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Community commodified: Planning for a sense of community in residential subdivisions

Peter Chamberlain
M.Soc.Sc. candidate, Lincoln University
peter.chamberlain@lincolnuni.ac.nz

Suzanne Vallance
Lecturer in Urban Studies, Lincoln University
vallancs@lincoln.ac.nz

Harvey Perkins
Professor of Human Geography, Lincoln University
harvey.perkins@lincoln.ac.nz

Ann Dupuis
Associate Professor, Sociology Programme, Massey University
a.dupuis@massey.ac.nz

Abstract

In New Zealand private property developers have begun to influence urban form in new ways by building large residential subdivisions and master planned developments reminiscent of those that have been built in the US for several decades. By creating these residential subdivisions and master planned developments, private property developers have had an increasing influence on urban form. Many have used the concept of 'community' in their advertising and promotional activities as a key selling point for these developments. Thus far, while there has been a great deal of research involving the residents of these new subdivisions, insufficient research has been carried out on the land developers themselves, their motives, intentions, and methods in regard to building communities. This paper presents the results of research that explored Christchurch real estate developers' understandings of 'community' and how they went about incorporating these understandings in shaping their developments and in the associated promotional material. In addition to in-depth interviews with real estate developers, advertising material, physical design, and section prices were examined.

Introduction

Increasingly, New Zealand real estate developers are influencing urban form by constructing much larger residential subdivisions than was previously the case. These subdivisions - described as "a place where developers have platted large parcels of land into smaller lots, installed the utility and street infrastructure, and sold the lots individually" (Blake & Arreola, 1996, p. 24) - have proved very popular in New Zealand. Many of the more recent residential developments, in the Christchurch metropolitan area at least, have taken place on the urban fringe and one consequence of this pattern of development is that the city's urban population concentration pattern is becoming increasingly decentralised. Other cities here (and abroad) face similar trends; it has been observed that many New Zealanders prefer to live in "low-density, `suburban' residential areas" (Perkins & Thorns, 2001, p. 644; see also Vallance, Perkins & Moore, 2005) and the demand for such housing seems set to continue.

For the most part, in the last few decades, housing development and residential subdivision in New Zealand has been undertaken by private property development companies, rather than the State. These companies then sell the sections/lots to home-owners or landlords who, in turn, contract builders to build housing consistent with the covenants established by developers and designs provided by architects, architectural designers or building companies. The marketing associated with these subdivisions often celebrates either social or environmental qualities (or both), however, little is known about the motives, desired effects and methods used by developers to create the communities and neighbourhoods described in their promotional material. Although it has been argued that developers are employing the principles of New Urbanism to plan for a "sense of community" in their estates (Grant, 2006, p. 3), further research is needed to explore if, and how, these principles have been worked out in the Christchurch context.

Background

Although New Zealand has a strong tradition of State or Public housing, as in other Western democracies the neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s saw state housing provision becoming less of a priority. Similarly, the New Zealand Government intervened with lowered enthusiasm to create the conditions in which home ownership was achievable for a high proportion of New Zealand households (Dixon & Dupuis, 2003; Memon & Gleeson, 1995; Le Heron & Pawson, 1996, Knox, 2005). Levels of home-ownership have been especially influenced by these changes with rates falling from 73.8 per cent in 1991 to 67.8 per cent in 2001, and is expected to fall further to 61.8 per cent by 2016 (Centre for Housing Research Aotearoa New Zealand, 2011). Rates have fallen for all levels of income, across all ethnic groups and, most dramatically, for the twenty and thirty-year-old age groups. At the same time, a more market-responsive, effects-based planning regime was implemented (Memon, 2003). Swathes of rural land were rezoned, allowing private developers to acquire and subdivide land for resale as residential sections which Knox (2008, p. 173), writing of residential subdivisions in a similar situation in the United States, refers to as the "nurseries of neo-liberalism".

Although it is clear that property developers have played a central role in the urban processes described above, to date little social scientific research has been conducted in New Zealand that focuses on their ambitions and practices in particular places. We have addressed this gap in the literature by focusing on Christchurch, New Zealand, which is a particularly useful site to explore these issues because, since the 1990s, the city has experienced relatively rapid, low density development of the sort described above.

Christchurch – a brief overview of the issues

Christchurch, located on the eastern edge of the Canterbury Plains in the South Island is New Zealand's second largest metropolitan area. According to the 2006 Census, 348,435[1] people usually live in Christchurch City, an increase of 24,375 people (7.5 per cent) since the 2001 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). These growth figures are consistent with a national population growth of 7.7 per cent during the same period and, as other cities in New Zealand have found, several factors besides population growth have contributed to Christchurch's residential subdivision and expansion at the urban fringe. The first and most significant of these was the introduction of the Resource Management Act (RMA 1991, amended 2005) which seeks to facilitate private enterprise within the confines of bio-physical environmental limits (Memon & Perkins, 2000; Perkins & Thorns, 2001). The stated purpose of the Act is 'to promote the sustainable management of natural and physical resources'. The Act has been called 'effects-based' because it is concerned primarily with managing the bio-physical environmental *consequences* of activities rather than governing the activities themselves through such techniques as land use zoning. There was, and still is, plenty of scope for a range of interpretations and applications of the Act, many of which have been tested in appeals to the Environment Court. The Act has also faced a great deal of criticism. It has been argued, for example, that planning's earlier focus on issues of social equity has given way to the environmental concerns of sustainable management (Memon & Gleeson, 1995). Others argue that the RMA neglects the social aspects of the urban environment thus creating problems for urban planning and management (Dixon & Dupuis, 2003; Perkins & Thorns, 1999). Despite determined opposition from Environment Canterbury (ECan), for example, the Christchurch City Council has re-zoned large amounts of land for urban development in the former green belt (Memon, 2003; Watson, 2003; Winstanley, Thorns & Perkins, 2003).

A second factor complementing population growth and the RMA that has led to the recent rapid growth of urban fringe development in Christchurch is the readily available nature of credit, especially in the early to mid 2000s. This has meant that people were able to borrow large amounts of money to buy land and build new houses on the urban fringe, many of which were marketed as a desirable mix of town and country (Winstanley, Thorns & Perkins, 2003; Perkins, Thorns & Newton, 2008), with names like Northwood and Aidanfield. Similar marketing strategies have been in evidence in other countries such as the USA and UK for many years (Eyles, 1987; Perkins, 1989; Gold & Gold, 1990).

Yet another factor deserving comment here is the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy which is the result of collaboration between ECan, the Christchurch City Council, the Waimakariri and Selwyn District Councils, and the New Zealand Transport Agency (Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy, 2011. This marks something of a return to strategic planning and what started out as a non-statutory, cooperative ambition now has legislative teeth through Environment Canterbury's Regional Policy Statement (Plan Change 1) which addresses land use and urban management for the next 35 years. Essentially the strategy seeks to direct future 'urban' growth towards existing centres and townships. Although there will be a degree of residential intensification, much of the region's future

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[1] The Canterbury region was stuck by two earthquakes, the first in September 2010 and the second in February 2011. There were 181 fatalities as a result of the second earthquake. Numerous people lost their homes and there was widespread damage. As a result the 2011 Census was cancelled. There is little doubt that the earthquakes have led to both permanent and temporary migration from the area but the long-term effects are not yet known.

development is likely to be a continuation of that seen over the last decade with fairly low housing densities complemented by a slow movement towards mixed use.[2]

Clearly, urban expansion is a complex mix of legislative, financial and socio-cultural factors and, as the number of peri-urban residential subdivisions increases, it becomes progressively more important to understand how these factors fit together and interact with each other. The research reported in this paper addresses the gap in our knowledge around the role developers take in this process and the ways in which they are helping shape both urban form and understandings of 'community'. Although a great deal of work has been carried out regarding the nature of community within residential subdivisions (Perkins, 1989; Bajracharya, Earl, & Khan, 2008; Bell & Lyall, 2000; Cook & Ruming, 2008; Dixon & Dupuis, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Knox, 2005, 2008; Miles, Song, & Frank, 2010; Wood, Frank, & Giles-Corti, 2010) it is important that we interrogate the myriad meanings of community – particularly those held by the developers of these subdivisions - before evaluating these, and other, findings.

Theoretical framework

What is community?
As a concept, community is difficult to define. Thorns (2002) makes reference to an article from the 1950s which identifies ninety-four different definitions of community. The only common factor in these definitions was that they all involved people, though many emphasised relational associations and common values. Similar features are also reflected in the more recent literature: Williams and Pocock (2009) highlight the importance of shared values and common goals while Scott and Marshall (2005) see a common sense of identity as contributing towards a sense of community. Incorporating these factors Etzioni (1996) claims to be able to define community with reasonable precision, seeing community as having two characteristics.
(1) A community entails a web of affect-laden relations among a group of individuals, relations that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one relations or chains of individual relations); and, (2) community requires a commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity - in short, a shared culture (Etzioni, 1996, p. 5).

In the context of our study it is significant that Etzioni emphasises the importance of a shared history as a characteristic of community, as such a view raises important questions about how 'instant' communities might be created in new subdivisions.

There are a number of other important debates in the literature on community. Some, for example, see community as Utopian, "…for it is as much an ideal to be achieved as a reality that concretely exists" (Delanty, 2003, p. 18). Others argue over the extent to which 'place' and geography are necessary elements of community (Bell & Lyall, 2000; Dixon & Dupuis, 2003), particularly given the rise of the internet and the prevalence of virtual communities. These may exist as 'computer-supported social networks', spanning the globe, yet still offering its members the advantages that community provides (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Shields (1996, p. 1) has stated that face to face communities are being neglected in favour of these virtual communities, raising fears of the public sphere declining into a "virtual world controlled by telecommunications corporations where only the privileged have access and the body is disdained as an embarrassing and imperfect support for minds infatuated with virtual, representational bodies." Others maintain that place is still of vital importance to community, "…because

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[2] Again, the long-term effects of the earthquakes are difficult to ascertain at this point. We do know that much of the commercial, retail and residential activity has fled the CBD to relocate in either the suburban centres of further afield in peri-urban villages and towns. The recovery literature tells us that such 'temporary' moves are likely to be permanent and that recoveries tend to drive urban expansion (Kelly, 2011; Smith, 2011).

people are motivated to seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are meaningful to them" (Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 347). In this vein, place attachment is seen as a catalyst to residents becoming involved in the local planning process (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Still others offer a reconciliation of these views by suggesting that we challenge the 'logic of substitution' (Crang, 2011) where 'virtual communities' replace 'real' ones and look instead at how they co-constitute each other (see also Perkins & Thorns forthcoming).

Others debate not just where, or how, community exists but whether it exists at all. Knox (2008, p. 173), for example, portrays a particularly pessimistic view of community stating that "To the extent that community has survived, it is community commodified; the classic idea of community exists only in developers' advertising copy and the rhetoric of new urbanists". Bell and Lyall (2000, p. 756) make a similar point arguing that "Community has never been as romantics claim. Currently, community commitment is not high; indeed, the idea of community is a contradiction in capitalist societies of individual self-interest." They add that most people are less committed to community than they are to their own survival, comfort and mobility. This tendency, some argue, is exacerbated in the urban environment; Delanty (2003), for example, believes that the city once had a connection to community but that it was lost during a process of deindustrialisation in the post-modern world. According to Marshall (2000, p. xvi), community has become "an option rather than a fact of life. It has become an accessory one can choose or buy, like a lifestyle or a Jeep Cherokee."

This is a point that has received a high level of attention from scholars with an interest in particular types of urban form and processes. In a 1980s study of the growth and intensification of small stand-alone US service class towns set within larger (sub) urbanising polycentric metropolitan regions, for example, Perkins (1989) found that developers conflated images of the rural idyll and community in their advertising to name and sell medium density housing subdivisions. These subdivisions were often partially or symbolically gated and promoted using lifestyle advertising containing strong references to bucolic themes and suggestions that while community may have been lost in large cities it was possible to recreate it in new, smaller scale settings. Despite the fact that the housing in question was much like that being built in any number of suburban settings in US cities the real estate developers and their marketing literature promised that it could provide community in various forms, such as those associated with convenience, the benefits of living in small scale environments where all people and things required in daily living were close at hand, and where there were enhanced possibilities for relaxation, a slower pace of life, security, and freedom of action (p. 69).

Similar themes are being found by researchers studying the marketing claims associated with much newer forms of residential development such as gated housing subdivisions. In this context, Ansley (2004, p. 16) has argued that the voluntary nature of communities is symbolised by gated subdivisions described as:

> ... a kind of community spreading throughout New Zealand, enclaves surrounded by walls, accessible only through locked gates, rules governing the design of homes and the behaviour of owners who are generally older, childless or professional people intent on surrounding themselves with like-minded citizens.

As in Perkins' much earlier work, gated communities are presented as an attempt to claw back those traditional elements of communities – place, style, common purpose and shared values – that have supposedly been lost over the last 150 years. Here, developers create their own visions of community and sell this vision as an amenity, walled into the confines of the development. Developers also take on a lead role in the creation of community and the creation of a brand name which they then market to the public (Lang & Danielsen, 1997).

Understanding the role of developers in creating communities is as problematic as its many definitions and means of creation, although, as argued above, it is clear that that they have used rapid urbanisation and a perceived loss of community to their advantage. Generally, developers identify community as something that people want and value and Knox (2005, p. 40) explains how developers have been able to capitalise on this: "In response to disenchantment among consumers with placeless Fordist subtopias, developers were quick to see the commercial advantages of switching their activities away from standardized subdivisions to focus instead on packaged subdivisions."

This raises a number of related questions about whether, or to what extent, community in various guises has been commodified in real estate developments, the nature of the communities being sold, and the ways in which developers actually attempt to create communities in these settings. It also raises a need to elaborate arguments about the meaning of, and processes underlying, the commodification of place and the associated marketing of residential real estate (Perkins, Thorns and Newton, 2008).

Commodification, advertising and the marketing of residential real estate

Residential real estate development is intimately associated with the translation of places, lifestyles and experiences into commodities. Real estate subdivisions, of the types discussed above, are produced as part of the continuing development of the social relations of capitalism driven by profit motives and processes of exchange (Harvey, 1972; Eyles, 1987). Accordingly, the residential real estate development sector is associated with well-known techniques by which private profit is maximised. From this perspective it would be expected that the translation of 'community' into a commodity, an object for sale in markets, would be but one of a number of iterations in the development of housing markets which have also seen the commodification of amenity and other landscape and lifestyle elements.

Commodification has been the subject of considerable analysis over many years (Best, 1989). First characterised by Marx, commodification represents a situation where objects become commodities when they take on an exchange value over and above their use values, are able to be traded, and are therefore given monetary value. Further elaborations of the concept have been developed. Debord (1983), for example, wrote about the society of the spectacle as representing the new conditions of late capitalist society and economy. While Marx focused on the creation of markets, possessions and alienation, Debord emphasised a further elaboration of alienation, suggesting that mass media society and the sophisticated apparatus of late-capitalism is responsible for suggesting to people that their needs are being met by the advancement of seductive imagery in advertising, consumerism and commodified leisure when, in fact, it is further needs that are being created. Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b), went still further, arguing that commodification is about sign-exchange, where objects, as commodities, are absorbed into their image, and so what is exchanged in residential markets, for example, are not houses primarily but their signs or meanings.

While not entirely rejecting all elements of these views of commodification, other researchers, particularly those writing from the perspective of cultural anthropology, challenge the idea of commodification as a process that works itself out in the same way in all places as part of capitalism's ever-spreading embrace. They query the significant emphasis in the neo-Marxist critique of capitalism on inversion and abstraction and their underpinning ideas of false consciousness and domination. Rather, they believe that commodification is the commercialisation of cultural performance and the places in which it occurs; it is a reality that is negotiated by actors in particular places to meet particular situations and requirements and therefore differs in form and content from place to place. This view of commodification suggests that it can be beneficial or detrimental depending on its outcomes in particular settings (Stymeist, 1996).

Whichever perspective one takes on this question, in order to understand residential real estate development, interpreting the link between commodification and advertising is crucial. This is because advertising is designed to connect with people's innermost concerns: those associated with, for example,

their intimate social relations, what is considered to be healthy, their happiness and the importance of a raft of cultural traditions (Leiss et al., 1986; Goss, 1993; Gottdiener, 2000; Leonard, Perkins and Thorns, 2004; Perkins, Thorns and Newton, 2008). Advertisements are thus designed to promote the trading of commodities in markets and those commodities include a wide range of physical objects, experiences and signs. Gold and Gold (1990, p. 178), pointed out, for example, that advertising for suburbs uses distortion and selection based on an "environmental rhetoric" (Jarvis, 1987) emphasising nature, making "better" places, up-to-date conveniences, health, family values and symbols of status (see also Perkins, 1989; Eyles, 1987). This is a form of lifestyle advertising (Leiss et al., 1986) directed at market segments which can afford to buy particular products, signs, images, experiences and places that are significant markers of self and collective identity. Real estate advertising thus gives houses and subdivisions meanings which represent the non-material things and experiences people also want (Williamson, 1978; Williams, 1982; Gottdiener 1995, 2000). Eyles (1987) reached similar conclusions discussing the ways housing advertisements can be understood in the context of commodification debates. With reference to housing he noted that the advertisements "make statements about nature, tradition, history, happiness and harmony and the statements emphasise the continuity and maintenance of existing social relations and ways of organising the world" (p. 96). Both Eyles (1987) and Perkins's (1989) work resonates with Sternberg's (1999, pp. 37-57) analysis of the ways US businesses create "objects replete with meanings that can be shaped to attract customers". This brings us to our central research questions about the commodification of community in Christchurch's recent subdivisions; how community is 'made', bought and sold.

Methods

This research has been conducted primarily at an exploratory level, employing qualitative social research methods in order to investigate the thoughts, opinions and interpretations of developers vis-à-vis community in their subdivisions. The research comprises a multi-methods approach including contextual modern historical research on the history of urban development in Christchurch, observations of residential subdivisions, in-depth interviews with developers and an analysis of their advertising material. Interviewees were selected by identifying land developers in Christchurch and contacting them by email or telephone. Interviews were recorded (or notes were taken) and transcribed for data analysis. Advertising material was also analysed to explore the idea that developers are 'selling community'.

Results and discussion

Is community being commodified?

'Community' and 'neighbourhood' are terms that residential subdivision developers seem to use synonymously throughout their advertising rhetoric. While the two terms refer to different things, both are general terms for "a cluster of inter-related situations relating to specific aspects of social organization" (Knox, 1995, p. 213). Developers are invoking nostalgic notions of community that planning approaches such as New Urbanism claim to provide, based on propinquitous, neighbourly relationships and attachments. In doing so they are portraying images reminiscent of movies such as *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* in an effort to "invoke nostalgia for mythological 1950s-style community neighbourhoods" (Bell & Lyall, 2000, p. 750). Ironically, one piece of advertising (for Addison in Auckland) states that "Most new developments are still based on 1950s style thinking," while the headline for the advertorial reads, "A sense of community never goes out of style." Developers are claiming that their new style of community-oriented planning will deliver more than a house; the buyer will purchase a stake in a close-knit community where times were simpler and the people kinder.

There is plenty of evidence suggesting developers have commodified community in the sense that it is an explicit part of a promotional strategy. The following are examples taken from websites and newspaper

advertisements, both of which are important tools when marketing residential subdivisions. Typically residential subdivisions are referred to as 'new communities.' For example one advertisement suggested "For a lifestyle in a new community, move to Aidanfield" (Aidanfield advertisement). Similarly advertising for a development in Lincoln describes it as "A new rural community" (http://www.liveinlincoln.co.nz) thus exploiting the now well developed connection in the popular mind between rurality and community.

The notion of a village character has been used to invoke a feeling of community.

> Stroll to the beautiful beach, join in the village atmosphere of a seaside community and enjoy seclusion of bush walks through the neighbouring reserve (http://www.kensingtonpark.co.nz).

Emphasis has also been placed on the family-oriented nature of developments and the security that a community allegedly provides.

> Strong community links that create a family-friendly and safe place to live (http://www.propertyrealestate.co.nz).

Legal aides and the capacity to protect capital gain are often used to promote a homogenous community, protect purchasers' investments, or promote a particular style.

> Covenants guide the creation of a timeless architectural theme and establish a sense of community and distinct identity for residents (http://www.propertyrealestate.co.nz).

New 'green communities' are being sold through mixing environmental concerns with the desire for community.

> Our aim is to make Prestons the first of a new generation of communities throughout New Zealand that balances the needs of the community and the environment (http://www.prestons.co.nz).

Advertising also draws a link between the physical planning and position of the subdivision and a sense of community.

> Wide open spaces, well designed avenues and a strong sense of community and freedom(http://www.waitikiri.co.nz).
>
> The physical positioning of the new development - between Lincoln University and the existing township - brings cohesion and a strong sense of togetherness to the whole Lincoln community (http://www.liveinlincoln.co.nz).

Some advertisements make reference to the evolving nature of community and the satisfaction one can achieve through participation in this process.

> A wonderful community is growing. You can be part of it too (Pegasus advertisement).
>
> A community in the making (Aidanfield advertisement).

It must be noted that these examples are not representative of all real estate advertising, however they do establish clearly that developers are selling much more than bricks and mortar; they aim to satisfy a "cultural craving for community" (Arvanitakis, 2009, p. 3) based on images of a cherished past (Fitzsimons, 2000). The ideals, signs and symbols of this 'good community' have become "marketable commodities associated with securing economic gains" (Bosman, 2009, pp. 237-238). While these examples suggest some of the ways in which community is commodified , our interviews with real estate

developers were used to generate a better understanding of what developers themselves understood by the term, and the ways in which they actually tried to build these communities.

The nature of community

There are strong links between developers' advertising material and their interpretations of community, and a strong sense of 'togetherness' was often evident in both. The idea of "strong community links" was reinforced by the developers' comments on communal interaction and social networks, for example. Their advertising often speaks of 'new communities', a view echoed by developers when they talked about the contrast between their developments and established suburbs. They believed that their 'new communities' have a stronger sense of community than the older, established areas of the city because, as one developer explained, "if you go buy a house in Sydenham – chances are you won't talk to your neighbours for a period of time, if at all. But on all our developments you'll find that all our neighbours know everybody else."

When asked what community means to them, the developers gave reasonably common sense answers that incorporated people 'getting along' and interacting in some way. As Developer 1 described it:

> The idea of community is that where possible, what we want to try to promote is –
> people will enjoy living in a certain place better if they get on with the people that
> live with them. And the best way to do that is to encourage them to have focal points
> where they will meet each other.

This idea of communal interaction forming the base of communities was reinforced by Developer 3. "I try to make them talk to each other and recognise themselves as part of a community."

Developer 2 spoke of developing *relationships* within subdivisions.

> The idea is that you get to know your immediate neighbours and then they might
> know someone else within the subdivision and you get to know their neighbours and
> so on. It gains momentum and builds the social fabric of the place.

This developer explicitly aimed to create a quilt of intertwining relationships within their subdivision, a sentiment echoed by others. Developer 6, for example, emphasised the importance to community of communal areas and social structures and believed schools, pubs and recreation areas were important in forming social structures. "Social structures help a network of relationships to form between people – this is the glue that holds communities together... The community is the sum of its parts, but also the sum of its social structures."

In this way, the developers appeared to be trying to foster something more than communal activities; they saw themselves as the providers of the tools that residents could then use to create their community. Developer 1 was especially aware of the need for residents' input and emphasised the importance of the residents' willingness to buy into the concept of community.

> So you know, to a certain extent, you're right, it is in the lap of the gods in terms of
> the people who buy into it, who buy into the subdivision – do they buy into the
> concept? But they're not going to buy into it if you don't promote it and you don't try
> and create it (Developer 1).

Developers 2, 5 and 6 all spoke of how community *develops* from day one. Developer 5 tried to instil "pride of place involvement right from the beginning", hoping that the residents shared in the transformation of their new environment. Developer 2 also mentioned attachment to the environment as an important factor in community. He believed that once people get to know their surroundings they would have more pride in their area and develop "empathy for their landscape leading to a sense of community". As new residents move into the subdivision they become a part of a shared history. This, of course, is highly dependent on the residents themselves. As previously mentioned, some developers interviewed believed that, having been provided the tools, it is up to the residents to create their community.

Others were less concerned with community than they were with profit. Developer 4 (who develops relatively small subdivisions) did not at all endorse the idea of creating community. When asked why community is not a big concern, Developer 4 described his company as a "dirty rotten developer", driven purely by financial goals. This developer maintained that the organisation's entire project is priced out from the beginning and sections were sold based on profit goals. Community *might* play a role in balancing financial imperatives with making the place attractive to buyers but this developer saw the provision of communal spaces and reserves, for example, as a requirement rather than a way of bringing people together. Effectively, this developer was creating a product which, like any other product, must attract buyers and must be sold at a profit. Although the other developers were perhaps a little more circumspect in their comments on profit, they too saw community as an essential part of their bottom line. If they cannot create an attractive environment with ample amenities – including a sense of community - then they would not be able to sell sections.

The relative sizes of the subdivisions affect this. It is much easier (and, we were told, much more necessary) to plan for community when developing a larger plot of land. There may, therefore, be some important differences between those who are effectively building 'master-planned' communities providing a range of amenities and services, and the smaller subdivisions with a focus on housing provision. In light of this finding the role the 'size' of the subdivision plays in the creation of communities is worthy of further investigation.

Mechanisms of commodification
Promotion

Promotion is an important part of the commodification process and the idea of selling 'community' to sell 'communities' is not new. This raised questions about the extent to which the developers we interviewed saw community as part of their promotion campaign. Not all the developers we interviewed believed community to be an important part of their marketing campaigns. "The community feel is not marketed heavily but there's an undertone and it almost is self evolving as a result of what we do" (Developer 5). In this sense, the subdivisions themselves become the advertisement for community, an idea reinforced by Developer 2, who said when community is used to advertise residential subdivisions it is more or less a "throwaway line". It is up to the developer to actually create an attractive place which is conducive to enhanced social interaction. They then either push the community message in their advertising or merely promote the elements of their development that they believe will be favourable to developing a sense of community.

Design

The design of the developments appeared to be of crucial importance in the building of communities and was seen as one of the most important tools at the developers' disposal. This suggests that larger, master planned communities are more conducive to physically planning a development to enhance community,

with the provision of a town centre as a key part of the community by design strategy. Developer 1 described their master plan as:

> ... a whole life experience type of thing. There's a lot of theory behind it, there's a lot of wishy washy stuff but the concept is basically understandably quite natural. It all falls back to your ability to be able to provide those services in the middle that your community wants.

There are nostalgic elements at work here; a harking back to an idealised time when at least some urban centres were smaller and the town centre was at the centre of public life.

Developer 6 re-emphasised the importance of commercial elements when he claimed "A true community has commercial opportunities." Developer 6 explained how the master plan means that nothing is left to chance. It takes all problems into account. The lessons that society has learned along the way are "injected into the master plan."

Designing subdivisions which are conducive to communal interaction outside the centre was also regarded as important and this was supported by the observations we carried out in these places. Developers attempted to bring people together by creating intertwining pathways, playgrounds and reserve areas. According to Developer 1 'walkability' was a major factor in the design of residential subdivisions.

> So we just said when you design it you've got to make sure that you're doing the right things in terms of connectivity for pedestrian traffic and cycles and try and encourage people to do that. So you want to link your green areas as much as possible so people aren't dependant on having to use a motor vehicle to get there.

The effort to encourage social interaction is a major influence on design. Once again, this might only create communal activity and not community *per se*, but the developers believed that, over time, social networks will grow from increased interaction.

Price
Section or lot prices are another tool that developers have used in the development of community although there were contrasting views on how this is carried out. One could argue, for example, that high property prices will lead to sections being taken up by people of a similarly high socio-economic status. Developer 5 talked about attracting the type of people that they wanted. "We have a vision to do a more exclusive style of subdivisions." Through the pricing of the sections the developer attempted to create a more homogenous group. Other developers argued that diversity rather than exclusivity was the key. Developer 1, for example, stated:

It's part of the rationale behind having a master plan is to try and get a better, fuller spectrum of people living in it … That's what all the planning experts tell us. And I think – most of it's logic if you think about it. It's just a smaller slice of what the whole of the city provides in a condensed area within the city itself.

Developer 6 also argued that "The strength of community is in diversity" and one of Developer 6's major developments provides both medium density and lower density housing. Through different pricing, this means that there is more likely to be a diverse social and economic population living in the development. The role of diversity and/or homogeneity in the creation of communities is somewhat contentious. We have already gleaned varying opinions from property developers on this point although, again, the size of

the subdivision may play an important role. The larger 'master planned community', by virtue of its size, may have to appeal to a larger, disparate market.

Garreau uses the example of Levittown to show that varying section prices are not as important as public amenities in creating community.

> In the case of the New Jersey Levittown in the 1950s, for example, it was not enough that there were three basic house types costing from $11,500 to $14,500. A collection of such houses would have been merely as 'subdivision.' What made it a 'community' was that for each cluster of twelve hundred units or so, there was an elementary school, a playground, and a swimming pool (Garreau, 1991, pp. 273-274).

This resonates with the developers' views that public amenities and focal points are of utmost importance in the creation of community. It must also be noted that varied section prices cover a wider range of the market, increasing the developers' chances of selling property.

Conclusion

Our research with real estate developers has left us with a suite of observations that contribute to the more general literature on commodification and urban change as well as the range of processes that lead, ultimately, to the ongoing development and redevelopment of the city and its hinterland. In the first instance, our research clearly suggests that notions of community have indeed been commodified by property developers; this is consistent with other studies that report on the role of real estate developers in building communities (Rosenblatt, 2005). References to, and depictions of, versions of community have become part of the advertising developers use to enhance the desirability of their subdivisions; there is ample evidence that 'community' has become a product to be bought and sold.

However, the research also suggests that this packaging and promotion is not entirely straightforward. In Christchurch today, the use of the term community makes nostalgic references to experiences of safety, wholesome values and togetherness that are perceived to have been lost to varying degrees. This indicates that the process of signification accompanying the commodification of community needs some sort of social referent if it is to help sell the product; in this case community reconciles the wider and perhaps more threatening elements of 'the city' with the connectedness and protection of the 'village'. It is specific enough to 'sell' but is, at the same time, vague enough to satisfy a range of 'cultural cravings' (Arvanitakis, 2009). Furthermore, to be part of a *convincing* cultural performance, our research suggests that the successful and profitable commodification of community requires providing a range of real and necessary facilities and services other than those associated with residential land and housing such as schools; shops; cultural and recreational spaces; educational, leisure and employment opportunities; and a set of aesthetic , administrative and legal practices associated with planning, design, legal covenants and so on. The commodity that community has become is, like other aspects of urban life, embedded in a wider set of processes. It is more co-production than 'product'.

Our work also invites some commentary on the role of place and the way these subdivisions have been marketed For those who can afford this commodified form of community, such developments do seem to provide some of the conditions that facilitate closer relationships with neighbours and others living in the subdivision. Design features, such as the inclusion of shared spaces, facilities and reserves, lend credence to the idea of community without necessarily requiring any real compromises around property rights, self-reliance or privacy. This ensures that there is enough 'there' there to suggest plausibly that community exists) without actually demanding an actively communal life.

While this paper makes these contributions, our research has also raised some concerns about the making of urban form and communities in the city at large. Questions remain, for example, about the extent to which the methods used by developers to create a sense of community can, or should, be extended to the wider population living beyond these subdivisions, some of whom also desire a stronger sense of community (Vallance, 2010). Nonetheless, this research has made important connections between the activities of real estate developers and the urban social fabric, and has highlighted the benefits of further study in this area.

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