

A place where everybody knows your name

David Pronger, urban designer of Antanas Procuta Architects details their winning entry in the Taupo District Council's competition

Sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues argue in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) that our individualism has become unbalanced creating a culture of separation, which, if left unchecked, will “collapse of its own incoherence.”¹

Increasingly we hear that we must remedy the isolation and loneliness of our culture through a renewed commitment to community.

“Environmental sustainability goes hand in hand with social sustainability. Towns and cities are first and foremost places where people live and work, not just as individuals but also as communities. If urban areas do not provide civilised places for people to live and for communities to prosper then it will not matter how “green” they are, they will not be sustainable.”²

Wider context: Nodal points

Our design concept is founded on a planning context strategy affirming proximity of residential areas to nodal points of community infrastructure: parks, local shopping, bus stops, health centre, and early childhood learning. These local facilities not only discourage car use, they bring residents together, reinforcing neighbourhood and community.

Building local community requires local spaces. Our layout is designed around a hierarchy of safe open spaces, from small sitting areas along walkways with access from the patio and gardens of half-a-dozen houses, to the larger community space in the centre.

Green shoelaces

Typically, open space will comprise of unrelated landscape elements. Our proposed

networks of green shoelaces join up parks, road reserves, schools and playing fields avoiding dead ends. They generate spaces that are more useful for amenity, recreational use and create wildlife corridors. These green paths tie neighbourhoods together and create convenient and comfortable places in which to live.

Landscape, green streets and water

Within the public domain our landscape strategy proposes to characterise Lot 60 by distinctive planting; predominantly native conveying visual softness and simplicity, low growing forms promoting safety through unrestricted visibility from neighbouring dwellings and productive landscaping such as plums, apples and pears, affording shade in summer and solar penetration and graceful structure in winter. We also propose to





Discussing design ideas for the project: David Pronger, Donna Lynch and Geoff Lentz

incorporate hedges instead of fences, to create a soft-edge threshold between private and common areas.

Taupo District has a global reputation for its mountain, lake and river environments. The landscape strategy of our proposal respects the existing topography and captures the views of Taupomoana to the west, Maunganamu to the southeast and the Tauhara mountain ridge to the northeast.

The carriageway will be porous with paving stones and gravel, interplanted with grass, mosses or even small flowers. Swales will direct storm water to intermittent sediment traps and rain gardens or reed beds along the berms.

The impact of high fuel costs on the commercial production and long distance transport of food means that local food growing is increasingly important to sustainability. Therefore individual household and community food growing becomes essential. Within the curtilage of each dwelling there is space for a food garden and composting of household organic waste. There is also potential to attach greenhouses to harness solar energy which will extend the growing season.

Each dwelling will be equipped for rainwater harvesting to supply bathroom, laundry and garden. After simple household-based aerobic treatment, grey water from bathroom and laundry will be reused for toilet flushing. Town water will only be reticulated to kitchen and bathroom hand basin. The plumbing system and fittings will be high water efficiency.

Mini neighbourhoods - demographics

By studying neighbourhood relationships, sociologist Herbert Gans, forty

years ago, gathered compelling evidence supporting the propriety of the concept of a small housing cluster gathered around a common area of open space.³

Like clusters of Shanghai houseboats, our design is a collection of mini-neighbourhoods respectively responding to a hierarchy of common spaces.

In our design we propose a mixture of large family-sized, medium and small houses in the form of terraces or clusters, to epitomise the accommodation demographics of the Taupo population. We recognise the advantages of commonality and diversity in communities conferred by the pepper-and-salt scattering of age, interests, livelihoods and wealth.

Mixed use and the provision of live-work environments contribute to this environment and partner human connectedness.

Green buildings – building aesthetic

Our houses would be modest, highly insulated, designed to act passively, absorbing energy from the sun, ventilating naturally allowing by the fabric and thermal mass to work effectively. Efficient wood/pellet burners will supplement passive solar space heating. Active solar water heating controls will contribute to power and hot water demands.

The houses are comprised of local aggregate within the concrete and timber is sourced from local sustainable forestry. All windows are double glazed.

While engaging with these issues of sustainability and energy conservation, the architecture is, at the same time, simple, modern and not limited by a low-tech aesthetic.

¹ Bellah, Robert et al, (1985).

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life

² Ruden, D & Faulk, N. (1999).

Building the 21st Century Home: The Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood.

³ Gans, Herbert, (1967)

The Levittowners

Sustainable urban design gets competitive

The Taupo District Council's 'Victoria Lot60 Urban Design Competition', judged and announced in July last year, was seen as an "opportunity for the town to lead the way in urban design, setting a high standard for development in Taupo", according to the council's strategic property projects manager at the time, Scott Holdsworth.

The objective for entrants was to challenge the traditional nature of subdivision development in Taupo while seeking to fit within the context of the existing residential form and environment.

The competition gave design professionals the opportunity to provide a sustainable solution to shape residential development in Taupo and accommodate the town's future growth. Entrants were to consider providing a mix of housing for retired people, larger families, and singles/couples, inline with recent studies into local market demand and housing needs.

Antanas Procuta Architects of Hamilton took away the prize for the best urban design for the 1.9 hectare greenfield site, with Harrison Grierson Consultants of Auckland runners-up.