

# Lakeside living: Commodifying community in a master planned estate

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## ABSTRACT

Master Planned Communities (MPCs) present new features to the housing development scene in Australia based around what has been called 'lifestyle consumerism'. As part of this, property developers involved in MPCs have associated the idea of community with their product through extensive marketing campaigns, and have expressed the aim to foster the formation of community in their developments. This paper considers the implications of developers wishing to foster the formation of community and presents the proposition that one aspect of this involves the commodification of community. 'Commodification of community' as used here refers to the development of community as a commodity. This process is shown to involve an idealised or mythical form of community. Following (Maffesoli 1996, p. 148) 'myth' is used here "...in the sense in which something that has perhaps never really existed acts, effectively, on the imagination of the time." The possible impact of the commodification of community on attitudes to community formation in a master planned community is considered. The paper is based on a project currently being undertaken investigating community building in a master planned community in South East Queensland.

## INTRODUCTION

Randolf (2003, p. 13) argues that Master Planned Communities (MPCs) 'represent something qualitatively new' in the housing development scene in Australia, representing an upmarket move to cater for middle-income families. MPCs are seen as being concerned with 'affluence, aspiration and security' and social cohesion (Randolph 2003, p. 13), in contrast to the earlier suburban developments and their greater focus on lower income, first-home buyers and social housing. Randolph defines these new features as 'life-style consumerism' (p. 7). Together with this focus on consumption, recent studies have shown that there is an increasing emphasis on the marketing of community, and an attempt by the developer to facilitate the formation of community, in relation to MPCs (Gleeson 2003; Gwyther 2002; Minnery and Bajracharya 1999).

This paper investigates this relationship between consumerism, the marketing of community and MPCs in terms of the commodification of community, in an attempt to further understand the nature of MPCs and their impact on urban society. The paper first looks at consumerism and the way that MPCs can be seen to be placed within that context. It then looks at community in a MPCs and the idea of the commodification of community. Findings from research carried out in a MPC in South East Queensland are used to illustrate the commodification process, and to draw conclusions relating to the dynamics that might exist between community as a commodity consumed by residents, and community as social interactions constructed by residents.

The research on which this paper is based has been funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant conducted in partnership with the property developer, Delfin Lend Lease (DLL). As Australia's largest developer of MPCs, DLL has a professed focus not only on building housing estates, but also on building communities, and its marketing campaigns highlight the importance of community to their developments. Springfield Lakes (SL) is one of a number of such communities being developed by DLL. Commencing in 2001, it now contains approximately 1500 occupied

homes with about 4500 residents. By 2020 when the development process reaches completion, it is estimated that approximately 30,000 people will be living in the Springfield Lakes community (Delfin Lend Lease 2005). MPCs can be defined as ‘... large scale integrated housing developments built by private developers in “greenfield” suburban or urban-fringe locations’ (Minnery et al. 2001, p. 2) which include the provision of extensive facilities, amenities, and aesthetic features. An additional significant feature of MPCs is the relatively long-term commitment of the developer to the project.

## **CONSUMERISM**

Contemporary society has been characterized as individualistic (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and relationships as fluid, highly mobile and impermanent (Bauman 2003). In spite of the appeals of communitarians for the maintenance of a moral backbone within communities (Etzioni 1993), the suggestion is that a previous ethic of interdependence has been abandoned and replaced by consumerism and satisfaction of individual needs (Hamilton 2003). Contemporary society has been recognised as being increasingly shaped by the consumption patterns of its members rather than by their production (Edwards 2000; Hamilton and Denniss 2005; Mullins 1995; Ransome 2005). This is not to suggest that work is no longer a significant factor in people’s lives, but that consumption has assumed a more significant role than in the past. Reasons for this include the rise of individualisation and informalisation (Edwards 2000; Warde 1997) which places a greater emphasis on the choices of individuals in the light of reduced controlling influence from groups and organisations. Rather than identity being defined primarily on the basis of our occupation or what we produce, identity is now increasingly seen to be defined by what we consume, and the lifestyle choices we make (Mullins 1995; Ransome 2005). Additional factors include the proliferation of goods to choose from, and, perhaps most significantly, an increasing level of affluence (Hamilton and Denniss 2005; Ransome 2005). Increasing consumption has also been seen as an attempt to manage and mitigate the uncertainties and insecurities of current times by buying our way out of difficulty (Bauman 1988; Meijer 1998).

While some have seen consumption as antithetical to social interaction by virtue of its manifestation of individuality (Edwards 2000), others have recognised the capacity of consumption to engender collectivities associated with shared taste for particular products and lifestyles (Warde 1997). For example, Meijer (1998, p. 240) claims that ‘The self constructed as consumer does not seem to be capable of citizenship’, and Aldridge sees the project of the communitarians being ‘...to turn consumers back into citizens’ (Aldridge 2003, p. 68). On the other hand, new forms of collectivity are envisioned, with Maffesoli (1996) for example, using the term “neo-tribes” to refer to those ‘... elective groupings, exhibiting high levels of temporary commitment, where boundaries are identifiable through the shared lifestyles of members’ (Warde 1997, p. 16). On a broader level, the shopping mall has been considered by some to be the new focus of community for members of consumer society (Bauman 2000; Shields 1992).

Consumption is seen as becoming inculcated into all areas of daily life, including social interaction and areas like personal and spiritual wellbeing (Edwards 2000), with the possibility of the purchase of a ‘make-over’ changing our world forever. On the one hand mass consumption tastes predominate (Ritzer 1996), while on the other hand, tastes can be seen to be becoming more “determinate, more specialized and more discriminatory” (Warde 1997, p. 16). With a shift from consumption meeting needs, to fulfilling desires (Mullins 1995) product differentiation has become critical to accommodate different tastes and to maintain market share, leading to brand marketing and to an associated enchantment of the product, whereby the products are ‘freighted with positive symbolic meaning – to enhance their appeal to consumers’ (Knox 2005, p. 35). The role of advertising becomes central to this process (Goldman 1992).

As Randolph (2003) indicates, homeownership and the development of new suburban estates in Australia, has been associated directly with consumption, with Mullins (1995, p. 88 italics in original) claiming that:

... a disproportionate number of Australian metropolitan households have moved to the metropolitan fringe because it offers them, relative to their social circumstances and to the opportunities available to them if they lived in inner or middle suburbs, greater consumption opportunities for satisfying both *wants/desires* and *needs*.

Similarly, in a North American context, Knox (2005, p. 37) states that: 'What is enchanting about contemporary suburbia, then, is not its social life but its appeal to people's exclusionary impulses and, above all, to their self-identity as consumers'. Consumerism, then, can be seen as one of the primary forces shaping the form of new suburban housing developments (Flusty 2004; Knox 2005; Mullins 1995). A key to the intrusion of consumption into all aspects of life is the process of commodification (Edwards 2000), a point that will be returned to later.

## **MASTER PLANNED COMMUNITIES**

Within this context of increasing consumerism, the MPC would appear to have particular characteristics that provide competitive advantage in the market under current conditions. In particular MPCs accommodate lifestyle choices in general and facilitate individual choices that incorporate the desire for certain communal conditions on the one hand, and the desire for individuality and privacy and security on the other, with quality control ensured by a long-term commitment from the developer to the project. All of this is managed and marketed to ensure maximum consumption opportunities. The success of the MPC might be measured in terms of their popularity, record sales, and expressions of satisfaction from residents. However, the focus of MPCs on the marketing of community in their developments as a distinguishing feature appears to have responded to particular sensibilities in purchasers (Gleeson 2003). It is this feature of the marketing and consumption of community in MPCs that is focused on here.

### **Community in MPC**

Community is a contested concept (see Mullins 1995 for a critical perspective). Bardo (1985, p. 388-389) groups the meanings of place-based community used by planners and developers into three groups:

1. Defined in terms of completeness – 'a geographical locale in which people can obtain all the requirements of their day-to-day lives...'
2. Defined in a social structural sense – 'a geographical locale distinguished from other locales by patterns and forms of social organization'
3. Defined in a social psychological sense – 'places to which people become attached, with which they identify, and about which they create cognitive mental images'.

In relation to MPCs all three of these concepts of community are applicable, but it is the third sense, the psychological-social meaning of community, whereby '[n]ew communities are designed to be socially psychologically satisfying and to promote processes of socialization and individuation' (Bardo 1985, p. 389), that concerns us here, because it is the claim to 'build' this form of community that is perhaps most controversial in relation to MPCs (Brindley 2003; Tait 2003; Talen 1999). Despite extensive literature that suggests the traditional form of close knit, location bound, reciprocal sharing and caring form of community may no longer be applicable or relevant to today's society (Wellman 1979), and in the face of Ziller's (2003) reminder that 'community is not a place', it is just this form of community that some developers wish to create. This form of community has been called ideological, in the sense that it implies a degree of control and regulation, of

homogeneity and conformity, by which developers may seek to produce the 'good' community, which panders to psychological needs for inclusion and security, and sells blocks of land. The danger here is of setting up an unrealistic view of community, but this highlights the point that it is this form of community that is being promulgated by various developers (Baum 1997; Bounds 2000; Talen 2001). It is the tension between the Communitarian-like, moral-based, reformist attempts to create this form of community, and the consumption-based setting of the MPCs that this paper seeks to examine more closely. One commentator on community formation in New Urbanist developments has suggested that it is the insistence on focusing on this form of relational based community that creates difficulties for developers in terms of successful achievement, and suggests that this ideal of community be replaced with the idea of community as the common good, to overcome this problem (Talen 2001). To compound the issue, participation in traditional place-based interactive community may not be of interest to residents, as Bryson and Winter (1999, p. 63) conclude:

... it does seem clear that in Australian suburbs we are likely to find that residents focus their interests around family and kin rather than the wider set of social relationships so venerated by those promoting more romantic views of 'community' – developers and social engineers alike.

There has been major criticism of these attempts to 'create community' through planning, both at the theoretical and practical level. Talen (1999), for example, argues that, while planning may be able to create a situation where people come into contact with each other, this is not a sufficient condition to ensure that this contact develops into community relationships. Tait (2003) investigated an urban village development in London's Docklands and found the claimed outcomes of 'localised, self-sufficient and integrated communities' (Tait 2003, p. 37) were not achieved. Brindley (2003) claims that these forms of 'traditional community' focused developments are failing to take into account current dominant social conditions like 'increasing social differentiation and segregation', the 'consumer economy', and the 'emergence of a postmodern culture' and the impact of these changed conditions on community formation and sustainability (Brindley 2003, p. 63). Ross (1999) is critical of the Disney Corporation's attempt to create community through their New Urbanist style town Celebration. However, while the explicit community building aspects of these developments may not have succeeded, there are generally high levels of satisfaction reported amongst people who choose to live in them (Baum 1997; Gwyther 2005; Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003), indicating that particular needs or desires are being met, but perhaps not a desire for community interaction.

## COMMODIFICATION OF COMMUNITY

As has been pointed out, consumerism has been seen as one of the primary forces shaping the form of new suburban housing developments (Flusty 2004; Mullins 1995; Randolph 2003) and an important aspect of this is the implication of community in these developments. 'Community' (in terms of communal spirit and communal activity) has been used to sell a wide range of commodities (Freie 1998; Sayer 1993), and community has been offered as an amenity, an '... option, rather than a fact of life' (Marshall 2000, p. xvi). However, as Forrest (2004, p. 19) points out, a further development of this aspect of consumerism is the commodification of community whereby '... people are being sold community *as lifestyle, prestige or security* or some combination of the three' (italics in original).

John Minnery (Adler 1998) used the term 'commodification of community' in a ABC interview in 1998, in relation to MPCs and stated: '...it's basically [that] some aspects of community are being packaged for sale, and it's being used as a way of selling the properties'. Gleeson (2003) also considers the commodification of community in new urban developments in general terms.

Bartling's study (2004) of the New Urbanist development, Celebration, is perhaps the first close look at the processes and implications of the commodification of a MPC. This paper moves on from Bartling's position to consider the microprocesses involved in the commodification of community itself within a MPC. Minnery, in his ABC interview suggested that commodification of community was, '... a reasonably successful sales pitch rather than anything else'. This paper proposes that apart from being a sales pitch, the commodification of community may have the capacity to impact on the formation of traditional-style community relations within MPCs.

While the Marxist origins of the term commodification relate to the alienation of the worker from their labour through the separation of use value and exchange value of their production, a more general sense of the word is used here. In this sense commodification refers to the transformation of social relations, goods and services, which normally have value inherently to those who participate in or produce them, into products that have exchange value and are able to be bought or used by others who have no input into the creation of them (Goldman et al. 2003). In this process the actual social relations associated with the production of the commodity become hidden. In common terms, commodification is used to refer to the commercialisation of products which were otherwise available for no cost and seen as having intrinsic value to those that produced them. Commodification is not only considered in economic terms, but is increasingly seen in cultural terms as well (Miles 1998). However, rather than seeing commodification as resulting in a particular permanent commodified form of something, commodification is best seen as being context specific, and that something may be commodified in one context and not in another, or commodified at one time but not at another (Appadurai 1986). Appadurai uses the term 'commodity potential' to describe this dynamic process (Morley 1995, p. 316).

In basic terms, the commodification of community can be considered a two stage process (Mitchell 1998) involving the construction or cooption of an idealised form of community, and secondly, the integration of this idealised form of community into the overall marketing, sales and development process of the MPC as a commodity. Gleeson (2003, p. 61) refers to this as 'dream weaving and dream believing'. The first stage is primarily achieved by building on existing myths and yearnings, while the second stage implicates the processes of marketing and advertising, the physical features of the MPC and the direct interventions provided by the developer. These three processes are referred to here as advertising, aestheticisation and administration.

The idealisation of community is built around imagined and nostalgic ideas of community. This idealised or mythical form of community has little to do with the day-to-day struggles of the traditional communities of the past, or with the forms of communities usually encountered today. Following Maffesoli (1996, p. 148) myth is used here '...in the sense in which something that has perhaps never really existed acts, effectively, on the imagination of the time'. 'Mythical community' refers to our dream or memory of some utopian form of community. It is talked about in terms of the 'good old days', and it is generally this form of community that we have a yearning for. It is an ideal, it never existed, we never had it, we did not lose it, but we would like it now (Bauman 2001; Brent 2004). This is not to suggest that all 'community' is mythical or that there are not many examples of ongoing collective recognition, interaction and reciprocity that are a part of community formation and maintenance. In fact Brent (2004) makes the point that we need to recognise the extent to which illusion, or myth, is constitutive of the reality of community, if we want to understand it fully. The ideal of community is nevertheless pervasive and readily exploitable, because it draws on a feeling of the loss of security, connectiveness and trust which results from current social and economic circumstances (Hamilton 2003; Pusey 2003). As Sayer (1993, p. 309) notes, '...the idea of community as a desirable, but essentially abstract quality is much more powerful than its reality'.

The second stage of the commodification of community can be considered in terms of advertising, aesthetics and administration. Advertising plays an important part in the commodification of community because it is through the association of idealised forms of community with observable features and images of the MPC that the exchange value of community is established (Goldman 1992). As Wood (2002, p. 3 *italics in original*) says:

What in fact they [the ads] set out to achieve is to *imagine* for the consumer (as reader or buyer) ideas about the realisation and fulfilment of the 'good community' (with its salutary emanation in self, family, neighbourhood)...

Advertising in terms of the commodification of community presents community in a way which has eliminated the difficulties and differences of on-going social interaction, and presents community as pre-existing and homogeneous (Wood 2002). It is this ideal form of community which is marketed. (For an extensive coverage of the role of advertising in selling the suburbs, see Wood 2002).

An additional aspect of the commodification of community relates to the prominence of the creation of a sense of place in MPCs through the provision of amenities, facilities and landscaping features (broadly termed here the aesthetics of place). It is through this aestheticisation process that a sense of homogeneity and a sense of separateness from other places is created and this facilitates the commodification of community (Duncan and Duncan 2004). In contrast to traditional community with its norms of reciprocity, aestheticised community is void of a normative component. Norms of reciprocity are rendered unnecessary, irrelevant or redundant in an aestheticised community because they have been replaced by the universal acceptance of the beauty, the newness, the cleanness of the place (Freie 1998, p. 43). The aesthetics of place creates an 'immediate familiarity' (Gwyther 2005, p. 68). Responsibility to other people in the community is overshadowed by the responsibility to the beauty and quality of the product, in particular in terms of maintaining the value of place. The aestheticisation of community extends more broadly to include the whole character and concept of the MPC. As Freie (1998, p. 43) says:

The special 'sense of community' being sold comes not from interactions among members of the neighborhood: rather it comes because anyone who would purchase a house in the particular neighbourhood already possesses values and beliefs similar to them.

Finally, the commodification of community is implemented through the ongoing actions and processes of the developer, in what is here called commodification through administration. This ranges from the formal Community Covenant which stipulates particular mandatory details of construction and completion of the house and surrounds, to events staged at regular intervals by the developer to bring groups of people together. It also relates to the provisions of formal links between the company and the community in the form of a community development worker. The condition is produced whereby residents consume a commodified community they have purchased rather than becoming a part of a developing community that requires their input to bring it into existence. In a commodified community '...one buys his or her way into a subdivision that offers as an amenity 'community,' along with the pool and the health club' (Marshall 2000, p. xvi). And the staged release of land in large master planned estates means that the establishment and maintenance of image and amenities is essential to ensure ongoing sales.

There are a number of major social impacts associated with commodification. By distancing the product from its means of production, the actual processes of production are obscured (Bartling 2004) – the relationship between certain brands of shoes and questionable labour practices, for example. Secondly, as more and more aspects of our social lives become commodified, the lack of

connection between the commodity and its social source, engenders a particular “commodified world view” which impacts on the way we interact with and consider others (Bartling 2004, p. 379) – for example, people might come to be related to as products or objects (Goldman 1992). An additional impact of the commodification of social processes is that it may lead to a withdrawal of participation in those processes (Clove and Perkins 2002). As Ball says, commodification involves the ‘...erasing of the social’ (Ball 2004, p. 4-5). As well, the commodification process, as will be discussed below, involves the utilisation of symbols and signifiers which may bear little relation to the process being commodified, thereby creating dissonance between the commodified product and the process that is commodified (Clove and Perkins 2002). The commodification of community has unique features that set it apart from commodification in general.

The MPC process appears eminently suited to the commodification of community because it controls the total environment of the project, it has varying capacity to regulate the type of resident in the development, it involves a total marketing process and extensive advertising program, it retains control over design and the opportunity to create a novel experience, and it involves a long-term commitment on behalf of the developer. In the MPC, community takes on exchange value in the sense that it is bought as part of the consumption package offered to those buying into the MPC – that is it becomes part of the consumption practices of MPCs. However, one thing sets the commodification of community apart from consumption interactions in general, and that is that “...people are actually living *in* the commodity they have purchased” (Bartling 2004, p. 380 italics in original). In this sense community can be seen to be both produced and consumed by residents (Lash and Urry 1994, p. 316). The implications of this will be considered below. In considering the commodification processes observed in the MPC it is important to note that commodified community is embedded in a more extended consumption package which might be called the MPC package. Purchasers of a block of land in SL enter into a complex set of commodity exchanges and commodified community is just one of these. The illustrations presented below extract commodified community from its context and thereby present a limited image of the commodification process in order to highlight aspects of it that can be related directly to the commodification of community. In addition to this, Appadurai’s (1986) reminder that things have variable states of commodification needs to be taken into account when considering the extent to which the commodification of community is manifest in the MPC. The three aspects of commodification considered need to be placed within the broader context of the MPC as a site of consumption in the sense that was presented earlier.

### **Commodification process in an MPC**

Having presented the theoretical perspective on the commodification of community, the next section is concerned with examining the extent to which the commodification process as expressed in terms of advertising, aesthetics and administration can be identified within a particular MPC, Springfield Lakes (SL) the site of the research project. In the first section, advertising and promotional material associated with a SL will be considered.

### **Advertising and commodification**

In this section we will look at some examples of advertising and promotional material associated with the MPC, and show that these examples are consistent with the notion that community is being commodified. In particular we will show how community is being presented not as a set of ongoing relationships in a particular context that require a personal contribution, but as an idealised product that can be purchased and consumed. (All examples are taken from DLL promotional materials, including their various websites).

It is suggested that community is presented as a product in at least the following ways:

1. Community is presented as being already in existence, created by DLL prior to the arrival of the purchaser, and requiring no contribution from the purchaser other than to complete the purchase. In particular the phrase 'thriving community' epitomises this idea that community can exist independent of its members.
2. The purchaser can choose the community on offer, and the marketing material emphasises that it is just a matter of choice, once again, requiring no input other than to choose. The purchaser chooses what they want from community and what they can get from community. Community is marketed as an escape from the present, as an opportunity to be removed from your present situation, and to be transported to an ideal world.
3. Community is branded – the Delfin brand, as the following example highlights. 'Vibrant, lush, and bursting with community spirit, every Delfin development bears the trademark of impeccable quality'. Not only can our longing for community spirit be more than adequately met, but it is also associated with, and available within, a context of impeccable quality.
4. More generally, community is presented in an idealised form, associated with beauty, with leisure, and convenience, for example, and devoid of the normal issues associated with day to day living. The following example illustrates many aspects of the idealisation of community:

Springfield Lakes, A special place in the Lakes District, is more than a place to live; it is a thriving community. Live, learn, work and play by the lake in a naturally beautiful environment. Enjoy the benefits of living within South East Queensland's most convenient address.

5. Community is presented as being detached from its human element, from ideas of support and reciprocity, and involvement and interaction, and is associated with physical elements like lakes and facilities, and with events. In some cases a concrete example is given: 'Community spirit: Carols by Candlelight, Springfield Lakes Fun Run and January festivals are just a few of the special events at Springfield Lakes'. In another example, 'sense of community' is defined particularly in terms of relationships to water features: 'Take a quick drive through Springfield Lakes and you'll see it is now a thriving community with beautiful homes, Spring Lake, recreational parks by the lake and natural creeklines with billabongs.'
6. Community is marketed in terms of the other purchasers who are buying it, as something that everyone is buying and the product provides a link to other like-minded purchasers. The billboard that has the simple message, 'I know a place that has great neighbours' presupposes a particular set of circumstances designed to create a sense of familiarity and wellbeing. The community marketed is one of exclusion not of inclusion, and although the promotional material states that Springfield Lakes is "...attracting a diverse community from all backgrounds and interests..." other material reassures the purchaser that they will fit in amongst their 'great neighbours'.

Bauman (2000, p. 99-100), while referring specifically to shopping centers, sums up the commodified nature of community that is presented in the marketing material:

We may say that 'community' is a short-cut to togetherness, and to a kind of togetherness which hardly ever occurs in 'real life': a togetherness of sheer likeness, of the 'us who are all the same' kind; a togetherness which for this reason is unproblematic, calling for no effort and no vigilance, truly pre-ordained: a kind of togetherness which is not a task but 'the given', and *given* well before any effort to *make it be* has started. (Bauman 2000, p. 99-100 italics in original).

In the following section the commodification of community through the aestheticisation of community will be considered.

### **Aestheticisation and commodification**

It is through the creation of a sense of place and an associated attachment to place that a very powerful aspect of commodified community is created. Aspects of this were seen in some of the advertising material considered in the previous section. Fundamental symbolic aspects of community (Cohen 1985) are created via the aesthetics of the MPC. These include the sense of exclusivity, a sense of awareness of community boundaries and a sense of difference. As one resident put it, by driving into SL you are reminded of where you aren't! It is the awareness of the difference between SL and other places that creates a sense of 'we-ness' and reinforces the sense of idealised community. And it is the assurance of the standard of aesthetics that is implicit in the commodification process, a sense that as long as the aesthetics of the place is not breached in some way, all will be well with our world, that is, the world of people of SL. This perception is reinforced by the quick response by Delfin to any contamination of the aesthetic standard, a notable case being the restoration of the entrance signage to SL that had been vandalised. To the great relief of one resident, the restoration was done in such a way as to prevent this desecration ever occurring again.

The creation of a special place and the development of a strong sense of place amongst residents is achieved through various aesthetic features including the creation of a strong entrance statement and the reinforcement of the first impression purchasers have of the development. This is carried forward through the attention to detail and quality and the maintenance of this standard throughout the development. The existence of a community covenant adds to the assurance that standards will be maintained (Gwyther 2005). In this context, residents did not complain about having a community covenant, but they did complain about Delfin not enforcing it! The fact that facilities and amenities are in place also reinforces the purchaser's sense of unity of the community.

The aesthetics of the development are frequently implicated in the discussion of community in SL, and illustrate the way community as a commodity is manifest. For example:

*S: A lot of the media you see all these dodgy neighbourhoods, you've got to know all the kind of places, I think if nobody gives a damn it all goes downhill and then it just gets worse and worse and then people are graffiti-ing and stealing and nobody cares and it attracts the bad people. Because I spent so much money on this place, and so has everyone else around here, and if everyone just does one thing, you get to know who your neighbours are, you get involved in sport or something, I think it makes it a nicer place and more pleasant and you keep the riff-raff out and insurance premiums stay down and all the rest*

Here we see complex links between images of other bad neighbourhoods and bad people, the money invested in property, and the way that community involvement will maintain the aesthetics and thereby the exclusivity of place, and result in benefits to residents.

As the previous example shows, a major reason given for participation in community activities is to ensure that the aesthetics of the place is maintained. Even an offer to help a neighbour can be seen to be couched in terms of encouraging the neighbour to maintain the standard of upkeep that was expected of good community members:

*B: We like gardening ourselves. We like to have everywhere symmetrically looking ship shape. It has to be smart and clean and tidy – our area. We expect everybody to do the same. Whether that happens or not I don't know. I've said to J next-door, "When you can start your garden, give me a call and I'll give you a hand". Then there's more of an incentive to do it.*

The issue of people who are renting is a point frequently raised by property owners. The point made is that rental properties and people who are renting them were not in the package that residents bought into and that Delphin has failed to deliver the product that purchasers expected. The implication is that the community offered was to be made up of people like us, property owners, who have a particular interest in the perseverance of our investment and who will act appropriately to do so. It is a perceived failure to commit to the aesthetics of place that is the primary concern that owners have with people who are renting, and gaps in the aesthetics of place are seen as gaps in the homogeneity of community.

### **Administration and commodification**

The final aspect of the commodification of community to be considered is what is called here the administrative component, and this includes the way those administrative actions implemented by the developer to facilitate the development of community interaction and sociability may also be seen to contribute to commodify community. These administrative actions include:

1. The employment of a community development person
2. The organisations of events
3. The encouragement and assistance of club/group formation
4. The publishing of a Community update magazine
5. The systematic response to complaints
6. The capacity to shape what takes place within the community

An overriding outcome of these administrative processes in terms of the commodification process is to distance the residents from what would otherwise be considered the normal politics of community. Community activities tend to be mediated and monitored through specific administration processes, and this has the effect of effectively regulating community activities. As one resident said:

*P: I still see that everything has to gravitate through Delphin, like the hub of the wheel. They need to move away and provide support in different ways, such as maybe seeding grants, or accessing low interest loans, I don't know, I mean for people that will then build up. So it would be in the period that Delphin are reducing their influence in the community.*

In terms of commodification of community, effectively what these administrative processes provide is an extensive after-sales service to ensure satisfaction with the product. Through this process dissatisfaction and needs within the MPC are monitored and dealt with, and are separated out from normal community activity. This is not to deny or question the genuineness of the attempts by the developer to promote community wellbeing, but simply to point out that these administrative activities may also be seen to limit effective community organisation processes, and to create a reliance on the developer and on the purchased community product they deliver.

The combination of aestheticisation processes, where all physical requirements are dealt with, and the administration processes, where all social aspects of community are mediated, results in there being no community building projects available for the community members to become a part of. Residents have bought into a complete community, and by its very nature, a MPC aims to deliver a complete product with nothing left for the purchaser to do. This reinforces the notion of community as commodity, while at the same time ensuring control over standards and possible deviations that may detract from the ongoing sales within the development.

Having considered the processes and practical examples of the commodification of community, the question of the possible impact of this will be considered in the following section.

### **Impact of the commodification of community**

Earlier approaches to consumption and commodification depicted consumers as victims, dupes, and easy prey before the power of commodifiers, marketers and advertisers (Robins 1996, p. 124). More recent thinking suggests that these processes are part of the establishment of an ever-increasing field of choice and expanded opportunity for the expression of individuality and the creation of identity, and that the consumer is a conscious participant in the process and takes advantage of the diversity of opportunities available (Robins 1996, p. 108-109). Purchasers of property at SL appear to be far from being dupes and prey and conform closely to Reich's (2000) observation that, 'All other things being equal, someone who buys into a community wants the highest return on his or her investment—the best value, best service, most enjoyable and stimulating peers, largest amount of prestige their money will buy'. The extent to which commodified forms of community relate to this equation is not easy to determine.

However, there is another aspect to the question of the impact of commodification of community that relates more directly to the research of this project. This aspect refers to the impact on the potential development of social interaction and participation in MPCs. The suggestion is that the conditions created by the commodification of community in MPCs may in fact make it less likely that these 'genuine' forms of community desired by the developer will be developed. What this commodified form of community potentially does, is, in Bauman's (2000, p. 201) words,

...scatter instead of condense the untapped energy of sociality impulses and so contribute to the perpetuation of the solitude desperately yet vainly seeking redress in the rare and far-between concerted and harmonious collective undertakings.

The research carried out so far in our project has shown some indication of the following impact of the commodification of community:

1. There is evidence of an expectation that some aspects of community are part of the package that has been purchased, and that issues relating to these aspects are best dealt with through the mediary of the developer, and not through community engagement.
2. There is evidence that a sense of community is created that takes for granted the commonality of values and attitudes of residents and therefore highlights difference as non-community. Some residents are apologetic about this sense of exclusivity while lauding it. Others see it as a part of what they bought into - to be strongly defended and maintained.
3. By purchasing community as a commodity, fellow residents are seen as part of the product that has been purchased. They may be seen as either contributors to or detractors from the product, depending on the perception of the purchaser.
4. In subtle ways the norms of community are displaced through the mediation of the commodifying process. At another level, by commodifying community the need to confront the environmental and social impact of the MPC is avoided or passed back to the developer.
5. There is evidence of strong attachment to place and an intense sense of community, but this does not necessarily equate to extensive social relations and integration within the community.

In general the research shows that aspects of commodified community are consumed by most residents while at the same time residents differ greatly in the extent to which commodified aspects of community shape their actions. For some residents, commodified community has offered the opportunity to become socially involved in a way that they had never before considered, or in a more extensive way than they did before. For others, the advantages of a commodified community are indulged in and utilised to the fullest extent and the fact that this does not involve community interaction and social involvement in the MPC suits them very well.

Following Appadurai (1986) and the idea that community may move in and out of a commodity form, it is the tension generated between the commodified notion community and the non-commodified notion of community that may be a critical aspect in terms of the impact of the commodification of community. The suggestion made here is that this tension may hinder the opportunity to develop meaningful social interactions that provide mutual support within MPCs. Looking more widely, these factors may limit the way MPCs can ‘...nurture the social sensibilities that are crucial to their successful positioning in a diverse, multicultural democracy’ (Gleeson 2004). It is these broader concerns that relate to equity, inclusiveness, sustainability, and civic responsiveness, for example, that the issue of the commodification of community raises, and that need to be considered in further research.

## CONCLUSION

The property development company that is the focus of this research uses community extensively in their advertising and promotional material. They employ community development officers to promote community within their MPCs. They spend considerable amounts of money in supporting community development in the MPCs. This paper has looked at the idea of community that is promoted by the developer and aspects of the development process, and has proposed that aspects of the developer’s approach to MPCs results in the commodification of community. While the developer aims to create community based on of ongoing mutually supportive relationships in a particular context that require personal commitment and contribution, the approach to community adopted by the property developer may have the potential to hinder the development of these relationships. However, the paper also shows that that some residents have use the commodified community form as a starting point for enlivened community participation. Jackson (1999) makes the point (in another context) that commodification need not necessarily be seen as negative, and calls for ‘...a more complex understanding of people’s relationship with the world of goods’ (Jackson 1999, p. 95). This paper has made a tentative attempt in that direction. Given the demand for places in MPCs and their position as sites of consumption, and the widely perceived need for the development of increased community participation, further examination of the role that the commodification of community plays in new housing developments and the impact on the broader society seems called for.

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