

KELVIN GROVE URBAN VILLAGE, BRISBANE POST IMPLEMENTATION: LESSONS FOR NEW URBANISM

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ABSTRACT: The creation of an ‘urban village’ is increasingly seen as an option for physical regional developments through the renewal of inner mixed use communities normally in densely settled areas. A leading Australian example of this is the 16.6-hectare Kelvin Grove Urban Village, which was a disused military training grounds located at the fringe of the central business district of Brisbane, Queensland.

This research explores how after only a span of 15 years, this inner city development has become an exemplar of new urbanism concepts and principles in Australia. A total of 30 of the original key stakeholders who each had a minimum of ten years involvement with the development were interviewed. The extended time period from inception to precinct maturity allowed the researchers to capture the reflections and insights from the participants.

The lessons learnt provide some key elements that can be applied to other contemporary urban developments that seek high patronage, vitality, character and economic viability in regional development.

KEY WORDS: Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Urban village, New urbanism, Inner city development, University town

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘new urbanism’ has been introduced to various precincts and major urban and regional development projects in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) since the 1970s and more recently in Australia. On the face of it, the concept offers significant opportunities to address a number of fundamental challenges in contemporary place making. It allows a nexus between the built and social environments that will facilitate strong, diverse communities, and a sustainable contemporary urban form.

The costs of fast paced urban growth and the inefficiencies of urban developments in the twenty first century have had critics campaigning for governments, developers and planners to review their approach to urban forms and revive the basic principles that made urban living superior in the first place. Mounting criticisms of the mainstream design principles for new urban developments in Australia are based on what is often described as ‘conventional subdivision’. The strict segregation of land uses, with typically low density developments that create the near obligatory use of private motor vehicles for transportation, are now increasingly seen as inefficient and unsustainable (Burchell and Mukherji, 2003; Cervero and Gorham, 1995; Fulton, 1996; Handy, 2005). The rapid increases in the costs of energy and of transportation are adding financial pressure to the viability of such urban layouts (Rubin, 2010). This view is shared by other recent works in Australia (Australia Futures Task Force, 2007; Salt, 2004) and by Florida (2002) which all emphasise the critical importance of considering urban development against a dynamic and rapidly changing business and social backdrop – one of ageing populations, dramatic changes in household compositions, and fundamental changes to the nature of work and growing demands of knowledge based enterprises.

This paper offers a case study of new urbanism in Australia. Wherein two major public institutions of the Queensland Government have come together to deliver an exemplar development, that embraced the new urbanism philosophy. It is one of the best known projects of this kind in Australia, Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) – an infill, brownfield redevelopment project located in the inner suburbs and just on the outskirts of the Brisbane CBD which is the capital of the state of Queensland.

It was delivered through a joint venture partnership between the Department of Communities (the Department) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). QUT is a major public university

founded in 1989 with over 47 000 students (QUT, 2015). QUT's principal campus is located within the Brisbane CBD and its secondary, smaller campus is adjoining, and now largely integrated with, the KGUV site.

The principles adopted at KGUV exemplified a fundamental change from the conventional urban design that dominated the expansion of Australian cities over the past five decades. This new consciousness has translated into the Australian environment, principles of urban villages and new urbanism, which originated from the UK and North America. Such principles challenged urban design that segregated land uses, encouraged low-density development and promoted the use of private motor vehicles as the dominant form of transportation. At least in part, the original focus for the introduction of these principles was the urban renewal of inner city slums in the UK and the US. However, their role in facilitating integrated communities and in providing exemplification and leadership across entire regions was then recognised.

KGUV aimed to promote diversity of activity and community and, at the same time, integrate land uses. The project's objective was to create an urban mosaic that incorporated the development of community, social interaction and networks as key elements of successful urban design and environments. KGUV has now been under development since 2001 and has matured to the stage where some key observations on the successful aspects of the project's concepts, design and ongoing evolution can be made. Subsequently, some of the issues and challenges that have emerged along that journey can be considered.

The overall objective of this article is to use observations from the KGUV as a case study to identify particular characteristics, successes and opportunities that emerged in its creation and evolution to date. These observations may then assist the final stages of development of the village and inform the development of comparable projects and wider regional development elsewhere. The paper will proceed with a literature review of contemporary urban village concepts then discuss the context of their application in the KGUV project, before presenting a summary of the key findings and outcomes from this research.

2. CONTEMPORARY URBAN VILLAGE CONCEPTS

The concept of an urban village conjures a paradoxical image - the notion of an urban lifestyle ensconced in a community village. The concept is recognised both in the US and the UK and is, based loosely on

the idea of traditional neighbourhoods in the US or '*quartier*' in France (Neal, 2003). In the UK, the term was popularised during the Urban Village Forum (UVF) championed by HRH The Prince of Wales in 1992. The subsequent publication of the original *Urban Villages* book (Urban Villages Group and Aldous, 1992) served as the foundation for the first phase of the UK Government's *Sustainable Communities Plan* in 2003 (Murray, 2004).

In the US, the movement was often referred to as 'new urbanism', as espoused by Jane Jacobs (1961) and further popularised by cofounders of the Congress for the New Urbanism, Andrés Duany and partner Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (2003). In all cases, the underlying drivers and principles were similar. The aim was to address the breakdown in the sustainability and practicality of mainstream, conventional urban design and to illustrate the meaningless and increasingly inefficient dormitory suburbs (Allon, 2006; Kellett, 2010) as well as the emergence of large tracts of inner-city blight, urban congestion and antisocial behaviour (Lee and Leigh, 2005).

The early work of Jacobs (1961), based on Greenwich Village, New York, is seminal to this philosophy. Gratz and Mintz (2000) summarise Jacobs' principal contributions as the reintroduction of the concepts of immediacy, authenticity and integration. She saw a city as a living organism and one of natural 'organised complexity'. The city and its localities could not be developed and be successful simply on a set formula or on the physical environment alone – the inhabitants and the communities were the ones that created truly liveable and sustainable neighbourhoods. Urban areas were holistic and inter-related organisations, where neighbourhood streets, local economies and community relationships all needed to be free to mix and evolve. Jacobs particularly objected to what she saw as planning fads or architectural fashion that were driven from outside of the location itself and did not emerge locally. She reflected not only on her own Greenwich Village location but also on other precincts in New York, particularly Soho; the Pearl District in Portland, Oregon and Little Italy in Boston. All of which were characterised (and were successful) on the basis of the huge variety of styles, materials, colours, textures, individualisation of houses and buildings, the effective use of streets and of meeting places, and a balance that worked with traffic. Jacobs saw that the entire urban system was made up of quite small building blocks – if the houses, streets and blocks worked well, then invariably the neighbourhoods and the city worked well. All of this represented something of a precursor to the work of Florida (2002), wherein he recognised that the economic capacity and

leadership of urban areas best came from within, encompassing the diversity and social interactions of the residents (concepts defined as 'social capital').

When considering an urban village, a number of key planning and development concepts can be identified. An urban village should include the following features (Neal, 2003):

- a development of adequate size or critical mass
- a walkable and pedestrian-friendly environment
- a good mix of uses and opportunities for employment
- a variety of architectural and sustainable urban forms
- mixed and integrated tenure for both housing and commercial uses
- provision of basic shopping, health and educational facilities
- a degree of self-sufficiency.

In 2000 in the US, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) recognised these principles as an alternate path for development that should be actively pursued, but recognised that the changes were not simply about philosophy and design (Anderson and Tregoning, 2000). Rather, they were about communities and individuals and that all stakeholders, particularly government, needed to fully re-think development regulations, infrastructure provision and the attraction of private sector capital. Primarily, in the development of a conducive built form and also, to accept the much longer-term task of building sustainable communities and economies from a local basis.

There was a risk of over-simplification of Jacobs' key elements of new urbanism and a particular danger that the whole philosophy became something of a caricature of Jacobs' Greenwich Village (Gratz and Mintz, 2000). The point was that there should be no suggestion that an urban village must have a particular style as if frozen in time. Consequently, it should not be construed that urban setting or design will follow a particular style or genre. Rather, Jacobs stressed the importance of individuality and the fine-grained nature of such developments, which include a myriad of small features that represent good, innovative and practical design that adds to the comfort and liveability of a particular urban place (Sucher, 2003). Certainly, urban development must be aesthetically pleasing, but that may well be quite eclectic and certainly

not a matter of ‘one size fits all’ – authenticity and culture appeared to be a very important ingredient (Bell and Jayne, 2004).

In a similar line of argument, several researchers warned of the dangers of taking too prescriptive an approach to these types of development. They point out that planning regulation can stifle the vitality and authentic nature of such places and cautioned against devaluing the concept simply to encourage property sales in particular developments (Cox, 2006; Florida, 2002; Reep, 2008; Salt, 2004). The sheer scale of urbanisation across the world now demands new, more innovative forms of development and community building, that produce not just efficiency and productivity, but a sense of place and authenticity in an organic residential community and in public places (Brugmann, 2010; Montgomery, 2013).

The early attempts at these types of developments received justifiable criticism that they were overly prescriptive and inflexible, perhaps reflecting something that was utopian rather than practical for the development mainstream (Neal, 2003). These philosophies coincided with that of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ and highlighted that urban villages, if well planned and subsequently allowed to evolve both physically and in a social community sense, represented an excellent opportunity to develop true urban sustainability (Hall, 2003).

It is not suggested that an urban village approach provides a panacea for all urban renewal projects. Cox (2014) highlights this suggesting, as does Wardner (2013), that even though the integration of ‘live, work and play’ represents an ideal concept, the development parameters to deliver residential, business and work activity are really in need of economic alignment. As shown in KGUV, the coordination of this over a long development period is extremely challenging.

Other fundamentals of an urban village were prescribed to provide a relatively dense and self-contained, walkable community that had a strong residential component but, with that, the integration of retail, dining, leisure and community elements (Gupta *et al.*, 2008). In short, a compact development in which people could live, work and play. They saw an urban village as distinguished from a town centre in that the former was more likely to have a higher proportion of residential development and a lower emphasis on retail – the retail facilities largely (but not exclusively) servicing the community within that village.

However, whether or not new urbanism can deliver its promise in practice is open to some debate (Talen, 2005). Critics argue that the simple aggregation of a number of novel development components may not really address the complex and interrelated factors that can provide a

truly liveable environment for residents (Duany *et al.*, 2010). This paper offers a chance to research and report such claims in a detailed case study of a large scale, maturing urban village.

3. KELVIN GROVE URBAN VILLAGE

The opportunity to develop the KGUV site came in 2001 after the Australian Army declared the 16.57 hectare site, which was occupied for about a hundred years as its 'Gona Barracks', was surplus to its requirements. The property sat adjacent to the secondary campus of QUT's Kelvin Grove Campus (approximately 20 hectares) and proved to be a natural extension to accommodate QUT's growing interest in the arts and creative industries.

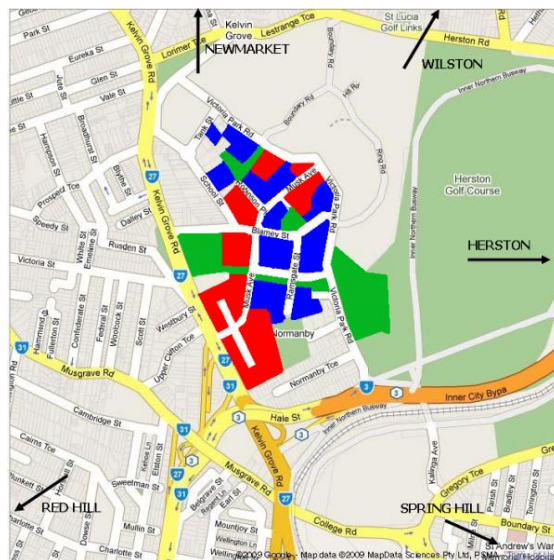
The site also suited the Department who wanted to launch its new approach to public housing. This new approach still had emphasis on the built asset, but attempted a more contemporary and flexible system of administration. Rather than simply the provision of built assets, the Department saw its goal as helping to create a housing system that provided safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing for the improvement of the lives of Queenslanders. The Department saw housing as being important in providing a sense of place, belonging and integration with a wider agenda of community development (see *Housing Act 2003*).

The partnership agreement between a state government department and a major publically owned university was, on the face of it, unusual. The charter of each, and their objectives under this project, were quite different, and their dealings and financial affairs were kept separate and at arm's length. Both organizations had their own corporate objectives yet both accepted the model of an urban village to create the required environment that integrated university facilities with a range of housing types and commercial activities – some provided from the public sector and some by direct private investment. In KGUV, this was provided by the Brisbane Housing Company, an independent, not-for-profit organisation which provides affordable rental housing and markets for sale this product throughout Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. It was set up with the financial support of both the State Government and the Brisbane City Council. Nevertheless, it was explicit that both organisations lay under the general control of the Queensland State Government.

The KGU V master plan went through several stages and iterations from the April 2001 initial master plan, then a revised master plan in March 2002, until its final integrated master plan was agreed to by all stakeholders in 2004. Throughout the process, the shared vision was upheld and that was to create:

“A diverse city fringe community – linking learning with enterprise, creative industry with community ... creating a new part of Brisbane that offers unique living solutions.” (QUT, 2004).

In its fully built form, KGU V will be significant in scale with 8 000 square metres of retail space, 82 000 square metres of commercial space and 4 800 people employed in the development. There will be 2 900 residents in over 1 300 housing units. The Cooperation Deed that governed the partnership, dictated the share of land for each party – 62 per cent for the Department (represented by lots coloured blue) and 38 per cent for QUT (represented by lots coloured red) as shown in Figure 1.



Legend:

- Land to be disposed of by Department of Housing.
- Land managed by QUT.
- Parks and Open Spaces.

Figure 1. Kelvin Grove Urban Village and Surrounds. Source: Google, Map Data 2009.

As of 2009, there were 10 600 QUT students, 1 100 QUT staff and 325 QUT scientists, together with 1 600 state college students and 150 state college staff around the KGUV campus (Hefferan, 2009). The successful integration of the QUT campus into the KGUV site is such that many of the University's new faculties are almost indistinguishable from those surrounds yet major buildings of QUT prominently anchor the main entry ways of the development, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Queensland University of Technology on Lot 1 'Creative Precinct' at Kelvin Grove Urban Village. Source: Photo taken by the authors.

In 2010, the buildings (both publicly and privately owned) on the KGUV site were approximately 72 per cent complete, incorporating retail, commercial and residential uses. The unbuilt sites mostly belonged to QUT and have been reserved for the University's future expansion. The on-sale and development of the sites available from the Department slowed following the global financial crisis of 2008 (as did the overall development markets in Brisbane through that period). Slowly however,

market confidence has returned and practically all of these sites are now sold or under negotiations for on-sale to developers.

All the infrastructure works on site have been fully completed and funded by the proponents. This included a triple fibre optic network throughout the village that provides telephone, television and data services as well as wireless 'hotspots' that allow access to internet in parks and cafes.

A key feature of the KGUV development was its commitment to develop and nurture its community identity and character. To carry out this vision the partnership provided the Community Hub in the Village Centre which was professionally managed by a community development practitioner, the Hornery Institute. Their approach to encourage community participation and the development of social capital between traditional and emerging audiences was through activated learning and cultural activities. The Hornery Institute was involved through the inception of KGUV up to the creation of the Integrated Master Plan of 2004. In August 2009, the new community hub, 'The Exchange' was opened and has been turned over successfully to the community.

The question remains however, as to whether the built environment and planning concepts focusing on nurturing social connectedness and enhancing distinctiveness identified with a traditional village, could be applied to an urban renewal area or, given the scale of change required, whether it could be applied to contemporary urban development.

As with any major urban development project, KGUV was influenced by nearby lands – in this case, the inner city of Brisbane. Through that long development period, punctuated by rapidly changing economic conditions, there were a relatively small number of large scale, brownfield developments available – principally Newstead, South Bank and the redevelopment of the Roma Street parklands. In addition, the period saw a rise in interest in inner city residential accommodation which benefited all these developments.

Of all of them, KGUV exemplified the new urbanism principles and was widely recognised across the sector which the sector awarded. It could be reasonably observed that some of the integrated features of KGUV were replicated soon after in those other developments.

Because the site had previously been used as an army base for such a long time, and the public was excluded, there was no integration previously of the neighbouring establishments. It is important to note that the surrounding and adjacent properties, have undertaken privately, renewal projects being able to leverage of the core facilities within the

urban village. This simultaneous rejuvenation has made the boundaries quite porous.

4. METHODOLOGY AND PARAMETERS

This paper is a result of a research project undertaken in 2009-10 and funded by the Department. The proposal and the original research was therefore nominated through to 2015 with the opinion stakeholders who continued to be involved progressively upgraded. Part of the brief from the proponents was to document the process and highlight the findings from the project, and to maximise the outcomes achieved in the delivery of the project.

The research was based on a review of literature pertaining to urban villages, new urbanism design and development concepts as well as a detailed investigation of project records pertaining to the Kelvin Grove area and to this project site in particular. Sound historical data on the locality existed and other research projects had been undertaken on community development aspects (Carroll *et al.*, 2007; Klaebe, 2006; Klaebe and Foth, 2006) and information and communication technology (ICT) applications to be used in KGUV (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Foth and Adkins, 2006). However, no comprehensive study or review on the project from a development perspective in its entirety had previously been undertaken.

In a diverse research area such as KGUV, the methodology chosen was to interview key informants who were able to mix knowledge with professional experience and opinion, to provide a holistic and comprehensive view of the complex matters under consideration (Buckley, 1995).

A respondent list was created through enquiries from a number of sources. The list identified individuals who had significant involvement through various stages of the project. It ranged from politicians, directors-general and vice-chancellors through to senior public servants, developers, key consultants, researchers and those representing the current community members. Several academics were also approached, given that KGUV was also the subject of their respective research. In total, there were thirty such individuals who were in the best position to become key informants. They provided a rich resource for this project as all had very diverse objectives, interests and time frames. Without exception, all were enthusiastic to be involved in the project, and many provided additional information which enriched the understanding and

final outcomes. Further, as noted above, a number of those informants remained involved in follow-up interviews through until the completion of the project in 2015.

With the research base in place and given the multifaceted nature of this research, detailed, structured and confidential face-to-face interviews were conducted. The structured approach was chosen to ensure that the hour long interviews with the high level respondents confined the interview discussion to the key factors provided by the literature. However, respondents were also given the opportunity to speak freely to better present their experiences and observations as stakeholders involved in the different aspects of development such as planning, design, implementation and operation of KGUV over the past decade.

The guide questions were forwarded to the participants several days prior to the interview to allow them to provide considered opinions. The areas covered followed the component parts of KGUV as a development project, overall strategies, design, development and construction, and ongoing management. The structure aimed to expose those key successful and less successful elements of both the project concept and the delivery as well as how the interaction between the various stakeholders (particularly public-private interfaces) worked. These interactions mainly occurred in areas of governance, regulation, tenure, investment attraction and promotion.

Upon completion of all the interviews and after preliminary data had been collected and analysed, a workshop was held. This meeting was well attended with twenty-four of the thirty interviewees in attendance. This allowed the group to retrospectively consider and further discuss the emerging themes.

5. SUMMARY RESEARCH OUTCOMES

In line with many other urban village case studies and principles, the plan envisioned that the village be developed in the public realm (as against private) and, at the same time, be an internally focused development.

As such, KGUV was planned to:

- be a vibrant 24 hour, 365 days per year area
- have a clear identity
- have a central focus and / or main street
- be community based
- be contextual, permeable, legible and accessible
- be sustainable, robust and adaptable
- be safe
- be public transport oriented.

On review, it was concluded that, overwhelmingly, the positive attributes tended to be fundamental and enduring – relating to the nature of the built environment created, the potential for true sustainability and liveability and the ability to build community into the future. The project was the first of its kind (i.e. planned and institutionally developed as compared to a gentrification of historic areas such as the Pyrmont-Ultimo district in Sydney (Bell and Jayne, 2004)). It would be both unfair and naïve to believe that, under such a scenario, all matters could be successfully handled or that, in retrospect or in subsequent projects, certain matters would not be addressed differently.

There was recognition by all interviewed in this research that even now KGUV remained as a ‘work in progress’. Whilst there was sufficient critical mass to analyse it at this point in time, it is premature to make final judgements.

Across the key informants, there was strong, but certainly not universal, agreement of the overall success of the project to date and a very high level of satisfaction from practically all stakeholders in both the public and private sectors. Importantly, however, those who did not believe that it was successful overall were quite strongly of that opinion. These tended to be from the private sector, but were not fundamentally opposed to the urban village concept. Rather, their issues related to particular developments or dealings that perhaps did not advance or succeed as first envisaged.

The fact that, amongst the private sector investors and developers interviewed, there were some quite divergent views as to the overall success of the entire development might reasonably lead to the

conclusion that issues encountered were often specific to a particular project / development within KGUV rather than generic in nature.

The respondents unanimously viewed the project to truly represent the vanguard for much of the future urban development of Australian cities, recognising the diversity that existed within. Furthermore, paralleling the complex nature of the village development itself, it was difficult to extract or indeed rank the importance of one element over another.

The following are the five strong common themes addressing the characteristics, successes and opportunities of KGUV that emanated from the interviews:

- planning, design and infrastructure provision
- design review and approvals
- lot size and the nature of private sector development
- retail components
- level of involvement of the principals

Planning, Design and Infrastructure Provision

A key feature of KGUV was that both of the proponents were from the public sector and had their own individual objectives – QUT to establish and integrate an educational area, and the Department to establish a new model for affordable, and some welfare housing which was to be provided by the public and private sectors. The willingness of both parties to undertake detailed planning and strategy to develop a true urban village based on a master plan and to have remained committed through the entire process provided a high degree of certainty to the entire project.

To underwrite this commitment and vision, the provision of key infrastructure – roads, drainage, service reticulation, land form, ICT and other services – in the very early stages of the project further signalled to the public that this development was set out to be an exemplar. This would appear to be quite a different approach from that normally undertaken by a private developer, who typically would not want to commit to such heavy infrastructure investment and detailed planning without the pre-commitment from sales in the market.

KGUV took an inherent risk in such an approach. Being an exemplar has its costs which can only really be qualified in hindsight. To illustrate, in the provision ICT, hardware and supply decisions made early in the project proved later to be inappropriate or redundant as technology had

rapidly changed in terms of platforms and systems. Even though such issues were difficult to foresee at the time of investment the considerable costs involved had to be passed on in the final asking price for individual lots. Such costs however, should be balanced out with the signals of certainty and predictability from the developer to potential buyers and investors, regarding the overall comprehensive infrastructure and design standards not typically available elsewhere.

A design element that adhered to urban village design principles that needed some flexibility was the issue of parking. There were opinions by a number of informants that, in the name of sustainability and in the promotion of public transport, insufficient car parking had been provided, particularly at peak times. This reflected design principles held strongly in a number of key texts and seemed to be a significant issue for the smaller businesses on site. In maintaining 'urban comfort', urban villages needed to promote and encourage alternate modes of transport – be they pedestrian, cycling or various forms of public transport. At the same time they needed to recognise that, throughout the surrounding urban areas, the use of private vehicles dominated. Therefore, even into the medium or longer term, private vehicles had to be accommodated (though not in the normal dominant or overwhelming way) within KGUV.

Design Review and Approvals

The design parameters, based on the master plan, were quite prescriptive in regards to size and orientation of buildings, use of streetscape and public realms and the integration of various land uses. Prescriptive planning was enforced by a process whereby land would be offered to the private sector for particular uses on a competitive basis and, once a preferred developer was identified, that individual or firm was given a period of time to submit detailed plans to an independent Design Review Committee (DRC), established by the public sector principals. It was only after the consent of that committee was secured, that the sale would proceed to local council approvals and final construction.

The local council was aware and generally supportive of the KGUV concept (though not, for a number of reasons, a principal to the development). The prior approval of project type and design by the DRC often facilitated and sped up local council assessment and approvals. Land banking was specifically prohibited.

Early in the KGUV project, there was some private developer resistance to what was seen as an additional and unnecessary step in

securing initial design approval through the DRC. Before long however, and because of a very practical approach taken by DRC members, the general opinion of those involved in making submissions changed considerably.

Developers and investors observed that, by going through this additional process, their development proposals were actually enhanced and better integrated with surrounding developments. Further, with the knowledge that design approval had been received internal to the project, the local council development approvals became easier to secure, particularly given that infrastructure was largely already in place.

In a practical project sense, it became obvious that individual developers involved (understandably enough) had little prior knowledge of urban village concepts. Interaction with the design group substantially increased that understanding and involvement. However, one senior planner noted:

“The two-stage approval process is also valid given that, whilst the Council will be the final approval authority, the nature of those development approvals is such that it will never be as fine-grained as is required to maintain the design principles within Kelvin Grove. Clearly, the assessment process or assessment officers within a council will not have the capability, time or indeed interest to investigate and challenge design to that level. Consequently, it would be difficult to see how these matters would work under a single approval process controlled under new planning regimes and changing local government processes.”

However, a more serious criticism regarding the operations of the public-private sector interface was made by several of the developers and marketing agents. All recognised that transparency in dealings was a critical issue for both the Department and QUT as public entities. A probity process with an independent intermediary / analyst was established from the outset of the project. Whilst this requirement was generally accepted by the private sector participants, the process was criticised at times for being too slow and lacking responsiveness and innovation in the face of immediate market opportunities. Probity processes were also said to hamper the direct flow of market information and instructions to and from the principals.

Lot Size and Nature of Private Sector Involvement

From the start of the project, the principals had the option of releasing all, or at least a substantial proportion, of the site to a single, large, private corporation to develop. In those early stages, there were overtures from the private sector to pursue that option. Instead, the principals decided to subdivide the lots into relatively small parcels ranging from 1 000m² to 2 000m² and release them progressively. This conscious decision was to encourage a more eclectic, human scale design philosophy within the village and also facilitate integrated and diverse land uses, including affordable and welfare housing, as compared to the ‘mass’ housing look that large scale development tends to deliver based on cost efficiencies.

Certainly, it would have been difficult (though not impossible) to provide such outcomes if a single, large developer had been engaged. It was difficult to judge which option would have presented the best end result. As one of the professional consultants noted in the interview:

“A fundamental problem was that the development owners were selling to the ‘wholesale’ market – that is, individual private developers, and, therefore, each development proposal had to be on a block-by-block basis. An important difference was that, say, in a Delfin project such as Varsity Lakes or Mawson Lakes, the long-term developer who was selling almost into the retail market, could afford loss leaders or to defer profits to make a particular component work. Loss leaders weren’t possible on the Kelvin Grove Urban Village because of the structure of ownership.”

Smaller-scale developers could not be expected to have the same financial resources to share a long-term vision or perhaps the innovative approach that a larger corporate can. On the other hand, the flexibility that was sought, combined with strict design and other guidelines, made the scale of the developer involved less important than it would be in a normal development project.

Retail Components

Retail development in almost any new project will always be difficult, and KGUV proved to be no exception to that. The master plan had

envisaged that retailing would be along a principal street and design axis (Musk Avenue) and, thus, would be centrally located and aimed at servicing the local KGUV community (residents, students, workers, etc.). Given the higher-use capacity and rental income from retail uses, developers pressured the principals both to extend the area of retailing and also to have it moved to an area of higher exposure at the boundary of the site. The former was allowed, but the location (and provisions strictly limiting external signage) remained as originally planned and was reflected in the final master plan in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3. KGUV Master Plan with Retailing at its Centre. Source: Hassells Pty Ltd.

The retail component for such a project confronts contradictory forces. On one hand, it is difficult to attract a residential population without those basic retailing facilities in place. On the other hand, the same business cannot survive unless there is sufficient cash flow from an existing population catchment to support them. Often, large scale developers can afford long-term rent free periods to allow the local patronage to gain critical mass. However, this would be at considerable project cost and still provides no guarantee of success. One developer interview observed:

“Retail only works if the volume of trade is there to be secured. Otherwise, you will be propping it up forever. In that general vicinity too, it needs to be observed that a lot happened with retailing over a relatively short period of time – the Newmarket shopping centre was developed after many years awaiting approvals, Woolworths at Ashgrove closed down but then re-opened, and the numbers of residents actually living in the precinct took time to emerge, particularly having regard to their final composition.”

It could also be argued, that the overall design of the retail area at KGUV was less than optimum – at the centre of the development, as shown in Figure 3. It could have been located closer to the existing QUT campus and its large student population, or even along the busy Kelvin Grove Road which links to its residential catchment. Nevertheless, today, some seven years after completion of the initial retail development, with the attraction of a major supermarket (Woolworths), a much larger catchment (with a substantial number of developments now completed) and the introduction of innovations such as weekend street markets, the retail centre is performing adequately.

Level of Involvement by Principals

The level of involvement of the public sector in any major urban development will vary considerably. In some urban developments, such as a major development area like a port or dam, state involvement may well be comprehensive, with the private sector only playing the role of contractor, at least until project completion. At the other end of that scale, a large, residential master planned community may be fully designed, financed, developed and owned by a private sector corporation with the involvement of the public sector confined to local authority planning, design and development control and infrastructure charges. Obviously, the level of involvement, ownership and financing of any development, either by the public or private sector, will determine the level of overall influence each group has on direction and outcomes.

The inherent risks involved in large scale, innovative design projects will always be difficult for the private sector. As noted above, KGUV's success and the diverse yet integrated uses that have been achieved were based on a resolute commitment to the urban village principles and the design plans, as well as the ability to fund practically all infrastructure in

the very early stages of the project. In the light of subsequent events and the protracted time frames involved, it is doubtful that the private sector could have maintained that level of commitment.

Fortunately, KGUV had an excellent management team, made up of senior representatives of both QUT, the Department and key consultants who remained involved through practically the entire project and who enjoyed wide recognition and respect of the development and property community.

In the case of KGUV, both of the principals; QUT and the Department, were committed to the urban village philosophy and, very importantly, remained involved for a considerable length of time. Whilst the Department's involvement will come to an end in the foreseeable future, both groups remained directly involved in the project ten years on from its initial establishment. This case study provides an example of different types of government involvement and motivations of public sector organizations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The physical manifestation and exemplification of an urban village is important and KGUV fills that role in Queensland - it is the more generic principles and lessons learnt that are important. These need to be translated and transferred to other, quite different localities and environments before the full impact and benefits of the alternatives and viable urban concepts can be applied. While by nature, such principles manifest themselves in a particular precinct there is no doubt as occurred in KGUV, that such high profile innovative and successful developments have exemplification impacts across the wider region.

At this time, new forms of urban development and densification, such as urban villages, represent quite a small proportion of stock being developed. However, exemplar projects such as KGUV do present an approach which better reflects contemporary demographic and business requirements, whilst also providing a more sustainable and coherent urban environment.

The KGUV project included certain components and coincidences that could not be repeated elsewhere. Consequently, as with successful urban models in other parts of the world, there are inherent dangers in attempting to simply transpose key development, design or implementation strategies from one project to another.

Nevertheless, a number of issues have emerged in KGUV that might be generic to comparable projects elsewhere. Given their scale, level of

innovation and timeframes, it seems likely that any such development in Australia will require a substantial level of government input and leadership and in KGUV that was overt. Specifically project proponents being both a government department and a publicly-owned university who were able to conceptualise and regulate the entire project, provide substantial up-front infrastructure and other funding, as well as become a dominant, long-term resident (as in the case of QUT).

KGUV also reinforced the importance of a high-quality, market-oriented master plan, which was agreed to and became the overriding mantra through the entire project. This level of commitment may be difficult to replicate in the private sector.

A fundamental decision in developments of this type, relates to the proposition of private or public sector involvement and that interface. Again, using KGUV as an example, the principals believed that the integrity of the project and the diversity and integration it promoted could only really be achieved if the private sector were introduced to the project on a lot-by-lot basis and well after the original plan, infrastructure and control mechanisms were in place. This appeared to have worked effectively, though there were sequencing issues between the various types of development and problems with the viability of the retail core represented significant issues that took time to resolve. It provided however, the eclectic urban form and diversity of uses that the original plan had envisaged. That was achieved at a cost, given the release of lots were too small to attract larger-scale developers who could have brought wider expertise, innovation and longer-term vision to the project than, perhaps, the smaller developers were able to provide.

The final observation was that of time. An urban village concept, like the villages upon which they may have been modeled, will take a remarkable length of time – not simply to develop (though that in itself will be significant by normal standards), but also for the community to populate the development and for that to mature and evolve – a process that indeed continues indefinitely. Consequently, it was quite difficult to reconcile all of that with a normal development project and sometimes, as proven by the ICT roll-out at KGUV, good intentions and perceived innovations did not always prove to be of significant benefit to either the urban village or its developers. The successful involvement of the private sector required a level of certainty to be provided and commercially realistic timelines envisaged to have the entire project absorbed into the market. With those critical timeframes established, and provided that the initial concepts and designs were appropriate, it is then up to the resident

community and the market for on-sales to establish the wider viability and sustainability of the concept for any specific development.

QUT was fundamental to the development of the whole KGUV concept and project, not simply in philosophy, design and funding but also in the 'university town' image and identity that the urban village presents. Additionally, it provided the iconic buildings and uses, and the 'base load' of 12 000 staff and students which represent a major catchment to the whole village. QUT will remain the dominant landholder for decades to come and, provided that it remains active and interested in more than its own uses, will remain a strong, positive influence in the maintenance of the urban village in perpetuity.

The embedding of the philosophy, design and approach envisaged from the outset may well be problematic unless, as happened at KGUV, a principal proponent maintains involvement as a long-time resident, user and/or 'anchor' on an ongoing basis. This may be more difficult in the case of even a large, private sector developer whose interest will cease on sale.

A contrary view here may be that, by their very nature, such developments and communities will evolve. Consequently, into the future, further development and use of the area will almost certainly be different from that originally planned. Before a true evaluation of such a project can be made, a sufficient period must be first allowed for the development of the built form and, thereafter, to allow the residential, business, and public realms to mature. This line of argument would hold that such evolution is, in fact, desirable as the project, now a completed urban village and community should respond to the changing market and its demands.

Only longer term retrospective analysis of projects, such as KGUV, well into the future will establish the validity or otherwise of these observations.

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