



Face to face with the fenceless society

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By ROGER PEGRUM

FEWER Australians every year can afford to build their own home. Even if they can arrange for the floor plan and internal space to suit them, there is little hope that the street will be visually harmonious or provide a safe area for children.

In the move from small communities to large cities, we give up to others the right to determine how our home environment will pan out.

Although most of us can recognise the lack of community in suburbia, not many of us are prepared to take the necessary steps to ensure that what we get is what we really want. To do that, you have to co-operate with your future neighbors.

Co-operative housing is new to Australia but not new to the world. It assumes that housing is a verb as well as a noun, and that there are real and measurable benefits that will follow from consulting each other and pooling ideas.

Co-operative housing is part of the platform of both our political parties. The Liberals would probably call it free enterprise in action. Labor might call it socialism in action. Either way, it may prove to be the salvation of our cities.

Most experiments in public participation in community planning have been horrible disasters, but in Canberra there are now two co-operative housing developments that might signal the advent of a real alternative to the standard quarter-acre syndrome.

It is probably appropriate that the Federal Territory should foster such a return to self-determination, for one of the major criticisms of Canberra's suburbs has been the lack of innovation in housing design and siting and the lack of a real understanding of the sort of living community that makes sense in these confused times.

Behind the two Canberra schemes, one in the Tuggerang Valley and one in Belconnen, is a Sydney architect, Michael Dysart. His early interest in the role of housing in the creation of a community brought him design awards for a range of project houses. But because the siting of the project house follows the decisions on roads and subdivision, he found little opportunity to integrate the house into a cohesive plan for the community.

Privacy, a sense of belonging or of place are usually impossible in piecemeal planning.

These can only be built in if the twin ideas of house design and siting can be developed together.

In 1971, Michael Dysart expressed his ideas about community involvement in housing design in a block of 40 apartments in Moore Park, Sydney. There was no Australian precedent for him to examine, although one-third of all housing in Sweden and Switzerland is built as a response to the wishes of common-interest groups.

His experience on this Sydney project assured his Canberra involvement, when the National Capital Development Commission agreed in 1973 to release large sites for co-operative housing schemes.

The first group of Canberra citizens to embrace the idea was offered a four-hectare site at Kambah, overlooking a reservation for a golf course. The Urambi Co-operative Housing Society was formed, taking its name from a low pair of hills near the area.

Despite its name, the society was far from a homogeneous body. It was made up from a number of smaller groups, each with their own ideas of the philosophy and form that their community should adopt. Michael Dysart was engaged as architect, planner and, hopefully, catalyst to bring their diverse dreams to fruition.

The aims of the Urambi Society were laid down — "to create a sense of community by providing a grouping of dwelling units which encourages human interaction, to maintain individual privacy and make the communal aspect far more positive than current suburban and medium-density solutions."

In due course the architect met the 150 interested members and showed them his outline proposals for the site.

The Urambi Society was small, and agreed to its objects. It was not so with the later society at Cook-Aranda.

Dysart recalls that four major sub-groups emerged at Cook. "There were the elderly, whose sense of traditional community was high. There were the socially innovative, quickly labelled as the trendies, whose ideas centred on introverted, tightly knit developments, where people lived in each other's pockets. There was a strong group of professional pragmatic people, concerned with getting on with the job, and there was an evangelical group who wanted a little church on the hill."

It was Dysart's job to bring out the needs and wants of each of these factions

"It was shattering," he recalls. "I used to walk away from some of those meetings feeling as if I had been to an intense encounter group.



MICHAEL DYSART

"It was just as shattering for the members. The people who came through at the end were those who had no strong affiliation with any self-interest group. They were the ones whose interest was in making it work for a wide range of people and lifestyles."

It was an enormously time-consuming process to extract decisions and get a consensus of opinion, but the results at both Urambi and Cook-Aranda would seem to justify the means. Early agreement was reached to banish the car to the outskirts of the area — "if you bring the car inside," says Dysart, "you end up designing around the turning circle of a garbage truck."

Now there is a large open site where children may play in safety. Those who felt the need to have their cars near their house have moved in close to the garage spaces.

The economic advantages are real. Land servicing, community facilities and landscaping add to the basic construction costs of each house, but the quality of the house, its increased floor area and the share of swimming pool, tennis courts, laundries and so on provide a high level of amenity at very competitive prices.

Moreover, every owner has the house he or she wants, chosen from a basic range of 16 building types, but sited where they wanted it and modified and customised with a kit of extras and accessories.

The architect sees other, less-tangible benefits. "Intrinsic in the idea is that there is a better sense of community. People are involved with decisions and can see the results of their efforts. Gone is the immediate alienation that a person feels when they move into a conventional private or public development. The whole point of the exercise is to allow self-determination."

Although co-operation is an integral part of both design and lifestyle, Urambi does not run as a retreat from reality. Each house has a strata unit title, and each owner a say in the operation of the village.

In time the community will

alter, people will sell and move on, all exactly as they might in a development planned for them, not by them.

It has yet to be proven in Canberra, but there is an expectation that the concept will prove to be not only more attractive environmentally, but also a very good real estate investment for the founder-members.

Urambi is now substantially completed, with most of its 72 houses occupied. On the other side of the river, the Cook-Aranda development is even larger, with 105 units.

Apart from using similar external materials, the two schemes are quite different in form. Urambi threads its way along a single extended pedestrian mall; Cook-Aranda climbs dramatically up the wooded base of a hill, presenting a romantic outline reminiscent of a citadel town.

One possible danger of this scale of development is that in the process of removing alienation from within it, a sense of aloofness from the rest of the suburb may result.

Starting with Swinger Hill (which was named after a surveyor, and not as a commune for wife or husband-swopping), Canberra has acquired a number of "prestige" zones in a supposedly egalitarian city-State. Will these co-operative housing groups acquire an unwarranted snob value?

Michael Dysart recognises the risk and the early discontent with the concept, but claims that this is only one stage in the life of a community and that time will tell. The community structure is strong, he says, and would not be threatened by a greater degree of physical integration with standard housing around it.

"The really important thing," he believes, "is that it is people, not government agencies, who are doing it, and that our society allows this to happen."

Only one further co-operative is under way in Canberra at present. Representing a departure from the low-scale suburban form, an eight-storey block of apartments is proposed for Ainslie Avenue, near the city centre, offering a form of lifestyle noticeably absent in recent years.

Together with the earlier complexes, it increases to almost \$8 million the value of such housing in Canberra.

In a total picture of traditional subdivision, so-called town-houses and home units, there ought to be a place for people to say what they really want and pull together to make sure that they get it. That is people power at its simplest, and the first developer to recognise its potential will make a bloody bomb.