

Taupo's 'Lot 60' design competition

delivers for council and architects

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Although there is growing interest in sustainable forms of suburban development and associated notions of 'low impact urban design', little has been built that sets New Zealand relevant benchmarks.

With significant growth planned along the eastern edge of Taupo (associated with the East Taupo Arterial Route that will see SH1 bypass the town centre) Taupo District Council is actively exploring alternative patterns of residential development that might achieve sustainability goals (having wisely made significant land purchases some time ago).

The open two-stage design competition held in 2007 for a 1.9 hectare block saw two of nineteen Stage 1 entries developed in a second stage. The winning design, by Antanas Procuta Architects, is an instructive engagement with issues that make sustainable suburbia a tough nut to crack.

Surrounded on two sides by conventional suburbia and on the other two by a future collector road and a public reserve, the Victoria Lot 60 site has been earmarked for 20 dwellings per gross hectare (approximately twice the density of adjacent areas.)

The winning design meets this target with a small number of detached houses, six groups of two or three attached houses, and the remaining eighteen units as row houses on narrower lots but with plan variations securing

extra exterior wall and access to outdoor spaces not usually associated with this housing type. At the southwestern corner of the site (the point of greatest accessibility from the future road network) the architects have located a small neighbourhood centre, with six shop/office units fronting a small plaza and residences above. Stacking dwelling units one above another has been avoided throughout the proposal.

A key site planning consideration

has been to minimize the number of street crossings, with vehicle access to all but eight houses from either an on-site loop road or shared driveways. (Market resistance nationally to housing clusters accessed via common driveways will need to be overcome if we are to creatively lift suburban densities). A network of pedestrian pathways either follows rain gardens and storm water swales, or connects to the loop road.





Sensibly, the main north-south pathway traverses the mixed use plaza. A small open space at the centre of the site – a gesture to communal life – is edged by this pathway network, encouraging its use by more than the on-site community.

If all this is little more than intelligent site planning, where Procuta Architects offer real innovation is in the design of individual lots and their dwellings, to achieve density targets without compromising resident amenity. All five house types include an upper floor over part only of the lower floor, resulting in interesting variations in building height, neatly exploited by the use of shallow mono-pitch roof forms.

Ground floor living spaces typically open in two directions, to courtyard or patio spaces. This double connection enables most units to look out to the public realm and inwards to open spaces shared by a number of dwellings.

Floor areas range from 136 sq metres (three and a half bedrooms) to 290sq metres where a shop/office space is included. Of particular note is the row house plan, where a double-height space with gallery access to upper floor bedrooms helps overcome the lateral compression of the party walls, and is integral with the low energy design of the unit. Clever planning of this predominant house type also sees the on-site open space drawn back alongside the adjacent property party wall, to open into a small courtyard linked to internal living and entry spaces.

North and west orientations for these deep outdoor spaces ensures good solar access, while overall site planning cleverly establishes sightlines from these

courtyards to the central communal open space and maximizes surveillance of through-site pathways. It is such simple yet insightful design moves that hold the key to wider market acceptability of higher suburban densities.

But if increased amenity can be achieved by these kinds of moves, it may be more difficult to persuade the market that living more closely to each other also requires a move towards less individuality of house form and appearance. The competition brief sought a development that not only offered high visual amenity but also responded to the Taupo environment, climate and landscape.

Procuta Architects took a consistently restrained and disciplined approach to the geometry, materials and details of each individual dwelling, and allowed much of the rich character of the development to grow out

of the numerous local inflections of both house and site planning that follow from reconciling often competing demands for density and amenity. This approach is, in my view, the correct one, demonstrated by the best of medium-density housing in other countries.

The outcome of the forward-looking 'Victoria Lot 60' competition demonstrates the importance of design that is an insightful response to site-specific conditions...the sort of thing that architects are supposed to be good at.

Given that the delivery of sustainable suburban development is an area that is professionally contested, this suggests that the architectural profession should be leading the charge in these kinds of projects.

(Professor John Hunt was competition advisor and chair of the judging panel).

