

BY JENNY DIXON, DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING, UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, ANN DUPUIS, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES, MASSEY UNIVERSITY, ALBANY, PENNY LYSNAR, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES, MASSEY UNIVERSITY, ALBANY¹

ISSUES IN MEDIUM DENSITY HOUSING

AMBRICO PLACE WAS THE FIRST MAJOR MEDIUM DENSITY HOUSING INITIATIVE IN WAITAKERE CITY AND HAS THEREFORE BEEN SEEN AS SOMETHING OF A TEST SITE FOR THE CITY.

Medium density housing in the Auckland region is a relatively new phenomenon which has changed the region's housing landscape and widened the range of available housing choices. It is a response both to changing lifestyles and preferences², as well as the outcome of a regional commitment to intensification as set out in the *Auckland Regional Growth Strategy: 2050*³. Given that medium density housing is a decidedly new way of living, it is not surprising that it has become a hot topic for public debate.

This article comments on two issues pertaining to medium density. These issues are drawn from findings from the Ambrico Place Research Project. The research project, commissioned by Waitakere City Council, looked at the medium density housing development of Ambrico Place, in Waitakere City's suburb of New Lynn. Ambrico Place was the first major medium density housing initiative in Waitakere City, itself a leader in this form of housing, and has therefore been seen as something of a test site for the city. The development preceded the adoption of the regional growth strategy and largely reflects policy outcomes of the city's 1992 urban development strategy and the city's Proposed District Plan⁴.

The article briefly reviews the purpose and methodology of the research before focusing on two issues, the tension between providing for housing intensification and urban amenity, and body corporates and their management. Both issues are germane to the successful operation of medium density housing.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The broad objective of the Ambrico Place Research Project was to gather data on life in and around Ambrico Place. These data included: a profile of residents; current and previous housing information; housing preferences and



expectations; design issues, amenity etc.; community; transport; leisure, recreation and consumption. Analysis of these data is not, however, canvassed in this article.

To meet the research's objective, 51 in-depth interviews were held with Ambrico Place residents. At the time the research was conducted, 250 units were occupied across a total of eight developments. Information was gathered therefore from approximately one fifth of all units. A further 35 interviews were conducted with developers, architects, designers, off-site owners, body corporate managers, local retailers, nearby residents and Waitakere City Council staff.

INTENSIFICATION AND URBAN AMENITY

The challenge of providing for intensification of housing at affordable levels, and at the same time maintaining or enhancing urban amenity, is one of the most pressing planning issues in the Auckland isthmus. Much of the debate about

Right top: Lakeview Terraces with Margan Court in the background.

Right bottom: Tuscan Towers - the largest of the eight developments at Ambrico Place.

Table 1: Key Issues in Designing and Developing Medium Density Housing

	Urban Design Principles	Economies of Scale	Avoid Co-location	Outdoor green space	Flexible development patterns	Adequate Parking	Privacy Space security	Maintenance Plan/ Manager	Quality Construction & Design	Infra-structure Services	More Council control of design	Location Near amenities
Residents			X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Developers	X	X	X									
Architects/ Designers				X	X					X		
Body Corporates						X	X	X	X			
Offsite Owners				X	X				X			X
Neighbours				X	X	X				X	X	
Retailers				X	X		X					
Council	X				X	X					X	

medium density housing has centred on how to provide for more intense residential use of a site without reducing what is perceived by existing residents to constitute accepted levels of neighbourhood urban amenity. While the debate focuses on determining acceptable environmental thresholds, such as provision of green spaces, infrastructure services and sufficient on-site parking, it is also about community acceptance of changing lifestyles and new forms of housing.

Table 1 above is a summary of views of Ambrico Place residents and non-residents on what constitutes "good" medium density housing. The table shows that the interests of various parties involved may not always be compatible. In these circumstances, trade-offs are then required to reconcile differences and therefore need to be made explicit. These trade-offs relate to the requirements to provide:

- A range of good quality housing at affordable levels, while at the same time ensuring profitability for the developer;
- Flexibility for the developer in designing the development, yet still ensuring certainty for neighbours and new residents about what might happen on the site;
- Sufficient outdoor open spaces, while still trying to maximise use of internal space and minimise off-site impacts such as parking and traffic generation;
- Transparency about what constitutes "private" and "public" space within medium density housing developments, and recognition of where the trade-offs have occurred;
- The above trade-offs are driven by the

desires of various groups to pursue and maximise their own interests.

The problem is that frequently these interests do not coincide. Often they cannot, because of the iterative nature of the decision-making processes, as the development of an area progresses from a concept to a built reality. As this progression takes place, new parties with new sets of interests become involved, and there is increasingly more at stake for everybody concerned.

In medium density housing, all parties want to maximise their own interests, as is clearly evident in Table 1. For example, developers are concerned with profit margins, while simultaneously meeting urban design principles and producing units that will sell on the open market; neighbours want to minimise environmental and social impacts and ensure their property values are maintained or increased; councils have a whole raft of objectives to meet, including accommodating current and future residents' needs, regional planning strategies, local neighbourhood aspirations and good environmental outcomes; residents are interested in such things as safe and secure environments, proximity to facilities and transport, maintenance of property values and livable internal and external environments; and off-site owners are interested in good investments and smooth management of their assets by body corporates.

The role of the council is critical when it comes to maximising interests for all parties. The Ambrico Place research shows that the Waitakere City Council has put much effort into

achieving workable outcomes. It has tried, and largely succeeded in putting its sustainable, eco-city principles and policies into practice. For this, the council should be commended.

The Ambrico Place experience has reinforced important principles which the council can continue to apply and extend in subsequent medium density housing developments. These include: ongoing and active engagement and communication with interested parties to ensure good information flows; requiring an integrated design brief; and making certain close attention is paid to design details. Ambrico Place goes a long way to demonstrating that urban amenity need not be compromised through increased residential densities.

GOVERNANCE OF BODY CORPORATES

A further issue that emerged from the interviews related to the operation of body corporates. A body corporate is the legal entity that represents all the owners of a property developed under the Unit Titles Act 1972. The body corporate, through its agent, is responsible for the maintenance and management of common property. The rules of a body corporate are set out in the second and third schedules of the Unit Titles Act.

Unfortunately, the law has not kept pace with the expansion of different housing types and the scale of new developments that have been constructed since the Act, and its subsequent amendments, came into force. In 1999, under a broader brief, the Law Commission reviewed the

shared ownership of land⁵. As part of the review it considered changes to body corporate provisions.

A pertinent issue considered by the Law Commission was the ability of owners to change the rules of their body corporate. There is provision in the Unit Titles Act for rule changes where unanimity has not been achieved. If a vote of 80% or more in support of changes has been achieved, application may be made to the High Court under Section 42 to approve the change despite the lack of unanimity. The commission concluded that the principle of unanimity should be retained if the change should result in an alteration of the conditions at the time an owner contracted to acquire his or her interest. However, inflexible provisions with limited discretion do not mesh well with the need to accommodate changing needs of owners over time.

BODY CORPORATES IN AMBRICO PLACE

Each development at Ambrico Place has a body corporate, the management of which presents five particular issues that require some redress. First, the difficulty of changing body corporate rules has led to considerable frustration for many owners. The Law Commission's recommendations offer no help in this regard.

Second, communication between Ambrico Place body corporates and owners could be improved. While the Act provides mechanisms, such as annual general meetings for owners to raise issues, regular newsletters and the facilitation of active owners' committees could be useful means of addressing particular matters.

Third, many Ambrico Place residents were born overseas and have English as a second language. Thus, communication between body corporates and these residents needs to take account of their particular language requirements.

Fourth, off-site owners are not always advising tenants of the body corporate rules in place for their particular development. This exacerbates communication difficulties for non-English speaking tenants.

Finally, seven of the eight Ambrico Place developments are relatively small, containing fewer than 40 units, thus constraining the financial ability of the respective body corporates to employ on-site managers. The

report *Building a Better Future*⁶ pointed out that larger, better-resourced developments can employ on-site managers. Attention to on-going maintenance and on-site management is a crucial factor in sustaining the long-term success of medium density housing.

In resolving these issues, two further steps can be taken. First, an integrated approach to management could be adopted, whereby Ambrico Place body corporates could work co-operatively in employing on-site managers. This may be more practical where the same management firm administers more than one body corporate. In addition, effective on-site management could also pay greater attention to cross-cultural communication issues.

Second, if legislative change is proposed to the Unit Titles Act, the council could make representations to ensure that the operation of body corporates can accommodate an increasingly wide range of housing and tenancy circumstances.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined only two issues relevant to medium density housing. Nonetheless, difficulties that might arise when these issues are poorly handled could have significant implications for the success of medium density housing at an operational level, and in terms of its acceptance in the wider regional community.

The Ambrico Place research has demonstrated the crucial importance of integrated planning, especially where several developments are co-located. First, there needs to be a co-ordinated approach to design and layout details. Second, it is important to maintain a good level of community awareness about the likely cumulative environmental effects of a large number of residential units on a contained site.

Attention to on-going management and maintenance has also been shown to be a critical factor for the sustained, long-term success of medium density housing. Such attention would also go a long way to alleviating community concerns regarding the deterioration of this type of housing stock over time.

Finally, the research points to what can be called "the mandate gap". With regard to medium density housing, the mandate gap can be seen most obviously in the issue of the

operation of body corporates, where it reveals the divide between the council's public responsibilities on the one hand and the private responsibilities of the body corporate on the other. We have argued that one key factor in the success of medium density housing is the effective operation and management of body corporates. Yet councils, which have a huge stake in ensuring the success of this type of housing, have no mandate to become involved. To ensure the ongoing success of medium density housing, it is necessary to bridge the gap.

FOOTNOTES


1. Other team members involved in the Ambrico Place Research Project include Professor Paul Spoonley, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Albany and Professor Richard LeHeron, Department of Geography, University of Auckland. Support and funding of the Ambrico Place Research project by the Waitakere City Council and the Auckland Regional Council is also acknowledged.

2. Synchro Consulting and PRISM (2000) Review of Literature on Housing Preferences and Choices, Auckland Regional Council: Auckland.

3. Auckland Regional Growth Forum (1999) *A Vision for Managing Growth in the Auckland Region: Auckland Regional Growth Strategy, 2050*. Auckland Regional Growth Forum, Auckland Regional Council: Auckland.

4. Waitakere City Council (1995) *Our Place, Our Future: Waitakere City Proposed District Plan 1995*. Waitakere City Council: Waitakere.

5. Law Commission (1999) Report 59: *Shared Ownership of Land*. Law Commission: Wellington.

6. Research Solutions and Auckland Regional Council (2000) *Building a Better Future: Intensification Review: ARC Residential Research and Monitoring Programme, Stage I: Community Perceptions and Attitudes*. Auckland Regional Council: Auckland. 

Jenny Dixon is Professor, Department of Planning, University of Auckland. Ann Dupuis is Senior Lecturer, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Albany. Penny Lysnar is Research Officer, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Albany.