

# LAURIMAR: a town like no other

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Located in the foothills of the Plenty Ranges 30 kilometres north of Melbourne, the town of Laurimar has been taking shape over the last decade. Ultimately it will comprise 2400 residential lots and a town centre, currently 550 of the lots are sold and about 400 houses are occupied. The town centre will also serve about 1500 residential lots in adjoining developments and a rural hinterland.

The development of Laurimar is being managed by Drapac Property. Michael Drapac, the founder of the company and the joint author of this paper, has been an advocate for change in the way that greenfields development is initiated in Australia. He believes that existing planning policies of government preordain undesirable subdivision outcomes—suburbia. Further, he holds that value adding to land resulting from rezoning should in part be captured to support the intention to build sustainable communities. From his viewpoint, the core of the problem lies in governments not taking into account the true cost of the measures required to create sustainable communities in new developments. This failure is reflected in the price paid for land parcels, which are subject to windfall gains at the time of rezoning. The result is the enshrinement of suburbia which, although improved by more comprehensive physical planning, still falls short of achieving its full potential of building comprehensively sustainable communities.

When the Laurimar land was rezoned 11 years ago it was on the very outer fringe of the growth corridor. Because of the size of the contiguous land holding, about 405 hectares, it suited government policy calling for urban development with the potential to achieve comprehensively designed communities. It therefore proceeded ahead of other more inner areas in the growth corridor, contributing and later responding to the 'Mernda Strategy Plan: Pathways to More Sustainable Growth 1994'.

The early thinking about Laurimar was founded on the fact that everyone knew there was something wrong with suburbia—it had become a degraded and unsatisfactory human habitat. Michael Drapac reviewed and visited all equivalent contemporary examples of greenfields development in Australia and, perhaps more importantly, immersed himself in the relevant literature—from the practical advice of place makers to the deeply philosophical issues surrounding the subject of human habitat.

The investigations and research resulted in the preparation of an Outline Development Plan for Laurimar in 1996. Under the heading 'Laurimar philosophy and Vision', the following statement encapsulates Michael Drapac's intention for the town.

'Laurimar will be developed to respond to the social, cultural, and aesthetic values of prospective buyers. Our aim is to meet their needs in respect of the provision of a high-quality residential environment supported by community, cultural and recreational facilities.

Michael Drapac and Associates recognises this rare possibility of fostering a special development,

which encourages a strong feeling of community and a clear sense of identity. People who live at Laurimar will have a clear sense of ownership and belonging'.

Thus the thinking and dreaming about Laurimar turned from what was wrong with suburbia to what makes places great. We have all been to places that have that special feeling—resonating to one theme or another. Although these characteristics are difficult to hold on to long enough for analysis, Michael Drapac honed both his own thinking and research and that of others to three fundamental pillars which, when working together, make places great. A single integrated approach was devised. It involved a return to traditional place making—through a revival of the spirit of community, to create a place rich in spiritual capital. The development of Laurimar demonstrates that it is possible to plan, design and build for it to emerge and grow.

## **INTENTION—THE THREE PILLARS**

The developer of Laurimar held the intention of creating a community, not just well-designed neighborhoods but a quantum leap from suburbia as we know it. This is being achieved with a design team of like-minded individuals and through partnering the design process with community development and establishment of community facilities in a single integrated approach. Therein lies the developers pride in Laurimar and its claim of being a place like no other.

The developer's intention stems from understanding that great communities are rich in spiritual capital for which the generators are the following three pillars: observing the laws of nature, pride in home and place, and the energy and interaction of individuals making up the community. He postulates that the things that foster individual human spirit will lead to the strengthening of community spirit which, when given the right circumstances, will create a great place. Therefore Laurimar is being built to provide for the deeper needs of the heart and soul, with human spirit in mind. A further premise is that incoming residents will respond positively to the nature in the setting, the creation of a high standard of public amenity and the priority given to community facilities and community creation.

However, such intentional community creation effectively compresses the traditional community creation process, and the developer acknowledges that the degree to which the growing Laurimar community accepts, adapts and engages with the intention and process will depend upon many factors. In any event, the influence of this external will or determinism should be measurable.

### **The First Pillar: Observing The Laws Of Nature**

The first pillar, observing the laws of nature, is fairly well understood and accepted in Australia within the concept of environmental sustainability. We have become accustomed to seeing habitat preserved and reinforced, and wetlands recreated in greenfields development. The importance of nature, however, extends beyond this paradigm in its influence on the human spirit. The energy and spirit in nature is exemplified by its incredible diversity; no two things are the same—out of sameness we get chaos. Nature strives to do its best at all times and, accordingly, provides inspiration for the human spirit to also do its best.

At Laurimar, the topography comprises gentle rolling foothills, mostly cleared, but with significant groupings of magnificent red gum trees. Low-lying areas have been prone to flooding. One of the early decisions taken by the developer to ensure nature achieved a higher priority and is integrated and networked throughout the development was to increase the land devoted to public open space from 5% to 17%. Further, it was decided amongst this contribution to devote the best land on the hilltops to that purpose. The effect is quite extraordinary, and unquestionably supports the developer's philosophy. The first hilltop park, now approaching completion, has the feeling of a highly attractive picnic ground in a bushland setting and is well patronised by the local community.

The views over Laurimar and to the hills and beyond are uplifting to the spirit. The park's high standard of amenity and generous space are conducive to relaxation and meeting up and mixing with others in the community, including at the well-equipped children's playground. The park also includes equestrian facilities.

The flood mitigation measures undertaken enabled an extensive network of wetlands along natural drainage lines to be integrated into the development. Planted with native species, the wetlands are increasingly creating habitat for native flora and fauna, most evidently a diversity of birdlife, which can be seen in the immediate vicinity of homes. The wetlands provide a recreational network and active wildlife corridor.

Touching the ground lightly, development at Laurimar follows land contours and avoids unsightly benching of building sites. Thus urban development blends with the natural landform.

This first pillar, then, involves working with nature not only for the purpose of environmental sustainability and aesthetic advantages, but also to raise community expectations as to the importance of nature in daily life, and provide opportunities for residents to interact with it and use it to interact with each other.

### **The Second Pillar: Pride In Home And Place**

The second pillar, pride in home and place, stems from a traditional view of place making as exemplified by the traditional village or country town in Australia. Although such places predominantly evolved in a largely laissez faire planning environment, many were subject to basic town plans which often established important components of built form, such as the location of public buildings around which the commercial main street, or town centre, usually developed. Land use was inclined to be mixed. This natural order of things created a strong identity for built form, which reflected community priorities. Buildings offered diverse character, generally indicated their use and presented their best faces to the street in the architectural style of their day. The built form of towns, therefore, did not happen by chance, but was part of a natural order of things which, when well done, created an identity greater than the mere sum of its parts. Thus towns of this kind, like nature itself, provided for deeper needs of the heart and soul. It is by these examples that the possibility is revealed to design for community spirit and the spirit of the individual.

The design approach adopted to achieve a similar result, includes working with individual purchasers on fostering community interest and involvement. Every residential lot at Laurimar has a planning permit in place which, among other things, includes a building envelope and design guidelines. A proposed building is assessed against that permit and if in compliance a developer's approval is granted. The full-time employed Laurimar architect assists individual purchasers according to a clear set of guidelines designed to: produce a healthy diversity in architectural expression and reduce ostentation; lower environmental cost and footprint; and foster passive surveillance of the public realm, community centred frontages, return frontages and corners, community centred densities, family friendly streetscapes and landscaping that integrates human habitat and the natural environment. Such a service does not detract from diverse individual expression, but improves the individual long-term outcome and so produces something that clients do not necessarily realise they need. The idea is to ensure that individual owners, imitating nature, produce the best outcome for themselves and their community. To compare townscape at Laurimar with that in other development in the region is to compare chalk and cheese—there are no 'McMansions'.

The transect of development at Laurimar parallels the 'new urbanist' model of increasing densities and consequent changing of built form typologies towards the town centre. Although the town centre is styled in the Mernda Structure Plan as an activity centre it will be developed at an earlier

date than the Mernda Town Centre and is therefore likely to attract greater interest in the interim from external localities. Allowance has therefore been made for greater flexibility in the space allocation for community and commercial development. Although the Laurimar Town Centre is located within the development and not on its edge and the regional connections are a work in progress, these are not seen as an impediment to its success because of its early development and its overall fit within the concept for the town and its wider catchment. Access to public transport is similarly a work in progress relying ultimately on transit connections to Mernda Town Centre as planned. In the interim the developer is providing a subsidised bus service.

The design of the Laurimar Town Centre exemplifies the developer's intention for the Laurimar development as stated previously. Paralleling now familiar 'new urbanist' components of a main street with development of appropriate scale, mixed use, encouragement of home occupation, well located public transport, shared-use facilities and a high standard of public amenity, the design of the Laurimar Town Centre pushes further to realise the developer's intention. The town centre is seen first and foremost as a community resource. Community buildings in the form of an activity centre, primary school, and pre-school occupy prominent sites and are integrated with commercial and mixed-use development. An outdoor community space, associated with these buildings, is at the nexus of the wider pedestrian network. This space, which is adaptable for a range of activities, including a planned community market for which partial cover will be provided, also adjoins a lake and leads to adjacent recreational facilities and sports fields. The radial pedestrian network adopted at Laurimar is based on the maxim, 'All roads lead to Rome'—the town centre.

The fact that a community market is planned for this space illustrates the involvement of the growing community in the design process, for which a series of well-attended and robust design workshops were conducted. Further, community consultation concerning facilities to be provided in the activity centre and how to fund them is set to begin. The Whittlesea Council will sponsor a range of facilities out of its own budget, and the developer will make a major contribution towards them. Community expectations are expected to drive a push for a more comprehensive provision, particularly for youth, and planning for the future.

The second pillar, then, involves designing and building with the spirit of the people, and adopting forms that promote human interaction and elevation of the common good.

### **The Third Pillar: The Community**

The third pillar, the energy and interaction of individuals making up the community, represents a field about which insufficient understanding has existed. Over the last decade or so the definition of social indicators has headed from matters that relate to tangible improvements to the lives of residents, such as lower crime rates, improved access to education and even avoidance of an untimely death, through to more intangible indicators of satisfaction, such as 'feeling safe walking down your street after dark', 'liking the community you live in', 'feeling valued by society' and 'ability to raise \$2000 in two days in an emergency'. These are indicators that clearly measure aspects relating to the Laurimar developer's intention of elevating the common good.

The Mernda Strategy Plan 1994 provides the planning context in this respect for Laurimar. The document cites two references for performance indicators for sustainable development: Newman 1999 and Berke and Conroy 2000. Newman falls into the category of tangible improvements, while Berke and Conroy take a more comprehensive view, but rely on terms such as 'livability', 'community identity and attachment' and that old favourite 'sense of place'. Based largely upon these indicators the Mernda Strategy Plan provides strategic responses to 'achieve many of them'. One such response is: 'to facilitate the timely provision of a range of recreational and community facilities to meet the needs of residents, and promote community health and cohesion'. This provides a basic foundation upon which the Laurimar developer can build in partnership with the

growing community. The strategic recommendations go further and suggest 'siting and design of community buildings will support co-location and integration'.

Emphasis on the less tangible elements of satisfaction has emerged more recently in a Strategic Policy and Research document by the Department for Victorian Communities entitled 'Indicators of Community Strength at Local Government Level in Victoria'. It is from this document that the less tangible indicators included above have been taken. The City of Whittlesea rates unevenly across the Local Government Association and fairly poorly in the report, which is easy to understand because of the fragmented nature of development in the latter half of the 20th century involving a great deal of poorly serviced suburbia together with rural and fringe development areas. Although it is not possible to distinguish Laurimar within the statistical sample used in this report, it clearly stands out as the bright shining star in this rather featureless firmament. To determine how well Laurimar rates against such indicators, further research is proposed in collaboration with the City of Whittlesea and the Department for Victorian Communities. The research will go further to obtain data relating to the success of Laurimar's single integrated approach.

A five-year longitudinal research program to begin with a pilot study this year will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the single integrated approach and the degree to which the developer's intention is ultimately realised. It is further acknowledged that the activity of observing and measuring indicators in the community will influence the outcome. Observation and measurement therefore will be undertaken as part of the community development process.

It is interesting to note as an aside that desirable tangible and intangible aspects of human habitat are becoming rare. This is because planners seem to be removed from such considerations in their thinking, requiring a paradigm shift and a subsequent rebalancing of the cultural agendas influencing planning.

The existing Laurimar community has been actively engaged in the evolution of the master plan, provision of recreational facilities, and the planning and design of the town centre through a series of design workshops. These events have been lively and of exceptional value to the design process, particularly in terms of priorities and identification of needs. The Laurimar community is very active; it includes a robust residents group, which has participation in the Laurimar Design Review Committee, which overviews any changes to design guidelines. It is the success of this engagement that has in part inspired the developer's interest in obtaining a better understanding of community perceptions as a measure of realisation of intentions.

The longitudinal research program proposed will explore and measure cultural change in more detail, that is, the response of new residents to a new urban environment designed and managed—during its development phase—to encourage community development and values around community, environment and health. The response of individuals will no doubt advance from perception and adaptation to, hopefully, ownership and development. The community response to the decline of elements identified as causing dysfunction and the increase in elements that are postulated by the developer as having the capacity to reverse this dysfunction can surely be measured. The research program will become part of the adaptation process regarding responses to the developer's determinism.

The capacity of the community to own and adapt the developer's determinism may be discussed in terms of cause and effect. Although at the outset the developer is at the cause point in respect of his intentions for the community, the community is encouraged to move from being in part the effect of this cause to sharing and eventually taking over from the developer in community development. This process is to be compressed into about a five-year program.

To accelerate this transition, the Laurimar developer welcomed new residents with a high-quality community centre, which includes a cafe, on a prominent corner site. A community development officer was engaged, a newsletter produced and a pony club established together with a program of planned activities and events. Most importantly, residents have been kept well informed about Laurimar. The community remains dependent on the developer to roll out the remainder of the facilities that, taken together, will make up the town of Laurimar. The core of the town centre, including the primary school, activity centre, supermarket, community space and lake are scheduled for completion in early 2008. In the interim the community must adapt to their temporary circumstances and at the same time remain at the cause point with the developer in the process of community creation. Although the developer must understand this and carefully manage the transition, it is the role of governments during this period to sponsor programs that lead ultimately to better communities and uplifting of the common good.

## CONCLUSION

What is wrong with human habitat? It is just not well enough researched and understood. Nor is it adequately codified in terms of all the characteristics that we hold dear, such as public amenity, livability, access and sense of place. To facilitate assessment, the authors of this paper propose a star rating for human habitat. Under the rating, a single integrated approach to development achieves six stars.

Achieving wider elevation of the standards of greenfields development will require change in government policy to capture some of the windfall benefit of rezoning and legislation to achieve a much higher provision of community infrastructure.

Laurimar may be an exemplar of enlightened greenfield's development, but its greatest value may lie in achieving a better understanding of how communities are created in a process involving intention, consultation, integration, activation, information, observation, adaptation and evolution. Thus the third pillar: it's the community (sic) stupid.

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