DOING A SUBDIVISION OR **DOING A COMMUNITY?**

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How to get community back into the new places.

t is typical to talk about new development areas in or attached to our cities and towns as "subdivisions". Of course they are more than that - they are the places where, one day, people will be expected to live, play, perhaps work, look after kids, grow old, and all the various combinations of activities that our lives contain.

In the integrated and social sense where a town or urban place supports 'life' - it also needs to be place that enables interaction, is safe, has a variety of people or different ages in it, sustains activities such as education, business, shopping, and recreation. We would call this a 'community'.

How good though are many of our newly made places to live and what conditions enable as them to function as a community - Is'community' important even? These are questions raised in this article and some examples of how community or social conditions are factoring into projects Boffa Miskell has been working on.

Why Bother?

We've all seen the pictures of tracts of generic new residential areas plastered across the landscape and wondered; is this it? If it is 'it' (and I would suggest it's not all it can be) then we better hope it is working. With over 20,000 building consents for new dwellings issued each year for the past 5 years (26,000 in 20051) then we better be sure we get this picture right.

This article is not by any means the first to raise this issue. There has been a noticeable increase in focus on the design of new places by some in the planning and design professions, seeking to push for better results. Government has 'urban'on its agenda too and is doing its bit. This is great and long may it continue.

However, where there is good design involved we have seen a focus on the physical environment and to some extent the aesthetic of it. Good planners and designers will look for physical conditions that make, for example, a successful central public place (a "community heart"). However, many will have little idea of whom the people will be in it if and when it's built (age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status for example). The type of people using such a place will influence for example the business type that will be economically sustainable there, whether it provides tenancies for the services that new community will need in the way of facilities, what the developer can afford to pay for it, whether residential activity above shops will work, and how big they can be. All of these factors and many more will influence the success of that new public place as the community heart. For most of the new'subdivisions'we see rolling out the level of design is even less and even thinking about creating a'community heart'will be unusual.

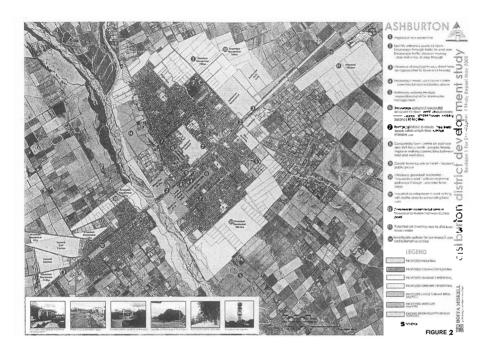
Getting the planning and design process to build a community is important and that means all spectrums of the community. We are innately social beings and respond well to places that enable us to live in places that provide those social opportunities. We all have different facility1 housing/recreational/social needs through our lives and these needs need to be provided for if we are going to have a community.

Community cannot be cultivated like a row of potatoes. Who that community will be and what the conditions are that will enable it to grow, need to be established at the outset.

So How Do we Inject Community?

Several Boffa Miskell planners and designers have attended a US Harvard short course in 2005 titled Master Planning: Creating Communities. That course picked up on the point exactly, that rolling out houses does not a community make: Although the US has different social expectations (they will'do' event or community building exercises we would consider forced and would not be seen dead near) some points, which are current for us, include:

- Master planning processes are a useful way to ensure that all the elements of planning and designing a new urban place (or even a revitalizing existing one) are incorporated (refer Image A).
 - Socio-economic factors are essential. Specialists with these skills need to be brought in as part of master planning team. These



people will (amongst other things) provide understanding of who will live in places being built, what their life cycle will be, what the economic determinants will be and thus what housing, places, recreational needs etc there will need to be. Although we might look at demographic information for bigger planning strategies, applying this to a very fine level is not common.

Planners (not those with a statutory focus, but those for wider urban planning or town planning backgrounds) are well placed to lead the process because of the broad skills they have and the type of people they tend to be. Developers will often pay for community facilities as part of development, recognising that this is a cost that cannot be directly returned, but pays through better sales of housing.

In our projects we have identified that making communities is part of the planning and design process. This starts at the highest levels of planning. For example our long range development studies (undertaken with other consultants) for

Richmond and Nelson (with MWH) and Ashburton² (refer to Image B) to name several, quantify the demographic profile of the current and anticipated community of those Districts and also describe what type of community is sought for the future (20 to 50 years out). Talking to the people that are likely to live in the place is essential and that is often not the current population of an area.

The spatial planning for people in the studies undertaken recognises what the needs of those people will be and organises urban areas accordingly. For example recognising that Methven is a community that shares its town with a large influx of visitors during winter especially, that the large open space at the centre of town serves large gatherings and big events, but that a smaller space with shelter and activity generators was required to enable local people to get together and have social contact - the big space was too large for sustained social contact or mass and had no day to day activities going on. It was not the design of the space in this case that was the point, but recognising from the profile of the town that social conditions were not working so well for the local

community as resources were spent on the town to service the visitors.

Flat Bush new town centre is a master plan level of planning and design process which Boffa Miskell is working collaboratively with others on. In Manukau City with a projected population of 40,000 people the master planning team is led by Warren and Mahoney Architects with Jones Coulter Young. The team have completed the masterplan drawing on other specialistinputs and the available information about the non-existent town's future population as well as consultation with the Manukau City community.

Behind the plan's visible layout and design is a huge amount of invisible but essential thinking about the future people of Flat Bush. What sort of people will live there? How and where will they make their livings? How will the future inhabitants move around the area? How will the land development be economically viable? What is required for this community to grow socially? What facilities and resources will attract people to a new town located without geographical advantage or any established sense of identity?

Summary

To create community (rather than just doing subdivision) requires attention to the future social conditions of a place as part of the planning and design process. The barriers to this (like funding for affordable housing, upfront costs for community facilities, and examples on the ground) will need leaders and national level encouragement.

I predict that people with skills in planning and design with social science and even psychological professions will become more a part of master planning teams and that the results on the ground will be more successful for the people that live there (and for the developer's pocket).

Footnotes

- Statistics New Zealand Building Consents issued
 2005
- Received a Year of the Built Environment award in 2005