

‘Privatisation, Security and Community: How Master Planned Estates are Changing Suburban Australia’

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Workshop Report

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) workshop on Master Planned Estates (MPEs) was held on the 28th and 29th September 2009 at The University of Queensland and was convened by Dr Lynda Cheshire, Dr Peter Walters and Dr Rebecca Wickes with the support and assistance of ASSA Fellow, Professor Geoffrey Lawrence.

The aim of the workshop was to assemble a cross-disciplinary group of leading established and emerging researchers to share and build upon existing work on the MPE. In particular the workshop was designed to use the differing disciplinary and methodological approaches of participants in the fields of sociology, geography, planning, criminology, labour studies and social work to address two key aspects of this phenomenon:

- a. The question of governance and privatisation of the public realm, with particular regard to the long term implications of the market construction of social space, the developer as provider of shared amenity, the potential loss of a civic culture, and consequences for the continuing role of the state.
- b. The issue of community, in its broadest sense, and the way it is imagined and experienced, both by property developers as they seek to market the commodity of the MPE, and by residents who bring with them their own understandings of community, which are often bound up with notions of place, security, aesthetics, family and lifestyle.

By all accounts, the workshop was highly successful in terms of three key areas. First, was the nature and extent of critical engagement by leading urban scholars with the phenomenon of master planned estates and the ways in which they are changing the outer-suburban landscape of Australia’s capital cities. Second was the degree to which the workshop considered the policy implications of these estates for planners, government and service providers, by inviting representatives from the planning industry, local and state government, and private development companies to attend and actively participate in workshop debates. Finally the workshop will produce a number of important scholarly outputs including a special issue of a journal on the topic; a commitment to pursue funding opportunities for future research in the area; and an agreement to continue discussions on this topic at forthcoming conferences.

The workshop attracted 25 participants in total, including five early career researchers. The majority were academics who travelled from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and the Gold Coast but there was also a significant number of policymakers and planners in attendance, including representatives from the Queensland Government and various planners from the private and non-profit sectors. The workshop was officially opened and welcomed by Professor David De Vaus, a fellow of ASSA and Executive Dean of the Social and Behavioural Sciences Faculty at The University of Queensland. The keynote speaker was Dr Louise Johnson from Deakin University who gave an excellent historical overview of the Australian suburbs and the emergence of master planned estates within that history in her paper ‘Master planned estates: pariah or panacea?’. The remaining 11 academic papers were

presented in the following four sessions: 'Exploring social life in MPEs'; 'The privatisation of MPEs'; 'Place-making and governance in MPEs'; and 'The construction of suburban social space'.

As part of the commitment of both ASSA and the workshop conveners to harness workshop discussions to public policy development, the workshop featured a policy roundtable entitled 'The future for suburban governance' with speakers from Delfin Lend Lease, The Urban Land Development Authority, the Hornery Institute and the Queensland Department of Communities. The key messages arising from this session, along with those from the academic papers, were discussed at length in the conference summary at the end of the second day. Briefly, these included the following key points:

1. Presently there is a great deal of myth and misconception surrounding MPEs, and it is the task of academic researchers to empirically and critically assess the various discourses associated with these estates. In particular, master planned estates are much maligned and often viewed as symptomatic of everything that is wrong with contemporary society. Yet MPEs represent an attempt by property developers to adopt a more comprehensive approach to planning new suburbs in a way that has not previously occurred. MPEs comprise only 25 percent of all new housing constructions on new land, which means 75 percent are not part of a comprehensive urban plan. Thus, those from government and industry felt that increased attention on the 75 percent of greenfield residential developments that may be fragmented and disconnected to other development plans was important.
2. The second issue of policy relevance also involves deconstructing various myths about MPEs, particularly those that view them as elite enclaves of urban affluence. Researchers pointed out that MPEs are also sites of economic disadvantage as families face mortgage stress, isolation, a lack of infrastructure, under-employment among women and young adults and relatively low levels of community capacity. Yet traditionally government have channelled their human services into areas that are viewed as more conventionally disadvantaged, with the effect that problems of domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, poverty and relationship breakdown in MPEs are left unaddressed. Non-profit organisations that provide these kinds of support services are also unable to establish themselves in MPEs because of the lack of availability of subsidised rental space on a MPE where land is sold and rented through the market, not the state.
3. A third issue that dominated discussions was the question of governance and the way in which lines of accountability between private property developers and public agencies, such as local or state government, have become blurred. Developers often find themselves intervening in matters that would otherwise be beyond their purview partly, perhaps, out of a desire to protect their investment and reputation by ensuring residents are appeased. Conversely, local authorities are often reluctant to invest resources into areas that are seen as less disadvantaged than others. The result is that MPEs become either 'private neighbourhoods', governed by a property developer, or they are 'abandoned' to manage their own affairs. This suggests that the process of establishing appropriate governance structures for MPEs is not a straightforward process but requires complex and ongoing negotiations with residents and other governmental authorities, often with unintended outcomes.
4. Finally there is the issue of resource dependency in the outer suburbs and the need to create more sustainable suburbs that are less car-dependent and less susceptible to the challenges of climate change. While it was noted that, in comparative terms, houses on a single block are less resource intensive than inner city apartment living, governments and property developers will need to work

together to create new suburbs that are more adaptable to climate change through different approaches to urban planning, building design and vulnerability assessments to drought or bushfire.

In addition to the policy implications of the workshop, a key academic output will be a collection of papers on MPEs in a forthcoming special issue of *Urban Policy and Research* in December 2010. The guest editors will be Lynda Cheshire, Peter Walters and Rebecca Wickes and the issue will feature the best 7-8 peer-reviewed papers arising from the workshop. Participants were also keen to keep the debate around MPEs ongoing and to find other fora for this to occur. One suggestion is to have a sponsored workshop on MPEs or the suburbs more broadly at forthcoming State of Australian Cities Conferences (SOAC). Delfin Lend Lease has already expressed interest in sponsoring the workshop on the basis of the immense value they saw arising from the ASSA workshop.

In closing we would like to express our appreciation to ASSA for supporting our workshop and for giving us the opportunity to host such a worthwhile event.

Lynda Cheshire
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