

THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE: A CASE STUDY OF MASTER PLANNED ESTATES IN THE LOWER HUNTER REGION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a piece of research from a broader project that explores the processes involved in the creation of “successful” new suburban development. Part of this involves exploring the way relationships might be conceptualised, valued and practiced in master planned estates. Current approaches to the development of master planned estates emphasise getting the morphology, design elements, facilities and spatial arrangements right with the intention that desirable places will emerge. Yet these morphological aspects might be more appropriately considered as being embedded within a network of relationships that manifest in the construction of particular types of urban spaces. The paper explores how relationships are (re)established, conceptualised and given meaning within discursive networks that both construct and are constructed by the places/spaces of master planned estates. In this regard three master planned estates in the Lower Hunter Region were selected (Murray’s Beach, Pacific Dunes and Sanctuary Living) and the content of basic promotional material and websites were analysed. The results indicate that master planned estates are the manifestation of material relationships linking consumption to emotional qualities such as desire, satisfaction and happiness, and dualistic rationalities of nature and economy.

INTRODUCTION

Cities (and their constituent parts) are, by and large, the result of processes, relationships and fluxes that lead to change, but these also create periods where things do not change. In this regard the creation of an urban place is problematic, for when a particular state is reached, the relationships and processes change, and consequently destabilising processes occur. In recent years there has been a move towards producing residential developments in the form of master planned estates (MPEs) which contain a range of residential and non-residential land uses, open space, public services and facilities (Johnson, 2010). In many cases MPEs aim to provide residents “with a complete living experience” (Johnson, 2010, p 376). The underlying rationality for master planning is that it is possible to align or engineer at least some of the material elements, processes and relationships in such a way that a greater level and longer lasting stability in urban residential areas is achieved. In a broad sense contemporary forms of MPEs seek to identify every variable that impinges on the urban condition and account for it through a plan. The assumption is that through planning it is possible to control chaos. Such control is symbolised through markers that instil particular meanings to space at points in time and in this way are attempts to create place.

Nevertheless, notions of place are not predetermined and as such it is necessary to go beyond *a priori* treatments where particular physical urban entities are taken to be places (Pierce, et al., 2010). The concepts of space and place are highly contested. Harvey (1996) on one hand regards place as being carved out from the “temporary permanences” of space. Whereas Massey (2005) proposes that places are “temporary constellations” from a field of space-time trajectories. Both accounts suggest that place may be experienced as being stable and more or less permanent, however it is also constantly changing and being (re)constructed. While there has been significant debate about the nature of place, (often defined in relation to the concept of space), place is the manifestation of a space that has been created through a range of processes and relationships that give meaning, whether it is through naming, creating boundaries and territories, along with aesthetic and emotional dimensions. In other words places are the product of processes and relationships that give them meaning (Hubbard, 2005). In this respect the insights provided by both Harvey and Massey are relevant.

To date there has been a great deal of research into mostly fully private MPEs, where infrastructure, services and facilities are provided, owned and managed by the residents through various types of governance arrangements. This research has focussed on whether or not MPEs are either the “Pariahs or Panacea” (see

Johnson, 2010) of new suburban developments. The increased prevalence of MPEs has been a cause for concern in relation to encouraging social difference, the sustainability of the community, perverse conceptualisations of community and environment effects (Wood, 2002, Kenna, 2007; Walters and Rosenblatt, 2008; Kenna and Stevenson, 2010). Other research has explored the demand-side drivers for the emergence of private communities (Kenna and Dunn, 2009). McGuirk and Dowling (2007) identify that the increasing prevalence of master planned residential developments serves a number of roles that meet goals of both private developers and public urban planning. In this paper I explore the relationship between discourses and place in the construction of MPEs, where discourses are the means through which they are constructed as places (Lees 2004). This is contingent on discursive events being regarded as “moments” (Harvey, 1996, p 78) in the processes of urban development that work to bring together “space-time trajectories” to create a level of stability, meaning, boundaries and consequently form part of MPE place making.

METHODOLOGY

There are three aspects to the methodological approach, the identification of the MPE case studies, discourse analysis of promotional material and website information and relating this analysis to relational place-making. The first part of the analysis involves characterising the nature of the selected MPEs. A number of frameworks have been developed to understand the diverse nature of the MPE phenomenon. Blakely and Snyder (1997) developed a typology that identified three major master planned community types: lifestyle communities, prestige communities and security zone communities. The typology develops further subtypes based on function, security features and nature of amenities. While this typology was derived from studies of gated communities in the United States, some of elements can be utilised to yield qualitative data when comparing different MPEs in Australia and elsewhere.

McGuirk and Dowling (2007) developed a framework that has the potential to provide greater insight into the diverse character of MPEs in the Australian context. This framework consists of three dimensions, the first of which are the governance mechanisms that produce and are enacted in MPEs. These range from the fully private estates (developed along the same lines as a tourist resort) to those that are actually required through statutory planning mechanisms. Once developed, the community governance mechanisms range from full community title (with a body corporate or private management firms to manage the communal property) to no community title with communal property being within the public realm. The second dimension is the housing market context, which is how the MPE engages with the particular sub-markets that they supply. This considers its locational context and the scale and relative uniformity of housing stock and the overall land use mix. The third dimension considers the nature of the community and neighbourhood as diverse, complex and dynamic. In this paper the first two dimensions have been used as a means of comparing the MPEs that are the subject of the research. In this research I have attempted to integrate these two frameworks by incorporating consideration of the overall theme of the MPE and the nature of the facilities. Such integration provides for a richer analysis of the processes that are part of the place-making rationalities and practices.

The use of textual analysis has become an important tool in qualitative geographical research (Forbes, 2004) and discourse analysis has been particularly useful in studying urban phenomenon (Hastings, 1999; Lees, 2004; Jacobs, 2006). Although there are a number of approaches to discourse analysis, post structural approaches are where “discourse is part of the process through which things and identities get constructed” (Lees, 2004, p 102). Consideration is given as to how discourse is part of the process of place-making. Pierce, et al. (2010) seeks to overcome *a priori* approaches to place, while still giving consideration to the material components. In this regard place-making is a networked process that is constituted through the socio-spatial relationships that link individuals together through common place-frames, which are the discursive political undertakings of the process of place-making. The approach is operationalised through the use of a framework that involves; identifying a conflict, identifying and exploring place frames, identifying key actors and institutions and unpacking and interrogating the “bundles” of processes and relationships. The first element of the framework has been altered so that rather than isolating a conflict the focus is given to the contextualisation of a particular issue. This research is concerned with the way discourse is part of the process that seeks to negotiate the particular forms of place making through broader discursive events such as the *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy* (LHRS) (Department of Planning, 2006) and *Building Liveable Communities in the Lower Hunter Region* (Wells, et al. 2007) that construct urban issues in terms of problems, challenges and required actions.

CASE STUDIES OF MASTER PLANNED ESTATES IN THE LOWER HUNTER

In undertaking discourse analysis researchers need to highlight the interpretative context in which the discourse is located (Lees, 2004). In the broader socio-spatial context the study sites are located in the Hunter Valley which is a region on the east coast (and extending inland) of New South Wales, Australia, approximately 150 km north of Sydney. The Hunter Valley is defined by the major urban centres of Newcastle, Maitland, Cessnock, Singleton and Muswellbrook, as well as smaller urban centres such as Dungog, Scone, Merriwa and Murrurundi. The Hunter Valley was divided into the Lower Hunter Region and the Upper Hunter Region as a means of planning for the growth of Sydney and the “need to move beyond metropolitan planning for regional development” (McManus, 2008, p 5). While the Upper Hunter has been constructed as a rural region notable for industries such as wine production, coal mining and thoroughbred breeding (McManus, 2008), the Lower Hunter, not withstanding an industrial, mining and agricultural history, has been largely (re)constructed as a residential region that is expected to support a population influx to ease the pressure on Sydney (Department of Planning, 2006). In this regard, over the last twenty years there has been a substantial increase in new urban residential estates on the fringe and in the in-between spaces of these major urban areas, some of which have taken the form of MPEs.

This research utilises three MPEs in the Lower Hunter, namely Pacific Dunes, Murrays Beach and Sanctuary Living as case studies (see Figure 1), the key attributes of which are provided in Table 1 based on the McGuirk and Dowling (2007) framework. They are all located within approximately 30km of Newcastle. Pacific Dunes is a fully private residential community located approximately 30km from the centre of Newcastle, adjacent to an existing rural residential estate of Medowie. It was primarily developed as a leisure community based on the provision of a golf course and club house, along with walking trails, community facilities and a range of other recreation and leisure facilities.

Sanctuary Living is not a community title estate, with communal property being within the public realm. It is located on the western outer fringe of Newcastle, adjacent to existing established residential suburbs of Fletcher and Minmi. The estate consists of six residential stages. Some stages have been completed, while others are in progress or not developed. While it is not a themed development, it contains a range of features based around the building of a closely connected community. Sanctuary Living was developed by Landcom (the NSW Government’s land development corporation which provides “the link between the government’s social, environmental and economic objectives, the commercial sector and community aspirations” (Landcom, 2011). In this respect Sanctuary Living seeks to showcase or model what is considered to be “best practice” in residential development.

In contrast Murrays Beach, at the southern end of Lake Macquarie, is a part private community, where key infrastructure and services are provided by Lake Macquarie City Council, yet there are private facilities for the exclusive use of estate residents such as the swimming pool and strict controls on building through restrictive covenants. This development largely consists of single dwellings set within the bushland of the Wallarah Peninsula. The developer, Stockland, promotes the estate as an eco-friendly lifestyle community, giving prominence to the nearby ocean beaches and surrounded by bushland.

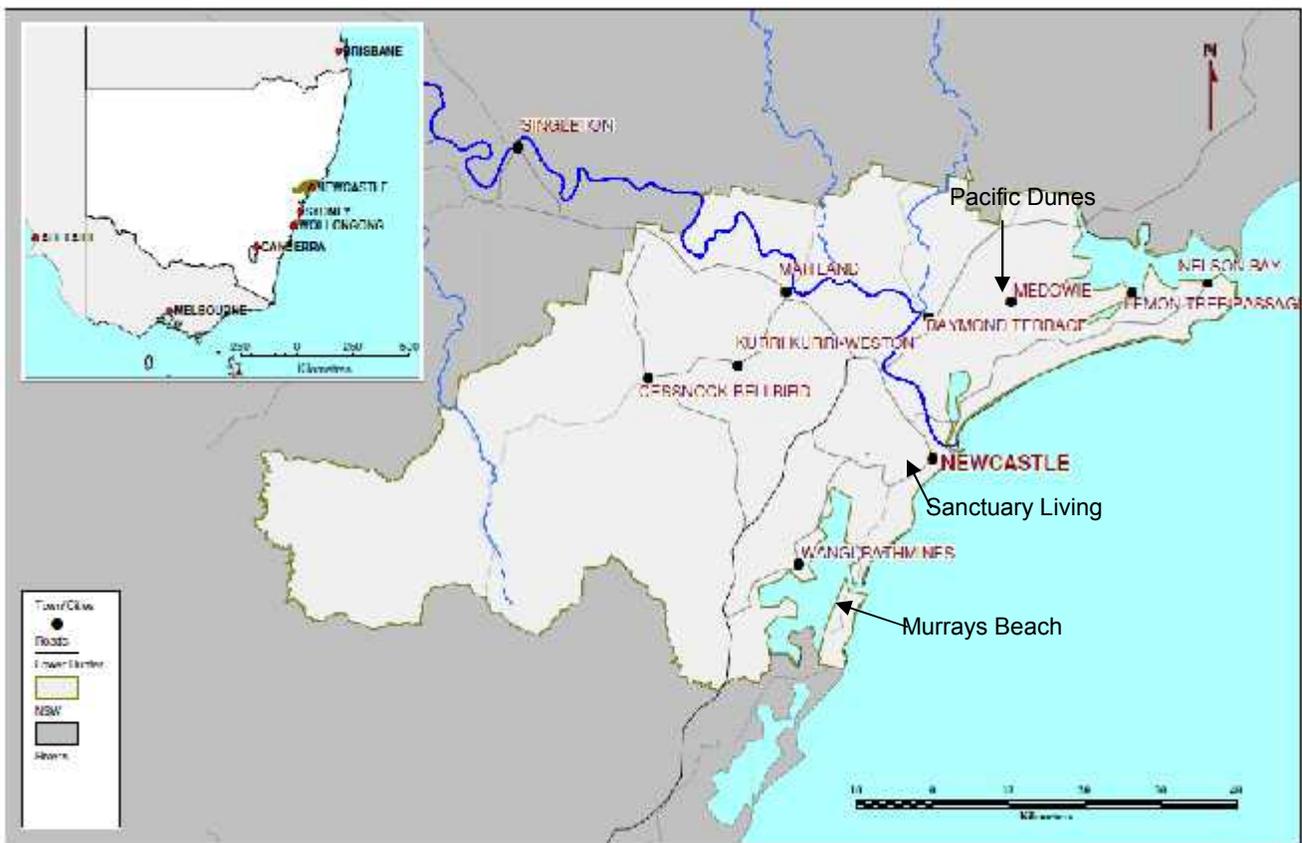


Figure 1. Location of Case Study Sites in the Lower Hunter

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Master Planned Estates

Framework for Analysing Master-Planned Estates	Master Planned Estate Case Study		
	Pacific Dunes	Sanctuary Living	Murrays Beach
1. Governance Mechanisms			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> that Produce the MPE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fully private. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Government through Landcom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fully private, however as stages are completed control of key infrastructure and services is handed to Lake Macquarie City Council.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> that are enacted in the MPE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Title 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communal facilities within public realm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Title
2. Housing Market Context			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locational Context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fringe of existing rural residential estate (Medowie). Greenfield site 30km north-east of Newcastle. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outer fringe of Newcastle. Greenfield site Adjoins existing residential areas (Wallsend, Fletcher and Minmi). 25km west of Newcastle CBD. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fringe of the settlements of Lake Macquarie Greenfield site Adjoins existing areas of Swansea and Nords Wharf. 20km South of Newcastle Separated by forested zone. That is associated with the adjacent Wallarah National Park
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scale and relative uniformity of the housing stock and overall land use mix 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 232 Lots Detached houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detached houses Some Medium Density (yet to be developed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detached houses
3. Function/Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recreational based largely on golfing. Minor passive activities – walking and social activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lifestyle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leisure based on more passive activities – eg bushwalking and water related activities. This also has a theme based on Eco-Living
4. Nature of Amenities and Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18 Hole Golf Course Driving range Tennis court 25m swimming pool community summer house walking trails bicycle paths club house, bar and restaurant parks playgrounds BBQ area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community facilities (yet to be built) Open Space Cycle ways Pedestrian Walkways Sporting fields (under construction) Commercial centre (yet to be built) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Village Green Jetty Café and General Store Swimming Pool Picnic area Foreshore walking trail

DISCOURSES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE

The analysis of the promotional material of each MPE case study identified place frames in relation to common themes of proximity and distance, sense of community, the provision of open space and natural areas and the creation of a residential idyll. The discourses within the promotional material reflect other processes and associated discursive practices where the existing city is constructed as a problem or under threat and some sort of action is required or justified. As a result of such discourses, MPEs are constructed through narratives that offer hope, peace of mind, security and a sense that positive action is being taken to provide residential spaces that are protected from the threats posed by the larger city.

Constructing the problem city

There has been a long desire to create urban spaces that are more conducive to human needs. In particular the social and economic transformations in cities over the past two decades have created greater need for more stable, peaceful and ordered residential environments (Kenna and Dunn, 2009). This desire to create what might be considered more perfect suburban developments is linked to discourses that construct the existing urban environment as either a problem or facing significant challenges. Unlike other research into MPE marketing products the presence of “weak-state” and “anti-public” (Kenna and Dunn, 2009, p 803) discourses in relation to the existing city are not explicit in relation to Pacific Dunes, Sanctuary Living and Murrays Beach. The marketing of these MPEs largely do not mention the existing city and place greater emphasis on the qualities that would make them ideal places to live.

Nevertheless this silence needs to be considered in relation to discourses on the existing city. The study of MPEs should be considered in relation to issues that are reflected in discursive events where the post-modern city is framed as a problem in relation to services and infrastructure, motor vehicle dependency, employment, use of resources, lack of affordable housing, social problems and population growth pressures. These problems are captured in recent public spatial planning documents such as the LHRS which identifies the “regional challenges” as being “low density development”, “low levels of public transport”, “increasing congestion” and “under-utilised infrastructure capacity in some existing areas” (Department of Planning, 2006, p 23). This problematisation of the existing city suggests there is a need for change and something that is new. As such the LHRS constructs a new future where “good urban design outcomes will be critical for all forms of new settlement in the Region” and “new release areas should be based on Neighbourhood Planning Principles to ensure that new suburbs have access to jobs, centres and transport choice within their communities” (Department of Planning, 2006, p 26). Thus the narrative of the problem city builds the case for future planning discourses that create a more stable and ordered residential environment. There is an emphasis on the qualities of place and “newness”. The desired result is an urban environment where all the possible needs of the residents has been planned and incorporated.

Proximity and distance

The discursive construction of place is also about negotiating pathways between oppositional concepts. Thus the politics of new suburban land development on the urban fringe seek to shore up the underlying tension between the notions of proximity and distance. In the case of Sanctuary Living it is possible to “treasure the feeling of being away from it all ... without being too far” (Landcom, 2010). Pacific Dunes is “just 25 minutes from Newcastle and 25 minutes to the golden beaches of Port Stephens” (Pacific Dunes, 2011). Thus the place of the MPE is framed as a halfway point between the spatial concepts of being near and far. There are two key elements of this framing. Firstly, that place in relation to proximity is constructed through a pragmatic temporal relationship to a major urban centre, where the reality of needing access to the existing services and employment, as well as broader connections within the city, surrounding areas and beyond come into play. Secondly place also emerges in terms of distance in relation to the more idealized notions where residential living can provide an opportunity for escape, peace and tranquility, and more opportunities for a relaxed and comfortable lifestyle.

The proximity and distance frame brings into focus a number of converging trajectories in the processes of urban land development. One of these trajectories is the way residential development markets are highly segmented, carrying substantial risks which requires land developers to be continually searching for ways of providing new residential products. This means that developers are always likely to be pursuing projects that gain an edge over other developers (Coiacetto, 2007). Another trajectory is the result of broader community desires to minimise

land use change by controlling land development and urban expansion. This is reflected in planning regulations where the supply of residential land is controlled, in the case of New South Wales by local government and state government. The development industry in seeking to produce new residential products, especially where the reclassification of land (i.e. rezoning) is required, must provide justification as to why a development should occur at a particular site, especially when it may be at odds with broader strategic planning strategies and rationalities. There is a preference for MPEs in the Lower Hunter to be developed on greenfield sites (which are usually within remnant bushland or “retired” farmland) in the urban fringe locations. However there are also trajectories that follow likely consumer demands for residential areas close to existing urban areas, particularly commercial centres, while the prospective residents will be able to enjoy a peaceful environment with open space that is away from the noise and stresses of the existing city and suburbs.

The proximity and distance frame exists in tension with preferences for the reduction of urban greenfield expansion and greater urban consolidation. Over the last three decades policies of urban consolidation have been adopted by the NSW Government as a means of delivering more sustainable urban development through reducing infrastructure service costs and increasing housing choice (Freestone, 2010). Urban consolidation operates side-by-side another political trajectory to counter the possibility of housing shortages and build homeownership expectations. Furthermore, as soon as new housing on the urban fringe starts to decline then urban development groups’ start lobbying for more land releases by comparing Sydney land releases and housing statistics with Melbourne. Consequently in practice suburban expansion into greenfield areas seems likely to continue, along with the redevelopment of existing inner city areas (Department of Planning, 2006). These MPEs are framed as providing some sort of acceptable medium or a situation where an exception is possible due to the more highly planned nature of the development. The proximity and distance frame then becomes a means of forming permanence to trajectories of development industry process, continued consumer preferences for living in the suburbs, community expectations for landscape conservation and community expectations for affordable home ownership.

Creating a sense of community

The creation of the sense of community within MPEs is largely an aspiration that is expected to be a logical outcome from the provision of facilities and events by the developer. Pacific Dunes promotes itself as an “established neighbourhood”, where “the community spirit is alive and well”, which is followed by “Young families will enjoy the parks and playgrounds where children can play together safely, while Pacific Dunes’ own bar and restaurant offer the perfect places to meet with friends and neighbours for a drink or meal” (Pacific Dunes, 2011). Similarly Murrays Beach provides a “vibrant village green, jetty, café and foreshore picnic spots” (Stockland, 2011). Thus the discourse constructs imaginations that a sense of community can be created by the provision of common property and communal open space and areas of high amenity where people are likely to go for leisure activities and meet. At Sanctuary Living along with the planned future provision of community facilities are “events...held throughout the year to bring neighbours together” (Landcom 2010, p 3). In this regard there is recognition that the creation of community may need to go beyond the provision of facilities to the creation of situations where people are likely to meet. Yet while the term community is open to multiple interpretations, to be consistent with other studies of MPEs the communities of place interpretation where individuals are “embedded in a web of relationships that involve adherence to shared values, norms, meanings and history” (Walters and Rosenblatt, 2008, p 399) is used. This type of community in the existing city and suburbs is said to have been diminished and replaced by individualism and more dispersed forms of community. This is constructed as a problem and a cause of social tension because people are disconnected and less likely to understand each other and less able to function in a local community sense. The promotional material of the MPE case studies is therefore enacting the place-frame of communities that grow out of place.

Providing open space and passive recreation areas

MPEs may also be framed as “healthified urban spaces” (see Fusco, 2007) where it is possible to “enjoy a healthy outdoor living” (Landcom, 2010, p 1). Table 1 shows that in the three MPE case studies a range of amenities and facilities are provided that encourage various forms of outdoor activities. Furthermore much of the related promotional materials have visual imagery of people being engaged in a range of outdoor activities such as playing golf, running on a beach, riding bicycles, children walking to school, children playing in bushland (see Pacific Dunes, 2011 and Landcom, 2010). This healthy living framing is closely connected the nature of the amenities and facilities that are provided within the MPE, but also the proximity to beaches, lakes and National Parks. The underlying logic is that by providing the open space and facilities people will adopt a healthier

lifestyle. Such place framing emerge from discourses that link existing city or suburban living to poor health associated with lack of physical activity. There are also future predicting discourses in *Building Liveable Communities in the Lower Hunter Region* where “communities around the world are presently facing unprecedented changes to the physical and social worlds” (Wells, et al, 2007, p 9) and planned suburban expansion will affect the future “liveability” of the Lower Hunter. Such discourses provoke both uncertainty and a need for action. Through the inclusion of lifestyle amenities and facilities, MPEs are able to respond to the fears and anxieties generated by such discourses by providing a relatively stable and predictable urban environment.

Place connection to the “natural” environment

The framing of place in new urban development can involve the use of the dualistic conceptualisations of human and natural environments. Such dualisms in relation to MPE developments may be deployed to establish more emotive and passionate meanings. For example, at Sanctuary Living “the built and natural environments come together to create the perfect place you call home – your Sanctuary” (Landcom, 2010, p 1). This implies that the built environment and the natural environment are separate but through careful planning they can be joined. The actual master plan of Sanctuary Living shows that “proposed open space/bushland” will be retained in and around each stage of the estate. Thus the human-nature dualism is used to suggest that the combination of the two can work to create the “perfect place”. Nevertheless one of the carefully planned features of a MPE is the regulated connections that are made between humans and features of the surrounding environment that are considered to be natural.

The importance of invoking conceptualisations of the natural environment may be driven by a number of factors. In the first place the developer may be seeking to create an estate that is different in some way and caters for a niche submarket of property buyers. In the case of the earlier stages of Murrays Beach there was a desire to create a residential estate within a bushland setting with access to Lake Macquarie, beaches and a National Park. This, however, may also be related to broader public policy frameworks that are concerned with the conservation of the environment. The *National Strategy for Ecological Sustainable Development* (Australian Government, 1992) and its adoption through state legislation placed importance on the protection of biological diversity, which can be in conflict with the need for urban expansion. The LHRs identifies that “much of the native vegetation remaining in the Region is of high conservation significance and provides habitat for numerous threatened species” (Department of Planning, 2006, p 8). The strategy also identifies that one of the key challenges is protecting and managing biodiversity and conservation values while providing for the additional housing needs of a growing population (Department of Planning, 2006). This tension has been played out in conflict between land development interests and conservation interests. The MPE case studies suggest there can be a mutually supportive co-existence between native bushland conservation and urban land development.

In relation to Murrays Beach the integration of biological diversity conservation and residential development is the central discourse in its construction of a place identity. As identified in Table 1, Murrays Beach was established as a themed MPE based on the eco-living concept. The earlier stages of this MPE utilised planning and designs that minimise the need to remove the Eucalypt trees and as such the tree and shrub vegetation are literally in and around the buildings. Furthermore the specifically architecturally designed dwellings are intended to be complementary to the bushland setting. Consequently one of the leading marketing statements is “Nature has crafted it” reflecting the care that has been taken to ensure the development is in keeping with the natural bushland setting. The degree of native bushland conservation is highlighted in that Murrays Beach is said to be “enveloped by the splendour of Wallarah National Park”, which enables one to “step outside” and be “immersed in the scenery and wildlife” (Stockland, 2011). Thus the co-existence of native bushland and urban development may frame Murrays Beach as a sustainable development because it results in less native bushland being removed than in a conventional suburb, where the practices usually involve clear felling and site and then re-establishing trees and landscaping in more convenient arrangements. This form of place framing is nevertheless overtly a political act in that is an attempt by the developer to negotiate the use of a particular area of native vegetation in a way that might be more acceptable to broader community expectations.

Constructing a suburban idyll

The construction of a place involves instilling particular meanings and associations. The construction of the existing suburbs as a problem involves focusing on negative meanings and associations. Kenna (2010) identifies that the lived experiences within the established suburbs of western Sydney were a factor in residents decision to buy into a gated MPE. The idyllic discourses associated with the MPE case studies seek to construct place

by drawing on very specific meanings and associations that are intended to evoke images and emotions about the particular environment. The promotional material for all three MPEs attempt to connect certain aspects of the “natural” environment with senses, emotions and feelings. At Pacific Dunes it is possible to “build your dream home”, which will be “set among natural bushland on offer, you’ll enjoy all the pleasures of living in a peaceful, friendly neighbourhood” (Pacific Dunes, 2011). At Murrays Beach “all homesites provide stunning lake vistas or views to natural bushland, so you’ll be instantly soothed by a sense of calm” (Stockland, 2011). Another aspect of constructing a residential idyll, which is not explicitly stated but implied, is the creation of an environment that is predictable. In the case of Sanctuary Living this desire for predictability extends to the inclusion of a “front landscaping package” to ensuring the right theme is maintained within the estate. In all three MPEs dwelling plans must be either based on approved designs or approved by the estate builder panel to ensure they are consistent with the desired theme for the estate. This is aimed at constructing some sort of suburban idyll where residential living in the estate is associated with peace, tranquility, escapism, being close to nature, predictability and stability (in an otherwise uncertain world).

The notion of idyll is about an environment evoking images and passions that are representative of that environment. The concept has largely been used in rural geography to represent rural environments and has been associated with ideas of pastoral wealth, anti-urbanism and a search for a time and place where life seemed better more controllable and less turbulent. Boyle and Halfacree (1998) have identified that the rural idyll conceals actual issues such as racial discrimination and poverty. In the case of suburban development the notion of idyll may have the effects of concealing the nature of the processes and relationships that seek to achieve the stability with the MPE environment. While there may not be an actually existing suburban idyll, there is an interest by those involved in the development and marketing of MPEs to (re)establish more positive associations with living in MPEs on the residential fringe.

CONCLUSION

The construction of MPEs as places is crucial to their success as new suburban developments. However constructing a collection of buildings and other structures in a particular locality does not necessarily pre-empt the manifestation of place. The works of both Harvey (1996) and Massey (2005) provide insights into how place is the combination of “temporary permanences” that are the result of the coming together of particular space-time trajectories which are constantly changing and can be constructed and re-constructed. In other words while an entity such as a MPE may give the appearance of being a place in terms of its physicality and tangibility, it is actually the convergence of particular processes and relationships that provide any sense of the stability and meaning.

Discourse is part of the process through which space is continually negotiated by providing connections to knowledges, logics, imaginations and values that instill particular, and what are considered to be desirable, place frames. The MPE is the ultimate solution arrived at through the problem city discourses that occur within broader spatial planning documents that reflect on past failures and future challenges. The existing city discourses reflect perspectives that individualism and dispersed forms of community are undesirable. At the same time the processes of creating MPEs builds on logics that communities of place are likely to be more socially desirable. The result is that the three MPEs that were part of this case study incorporate progressive discourses of how they are building local communities through the provision of facilities and spaces where people are more likely to meet. Place is also framed as both a staging point and a refuge through the discursive construction of MPEs as being near and far in relation to existing city centres and localities. This draws on discourses that construct past approaches to urban planning as creating situations where new suburbs have been placed in locations that were too remote and difficult to service, but also discourses that construct the current city as emotionally demanding and something from which temporary escape is desirable. The healthscape place frame is formed through both words and the imagery that convey a sense of there being an effortless ability to engage in outdoor activities and thereby improve one’s lifestyle. Thus place is constructed out of the discourses of an existing city where physical activity is difficult, and knowledges about the body and its requirements for physical activity in order to remain healthy. The MPEs, particularly in the case of Murrays Beach, are framed as places that can exist in harmony with the “natural” environment. This is formulated through discourses of the existing city and particularly suburban expansion being a threat to nature and biological diversity. Finally MPEs are places that can evoke deep emotional attachments to the environment. This is through discourses that frame the existing suburbs as a problem and the cause of many social problems. MPEs are then presented as a logical and highly desirable solution.

Thus through the case study of three MPEs in the Lower Hunter Region, it is possible to gain insights into how the discursive practices in the promotional texts help to establish connections between these space-time trajectories in a way that is embodied within their physical forms and spatial arrangements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Phil McManus, Kurt Iveson, Dong Xing and Liping Yan at the University of Sydney, School of Geosciences for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

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