

Community Commodified: The Prestons Road Residential Subdivision Peter Chamberlain*

Introduction

Residential subdivisions on the urban fringes of cities are popular throughout New Zealand. Our urban population pattern is becoming increasingly decentralised, with most New Zealanders preferring to live in “low-density, ‘suburban’ residential areas” (Perkins & Thorns, 2001, p. 644). Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth in the number of new residential subdivisions around Christchurch’s urban fringe. The most significant of these has been the introduction of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA).

Despite determined opposition from Environment Canterbury (Watson, 2003), the Christchurch City Council has re-zoned large amounts of land for urban development (Memon, 2003; Winstanley, Thorns, & Perkins, 2003). The ‘effects-based’, market-driven style of the RMA legislation meant the territorial authorities were more susceptible to pressure from land owners and developers to re-zone land (Memon, 2003). Consequently, residential subdivision development has significantly increased since the RMA was introduced (Buchanan, Barnett, Kingham, & Johnston, 2006).

Increasing pressure is put on space for housing as Christchurch continues to grow. The growth is concentrated on the outskirts of the city, encouraging the city limits to sprawl out onto the green belt. This sprawl comes at the expense of growth in the inner city. Memon (2003) explains how people’s preference to live in the suburbs is contributing to the degradation of Christchurch’s city centre.

Contemporary urban growth trends in New Zealand reflect the long standing cultural preferences for low density living in suburban and peri-urban settings. Consequently, growth pressures in the larger New Zealand cities are focused on suburban and fringe locations while inner city areas in cities such as Christchurch are in a state of relative decline in terms of population and economic activity (Memon, 2003, p. 27).

While Memon points out that this is a contemporary growth, it must be noted that this is not a new phenomenon. Christchurch experienced significant growth in its population from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s. As Barber (1983, p. 308) found in 1983, this growth was “rapid and almost uninterrupted... according to most demographic and economic indicators”. This increase in population during the post-war period was located almost entirely in the rural area adjoining Christchurch’s urban fringe (Barber, 1983). At the end of the 1960s there were more people living outside of the city centre than within it (Buchanan et al., 2006). The rapid growth in population around the urban fringe “reflects a preference by households for high amenities at acceptable personal costs” (Memon, 2003, p. 36). There is a paradox between urban desirability and suburban liveability (Neuman, 2005). Across New Zealand land developers are

cashing in on this paradox through the development of residential subdivisions.

‘Prestons’, which has been proposed in Christchurch, is one such residential subdivision. Ngāi Tahu Property, Foodstuffs and CDL Land New Zealand Ltd (jointly known as Prestons Road Limited) are the developers of Prestons. This new estate will comprise of 2500 houses and 6000 residents. The proposed site is west of Marshland Road, bisected by Prestons Road, 7.5 kilometres northeast of Cathedral Square.

Residential subdivisions such as Prestons have been criticised for the following characteristics: “low density; relatively large geographical spread; functional zoning and separation of activities; car dependent; wasteful of land resources; requiring high infrastructural capital and operating investments; and requiring high levels of expenditure by residents to operate across its zonal spatial arrangement” (Saville-Smith, 1999, cited in Perkins & Thorns, 2001, p. 644).

However, the developers claim that Prestons will have positive effects on Christchurch, such as a reduction in the inflationary pressures of section prices around the urban fringe (Pressure likely, 2009). Increased section prices, they claim, will drive homebuyers to outlying areas, which will itself cause extra pressure on motorways and roads.

The social issues surrounding residential subdivisions have also been highlighted (Knox, 2008; Ritzer, 2003). Ritzer (2003, p. 131) goes as far as calling them “islands of the living dead” - ghettos which are cut off from the surrounding world. Residential subdivisions are criticised for lacking a sense of community. But what exactly is community, and how do developers set about attempting to achieve it?

What is community?

As a concept, community is difficult to define. It can mean different things to different people, and its definitions have changed over time. Some see community as an utopian idea, “...for it is as much an ideal to be achieved as a reality that concretely exists” (Delanty, 2003, p. 18). Some remain sceptical of community and its existence in today’s world (Bell & Lyall, 2000; Dixon & Dupuis, 2003). Etzioni (1996) claims to be able to define community with reasonable precision. He sees community as having two characteristics.

- (1) A community entails a web of affect-laden relations among a group of individuals, relations that often criss-cross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one relations or chains of individual relations); and,
- (2) community requires a commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity - in short, a shared culture (Etzioni, 1996, p. 5).

There is debate over the importance of geographic location when defining community. Some academics suggest that place is of vital importance to community, "...because people are motivated to seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are meaningful to them" (Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 347). Place attachment is seen as a catalyst to residents becoming involved in the local planning process (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Others state that community can be either territorial or non-territorial, emphasising the importance of relational factors (Kornblum, 2002; Voydanoff, 2001). Relational associations and common values seem to be present in all definitions of community. Williams and Pocock (2010) highlight the importance of shared values and common goals while Scott and Marshall (2005) see a common sense of identity as something that relationships within communities have in common.

The commodification of community

Modern sociological thinking surrounding community has been dominated by a theme of loss (Delanty, 2003). Land developers seem to be cashing in on this loss by providing people with a pre-packaged sense of community in the form of residential subdivisions. "People's sense of community and sense of place have become so attenuated that 'community' and 'neighbourhood' have become commodified: ready-made accessories furnished by the real estate industry" (Knox, 2008, pp. 1-2).

'Community' and 'neighbourhood' are terms that Prestons' developers seem to use synonymously throughout their advertising rhetoric. Prestons Road Limited is invoking the nostalgic notions of community to sell sections. The developers are portraying images reminiscent of movies such as *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* in an effort to "invoke nostalgia for mythological 1950s-style community neighbourhoods" (Bell & Lyall, 2000, p. 750).

The Prestons website (prestons.co.nz) describes Prestons as having a "*Community* heart and focus" (emphasis added), claiming that "Prestons has been master planned to create a new central *village* and commercial area offering all local facilities." Instead of being referred to as a new town or a new suburb, Prestons is referred to as a new community. The developers seem to be relying on a master plan to create a sense of community within their subdivision. Developers are claiming that their new style of community-oriented planning is superior to that of past eras, but also that this new style of planning will lead to the close-knit communities of the past.

The idea of selling 'community' to sell 'communities' is not new. Suburban developers in the 1950s sold community and their successors continued this trend in the 1990s and beyond (Putman, 2000, p. 210). Gwyther (2005, p. 70) emphasises the way developers sell community in order to differentiate their suburban estates from others: "During a period when community is perceived as a scarce resource and a goal to be achieved, 'community' has become a resource deployed by both the planner-developer and residents to differentiate one residential area from another."

Prestons and new urbanism

Prestons Road Limited is employing modern design techniques in an attempt to attract residents. There are recurrent themes in

both the design and marketing of planned residential developments such as Prestons. An increasing number of these new subdivisions on the urban fringe seem to have been influenced by the principles of new urbanism (Winstanley et al., 2003). New urbanism represents a new phenomenon in urban design. An important foundation of new urbanism is the idea of an urban village. This term is common in the rhetoric of developers, including Prestons Road Limited. Grant, a proponent of new urbanism, summarises the basic ideas of new urbanism;

The new urbanism involves new ways of thinking about urban form and development. Drawing on historic lessons from the most beautiful and successful cities, new urban approaches affirm the appeal of compact, mixed use, walkable and relatively self contained communities... In sum, in an era when modernism has profoundly affected the shape of the city, new urbanism presents a new image of the good community (2006, p. 3).

Developers and proponents of new urbanism appear to be invoking the nostalgic notions of community that new urbanists claim to be able to provide (Winstanley et al., 2003). There is a perception that we once had a sense of community but we lost it at some stage (Ritzer, 2003). New urbanists believe that we can return to this golden age of community and neighbourhood by embracing the ideas of new urbanism. This 'sense of community' is the essence of new urbanist design theory.

The most obvious aspect of the influence of new urbanism on the Prestons subdivision is the effort to nurture social interaction. A new primary school will create a common point of interest for residents with children. Shared green areas and pedestrian routes are to be incorporated – a way of getting people out of their homes so that they may interact with their fellow residents. Community, new urbanists claim, can be achieved by concentrating aspects of design on the public realm (Grant, 2006; Talen, 1999). New urbanists believe that close social bonds will eventually develop from chance encounters in public spaces such as the proposed 'urban village' commercial area at the centre of Prestons.

Critique of new urbanism

Despite the claims of new urbanists, there is widespread scepticism regarding their ideas (Robbins, 1998; Talen, 1999; Winstanley et al., 2003). The idea of creating something intangible through a physical environment is not dubious in itself, but new urbanism certainly has some questions to answer. For Talen, (1999, p. 1374) "The theoretical and empirical support for the notion that sense of community (particularly its affective dimensions) can be created via physical design factors is ambiguous at best." Talen accepts that there is a link between social interaction and the environment. However, new urbanists move beyond interaction to claim that physical design can lead to a sense of community – something that can only be achieved through an intermediate variable (for example, homogeneity). Knox (2005, p. 41) states, "New Urbanism is both brilliant and original; but unfortunately the brilliant elements are not original and the original elements are not brilliant." Knox criticises the way in which new urbanism emphasises the form, shape and pattern of the built environment, while neglecting the social construction of place that takes time to develop. Like Talen, Knox does not believe that the built environment alone

can induce a sense of community. The construction of Prestons has not yet started, so how can it be said that it will be a community? Relying solely on the built environment to generate a “process of ‘immediate familiarity’ as the basis of trust and reciprocity contrasts with explanations of habitual familiarity that develops over time” (Gwyther, 2005, p. 68). Winstanley et al. (2003, p. 178) are critical of new urbanism which, like neotraditional town planning, aims “to produce socially interactive local community by design.” This relates to Knox’s position regarding the social construction of place. Places are created not only through physical construction, but through interaction experiences that take place over time. Prestons can be built, and residents can move in, but this does not entail a sense of community. This is something that requires time and a greater social investment – elements that are often neglected by new urbanists and the developers that tout their ideas.

Talen (1999) believes that more research into the conditions under which sense of community can be linked to physical design is needed. “Spatial arrangement is... a medium rather than a variable with its own effect” (Talen, 1999, p. 1374), yet Prestons Road Limited seem to believe that they can create a ‘new community’ via the physical arrangement of their subdivision. The built environment provides subdivisions with the potential for a sense of community, but it is not the end of the matter. As Winstanley et al (2003, p. 178) argue, “residential developments offer increased opportunities for communal activities rather than community per se.” The spatial design of Prestons will merely create a context for community to potentially develop over time.

Conclusion

The problems surrounding residential subdivisions have been well highlighted (Buchanan et al, 2006; Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy, 2010; Scanlon, 2005). Issues such as overcrowding, water quality, traffic congestion, pressure on natural resources, increased pollution and a loss of productive farm land are all important factors to consider when planning new subdivisions. However, the social implications of these places cannot be ignored. More research is required to determine the role that developers play in the creation of community within residential subdivisions such as Prestons. The advertising rhetoric of developers and the ideas of new urbanists cannot be taken at face value.

Community is now a resource used by developers such as Prestons Road Limited to sell property. So will Prestons’ developers achieve their promise of community? Or will the Prestons Road subdivision become an ‘island of the living dead’? Time will tell.

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