

Save Our Brisbane Suburbs

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Factsheet #4

"Controls bring housing balance" says BCC's Tim Quinn, but do they really?

Whenever "balance" is used in a debate, bias is not far away. It appears this is perhaps the case in Cr Tim Quinn's "Perspective" (C-M July 26, 2001) as he seeks to explain if not justify the removal of vast numbers of older houses and buildings and their replacement with "modern" buildings. It is essential, however, to recognise that the problem of the demolition of not only the houses but the character and amenity of inner and middle Brisbane commenced some 30 or more years ago when very large areas of Brisbane were "given" a multi-residential zoning. From that day on, Brisbane was at risk of inappropriate re-development. Here is a quick history in summary to help understand this debate.

Many people recognise the Brisbane three storey walkup, "the six pack" apartment block. In fact flats and units were allowed in many places long before Brisbane had a multi-residential zoning. The architecture of most but not all, is of little merit. They were widely distributed and usually of one or two storeys mixed in with other housing types. Most were so innocuous that in some areas, they have been converted or retro-fitted and still remain unnoticed. It was the "six packs" BCC allowed everywhere in the appropriate multi-residential zones that had the most dramatic and arguably lasting impacts.

Perhaps the most onerous and long lasting impact was the gradual and continuing reduction in the power of the local community "to have a say" as BCC became more a regional authority, pro-development and on "balance", less supportive of special interests, local knowledge and history embedded in local areas. Eventually, despite the local if not development community interest obligation and arguably, the legal power, to act in the public interest, "six packs" eventually were effectively approved "as of right". Council simply approved them and it was up to residents to try to stop them. Many tried, most failed. Although precedent is not supposed to be a major element in town planning, it seemed that Council had allowed so many "relaxations" that all but the most outrageous projects, were approved. At the same time, many apparently "illegal" buildings were also built and presumably approved. Arguably, an ability to encourage the maintenance and preservation of the "timber and tin" areas lay in Council's ability to refuse development of buildings it did not want. It approved most yet it did not seek to change the town plan to control or prevent the "six packs". The ability of the local community "to have a say" had been removed, foreshadowing the recent Lang Park situation.

The next stage saw Council seek to find a "six pack alternative", a project in which I was privileged to be a participant. Council's aim was to develop a better alternative able to be approved within the existing town plan. The "alternative" proved so popular that within two years of completion of the demonstration project, Council had allowed so many developments, many which did not conform with the "alternative" that even more houses were being demolished. Note however that no attempt had been made to reduce the area available for re-development, an option available to Council where the local community sought it. Council has always argued, as does Cr Quinn, that "back zoning" would mean compensation whereas in fact, if voluntary, it would have meant peace of mind for the residents and areas of "timber and tin" character preserved for posterity. For similar reasons, Council did not endorse the "alternative" but rather, within a couple of years, effectively banned it despite its popularity as a better form of medium density housing than the "six packs". The question now was what to do instead.

Council's answer was to promote additional houses on existing blocks, aiming to preserve at least some of the existing houses despite the need in many cases to shift them on their sites. In many cases, the distance between houses was so small that in some cases they seem closer than the houses of a century before, regarded then as a health hazard due to lack of light and breeze. At this time Council also introduced its "controls" on pre-war housing. However, these controls are, in most cases, exercised by Council officers, not the local community, and invariably, in many areas, the houses kept moving out. Council's "promotion" of small block housing aimed to save old houses but add new ones. It simply increased demand for land already subdivided or suitable to subdivide, in particular, the ubiquitous 32

perch (809m²) blocks, mostly the same blocks in the same areas in the middle and inner ring as zoned for the "six packs" but with more added. Some claimed "character housing" was being preserved and others very obviously disagreed ... a result Cr Quinn appears to regard as bringing "balance".

Again, too many houses on the "old" 32 perch blocks disappeared or were joined by "modern" neighbours. The latest policy aims to reduce that pressure by increasing the minimum site area for a house above 16 perches. Now it is the suburbs in the middle ring where slightly larger blocks prevailed which are under attack. It is in many of these areas where post-war architects developed early forms of light weight sub-tropical housing now so well recognised nationally and internationally. Here however, there is no "control" at all. Those in the post-war housing boom who could, brought up their "baby boomers" in these new suburbs. Now it is in these suburbs, not yet even recognised by Council, where roofs are torn off and houses disappear in the middle of the night because there are now no objection rights. How will these leafy suburbs of the 1950's and 60's survive the onslaught?

So what is the problem? Arguably Council encourages growth and argues increased housing capacity is therefore needed. Around 18000 blocks were zoned for "six packs" allowing a population of up to 200,000 people to be accommodated. A huge number of subdividable blocks remain in addition. The problem that remains is the conflict between the re-development potential allowed, if not promoted, by current land use "zonings" and lack of effective "control" by and at local community level. It only needs one developer to "discover" a pleasant local enclave to convert it into a precinct of building sites. The locals have no "say". In a spectacular recent example, Council seems to have decided to convert a precinct the locals thought was a pre-war character area into a higher density housing development site to provide more patrons for what, until then, appeared to be a poorly located Southeast Busway station.

There are in fact very few, if any, areas in Brisbane that are "safe" from re-development. This encourages insecurity of place and it discourages preservation and community building wherever the development potential is viewed as more valuable than the character and amenity. During the "six pack alternative" process, it was agreed that the "six packs" borrowed their neighbour's amenity. In fact, they and the developers stole the amenity while devaluing the remaining properties other than for re-development. The current "vogue" is for more small houses on each block but who has assessed the environmental impacts of a sub-tropical city based on dense, small lot housing. Every time local creeks flood, we get a taste of what the increased run-off can do. But what happens as the large trees are removed, the pavement is increased, the city's ambient temperature rises one, two or more degrees and increasingly more people install air-conditioning? A sustainable or environmentally friendly city?

As with other forms of conservation, there is little point in preserving false images in suburbs where the big trees have gone, houses have been moved, new houses inserted and false character invented to replicate a history which is being exported on the back of a truck. It is happening, not in a rush but surreptitiously, almost unnoticed except by the local communities that try to but cannot "have their say". And as each area is attacked in turn, our city's heritage, character and diversity is eroded so that, like the early development of Brisbane, virtually nothing genuine remains. Yet it is this sense of history that other communities and cities value and promote, their past a part of their future. Brisbane's problem is that it actually has very little past and what there is, is increasingly next to something from the present.

Cr Quinn suggests that "the test of a local council is how to change in the face of population growth". Arguably the real test is allowing the local community "to have a say", if necessary preventing development, in other places encouraging and perhaps negotiating with developers to gain particular forms of re-development but prevent others. The city must develop and new buildings are as much part of its quality as the old. However, perhaps the most valuable asset is the security that the local community can have an effective say in local development, which may in fact be a commitment to character conservation. The test is really one of whether, and to what extent, our towns and cities such as Brisbane provide a diversity of security of character and amenity values as well as security of re-development potential rather than city-wide planning processes that require the same sized small lot housing in the inner ring, in the "rural" areas and in between. Thus the real test is the extent to which the local community really "has a say" about change. The answer to getting that "balance" is the issue.

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