

DOING A SUBDIVISION OR DOING A COMMUNITY?

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How to get community back into the new places.

It 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, socio-economic 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

