Cooperation and Canals
Beacons for a ‘Good Life’ in Queensland

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The nature of what constitutes a ‘good life’, or at least a better life than that on offer, is varied and contentious. This paper focuses on two historical examples of the search for a good life in Queensland in which the mechanisms involved were the creation of locally innovative forms of settlement.

The first of the two examples is the cluster of cooperative settlements set up in parts of Queensland, including the more populous South East, during the turbulent years of the 1890s. An influential source of the cooperative ideal was the radical journalist William Lane, who in 1893 took a group of like-minded people to start the utopian New Australia settlement in Paraguay; but the cooperatives were also a reaction to the appalling conditions of the 1890s economic depression and the government’s desire to populate and develop the Colony. The second example is the canal estates, initiated in Australia on the Gold Coast in 1957, driven by a desire for a good life by the sea, a craving to emulate (and to sell) the perceived golden lifestyle of Florida in the USA as well as by consumerist capitalism.

The two examples identify some of the potential elements of a ‘good life’ sought by the community or sold by the market, but more importantly they point to different conceptions of the role of the state in achieving the ‘good life’.

**Keywords:** Cooperative settlements, canal estates, Queensland, William Lane, State government, local government

**Introduction**

The idea of a ‘good life’, or at least a better life than that currently on offer, has inspired a spectacular legion of thinkers, novelists, dissidents, activists and philosophers for centuries. There are, of course, many bases for this better life. It can, for example, be seen as better in the sense of
moral more worthwhile (or morally good) or better in the sense of more successful, more personally meaningful or of a higher quality (Tafarodi et al. 2012, p. 787, Bonn & Tafarodi 2013). The two approaches often overlap, as will be seen below.

Whatever this improved life might look like it usually involves people living as individuals or in groups in some locality – that is, living in a social arrangement in an identified place. This place might not be real. More's eponymous book, *Utopia* (More 1965), is based on a description by a sailor More calls ‘Teller of Tales’ of a mythical island in the New World, a ‘good place’ that at the same time is ‘no place’. But what of good places that do (or did) exist? Exploration of such places could help us understand the role of the perceived form of a ‘good life’ in their creation.

The two examples used here are located in Queensland, Australia. They are the cooperative settlements started under the *Co-operative Communities Land Settlement Act* of 1893 and the canal estates that sprang up on the Gold Coast in the 1950s in an attempt to bring a local version of the lifestyle of Florida to Australia. The two examples span a long time period (from 1893 to the present day). Although it is not the intention of this paper to debate the place of utopian thinking in historical settlement planning in Australia it may be useful to visualize the two as potential beacons marking the shift in Western conceptualizations of utopia identified by Baeten (2002), who describes the move from writing about essentially socialist utopias in the 19th and early 20th centuries (the last of which he claims was H. G. Wells’ 1905 *A Modern Utopia*) to the capitalist and eventually neoliberal “revanchist utopias” of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Baeten 2002, pp. 146-7). The cooperative communities of the 1890s were firmly anchored in socialist and communitarian idealism (although also described through government channels in decidedly entrepreneurial rhetoric); the canal estates of the 1950s were created by capitalist developers and sold to both property investors and residents who wanted to be part of a consumerist capitalism.

Although they at first might appear quite disparate in approach, form and impact there are still two common threads linking them: the very idea of actually creating a ‘good life’ rather than just thinking about it and the fact that intervention was required by the state actually to make them happen. I use the two examples to explore for whom this good life was intended, by whom it was created, and the role of the state in its implementation.

**Queensland’s Cooperative Settlements**

The early 1890s were a turbulent period in Queensland’s history, for “following the collapse of the economic boom of the 1880s and the crash of major banks, Queensland and Brisbane in particular, suffered high unemployment and severe poverty…” (Metcalf 1995, p. 556). The financial crisis of 1890-3 triggered industrial unrest that tested the newly formed labour unions. Employers organized amongst themselves with the aim of breaking these unions. A strike by shearers began in the first weeks of January, 1891, but was essentially at an end by June of that year after the forces of state intervention through the police and defence forces were vigorously used to support the pastoralist employers (Wilding 1980, pp. [12]-[15]).

The latter part of the nineteenth century was also a period of social unrest and new thinking in other parts of the world. There were growing concerns about living conditions in the industrial cities of the United Kingdom. The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes had reported in
1885, leading to the *Housing of the Working Classes Act* of 1885. Charles Booth’s survey of the poor in London, presented in 1887, showed that little had changed after the legislation, leading to the revised *Housing of the Working Classes Act* of 1890 (Hall 1996, p. 31). Utopian and socialist thinkers and their writings had a considerable influence in America, Europe and Australia. These included the socialist Edward Bellamy and his book *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (Bellamy 1967). Henry George, with his radical ideas about land-based taxation, had lectured in Australia in 1890 as part of a global tour, although locally his ideas were not well received (Nairn 1972). Arturo Soria y Mata proposed his linear city for Madrid, an ideal that like Howard’s garden city was intended to marry town and country to provide a better life for the working population, in 1882 (Collins 1959a, b). It was a time of great social and philosophical ferment, including in the problematic areas that underpinned the early town planning movement, such as public health, public finance and the built environment.

In Australia, this soup of international ideas was spiced by the difficult local social and economic conditions at the century’s end. In Queensland the mix of ideas was strongly influenced by William Lane, the socialist writer and visionary. Lane was born in the UK then worked in Canada and the United States before moving to Australia. He became “one of Australia’s foremost radical journalists, addressing himself mainly to the bushworkers of Queensland, whom he idealized” (Souter 1983, no page). He was heavily involved in the developing labour movement. This included publishing the ironically-titled, semi-utopian novel *The Working Man’s Paradise* in 1892 (under the pseudonym of John Miller) to raise funds for the families of the strikers convicted in the Rockhampton conspiracy trials from the 1891 shearsers’ strike (Souter 1983; see also Wilding 1980). According to Souter (1983) he had corresponded with the communitarian settlement of Topolobampo in Mexico and was familiar with the North American utopian settlement of Icaria started by followers of Robert Owen. In 1891 the newspaper he edited, *The Worker*, which was supported by a range of labour organisations, announced that the New Australia Cooperative Settlement Association had sent a representative to South America to find suitable land for a settlement. Then on July 1893 Lane, his wife and four children, his brother and his wife and another 220 settlers set sail to Paraguay to found the cooperative settlement of New Australia (Souter 1983). Participants had to pay £60 to be part, which made joining beyond the financial resources of most working people (Metcalf 2010).

Lane’s actions were one of the influences on the Queensland legislature that led to the *Co-operative Communities Land Settlement Bill* of 1893. Queensland was not alone in supporting such settlements, nor was it alone in trying to counteract Lane’s influence. Walker (1970, p. 19) points out that New South Wales and South Australia also created legislation in 1893 brought on by the immediate circumstances of the “depression and great unemployment”, as well as “to exploit natural resources more fully and to develop the wealth and population of the colonies”; but in all three cases this was tied to “the belief that there should be the opportunity for the experiment [i.e. Lane’s New Australia] to be tried within Australia and that some of its best young men and women should if possible be dissuaded from emigration”.

As the parliamentary debate over the Queensland Bill showed these several issues were addressed by the proposed legislation. The Secretary for Lands claimed the purpose of the Bill was to “enable people who really have a desire for country life, and wish to settle the land in communities, to do so” (QPD 1893, p.393). The eventual Act (passed in October 1893) enabled 30 or more men (women were not counted) to create a formally defined group with a name and agreed regulations and then
to apply for up to 160 acres (65 hectares) per man for the creation of a cooperative settlement under a perpetual lease on Crown land and for each man in the group to be allocated up to £20 for tools, food, seeds and the like. As in New South Wales the government’s overt justification for the legislation was the need to develop and populate the undeveloped areas of the Colony. The Colonial Treasurer pontificated, “We want to get the land populated. The land of Queensland belongs to the people ... We, as a Parliament, are the trustees of those lands” (QPD 1893, p. 406). But population of undeveloped land was also seen as a counter to the need to grapple with the high unemployment of the time, the high costs of providing government rations for the unemployed and the claimed potential temptation of those on government rations to maintain their reputedly indolent lifestyle (QPD 1893, p. 66).

The government pushed the Co-operative Communities Land Settlement Bill mainly because it would help deal with these problems, caused by the unemployed who “now crowd around the cities and towns” (QPD 1893, p. 66), but in addition people moving to such settlements would “learn a useful occupation” (QPD 1893, p. 66), although the nature of this “occupation” was never defined. They claimed that mechanism cooperative settlements would help overcome the problems associated with earlier land settlement schemes which had been “only moderately successful” because of the “hardships and isolation to be endured by settlers who had to live apart from their fellows – away from schools and other advantages of civilisation” (QPD 1893, p. 66). Positive examples of similar cooperative settlements from New Zealand, the United States and Europe were highlighted during the debates (QPD 1893, p. 66).

Although conservative government members in Parliament spoke only of overcoming urban unemployment, populating and developing the State, and reducing the costs of government support for the unemployed, the shadow of Lane and New Australia hovered over the debate. Opposition members flagged this. Mr Hardacre, an opposition MLA, went as far as to say that, “I think I am not out of order in referring in connection with this Bill to one of the grandest men who ever left these shores, whom we may thank more than anyone else for this – that is Mr. William Lane” (QPD 1893, p. 404). He went on to say that

“The fact that so many persons going away from the colony has almost shamed our legislators to doing something to wipe out the disgrace of people being forced from these shores, like the pilgrims of old, to seek new land wherein to build up a society which will give them what they ought to be able to enjoy in our present civilisation” (QPD 1893, pp. 404-5).

Opposition speakers gleefully pointed out that the Bill provided for “socialistic settlements, State-aided settlement, compulsory arbitration, and a recognition of the obligation of the government to find work for those who want it in the form of labour colonies” (QPD 1893, p. 398), all policies espoused by those on the political Left but supposedly refuted by the government.

Thus, government initiated the legislation to support the creation of local cooperative settlements both as a way of covertly counteracting the socialist agitation exemplified by Lane’s New Australia Movement as well as overtly as a way of developing unoccupied lands in the Colony. There was strong support for these actions by the newspapers of the time, despite the socialist flavor of the proposal. Such commentators seemed to ignore this socialist flavor in favour of government-supporting arguments couched in terms of enterprise, expansion and development. The editorial
comment in the weekly newspaper *The Queenslander* of 12 August, 1893, is typical, noting that land settlement was important because the poor employment prospects of the time meant that men were perpetually moving from place to place looking for employment, so many had never attempted to form homes “which would do so much to attach them to the country in which they live”. The editorial goes on the note that

> “this is really one of the problems of our time, and thoughtful persons have begun to recognize the fact that until some link of attachment connects the people with the land Socialism will have a productive field and an abundant harvest; for the man who has nothing to lose, but thinks he may gain by social upheaval. Queensland just now has many hundreds of men who have no homes, no employment, no means of living…” (*The Queenslander* 1893b, p. 297).

The editorial commended the Colonial government for the proposed legislation because “there are many thousands of acres which may be made more productive than they have hitherto been if they were properly worked for agricultural or pastoral purposes”. The Bill:

> “places it in the power of a number of persons to combine under more favourable conditions than have previously existed for utilizing the Crown lands of the colony; and to those who have no money it offers some sort of hope that they may by diligence and thrift ultimately establish themselves on their own homesteads” (*The Queenslander* 1893b, p. 297).

*The Queenslander* (1893a) also showed it was aware of the link between the Co-operative Communities Land Settlement Bill and Lane’s actions in leaving Queensland, stating that:

> “While offering a premium for individual effort it also allows a combination of men to accomplish in the land of their adoption what the ‘New Australians’ have gone thousands of miles to attempt, and besides securing to the settlers perfect security from hostile forces guarantees them absolute freedom and a handy market” (*The Queenslander* 1893a, p. 297).

After the Act was passed some 14 communal experiments were established in Queensland including Excel and Byrnestown (See Figures 1 and 2). Metcalf (1995, p. 553) notes that these were only part of the 116 utopian communities established with support from the various Colonial governments in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The Queensland communities started with high expectations. They included settlements made up of Catholics only as well as non-religious settlements based on an egalitarian working-person ideal. But by the mid-1890s all had collapsed (Metcalf 2010). The collapse was for many reasons, but included lack of farming skills by the mainly urban settlers and the poor land they occupied. There was also a divergence between two arms of the Colonial state. Whilst the legislature had approved and supported the creation of cooperative settlements (despite their socialist underpinnings), hindering tactics were employed by unconvinced bureaucrats, tactics which included making only unproductive land available in locations far from good transport and delaying payment of the money for setting up the settlements (Metcalf 1995, 2010). This recalcitrance may have reflected support for already established farmers, who had bought their properties with their own funds and established their farms with minimal government support – this potential conflict between the new subsidized settlements and existing private farmers was identified several times in the parliamentary debate over the legislation (QPD 1893).
The ‘good life’ as expressed in these communities was concentrated on working men and their families. The settlements were cooperative and egalitarian, based on self-sufficiency gained through working the land. The ‘good life’ was supported by government policy because cooperatives were seen as a way of reducing a problem (unemployment) in a period of economic uncertainty, of helping tame the unsettled parts of the Colony and of doing this through groups of like-minded people who could support one another rather than repeating the individualistic isolation experienced through previous settlement programs. The ‘good life’ could be found in small settlements of 30 men (and their accompanying wives, daughters and partners). The initiative for these settlements came from the wider community, including specifically socialist and utopian elements, but it was implemented through the legislative and financial support of the state run at the time by a conservative Colonial government. The state’s role was that of providing a mechanism by which cooperative communities could be created and supported; but it took this action partly to counteract community agitation and unrest as well as to support the state interest in the spread of settlement across the fledgling Colony.

Gold Coast Canal Estates

The canal estates initiated on the Gold Coast in the 1950s illustrate another approach to a ‘good life’. They point to the possibility of constructing and selling a ‘good life’, where this is achieved through local initiatives that mimic desired life styles from other places.

The Gold Coast lies some 70km south of Brisbane. Until the 1920s it consisted of a string of fishing villages and small towns, but gradually it became an important family holiday destination for day trippers and vacationers from Brisbane, especially after the construction by the Queensland State government of the railway from Brisbane to Coolangatta at the southern end of the Gold Coast in 1903 (Mayere, Dedekorkut & Sipe 2010). The area of easily buildable land is a narrow strip between the sea and the inland low-lying swampy flood plains of several rivers (mainly the Nerang River). The main local authorities in the area were amalgamated in the late 1940s, and then renamed Gold Coast City in 1958: “The name change was thought to offer better marketing prospects for attracting
tourists and potential investors” (Mayere et al. 2010, p. 3). The area of developed urban land grew fueled by this tourist attraction and the related investment. The first tourist-oriented hotel was opened in 1925, with “the largest private zoo and gardens in Australia” (Jones 1986, p. 17). In the period from the 1920s to the 1950s the residential population grew slowly but the Gold Coast’s attraction as a tourist destination grew far more rapidly. Jones notes that in 1933 there were only 6,000 permanent residents but the community would often grow four-fold during holiday time and improved roads were making day trips from Brisbane more common (1986, p. 18). The rapid growth of the area as a holiday and tourist destination followed from the actions of the State government in building and maintaining a rail line and main roads, local government in implementing policies to support population growth and tourism activities, as well as the various private entrepreneurs who saw the opportunity to make substantial sums of money from their own and the state’s investments. The development of the Gold Coast reflects the support given by the state to the private land speculation market.

During this explosion of activity both local government and the State government supported private development at the cost of environmental integrity. For example, in 1937 a scheme was undertaken to dredge and pump large quantities of sand from the Nerang River bed into mangrove areas behind the beach to increase the area of land that was available for housing and other developments (Fitzgerald 1984 p. 459). The State government, under Queensland legislation, is responsible for the control and regulation of all areas below the high water mark – this would clearly include the bed of the tidal Nerang River. The State supported the private market by permitting this dredging.

By 1947 there were 12,483 residents in the Gold Coast. With the growth in population came increased sales to and by property speculators. The 1950s saw the start of the real speculative property boom: “Big capital replaced the money of well-meaning amateurs” (Jones 1986, p. 22). In fact, “land speculation became rampant after 1952 when war-time building restrictions were lifted” (Fitzgerald 1984, p. 459). Up until that time the national government had helped dampen rampant speculation through the regulated control of building materials during and immediately after World War II. The urban development at this time was seriously shaped by the tourism-based nature of the Gold Coast. One obvious influence was the desire to emulate other places that were seen as outstandingly successful tourist destinations. One such place was Florida in the United States.

This desire for emulation faced the barrier of insufficient easily buildable land:

“As rapid development was taking place along the narrow strip of sand dune immediately behind the beaches, it became clear to Gold Coast developers that further expansion needed to take place in low-lying areas adjacent to the Nerang River, subject to periodic flooding, and on the inland side of the sand strip” (Mayere et al. 2010, p. 4).

When land entrepreneurs sought models of how to use this land some of them looked to the canal estates in Florida that had been made possible by land reclamation there since the 1920s.

There are two competing claims about the direct inspiration for the origin of the Gold Coast canal estates. Sir Bruce Small, a Melbourne bicycle manufacturer who retired to the Gold Coast then became a millionaire land developer, Mayor and local icon, claimed to have visited Miami Beach, Florida, in 1958 and seen the possibilities for similar developments on the Gold Coast. But another
developer, Alfred Grant, after visits to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Hawaii, worked with the architect and landscape architect, Karl Langer, to build two canal estates (Miami Keys and Rio Vista) in 1957 (McConville 2010, Sinnamon 2010). However, Langer claimed the designs were based on a mixture of the fundamental principles of Radburn planning (with canals replacing the fingers of greenspace running through the original Radburn layout) and the land reclamation engineering used in Holland (Jones 1986, pp. 30-32; Mayere et al. 2010, pp. 4-5, citing Langer 1959). According to Gold Coast History (n.d. (a)) the “First canal-estate subdivisions approved by Albert Shire for Florida Gardens” were in 1956. However, Florida Gardens should really be described as “canal-estate inspired” although it was created by pumping sand from the bed of the Nerang River and was separated from other suburbs by an artificial canal (Centre for the Government of Queensland 2011a, 2011b) rather than a canal estate. It was 1957 when:

“The guru of Queensland real estate Alfred Grant, of Brisbane, brought the idea of canal estates to Queensland from Florida, but the first, Florida Gardens (sic), was developed by the Melbourne-based Savoy Corporation. It was subsequently followed by Miami Keys, Rio Vista, Moana Park and Rialto” (Gold Coast History n.d.(a)).

The early three canal estates and canal-estate-like developments (Florida Gardens, Miami Keys and Rio Vista) can be seen in Figure 3.
Whatever the inspiration, the two estates of Miami Keys and Rio Vista were advertised in 1957 by Alfred Grant Estates as “Australia’s first, truly Florida Keys style, man-made waterway development” being “Exclusive freehold residential sites” with “absolute frontages on Nerang River and 72 acres of water, deep man-made Lakes and Bays” (Courier Mail 1957: See Figure 4). The advertisement from which these claims are taken notes that “Gold Coast real estate investors are reaping a rich harvest” (Courier Mail 1957). In other words, the new canal estates were offering an exclusive, water-based lifestyle along with rich investment opportunities (Dedekorkut-Howes and Bosman 2011). As explained by Mr Gaven, the local State parliamentarian in the debate concerning the Canals Act of 1958,

“There has been an intense and long-sustained demand by people from the southern States and from overseas for land in the area. Many speculators, many men with vision, foresight and courage, have come from other places and purchased land that was once dairying land to reclaim it, build it up above flood level, subdivide it and sell it. They have not done it for fun but to make money … but it is our duty, and the duty of the local authority to see that the people who purchase the land are protected and that they will not be flooded out” (QPD 1958, p. 2197).

The earliest of these estates were created by excavating the canals from originally swampy dairying land and piling the spoil on newly created lots (as well as by pumping silt from the bed of the Nerang River). Because they were on originally freehold land the canal-based properties could be sold freehold. The only connection to the State-government controlled land below high water mark was when the new canals were connected to the river and for dredging. The early subdivisions were approved by the relevant but neighbouring local authority, the Albert Shire, even though they were marketed as being on the Gold Coast. The shape of the two local authorities was an historical anomaly: the Gold Coast City Council stretched in a narrow strip northwards from the NSW border with the Albert Shire inland from it; but in the area where the canal estates were approved Albert Shire reached almost to the coastline (see Figure 3). The Gold Coast local government area at that point was only some hundreds of metres wide, as the boundary between the two had been drawn to exclude from the Gold Coast City the swampy dairying land on which the canals were now being built. Albert Shire has a history of adept approval of major projects just within its borders to encourage developers to capitalize on the population and reputation of the next-door Gold Coast City. Albert Shire continued this strategy successfully in later years (including approving Jupiters Conrad Casino which opened in 1985 and the regional shopping centre, Pacific Fair, started in 1976)(Gold Coast History (n.d.(a), (b), (c)). The Gold Coast City and Albert Shire were amalgamated by the State government into a single new Gold Coast City in 1995.

Despite the approval for the subdivisions by Albert Shire the legal status of the new canal estates was murky, as amply demonstrated in the parliamentary debate around what became the Canals Act of 1958. Parliamentarians on both sides of the house were concerned about who would be responsible for flood works and flood damage (because the canal land was in the floodplain of the Nerang River), who would be responsible for maintenance and repair work on the canal edges, and who would be responsible for regulating the navigational use of the canals (as “when you let the salt water in over the land the water part was under the Harbour Board, yet the bed of the canal was still freehold land” (QPD 1958, p. 2191)). Parliament was also concerned to protect the rights of
purchasers of the properties, because some of the property boundaries extended to the median line of the new canals and “the Register of Titles would have nothing to do with it and refused flatly to register any subdivisions that extended to the median line of the stream” (QPD 1958, p. 2191).

Figure 4: Advertising Supplement Courier Mail, 23rd December, 1957 (Source: State Library of Queensland – see reference Courier Mail (1957)).
Implementing the canal proposals thus required approval from Albert Shire council, but was later supported by State government legislation. State government had regulatory control over dredging activities and changing the shape of the Nerang River itself needed State government permission. The speculative creation of the canal estates was boosted by the passing of the *Canals Act* of 1958 that removed the ambiguities and allowed the newly created water-frontages to be sold clearly as freehold (State Library of Queensland 2012).

Considerable areas of the Gold Coast, inland from the coastal sand strip, have been developed as residential canal estates in the period since the 1950s. The developments were, and are still, advertised for both their lifestyle and their investment potential. They have spread across Australia, although new canal estates were banned in Victoria in 2008 because of their environmental impacts (*The Age* 2008) and in Queensland new canal estates are almost impossible to develop because of government’s change of heart about environmental protection, illustrated through the passing of the more restrictive *Coastal Protection and Management Act* 1995.

The ‘good life’ offered by the canal estates of the 1950s and 1960s reflected the desire to emulate other coastal tourist areas, in particular the coast of Florida in the USA. Speaking about the Gold Coast more generally, but resonating with the values underpinning the canal estates, which they call “hyper neoliberalism” Bosman and Dredge (2011, p. 2) claim the outcomes are “global identity markers that are shaped by consumption”. But the emulation of tourist exemplars like Florida was in terms of forms of consumption that both places offered: a sub-tropical climate that could be enjoyed in a leisured and leisurely setting, access to water for recreation (including access for ocean-going boats from the canal estates via the Nerang River) and the attraction of exclusivity. At first there were few canal estates. The subdivisions also offered the possibility of constructing houses facing the open water rather than the road. In this latter regard they did reflect a basic design element of the Radburn scheme as noted by Langer (1959), where houses faced the internal open space system rather than the access roads (Freestone 2010, p. 194). A great deal of money was sunk into the engineering works needed to create canal estates so the price of land was high and exclusivity was almost guaranteed. Only the relatively rich could afford them. As Mr. Gaven, the local MLA, noted during the debate on the *Canals Act* in 1958 “some people have paid £3,000 already. There are some beautiful allotments” (QPD 1958, p. 2199). The estates were not built just for residents, however; they were designed to attract financial investors. The good life included return on investment and future capital gains. Achieving the land development that supported this form of the good life on canals required active support from both local and State level governments, in terms of approving a locally innovative new form of land subdivision, providing infrastructure, permitting dredging of the river bed, and providing legislative support for speculative land sales. Because the canal estates were speculative property developments, here the ‘good life’ could be bought and sold.

**Conclusions**

The two case studies cast a fascinating light on the role of a ‘good life’ in underpinning two forms of settlement planning at two periods in Queensland’s history. It is tempting, but undoubtedly premature, to link the two -- one firmly a socialist and communal approach in the 1890s, the other firmly a capitalist and consumerist approach in the 1950s -- to the socialist to capitalist to neo-liberal trajectory of utopian thinking from the 19th century to the 21st century claimed by Baeten (2002).
This is, however, a potential trajectory that can be confirmed or refuted only through far more empirical evidence.

Nonetheless there are important lessons to be learned from setting the two side by side. First, there are lessons about the interplay of the three ‘actors’ in urban and planning governance (Minnery 2007), in that both involve civil society, the private sector and government. In relation to the cooperative settlements of the 1890s the roles of civil society institutions and individuals such as the burgeoning labour movement and William Lane were powerful stimulants. The private sector exhibited a rather shadowy presence, mainly through the concerns of conservative policy-makers about the potential competition between the government-supported cooperatives and private farming entrepreneurs. This competition may have exhibited itself through the indifferent or even recalcitrant implementation of the policy by civil servants, although this influence is a matter of speculation rather than empirical evidence. In relation to the canal estates of the 1950s the role of the private sector, in the shape of land developers and speculators, is dominant. Civil society plays a more passive role, illustrated mainly through the concerns of parliamentarians to ensure that the eventual purchasers of the properties are protected from harm from floods, bank erosion or inadequate property registration.

In both cases a critical role is played by government (either the Colonial/ State government or local government). Implementation of both the cooperative settlements and canal estates required supporting legislation from government as well as policy-related actions attached to this legislation.

A second lesson is that the potential vision of a ‘good life’ is very broad. It needs to encompass a wide range of philosophies and values, ranging from those supporting socialistic cooperative and egalitarian communities to individualistic consumerist capitalism. The two case studies also show, however, that state intervention to support such efforts to achieve a ‘good’ life can be for a number of both covert and overt purposes. The communitarian cooperative settlements were facilitated by a conservative government, ostensibly as a way of populating undeveloped parts of the Colony whilst combating rampant unemployment. They were also a mechanism to help counteract support for utopian and socialist emigration as exemplified by the New Australians. The Gold Coast canals were ‘invented’ by local land developers as a way of making speculative profits, but they were supported by a local government with a pro-development ethos and taken up by investors and residents who identified in the estates both a new form of an exclusive ‘good’ life and a mechanism for achieving private financial gain.

Were the two attempts at creating a better life successful? Were they approaches we can admire and emulate today? Both examples were seriously flawed but for different reasons. The cooperative settlements attempted to provide a lifestyle for which the people involved were largely unsuited. The mainly urban dwellers had little knowledge and few skills relevant to the kind of farming life they were entering. The settlements all failed. The canal estates are still there, but community attitudes have changed so that concerns about environmental degradation have largely prohibited any more being built. Although lessons were learned about the engineering requirements for such estates as later versions were designed and constructed there are unlikely to be many more in Queensland or elsewhere in Australia.
Perhaps the main lesson to be learned from this comparison is that the breadth of values underpinning ideals of a ‘good life’ is so great that they require a range of different forms of government intervention (or planning approaches) that will lead to a range of different outcomes. There cannot be a single version of the ‘good life’ even if it is supposedly folded into values aimed at protecting or enhancing the ‘public good’. In this case the examples reinforce what is now the accepted wisdom in urban planning – that planning needs to recognise the values of a range of publics and to work appropriately. There is also a supplementary lesson, in that whilst active state intervention was required for the implementation of both the settlement forms in the 1890s and the 1950s, they both demonstrate the strong but quite different roles of all three actors in urban governance, the state, the private sector and civil society.

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