

Public Transport Alliance

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The suburban housing problem ... saving our suburbs?

Recent articles in *The Australian* identified the ongoing battles in Australian cities to "save our suburbs". Interestingly, battles in Brisbane were not specifically identified yet, arguably, Brisbane is a specific case worthy of detailed study in regard to the planning and political processes. As one large local authority for the whole city covering 20-30kms in each direction, it has disproportionate political power in relations with surrounding local authorities and the Queensland state government, and also with other local authorities and their organisations both in Queensland and nationally. As a major regional planning authority, it might be assumed that planning processes would be well developed and that at least in relative terms, both the processes and the outcomes might be exemplary. Current battles to "save our suburbs" suggest that this is not the case despite massive BCC public relations efforts to the contrary.

From a housing perspective, (ie ignoring unplanned road projects and major shopping centres "landing" in the suburbs), the first major round of battles took place in the late 1980's when in response to excessive replacement of Brisbane's "timber and tin" Queenslanders by the 3 storey walkups known as "six packs", BCC attempted to replace the "six packs" with a new alternative. However during this process, it became clear that the problem was not able to be resolved by design alone. In fact the problem was created many years previously during the administration of Clem Jones when large areas of the city were planned for multi-residential use. However, as seems usual in such planning decisions, no apparent effort was made to foresee the outcome in the future. Alternatively, if it was, then clearly it was intended that the "timber and tin" areas would be redeveloped.

As BCC has always argued against "back zoning" both from a planning intent position and to avoid paying compensation, BCC has sought to "regulate" the "timber and tin" areas by design guidelines and by placing an increased value on preserving the "timber and tin" buildings. Being strategic in such situations, owners of sites with buildings of merit can allow deterioration of quality buildings until their preservation value is sufficiently diminished to constitute a penalty. In addition to this tactic, many owners have transported the "timber and tin" houses to new sites both in the "timber and tin" areas and to acreage sites both inside and beyond Brisbane. This is such a thriving market that it is now served by increasing numbers of sites on which are displayed large numbers of "timber and tin" houses of various periods and merit ... much like purchasing a car at a car yard. But what of "our" suburbs?

Interestingly, the "timber and tin" suburbs are subject to several forms of redevelopment, each of which ensures deterioration of the original "character". Character is difficult to debate and very difficult to defend. In many areas, rather than "six packs" or the new "alternative", sites are effectively subdivided allowing between 2-5 or more new dwellings designed in sympathy with the character to be inserted on a site where one house previously stood but now with little if any space for the trees or backyards so characteristic of Brisbane's older suburbs. Medium density housing effectively provides the higher density while trying to look like the older houses ... acceptable to development control planners who approve such development but hardly preserving the character of the buildings ... or of the suburbs.

The effect of Brisbane's planning process has therefore been to "plan" the redevelopment of much of the "timber and tin" areas so characteristic of Brisbane and to replace it with a pseudo version with much less open space and few if any remaining old trees. Was there an alternative?

The effect of the guidelines has been to legitimate the removal and replacement process with so many approved variations that legal precedents exist for almost any kind of development thus removing the effectiveness of appeals by either BCC or local groups.

Arguably, the single large city authority blurs historical and locational differences removing the local nuances and qualities of difference. By allowing precinct committees to set acceptable standards based on planning guidelines as a minimum compliance standard, BCC could return the power to negotiate with developers and thus allow standards to reflect different values and locations throughout the city. Some precincts might even negotiate "back zoning" without compensation to preserve the inherent value of their precinct or street.

The fundamental problem is that even for developers and owners who do wish to preserve the character either by preserving the "timber and tin" or by inserting sympathetic new development, there is no guarantee that BCC will not approve a project that locals do not want. As each area is redeveloped, it is irrevocably changed. As the character disappears, the redevelopment value peaks then reduces. The developers then move on to a new area, again borrowing, or perhaps more accurately, stealing amenity with BCC planning approval. As this happens in each new area, the "battles" flare and then are lost.

interestingly, Brisbane appears not to have had a city- or region-wide overarching suburban protection group such that the issues become explicit, the processes identified and the failures recorded and obvious. It certainly has had, and continues to have, the "battles". But clearly, Brisbane's character is changing. If there is a value in preserving the "timber and tin" and the suburban character of the inner and middle suburbs and of the outer villages as they become subsumed by the sprawling agglomeration, perhaps it is time for Brisbane residents to support "Save Our Suburbs" ... in Brisbane.

With only one Councillor representing up to 25000 people in each of 26 Council wards, "our suburbs" deserve more local input and arguably, increased control, not necessarily over whether development is permitted as that is a planning function, but definitely over the standards and quality of proposals.

Michael Yeates is an architect with Masters degrees in Environmental Management and in Environmental Education. With others, he was involved with the BCC project to develop an alternative to the six pack and later, the development of an RAPI and RAIA award winning prototype at 60 Hassall Street Corinda. A life long Brisbane resident, Michael is concerned that Brisbane is changing in ways that offer residents little or no control or effective input into decisions at the local level and thus control over outcomes is removed. He is currently undertaking a PhD researching the role and potential of forms of "community consultation" in transport and planning.