

Ella Bay: A Self-sufficient Lifestyle Community Expression of Interest for a Social Science Research Agenda

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The agreement between John Holland/Witt Property Group Joint Venture and The University of Queensland regarding the establishment of joint initiatives for research and training on the development of a sustainable town at Ella Bay provides a unique opportunity for social science research to be undertaken on the social, community and governance aspects of the proposed development. The fact that the agreement has been made so early in the project's development allows such research to inform, and contribute to, the planning and building of the Ella Bay Master Planned Community (MPC) during the next ten to fifteen years, and to assist the developer in meeting its aim of building a socially sustainable lifestyle community.

From a social science perspective, there are a number of potential issues that arise from the proposed development, which could be considered via a collaborative programme of research between the developer and researchers from the School of Social Science and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at The University of Queensland. A preliminary list of some of these issues is provided as follows.

1. Creating an embedded community within the region

The aim of the Ella Bay proposal is to develop an environmentally and socially self-sufficient lifestyle community, independent of any reliance upon outside amenities or utilities. The aesthetic beauty of the region, the luxury accommodation for both residents and tourists, and the championship golf course will all enhance the exclusivity of the Ella Bay MPC, and increase its appeal to the targeted market. Nevertheless, there is a risk that self-sufficiency and exclusivity might translate into exclusion and social distance as estates become 'enclaves of affluence' quarantined from the broader social fabric of the outside world (Dowling and McGuirk, 2005). This could lead to hostility and resentment among those who see themselves excluded, and create a climate of 'us and them' within the local area. The Ella Bay development is likely to bring a number of significant benefits to Innisfail and the Johnstone Shire, particularly in terms of employment, population growth and the opportunity to diversify the economic base of the region. If properly managed, these positive attributes of the proposed development could allow Ella Bay to become fully embedded into the *social* fabric of the local region without undermining its market appeal or self-sufficiency in other aspects.

2. Building community within the development

In addition to the broad range of retail, social and professional services included in the MPC package, a master planned community adds further value to property development by attempting to foster a sense of community among the residents living there through physical design features and community development activities. Feelings of belonging, of shared physical connection to place, of heightened social

interaction, and of being able to rely upon friends and neighbours at times of need are all believed to enhance a person's sense of well-being and to increase the capacity of any community to become more self-sufficient. Research has suggested that these goals are often more straightforward when the resident population is socially homogenous, as with lifestyle communities like the one proposed at Ella Bay. Yet, the task of creating community remains complex and can easily fail without a clear understanding of the expectations and understandings of new residents in terms of what community means to them, as well as the associated issue of the complex relationship between design features and social outcomes.

3. Establishing governance structures

The development of a successful MPC relies on the establishment of appropriate governance structures, which provide mechanisms for the preservation of common areas; the long-term ownership, maintenance and operation of amenities that are utilised by permanent residents; fulfilling the obligations of property developers which are a condition of obtaining development approval; establishing and enforcing community-wide standards of property design and maintenance, including covenants; facilitating and encouraging community activities to build a sense of community; and developing an appropriate exit strategy for the developer over time (see Urban Land Institute, 2004).

In many cases, governance becomes a difficult issue once the community is established, as the developer finds itself taking on a quasi-governmental role in providing and managing community facilities and services, and in playing a dispute resolution role. Not only does this undermine community self-reliance, it also creates a potential problem for the developer in preparing for exit as it seeks to transfer some of its responsibilities onto other agencies, such as local government or the community itself. Appropriate governance structures, established early in the planning and execution of the project, can greatly reduce these problems by clearly identifying the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors and agencies. Moreover, a variety of organisational structures may accomplish these objectives, including the establishment of residents' or community associations. Research early on in the development process of the Ella Bay MPC – including a review of governance arrangements in other MPCs – may assist with the process of identifying appropriate models of governance for all regulatory, financial, maintenance and community development functions within the MPC.

4. Demographics

Lifestyle developments such as the one proposed at Ella Beach might be expected to attract a higher than average proportion of retirees from outside the local area, as well as international buyers and visitors. The presence of a 'critical mass' of retired residents, with the resources, experience and time to provide community leadership and continuity, will provide the development with a permanent community presence. As well as increasing a 'sense of community' among these residents based on shared interests, values and income, the presence of retirees will act as a counterbalance to the transience of other resident groups who prefer to 'fly in' and 'fly out' of the development for weekends or vacations. If managed properly, this element of the community at Ella Beach could also be expected to play an important role in the governance of the community.

However, an increase in the proportion of older populations will mean that a whole range of ancillary health services is required, beyond the provision of a local doctor or health centre. Without adequate planning and engagement, this is likely to place pressure on local health resources and may create dissatisfaction among residents and visitors to Ella Bay if they find their needs unmet. Some health services may be available in the town of Innisfail, but this too will require careful planning and ongoing collaboration with local service providers. The provision of age-friendly sustainable house designs and amenities will also ensure a more sustainable long-term community in the Ella Bay development by enabling residents to age comfortably in place.

The Research Team

The research team will be led by Dr Lynda Cheshire, Mr Ted Rosenblatt and Mr Peter Walters from the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Other team members will be added as required.

Lynda Cheshire is a lecturer in sociology with a well-established track record of research in the areas of governance, community engagement, Master Planned Communities and rural development. She has worked collaboratively with a range of industry partners including various government departments, property developers, mining companies and community organisations.

Ted Rosenblatt has been involved in community related research projects at a national and local level for over ten years. He is currently completing PhD research into the social aspects of Master Planned Communities, with a focus on the interactions between the developer and the residential community.

Peter Walters is an APAI scholar with the School of Social Science and the Australasian Centre on Ageing at the University of Queensland. He is completing his doctoral research on the sociological creation of place in a master planned community in Brisbane, in collaboration with a large property development company. He is focusing particularly on the role of retirees in the creation of community. Peter has expertise in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, particularly in the development of detailed case studies.

References

- Dowling, R. and McGuirk, P. (2005) 'Situating master-planned estates', *Paper Presented at the State of Australian Cities Conference*, Griffith University, Brisbane, November.
- Urban Land Institute (2004) *Residential Development Handbook*, Third Edition, Washington DC: The Urban Land Institute.