

'Meanwhile' is a space for everybody

Reimagining community with collaboration and ping pong!

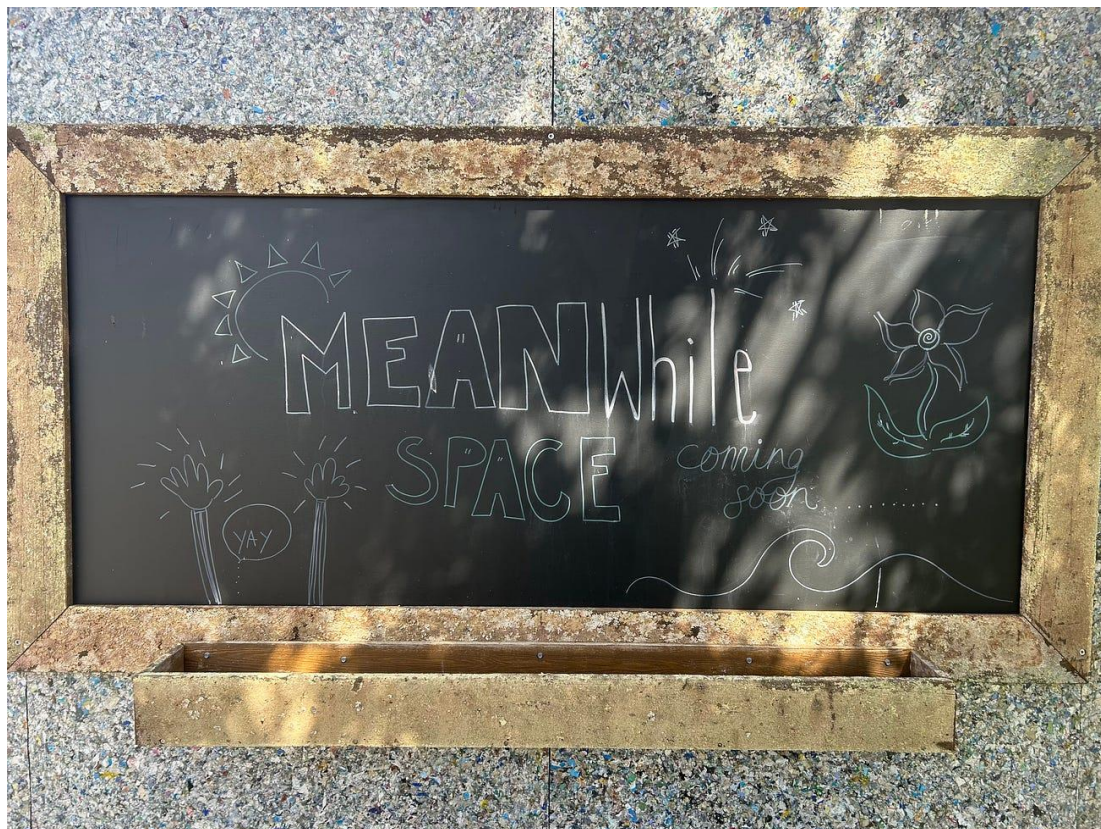
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APR 6



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Hidden behind a carpark and beside a condemned building in Paraparaumu is the **Pakeke Lions Rest Area**. It's a basic patch of grass with a border of trees, and a curved path that connects you with the Bridge Club and the path to the Coastlands Aquatic Centre. It's a real 'blink and you'll miss it' space, and on most days, it is obscured by a full carpark used by nearby school, ECE and library visitors. To be honest I didn't even know it existed, until late last year when Norie Parata from Kapiti Coast District Council (KCDC) floated an idea with the council Disability Advisory Group of creating a 'Meanwhile Space' there.



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She explained that the Meanwhile Space would hopefully become an open-air 'hub' for people to find out about the history of the neighbouring site of the now closed Te Newhanga Kāpiti Community Centre and share their ideas of what a new community centre could look like and how it could best serve the community.

Te Newhanga Community Centre closed its doors in 2021 after it was found to have "significant levels of mould and decay throughout the building" caused by moisture ingress. It has been a big loss to the community, as the centre was where many local groups held regular meetings, workshops and networking events. It was a place of connection for many locals, in particular the aged and disabled community. Since it was built in the 1990s, it has housed the Disability Information Centre, and also in later years housed the Kapiti Food Bank.

For me, Te Newhanga was a place of connection. I'd go to monthly Parent to Parent coffee groups there, and meet other mums and feel instant release at not being 'the only one' experiencing things. I'd go to workshops on autism and disability and NZSL lessons. Most days I would walk past on my way to pick the kids up from school and look in the front window to see what group was happening today. Tai chi, art class, baby massage, all sorts. I miss that, now the building is boarded up

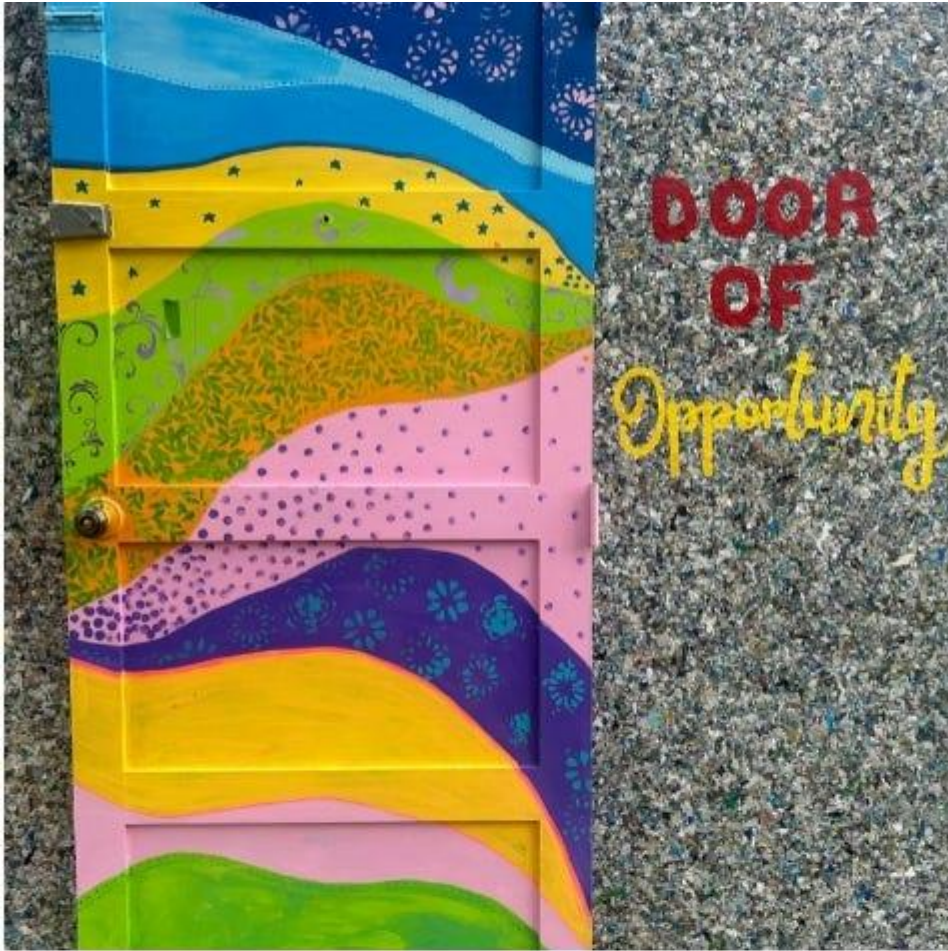
It's always been a dream of mine to have a sensory garden in my town - an outdoors space where people like my daughter (who is autistic and non speaking) could feel welcome, and engage with the natural environment around her. For her, nature is her happy and safe space, yet we always seem to be excluded from public spaces around town because of crowds, noise, unleashed dogs, and sensory overstimulation. There would be gardens with plants that were interesting to the senses - touch, smell, sight... things that enhanced the elements, like water features and wind chimes, interesting and interactive art, and a nice place to sit and watch the clouds float by.

So I jumped at the opportunity to give Norie my exhaustive list of wishes for a sensory friendly space in Kāpiti, and over the following weeks she sent me regular updates of her progress.

I want to share with you the final product, because I'm proud of what this space has become, and all that it represents!

First of all, this was an isolated spot at the end of a carpark that wasn't being used. It has a line of beautiful trees, that when I inspected them, I could immediately imagine my daughter leaning up against, gazing skyward and watching the branches move in the wind. I imagined wind chimes, streamers and other interesting things amongst the branches that might capture her attention. Now there is a wind chime, bird houses, weta hotels, fairy doors, scarecrows, and other pieces of art in and amongst the trees.

There's a table tennis table, so BYO paddles and balls or have a lend of the ones held at the nearby public library. Pro tip: bring a bouncy, non ping pong ball as the cross-wind and sap from the overhanging tree can impact play!



There's a winding footpath between the meanwhile space and the nearby bridge club, now painted with bright and fun designs by local rangatahi from the [KC Youth Council](#), encouraging connection through play with actions like jumping, hopping and spinning.

There's some beautiful sensory gardens - the raised garden beds (at alternate heights - standing and wheelchair height) have been made by [The Shed Project](#), and a variety of seedlings and fruit trees have been donated by Kapiti Horticultural Society

There is lots of beautiful art painted by members of [Kapiti Art Studio](#), another awesome space for disabled people in the community. This includes a repurposed mural that was alongside the wheelchair ramp at Toi MAHARA art gallery in Waikanae, which is now situated alongside the sensory footpath. My favourite is the selfie wall, a painting of bright butterfly wings to stand in front of. There's even a selfie post opposite, to conveniently place your phone/camera on.

The stunning art everywhere has completely transformed the feel of this space. It feels so welcoming now.

By far my favourite part is the sensory footpath - interesting bumpy, smooth, crunchy and soft surfaces made of rope, shells, bark, wood and concrete to walk along in a fun hopscotch type design, fun for the young and young at heart alike! At the end of the path is a rock garden where visitors can leave/swap a painted rock.



Some of the sights at the Meanwhile Space

Around the corner there are even more interactive features - like a large blackboard, a toy car race track, more raised gardens and walls made completely with recycled plastic. There is a timeline on one wall that shows the history of the community centre, and shows all the groups were a part of its history.

The beauty of the Meanwhile Space is not all its shiny bells and whistles, it's the people who made it possible. Community groups that support disabled people brought all the colour and flair to the space, Local rangatahi paved the way between the two spaces, older people from the Horticultural Society planted seedlings that will grow and flourish over time, and council provided spaces for people to come together and share their ideas and dreams for the future.



On 25 March 2024 the Meanwhile Space was launched with waiata, warm korero over a cuppa, and lots of smiles from everyone taking in the sights and sensory delights of this transformed space. All the groups that created this space came together and celebrated each others creations.

The new community centre is a work in progress. Bricks and mortar will need to be laid to create the physical building, but the Meanwhile Space has, and will continue to exemplify what true community representation and collaboration should look like, and will result in a strong foundation to build on in the future.

So in that respect, I hope ‘meanwhile’ lasts for a very long time.

(The Meanwhile Space is located at 15a Ngahina Street, Paraparaumu - behind the carpark beside the community centre. Table Tennis Equipment is hireable from the nearby Library, and access to bean bags etc in the shed can be booked by emailing neighbours.event@kapiticoast.govt.nz)

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