for his involvement with the New Zealand Aids Foundation, and his massive ongoing community engagement. Despite the fact that he is big man who wouldn't look out of place on a Harley Davidson, he is incredibly warm, surprisingly soft spoken, and has a wicked sense of humour. After running the bar for the better part of a decade, the original owners wanted to sell up for a variety of reasons, so Heard and co-owner Alan Granville decided to buy it in 2005. Heard explains how, under the ownership of he and Granville, the bar evolved so that it became not simply a leather bar, but also a well-known spot for Bears to meet up for an exciting time. "When it first opened the whole idea was that it was more of a hobby bar. It had events, and it had good nights which we continued on with, but that market is only so big. We increased market share by opening it up a little bit to wider circles. The leather crowd kind of died off for one reason or another, so we got involved with the whole Bear crowd for example, which a whole lot of the leather boys became because they got fatter," Heard claims with a mischievous chuckle.

And as much enjoyment and success as Heard and Granville had with Urge, they found there were a variety of challenges that would ultimately undermine their ability to keep the doors of Urge open by 2015. While some of these challenges were a result of positive changes in Auckland, others were sadly born from economic cynicism.

## SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES

One of the major talking points since the closure of Urge has been around how gay men meet each other today, and how this has changed rapidly since the advent of the Internet. Social media is blamed by many casual observers as a culprit in changing the dynamics of how gay clubs operate. The popular wisdom is that, since the emergence of popular apps like Tinder and Grindr, establishments such as Urge have taken a major hit, because people no longer need to go and meet others in safe spaces. Heard agrees somewhat with this assertion, stating that, "in the past couple of years it's made quite a difference". But he also feels that the explanation is too simplistic. The online revolution hasn't simply been about how people meet, it's also had "an impact on how people are socialising with one another". To Heard, "even NZ Dating, which was just online, meant you stayed at home chatting and then you'd meet at a bar later".

In other words, Heard believes that rather than being a ground-breaking catalyst for

the collapse of gay bars, the Internet has had a bigger impact on *how* people communicate. Rather than seeing men plucking up the courage to talk to someone they might like at a place like Urge, they will still communicate via app even when they are in the same room. Heard laughs when he recalls nights where five or six people were talking to each other on a social app, while they were literally less than a metre apart. It is this normalisation of communicating through an electronic firewall, even in extremely close quarters, that strikes Heard most about the influence of technology.

The very concept of a safe meeting place for homosexual men (and thus the closing of a place like Urge) has been affected by the way in which wider society has evolved and changed its views on the issue of homosexuality. Heard told me that "if anything, that [the wider acceptance of homosexuality] has probably had a bigger impact, especially with our traders who tend to be 25 and over. Guys in their 30s and 40s can socialise anywhere, and they don't mind. Even the Bears' meetings that we've been doing now since we closed Urge, we just have at the local pub up here and nobody blinks an eyelid with fifty gay men standing around'.

This kind of mainstream acceptance was pretty much unthinkable in the late 1990s when Urge first popped up on the Auckland radar, and shows how far the general public has come along in such a short space of time. But before middle class liberal Aucklanders start patting themselves on the back for being such wonderfully accepting people, it needs to be pointed out that, from Heard's perspective, this social transition has hardly been limited to Auckland. "Socialisation, as far as being open in a city like Auckland, has changed a lot. But it also has in Wellington, Christchurch, and, even to a degree, Hamilton. In fact, Hamiltonians are almost a step ahead because the police are much friendlier — don't ask me why". And while there has been an increase in tolerance across the

board, intermingling has not always been smooth. During the past few years there have been growing numbers of assaults against LGBTI people around areas like K Road by alcohol-fuelled morons during the night. Even this past Saturday night, a gay patron at K Road's Family bar was assaulted by a mouth breathing homunculus undertaking some homosexual tourism and unable to cope with his own insecurities. Things may have improved, but there is still an ugly undercurrent in the city that sometimes bubbles to the surface, particularly when fuelled by booze.

The growing societal tolerance has affected how certain businesses run and how gay men meet. While it is wonderful that urban New Zealand society has predominantly adopted an attitude befitting of the year that we are living in, it's also incredibly sad that the very institutions that helped foster gay voices and helped challenge some of the disproportionately loud homophobic assholes in New Zealand, are now not needed as much. Heard is a little melancholic about the inevitability of this — "unfortunately as soon as people found out that Urge was closing they were like 'oh no you can't do that, what are we going to do?' Because every now and then they wanted to have a blowout in a gay place and you know, dance with their shirts off. Our underwear parties were infamous. They were in their own environment with sweat and they were doing their own thing. Unfortunately though, with rents and rates like they are, you just can't run a business on that kind of thing alone'.

It would be insane for anyone to think that these social changes are enough to close Urge by themselves. The differences in how people interact aren't necessarily negative or bad for business. The ongoing dissolution of homophobia nationwide has been one of the few major positive advancements that this country has seen in a period marked by generational alienation and increasing tensions. What has been fatal for business though, and what ultimately forced Urge to shut its doors,

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has been the almost pathological squeeze of small businesses by a local government doing its best to mimic the neo-liberal economic fundamentalism that has been psychotically pursued by successive New Zealand governments since the 1980s.

## ECONOMIC CHALLENGES ON THE FRINGE

Council and community costs have always been a factor in running a business, but these expenses have absolutely exploded recently. When I asked Heard about why he thinks the Council has become so ruthless over the past decade, he tells me that "it's a bit of everything" and that "the Council is trying to make everything pay for itself", which is essentially a succinct summary of what neoliberalism purports to be. Heard elaborated on some of the figures and how they have increased since he and Granville took over the bar in 2005. They are shocking yet depressingly predictable. "They have now decided that it costs \$400 just to renew your manager's certificate. You have to have at least one person at a time on the bar depending on the number of customers etc. That used to cost fifty bucks. Now it's \$400. Then to get a new license every two years you just rolled it over and filled out the paperwork and they just stamped it, and it was like \$230. Now it's \$1000 or upwards. Ours was \$1000, but I know other bigger bars where it's \$2500". I asked him why, hoping that perhaps the Council at least had the cynical savvy to argue that it was in some sort of public interest, but Heard simply shrugged his shoulders and told me "by their evaluation that's how much it cost to do each one".

What is also particularly frustrating to the crew at Urge has been the counterproductive nature of some of these hikes. The stratospheric increase to the cost of getting your manager's certificate has been a strong example of apathetic council greed. Heard elaborates: "at one of the big meetings we had, I and several others argued the point that if you make the manager's certificate so expensive - to get it now in the first place is nearly \$900 - no kid at university is going to go and get their manager's certificate when they're only going to get a dollar more an hour while taking on all the extra responsibility". Despite this seemingly obvious and important observation, the hike was rushed through regardless.

This is also not to mention the fact that during the ten years Heard and Granville have been in charge, they have faced 7.5%-10% rent increases every year. These disproportionately excessive hikes have cost Urge an extra \$60,000, on top of the rent already paid, for a bar in a section of K Road that was once derelict and empty. Of course we are yet to men-

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tion the almost extortionate increases that insurance companies have been able to get away with since the events in Christchurch four years ago, as insurers have attempted to claw back their own losses through their customer base. Premiums for the bar were around \$5000 when Heard and Granville took over - they are now over \$20,000.

The change in accessibility to alcohol has also been crippling because, as the cost of running a bar has skyrocketed, the price of buying booze from supermarkets and wholesalers has inexplicably plummeted. "When we took over, a twelve pack of Heineken at the supermarket was \$29. Now it's \$19." Understandably, these increases placed Urge in an almost impossible position - they needed to recoup ever rising costs, but couldn't put their own prices up because then people would just stay at home longer and later drinking alcohol that, for some reason, has gotten progressively cheaper despite promises from multiple government agencies that they want to take seriously the issue of binge drinking. The combination of these factors made it seem in many ways like Urge was facing a perfect storm of economic problems.

These economic issues are important to look at and keep in mind, because the strongest indicators of how diverse and cosmopolitan a city can be include the strength and variety of its fringe cultures. And unfortunately with these kind of economic policies, only the wealthiest and most generic establishments can afford to run. Establishments like Urge are crucial in helping keep cities accessible to everyone. They provide a consistent space for those who don't crave the mind numbing shallowness and stupidity of the Viaduct, or the bourgeois masturbation of downtown. Amidst the sweaty dancers with their shirts off, Urge provided family, community, exhilaration, and freedom of expression - all the elements that people look for when assessing cosmopolitan legitimacy. Urge also gave back to the Auckland community through ongoing fundraising initiatives for everything from gay sports teams to the SPCA, in ways that were more ingenuitive and imaginative than the Council

could even dream of. If the local governments' never ending quest to squeeze profit out of its own patrons had been less brutal, there is every chance that Urge would still be around today, and that Auckland could be a city full of alternative venues, with options for a diverse and multicultural populace to thrive.

## THE FUTURE

While it might be upsetting that Urge has closed the doors to its permanent location, this does not mean that the spirit of the bar itself has vanished or that its culture is dead. There is no way that the incredible patrons and owners of this establishment would let that happen. Heard is currently licensed to run temporary cash bars, so in the future there will be Urge themed nights just like in the old place, albeit in a different location. "Rather than paying rent month after month, there are plenty of empty bars around, so why not?" The first of these events will be Urge Phoenix, which will be on Queen's Birthday Weekend at Totos on Nelson Street. Urge Phoenix will have a visiting DJ from Australia (who I am assured is "very hot"), and local DJs as well. After this there will be Urge Black in Wellington, and plans are currently underway for an event in Hamilton too.

For those that are interested in finding like-minded Bears now that their local drinking hole is not readily available, Urge regulars have organised a monthly get together called the 'Furry Friday Flashmob', where Bears of all shapes and sizes from across Auckland get together and have a drink (or ten) at a local establishment around Auckland. These have been hugely successful so far, and are a great way to make friends, and embrace your tastes in an environment where everyone feels the same. The details can be found simply by searching Facebook, and anyone who wants to come along is invited. So if you missed out on Urge while it was around, and it sounds like it might have been your thing, have no fear - the spirit and community is still very much alive and kicking, and will be around for the foreseeable future. But rather than being at 490 K Road, Urge is going to be everywhere.