Fringe development and landscape impact: ‘concerts in culs-de-sac’

Last year Delfin celebrated 25 years of creating special places. Earlier this month I celebrated 25 years as a member of the Delfin team. In attempting to address the topic of ‘fringe development and landscape impact’ I will talk from the perspective of the urban development industry and Delfin in particular. I will explain how our impact on the landscape has changed since I commenced with Delfin.

I started my career, as a qualified town planner, with a burning desire to be an urban designer. The first subdivision I designed for Delfin consisted solely of quarter-acre lots. I had not yet heard about ‘urban consolidation’, ‘ecologically-sustainable development’ or ‘new urbanism’. I thought ‘monument’ was the large house at the other end of the street where my rich cousins lived; that my ‘cultural heritage’ was something I should be terribly ashamed of; and that ‘conservation’ was probably a method of making fig jam.

What I had heard of, in 1971, were the three buzz words of subdivision design: cul-de-sac, cul-de-sac, cul-de-sac.

As Delfin’s planner I designed lots of them, and our buyers loved them. They said our subdivisions were ‘well planned’, and the cul-de-sac became the symbol of ‘good planning’. Whilst our competitors continued to sell ‘subdivided land’ we commenced marketing ‘planned developments’ with ‘safe roads’ and were rewarded with increasing sales.

The cul-de-sac had given us a marketing advantage.

Planning has come a long way since my first subdivision. Today, Delfin’s fully-planned urban communities incorporate many innovations including:

• A wide range of housing styles and densities.
• Ecologically-sustainable development practices.
• Urban design with a focus on community.
• And much more.

The impact of these innovations on fringe developments and the landscape have been immense. I believe these innovations begun with the cul-de-sac. Therefore, I would like to offer this paper as a celebration of the cul-de-sac – for its role in the creation of modern-day urban design and development practices.

As a celebration I have titled this paper ‘concerts in cul-de-sac’.

Perhaps no other project in Australia celebrates cul-de-sac more that the Golden Grove development in South Australia (SA). This development, which will house 30,000 people on 1230 hectares, 20 kilometres north east of Adelaide, is a joint venture between Delfin Property Group Limited and the South Australian Urban Projects Authority. Golden Grove has more culs-de-sac per hectare than any other large-scale, fringe development in Australia. It is widely recognised as pre-eminent in urban community development in this country, and probably the rest of the world. I would, therefore, like to use Golden Grove as a case
study in attempting to address the topic of 'fringe development and landscape impact'.

In doing so I would like to address a number of questions including:

- Is urban development the culprit?
- What do we mean by 'urban consolidation' on the urban fringe?
- What have been the major innovations in urban design and development of the past 25 years, and how are they impacting on the landscape?

**Is urban development the culprit?**

One of the first questions that arises in any discussion on fringe development and landscape impact is whether urban development is the culprit. With each development I have been involved with, the answer is clearly 'No!'. In each case the landscape had been severely tampered with a long time before our involvement; our West Lakes project in SA was previously a swamp, heavily polluted with sewage; and at our Forest Gardens project in Cairns, a sugar farm had previously replaced a pristine tropical forest.

At Golden Grove our forebears had completely destroyed all natural vegetation, except for that which lined the deeply incised creeks and gullies. They had built stately homes and more modest ones, outbuildings, fences and tracks. They planted fruit orchards and vegetable gardens. The cropped the land with wheat and barley, and grazed sheep and cattle. When Delfin arrived at Golden Grove, many historic structures and buildings had disappeared, some were in dilapidated condition and others were left in ruins. As part of the development process, Delfin has restored, rebuilt and rejuvenated many of these items for the enjoyment of future generations.

**Urban consolidation**

One of the most significant changes that has occurred in Australian fringe development over the past 25 years has been the more towards urban consolidation. 25 years ago, the fringe was just subdivision after subdivision of quarter-acre lots with:

- Very little housing choice.
- Community facilities provided too late.
- Barren reserves.
- Poor streetscapes.

The only buyers were first-home buyers, who wanted a new home at an affordable price. Those buyers who could afford a better choice remained in the inner suburbs.

Our goal has always been to broaden the market for our fringe developments as much as possible, to attract a wide cross section of buyers, and achieve balanced communities. We believe that urban consolidation is not about how many
persons or dwellings we can squeeze into each hectare. Our definition of urban consolidation is urban development which meets all the needs of a balanced community in terms of lifestyle, affordability and quality of life.

At Gordon Grove we have achieved urban consolidation by attracting more than just first-home buyers. The following people have also been attracted:

- Singles.
- Sharers.
- Single-parent families.
- 'Move-ups'.
- Empty nesters.
- Retirees.

At Golden Grove a community has now been developed with a demographic profile, in terms of age and household style, that matches that of our major cities. We have been successful in attracting such a broadly mixed community because of our determined and conscious effort to meet our buyers needs.

The broader the mix of a community, the broader will be the needs and interests of that community - the broader the needs and interests, the greater the opportunities for conservation. At Golden Grove we have exploited these opportunities. Some heritage items have been restored for school children, some for families and others for the enjoyment of the elderly.

I believe that urban consolidation is good news for the landscape and conservation on the fringe.

**Major innovations in urban design and development**

What have been the major innovations in fringe urban design and development over the past 25 years and how have these impacted on the landscape?

I believe six major innovations have been responsible for reshaping our industry, and that each has been beneficial to the landscape and conservation. These are:

- Greener environments and more ecologically-sustainable development.
- Community development plans.
- Large-scale, fringe developments.
- Private/public joint ventures.
- Improved housing choice.
- Better urban design for safer, friendlier, less car-dependent, more energy-efficient neighbourhoods.

**Greener environments and more ecologically-sustainable development**

When we started developing the Golden Grove project in 1985 our competitors
told us we were crazy: 'How can you possibly afford to spend all that money on landscaping', they said. Today, the same developers are busily copying us. They, too, have realised that customers prefer greener environments.

At Golden Grove our objective was to provide our customers with a greener environment. As a result, we have developed more ecologically-sustainable landscaping and urban development practices, which we are now utilising nationally. We have:

- Retained over 20 per cent of the site as open space.
- Established our own nursery.
- Collected and propagated seeds from local, indigenous species.
- Developed reserves early.
- Planted over 700,000 plants in 10 years.
- Given away over 130,000 plants to residents.
- Offered free landscaping advice.
- Held garden competitions.
- Re-used top soil.
- Built stormwater detention basins.
- Recycled damaged stormwater pipes.
- Used bio-degradable tree guards.
- Encouraged energy-efficient housing designs.

What do these practices mean for conservation? It means that heritage items are no longer left aside and ignored by the developer. Today, many heritage items are becoming an integral part of public open-space development and an integral part of the provision of a greener environment.

A good example, at Gordon Grove, of the integration of conservation and the provision of greener environments, is the 'Kids for Landcare Outdoor Classroom'. This classroom was created as a resource for schools and the community to learn about caring for soil, water, flora and fauna. It demonstrates how degraded land can be rehabilitated through the use of wood-lotting and planting of native grasses. It illustrates soil profiles, native food vegetation, retention dams and a working windmill. It also illustrates the stabilisation and retention of historic structures and buildings.

**Community development plans**

Another major change that has occurred during the past 25 years is that some large-scale developers have changed from being developers of land and buildings to being developers of communities. One of the many planning tools we now use to help us create communities is the 'community development plan'.

In the early 1970s, planning for community facilities began only after the need for such facilities became evident. At Golden Grove, Delfin became the driver for the preparation of a comprehensive community development plan and the
catalyst for its implementation. Our objective was to be pro-active in the provision of community facilities rather than re-active. Our objective was to predict community needs and to have a program in place to meet those needs – our objective was to create a sense of community.

The Golden Grove community development plan was prepared together with our partner, state and local government authorities as well as other providers of community facilities and services. The community development plan addressed the timing, location and financing of new facilities. It also addressed the need for restoration of historic monuments and buildings. Some historic buildings were identified in the community development plan for future community use and possible uses were identified. The historic homestead known as ‘Surrey Farm’, now used as a child care centre, is one example. The Golden Grove community development plan was very good news for conservation – it helped to save the Surrey Farm homestead and other historic monuments as well as create a sense of community.

Our joint venture partner has developed the model we used into a ‘human services planning kit’ which has become a model for the preparation of community development plans for fringe developments across the country.

**Large-scale fringe developments**

Something else I have seen happen during my 25 years of work has been the emergence of large-scale, fully planned, fringe urban developments; developments spanning many years and housing tens of thousands of people.

These developments have had a tremendous impact on our community. Just about every innovation in fringe urban development practice, that has occurred in my time, has come from large-scale, fringe developments. Innovations like:

- Small-lot housing.
- Better, safer urban design.
- Community development plans.
- Greener environments.
- Ecologically-sustainable development practices.

Each of these innovations has produced benefits for conservation. The developer of large-scale projects is able to co-ordinate and often finance, not only key facilities but also the conservation of heritage items within its developments in a way that is just not possible when heritage items are spread amongst a multitude of smaller, unrelated developments.

Next time you visit Gordon Grove, please collect a brochure on our Cobble Creek nature trail. Along this trail you will come across historic wells, homestead ruins, a copper mine, orchards and some of the first European trees planted. These items have been retained and restored by Delfin for the enjoyment of residents and visitors.
Large-scale developments on the fringe can be a great benefit to our community and to conservation. I urge governments to consider the importance of large-scale urban developments to the future of planning, housing and conservation in this country.

**Public/private joint ventures**

Golden Grove was the first large-scale urban development in SA undertaken as a joint venture between a private developer and a public authority. The combination of a highly skilled, market driven, private company with the strong social conscience of a public authority can produce spectacular results that would never be achieved by either party acting alone.

The benefits of such joint ventures include:
- Sharing of financial risks.
- Co-ordination of physical and human services.
- Optimism of public sector returns.
- The conservation of historic buildings.

At Golden Grove a number of existing buildings within the development were identified for conservation in the Golden Grove indenture. One of these is Petworth Farm. Located at the northern boundary of Golden Grove, this farmhouse will be restored towards the end of the project. The other nominated buildings have been, and are being restored by the joint venture, even though they are not listed as heritage items under any other legislation.

The Golden Grove example illustrates how conservation can benefit from public/private joint ventures.

**Improved housing choice**

In the early 1970s every builder display home in Adelaide was designed for fit on a 70-foot wide allotment. In contrast today, at Golden Grove there is an incredible range of housing types and allotment sizes – small allotments have frontages as narrow as 8 metres.

Delfin has played a major role in housing innovation. We have been leaders in adopting zero-lot-line housing, in the creation of small-lot housing including villa housing on 300 square metre lots and courtyard housing on 450 square metre allotments. These products are now available in each of our projects. They are also being offered by some of our competitors.

Delfin is committed to improving housing design in Australia. Our initiatives have included:
- Extensive market research.
- Free design services.
- Incentives for home builders.
Housing design competitions.
Housing design workshops with architects, home designers, builders and suppliers.
Housing design partnerships with major suppliers like James Hardie.

The arrival of small-lot housing and zero-lot-line housing in the late-1980s forced home designers to go back to the drawing board. The result has been a vast improvement in housing designs. Housing designs today are more user-friendly, energy efficient, have better indoor/outdoor relationships and have greater street appeal than the housing of the 1970s.

Housing styles have changed too — gone are the colonial and Spanish mission styles of the 1970s and gone are the monotone, featureless, wide frontage, housing styles that were popular well into the 1980s. Today, buyers are going for more detailed facades such as Mediterranean, Tuscan, Georgian, Tudor and Federation styles.

The introduction of Federation style, villa housing at Gordon Grove in 1990 was incredibly successful. So successful, in fact, that two years later we ended up with some streets in Golden Grove in which every home had a finial! I am glad to report that we have been able to get people away from the finials, but traditional facades are still very popular.

Better housing design and the return to older styles is not only a reflection of developer initiatives but also of changing community values. The community is becoming more interested in design and more interested in traditional values. As people become interested in traditional styles they also become more interested in historic buildings and conservation.

**Better urban design**

In 1971 urban design was not an issue. However, things have changed — just ask your next taxi driver. 'It's a credit to you', a driver recently said to me, 'Golden Grove is a fantastic development'. 'I wouldn't live there for quids', said another.

Over recent years we have seen a tremendous growth in community interest and discussion on the design of our cities.

We owe this to:
- Federal Government initiatives including its Better Cities program, and the many activities of the Green Street Joint Venture.
- State Government initiatives like Vic Code.
- The many professional and industry organisations like, RAPI, UDIA, RAIA and now ICOMOS for including the issue of urban design on agendas, conferences, study tours etc.
- The strong, healthy competition between Australia's leading developers — nothing stimulates our performance than the knowledge that our competitors are catching up to us.
There is always room for improvement. But at Delfin we are very proud of our achievements in urban design, and I am sure the ULA in Melbourne is very proud of its achievements as well.

Perhaps our greatest indebtedness to the growth of interest in urban design is owed to the prophets of 'New Urbanism'. Even though I disagree with much of what they have to say, the 'New Urbanists' through their literature, design workshops, and charrettes have raised interest, discussion and debate on urban design to unprecedented levels.

One of their more important missions in life is to crucify the cul-de-sac and take us back to the grid. The argue, in part, that the grid is more desirable because is more permeable and more ecologically sustainable.

This is not the forum for an argument on culs-de-sac versus the grid, but I would still like to make a few points:

• Cul-de-sac residents love their culs-de-sac, are not anti-social, are not elitist, and use no more energy than anyone else that lives in similar homes in similar locations.

• The cul-de-sac does not necessarily equate with no permeability - we believe that easy pedestrian and cycle access throughout a neighbourhood is essential, it is central to our urban design.

• The cul-de-sac does reduce vehicle speeds, create more defensible spaces, and can help to keep through traffic away from a high proportion of residential areas.

Therefore, the cul-de-sac in some ways was not just the beginning of modern-day fringe urban design, but perhaps also the reason for today's increased community awareness of urban design – increased community awareness, discussion and debate on urban design can only result in better design. And better design will help to create better conservation practices.

Conclusion

Many innovations have occurred in fringe urban design and development practices during my 25 years with Delfin. Each of these innovations has bought – and will continue to bring – benefits to conservation.

Delfin has played a major role in each of these major innovations. In my role with Delfin, the cul-de-sac was the first innovation – it led to all others. I therefore propose a toast to the cul-de-sac ... let's celebrate it!

Tony Sabino was one of a panel of three practitioners, which included Barry Young of Keys Young Architects and Rod Fehring of the Urban Land Authority (Victoria).