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Background: In settler countries, attention is extending to the wellbeing benefits of promoting indigenous-cultural identity of urban communities as a significant contributing factor to healthier and safer communities for all. Yet, efforts to (re)implement cultural identity into community redesign can be challenging and ineffective without the leadership and collaboration of local-indigenous peoples. Local-indigenous autonomy is evolving as an integral strategy to ensure the appropriateness and validity of cultural initiatives within urban retrofit projects. This paper reviews the emerging development of local-indigenous autonomy, as a re-indigenisation approach, centring on restoring, recognising and empowering the first occupants of a community in situ.

Methods: Employing a Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centred) research approach we focussed on the workings and perspectives of mana whenua (local-indigenous peoples) and community stakeholder engagement. This indigenous research methodology was selected because it privileges Māori voice and knowledge. Our data comprised of a recent literature review and a case study examination of Te Ara Mua – Future Streets, a community street retrofit project, undertaken in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Māori and non-Māori stakeholder members involved in mana whenua engagement. An indigenous theoretical framework, Te Pae Mahutonga, was utilised in the data analysis to explore indicators of indigenous individual-collective agency, empowerment, and wellbeing.

Results: Stakeholders described the benefits and challenges of their involvement; including the outcomes and their aspirations for developing authentic cultural community redesign. They stressed the need for continued development of mana whenua capacity, and the tangible and intangible facets of shared power and control. Many argued the importance of mana whenua leadership and innovation in this project was crucial in resulting outcomes that were authentic and distinctive, and a defining feature of their involvement. Overall, local-indigenous autonomy was identified as a promising, if not obligatory, strategy for community street retrofitting and cultural landscaping.

Conclusion: The practice(s) and implications of local-indigenous autonomy in community street redesign is an evolving approach that needs further investigation. Local-indigenous autonomy and the re-indigenisation of communities cannot be regarded as a simple solution without acknowledging some complications. Our research demonstrates that developing capacity amongst indigenous communities is integral for effective engagement in the co-design, leadership and ownership of communities. The realisation of autonomy in community redesign projects can have broader implications for indigenous sovereignty, spatial justice and health equity.