Abstract: Research on master planned estates (MPEs) to date has concentrated on whether they are desirable or undesirable approaches to new residential development. Yet MPEs are also one form of emerging space in the Australian urban landscape. These spaces reflect the logics of highly mobile capital, where certain regions and cities are treated as commodities that are produced by branding to make them competitive and open to investment. Similarly, MPEs are spatially embedded commodities that go beyond providing residential living space to offer additional facilities and other attractions to improve the quality of the living experience. This paper explores engagement with the experience economy and understandings of the living experience by developers and residents of MPEs. Based on case studies of MPEs in the Lower Hunter region of New South Wales it was found that residents have different interpretations of living experience, which do not necessarily reflect the intentions of developers. Although the experience offerings provided by the developer may fall short of expectation, this does not necessarily detract from the way the residents (or consumers) construct their living experiences within the estate. Through this analysis MPEs are interpreted as a spatial manifestation of the experience economy, with the emphasis on constructing a residential environment where the physical elements of the estate serve as props to stage experiences are produced by the developer and thereby made available for consumption by the resident.

Introduction

Australian cities are testament to the role of urban planning in creating a range of suburban forms (Freestone, 2010). In recent times master planned estates (MPEs) have emerged as a popular approach to urban residential development as they are regarded by government and development firms as the most efficient way to deliver housing choice, housing affordability and environmental sustainability (McGuirk and Dowling, 2009). Consequently master planning has been used to facilitate urban expansion into new areas sometimes in the face of strong community opposition, based on the assumption that it is possible to conceive the needs of the community and the environment.

Urban development involves multiple processes, rationalities and politics in relation to how space should be used and organised. The expansion of the urban environment into high quality amenity, cultural and biodiversity rich environments, especially in coastal locations has met with strong community opposition (Collins, 2009). The state needs to be seen as supportive of environmental conservation measures in the public interest, while at the same time be seen to support new housing opportunities and create an economic climate conducive to capital investment. Development interests seek to maximize the potential financial returns within regulatory structures. Thus as place is an emerging quality (Massey, 2005) it is possible to create new interpretations and imaginations about how a site might be experienced, and what experiences can be derived, and thereby change perceptions about its appropriateness for urban development. Another aspect involves the creation of a valuable commodity from which surplus value is realized at the point of exchange and converted back in money capital.

By focusing on a specific MPE, this paper, using a conceptual framework of urban space as a commodity (Harvey, 2000; Galster, 2001) explores the notion of living experience as it is deployed by developers to reinterpret the site in relation to biodiversity conservation and residential development. The paper then explores the way these experiences are transferred from the logics, imaginations and passions of the developer to the decision makers, and to consumers (residents and visitors).
Approaches to Master Planned Estates and Experiences

There has been significant amount of research into different aspects of MPEs over the last decade. Areas of research focus include the delivery of planning visions and outcomes (Minnery and Bajracharya, 1999), the development of analytical frameworks (McGuirk and Dowling, 2007), social exclusionary tendencies (Kenna, 2007), the creation and organisation of community (Gwyther, 2005; Walters and Rosenblatt, 2008; Williams and Pocock, 2010), formal and informal partnerships between government and developers (Ruming, 2009), and the lived experience of private governance (Kenna and Stevenson, 2010; Goodman and Douglas, 2010). This work has focussed on the understanding MPEs and their presence within the Australian urban landscape.

The underlying discourses associated with MPEs are that by paying extra for the setting and community facilities, residents can have an enhanced living experience through the provision of extra lifestyle features, compared with that provided in a conventional suburb. While the notion of living experience is not explicitly referred to in the literature on MPEs, "lived experienced" is featured. Kenna (2010) in relation to Macquarie Links covers the lived experience of the residents within the estate and compares it to their previous suburban experiences. Kenna and Stevenson (2010) focus on resident experiences of private governance in relation to lack of transparency and limited access to appropriate information. Williams and Pocock (2010) consider how, through the shared spaces, communities have focused on creating the experience of community. In their study of MPEs they find there is a "poor understanding of the links between social and community networks, community services, and the labour market for people at different stages of life (Williams and Pocock, 2010, p 85). Essentially these works focus on whether the financial procurement of a high quality and secure lifestyle meets expectations and how the value contained within the MPE is based on assumptions about community which do not link to the expected living experiences.

Certain commodity elements of MPEs align to the notion of the experience economy and are conducive to consideration through the analytical lens of the commodity circuit framework (Smith, 2014). Some economic offerings are neither raw materials, goods nor services, rather they are memories and feelings that come from particular experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The economic function is to stage events and activities where the offering is a feeling or a memory, rather than producing or selling any tangible good or intangible service (McManus, et al., 2013). In the experience economy the buyer is regarded as a guest who chooses to take part in the experiences that are on offer. The associated material objects and services creat the "stage" upon which the experiences become attainable. McManus, et al. (2013), in their study of the thoroughbred industry, note the excessive use of water used to maintain green paddocks and equine architecture function so that potential clients feel comfortable and relaxed, giving the impression that potential racehorses are bred and raised in a clean and caring environment. In a similar way the additional features of the MPE seek to provide feelings of security, relaxation, comfort and fulfilment.

The experience city has been prominent, in relation to ways of progressing competition and new identities in post-industrial urban landscapes. Lorentzen (2009) suggests that although experience economies are more prominent in relation to cultural cities, which are big, diverse and centrally located, it is not a precondition because the experience city can be small and on the periphery. Lorentzen identifies a number of preconditions for the success of the experience city. First, knowledge of event production, including communication and media skills, logistics and infrastructure (props) is required. Second, consumption needs to be the driver of economic growth, and urban quality is the means of attracting consumers (eg residents, tourists and new businesses). Third, the experience city requires a high level of individual mobility that enables people to travel to consume experience products. In other words a small place or the hinterlands of cities can play a major role in the experience economy if it has something to offer consumers. Fourth, there are many different actors and networks that emerge in the production of the product. In some cases this results in temporary coalitions between, for example, urban developers and artists (Jakob, 2012).
MPEs are not cities in themselves, but are suburbs that usually (but not always) occur on the periphery of large cities. They can exhibit features of spaces of the experience economy in the sense that they go beyond the land and house package to provide a range of extra features – golf courses, tennis courts, walking trails, cafes, restaurants etc. Thus the work on lived experience in MPEs, the experience economy and the experience city offer potential for further exploration into the spatial connection between human emotion and the material world. In this particular case the way living experience is scripted into the idea of a MPE and then enacted.

Case Study: Murrays Beach

A case study approach involving the integration of a range of research methods is used (Baxter, 2010). The existence of an experience commodity is not readily identifiable as it is up to the individual to acknowledge and consume the experience. Unlike other commodities which have material form or have the consumer purchasing a service, it can be difficult to identify the experience commodity. Thus research involves reading the proposed urban space or actual urban space and then interpreting how material and discursive practices aim to “stage” particular experiences. Exploring this notion of living experience in MPEs involves a combination of discourse analysis of key documents, targeted interviews with the developer and government planners, post occupancy evaluation questionnaires and resident interviews.

Discourse analysis is used to identify the way new knowledges are introduced about a particular site (Waitt, 2010). Key documents were selected from different stages of the development. These include the North Wallarah Peninsula: Philosophies and Principles (Prudential Financial Holdings Pty Ltd, 1999), North Wallarah Peninsula Master Plan (Lensworth Pty Ltd, 2003) and various marketing and promotional texts from the Stockland website. The targeted interviews with the developer and government planners sought to identify development objectives and reasons why the development was able to obtain consent. The post occupancy evaluation questionnaire was hand delivered to the 120 houses that have currently been completed and occupied. This approach resulted in a 20 per cent response rate with the majority of the respondents being either in full time employment (or their spouses) or retirees. While this does not necessarily provide a representative sample, it provides insights into some of the view of the participant residents. The post occupancy evaluation questionnaire asked residents to reflect on reasons for moving to the estate, living in the estate and the importance of the extra features and design guidelines.

Murrays Beach is a MPE located on the east coast of Australia, approximately 150km north of Sydney and 30km south of Newcastle, in the Lake Macquarie Local Government Area (LGA). The site of Murrays Beach is on the North Wallarah Peninsula with the Pacific Ocean to the east and Lake Macquarie to the west (see Figure 1). The name of the estate, Murrays Beach, did not arise until after the development had commenced and many of the early conceptual and planning documents refer to the site as the North Wallarah Peninsula.
The Wallarah Peninsula has long been considered important for its biodiversity, scenic and cultural values (LMCC, 1999) and its strategic role as a natural buffer between Lower Hunter and Central Coast urban areas (LMCC, 1996). Although some areas of the Peninsula have a history of mining, large areas had been “relatively undisturbed by human activity” (LMCC, 1996). Much of the land of the Peninsula is privately owned and as such there was an expectation that development would be possible. There were a number of previous attempts to develop the site. In 1989 Gordon Pacific, and then in 1990 James Mullins Development, proposed tourist resort and golfing estate developments which were opposed by the local community and rejected by Lake Macquarie City Council (LMCC). In 1996 the Wallarah Peninsula was effectively declared off-limits to development through the introduction of land use zonings that reflected the environmentally sensitive nature of the area (LMCC, 1996). In 1999 the site was sold to Prudential Financial Holdings Pty Ltd at a significantly reduced price, but with virtually no development potential.

In the broader context these events occurred at a time when there was increasing community interest in biodiversity conservation. This coincided with the Australian Government’s commitment to the environment through the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD) of which a core objective was “to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems” (Australian Government, 1992). The NSESD was adopted by the State through the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Environment (Council of Australian Governments, 1992), leading to a range of policies, legislation and planning approaches that established measures to curtail overtly economic development rationalities in favour ecologically sustainable development. The Wallarah Peninsula represents an important area with respect to the protection of biological diversity, and as such its protection would have been consistent with the intent of the NSESD.

Figure 1. Location of Murrays Beach in relation to Newcastle and the Lower Hunter
Despite the protection afforded to the Wallarah Peninsula, in 2005 a development application for a master planned residential estate, which became known as Murrays Beach, was approved. To date Murrays Beach is made up of approximately 120 dwellings within a coastal forest setting and has a range of features including swimming pool, café/restaurant, village green, jetty, bushwalking trails, playground, picnic areas and landscaped open space. Murrays Beach is a part private community where some facilities are held in community title, such as the swimming pool, and there are strict controls on building. Yet the infrastructure (eg roads, water and sewer) are publicly owned and there is full access for the public (no gates or walls). Stockland is currently both the developer and estate manager.

**Developer construction of Living Experience**

One of the key elements of creating experience commodity elements within MPE is the knowledge of event production and communication skills (Lorentzen, 2009). The apparent lack of development potential for the site provided impetus for the developer to explore some innovative approaches to urban land development. In 1999 the new owner of the Murrays Beach site, Prudential Financial Holdings Ltd produced an initial document, the *North Wallarah Peninsula: Philosophies and Principles* (Prudential Financial Holdings, Ltd 1999) which established four cornerstones of environment and conservation, public access, socio-economic considerations and village heritage as a coastal settlement form that would guide development on the North Wallarah Peninsula. The associated conceptual document, *Integrating Ecology and Lifestyle* (Anonymous, undated) used graphics and artwork to visually represent the proposed estate. This shows dwelling houses set amongst trees and people walking along pathways between trees or heath land, people sunbathing in a village green and shopping and el fresco dining in a village square. Thus the developer portrays the North Wallarah Peninsula were social practices can be linked to the existing tree and heath vegetation to create a particular narrative of a relaxed and leisure based living experience. Instead of being a vast area of coastal forest and heath land, through the vision presented in these documents the North Wallarah Peninsula could be a place of human habitation, employment and improved access with emerging qualities that could support an innovative residential community. The *Conservation and Land Use Management Plan* (CLUMP) (Woodward-Clyde, 2000) produced as a collaboration between the developer and LMCC established how different development types could be incorporated into an overall biodiversity conservation strategy with minimal vegetation disturbance. These initial documents provided the basis for new interpretations and visions based on the integration of people, an urban landscape and a coastal forest and heath land vegetation community. While this provides some foundational work for the construction of a MPE oriented towards an eco-themed living experience and was sufficient for the developer to gain some level of confidence to pursue formal development approvals.

The *North Wallarah Peninsula Master Plan* (Lensworth, Pty Ltd, 2003) establishes more specific details about how this eco-themed MPE would be brought to reality and experience living would be staged. The master plan consisted of management plans dealing with ecology, bushfire, construction, open space and public access, social equity, built form and visual integration. A major part of the master plan was creating new meanings about residential development and biodiversity conservation. The underlying discourse is about the common sense of integrating the existing natural environment into the residential estate. Thus:

"the Wallarah Peninsula will be a community where the lifestyle of the people and the health of the environment share sustainable outcomes" (Lensworth, Pty Ltd, 2003, p v).

and

"the natural environment and human enjoyment are intimately linked" (Lensworth, Pty Ltd, 2003, p v).

The *Ecological Site Management Plan* (Mandis Roberts, 2003) develops a more detailed strategy for the retention of the native vegetation and the minimal disturbance of the natural landscape. The estate was designed around four development types based on the suitability of different locations within the site. Type 1 in the more constrained areas allow for large low density development lots, requiring a high retention of the vegetation. Type 2 allows for clusters of development lots with building envelopes and selective tree canopy removal. Type 3 allowed for clusters of smaller lots in individual precincts of 20-40
lots. Type 4 could occur in the more disturbed areas and was intended to allow for urban village settlements with a diverse range of urban forms and mixed uses. The intention was to allow some small commercial precincts that incorporated landscaping using “indigenous species to enhance the natural vegetation retained in road reservations and open public space particularly along drainage lines” (Mandis Roberts, 2003, p 49). Furthermore approximately 200 hectares of the coastal forest was dedicated as the Wallarah National Park. Although the requirement to protect the biodiversity values of the site came from broader social attitudes towards the environment, the approach taken by the developer was to turn the non-commodity aspects of the site into the “props” that create the perception that Murrays Beach is going to be a special place where it would be possible to live harmony with nature.

The Built Form Management Plan (BFMP) (Architectus, 2003) provides further detail of how individual house lots and buildings would be integrated with the forest and heath land vegetation communities. The BFMP:

“provides the basis for the siting and design of buildings and other structures and landscaping treatments to ensure the sensitivities and scenic qualities of the site are properly considered” (Architectus, 2003, p i).

In relation to biodiversity conservation and scenic landscape protection the focus was to ensure that the development of buildings would not disturb the natural landscape qualities. In this regard a number of strategies were devised, including limiting native vegetation removal within allotments to specified building envelopes and primary setbacks, ensuring that the height of buildings would not exceed the top of the tree canopy, where possible understorey native grasses were to be retained in private lots and vegetation in front of building will be retained to reduce the visual impact of the building. Furthermore building materials and finishes would need to reflect the natural forest or heath land setting. The overall planning approach involved concealment, screening and complementing the natural landscape to provide the consumer with a sense that they are in a forest rather than a residential estate.

The moment of exchange is when the monetary value of the development is realised. Exchange is a crucial moment within the circuit of capital because, despite the efforts of the developer to create an enhanced residential product, the attainment of surplus value reflected in the price is not guaranteed (Hudson, 2008). Consequently the estate is discursively enhanced by drawing attention to the qualities that may not be readily apparent, or by fictitiously constructing aspects that do not actually exist unless through a collective imagination. During the process of development, the development can be sold to another developer at anytime. As one developer explained:

“...the bottom line is profit and if they can see they might not reach the profits and they can still sell it and get back their money without incurring a loss they will do that and they are happy to hand it on.” (Development Consultant)

In 2002 the site that was to become Murrays Beach, was acquired by Lensworth Pty Ltd (a partner of the Colonial Group and subsidiary of the Fosters Group) through the acquisition of Prudential Financial Holdings by the Colonial Group, during the conceptual planning stages, although the project team remained constant. The commodity that existed at the time of these transactions comprised of the land and an accepted concept of what is possible, and how this idea could be valued by others through the potential living experience offered at Murrays Beach.

In 2005, Lensworth Pty Ltd sold Murrays Beach to Stockland for a significantly higher price as part of a package of MPE developments. Having paid a premium for the site and development consent, Stockland was to undertake the physical construction, marketing and on-going management of Murrays Beach. It was important to bring the idea of Murrays Beach to the potential consumers (or the future residents). Two dominant discourses are apparent in the marketing texts produced by Stockland. The first discourse centres on the consumer feeling good about living in an estate that has a lesser environmental impact. Thus:

"At Murrays Beach homes have been built within a building envelope and native habitat remain” (Stockland, 2011)
"Hard surfaces are minimised allowing more rainwater to soak into your garden and less drains into the Lake" (Stockland, 2011)

The consumer can feel good about the decision to purchase and live at Murrays Beach because they are living in a way that minimises environmental harm. Another aspect is the feeling of absolution in the sense that by living in Murrays Beach and paying a premium, the consumer can feel that they are doing their bit to protect the environment.

The second discourse is the emotional attachment derived from the integration of lifestyle and the natural features. Thus in one sense the integration of the forest vegetation adds to the overall attachment to Murrays Beach, for example:

"Nature corridors add to a sense of place" (Stockland, 2011)

The incorporation of nature corridors, for the protection of biodiversity, is part of the commodity, but also promoted as a place making strategy. The nature corridors have been retained along the watercourses and those areas not suitable for development. The idea of place making involves defining an area and giving it particular meanings. Thus potential consumers need to have some parameters around which to define their living space from other areas. In this case the nature corridors help to define the areas of settlement.

In a similar way the integration with the forest vegetation creates a better environment that is more conducive to the experience of pedestrian mobility. It is not just about incorporating the infrastructure to help convey people to various points in the estate, but provide a special experience during the process of movement. Thus:

"All of the roads at Murrays Beach meander around graceful old trees, creating a beautiful pedestrian friendly environment" (Stockland, 2011)

The priority given to the conservation of trees is used to add to the experience of living at Murrays Beach, by suggesting that it is pleasant to walk within the tree lined footpaths.

A large part of the development of Murrays Beach is based on discursive production to create new ways of interpreting the site. These new interpretations involve creating new experiences and sensations initially to obtain development consent, selling the estate to another developer and selling the estate to consumers (ie the potential residents).

**Contribution of Experience Commodities to Resident Living Experience**

Through the production process the developers construct the type of estate that was deemed acceptable to LMCC (the consent authority) and the local community. The “staging” of experiences as a commodity is highly personalised as they are on offer for the individual to participate and get the feeling of satisfaction. Yet not everyone may receive or interpret the experiences in the same way. The production of this MPE involved creating new understandings of residential development and transferring conservation oriented approaches into new experiences for the resident and visitors. Furthermore the experiences that are on offer are based on only partial understanding of the complexities of the social needs of people. Not all social needs can easily be captured and flow into the circuits of capital.

Murrays Beach has become established as an eco-living master planned residential estate. The majority (63%) of the residents who responded to the post-occupancy questionnaire indicated that they were attracted by the “environmentally-friendly” credentials for which Murrays Beach won a number of awards, including the Urban Development Institute of Australia’s NSW Award for Excellence 2006 in Sustainability (Stockland, 2013). One resident explained:
“the main reason for my purchase in Murrays Beach was the opportunity to live in a new environmentally friendly, low density housing estate...” (Resident 4)

Thus the promotion of the nature corridors, natural bushland setting, minimal tree clearing, water sensitive urban design and building design guidelines were part of the decision making rationality of at least some of the residents.

The actualities of living at Murrays Beach, nevertheless, would suggest a more varied living experience. The majority (84%) of the residents who responded to the post-occupancy questionnaire indicated that they were happy with the “environmentally-friendly” aspects of the estate. For example:

“I really [emphasis added] enjoy the fact that no cats are allowed and the bird life can be observed and enjoyed” (Resident 5)

The logic in the North Wallarah Peninsula Master Plan developed by Lensworth established a discourse of connection between nature and human enjoyment. These perspectives are evident in comments made by some residents, for example:

“I always feel that coming home to Murrays Beach is like returning to a sanctuary where I can unwind and enjoy living in a beautiful place” (Resident 5)

The type of nature experienced at Murrays Beach is one that produces a feeling of relaxation and being at peace.

While the overall responses reflect on the high quality living experience at Murrays Beach, there were comments made that identified threats to these living experiences. In some cases residents did not appreciate the efforts of the developer to conserve the tree vegetation, complaining that the narrow, winding roads made driving and walking around the estate an effort, rather than a pleasant experience. Furthermore the efforts to create a peaceful and relaxing environment were reinterpreted as the estate being too isolated from appropriate services and retail facilities and employment areas.

Many responses commented on the “watering down of the conservation measures”, reflecting concerns that the original vision of an eco-residential estate had been lost. One resident made the following comment:

“the last couple of stages included clearing a lot more trees and bushland compared to the earlier stages” (Resident 6).

There also appears to be some social distinctions made between those paid premium prices and bought into the eco-living ideal, to those who have purchased more recently and have not been subject to the same strict land development and building requirements. The original buyers, in some instances, regard themselves as the true visionaries, but also financial victims of the now watered down ecological vision.

**Conclusion**

The commodity circuits approach facilitates an exploration of the way the experience economy may be integrated into the type of new urban spaces such as MPEs, involving understanding the way commodities and non-commodities are combined to create value. Much of the value or anticipated value is created and held together by new flows of meaning that seek out innovative approaches to capital investment in the urban environment. In the case of Murrays Beach, new flows of meaning into the circuits of capital came from understanding inherent human needs to seek out relaxing, scenic and peaceful places (and suggest that activities associated with holidays can be an everyday experience), broader community interests that were inherent in the NSESD, economic growth driven interests, human needs to transform nature, political interests in facilitating investment opportunities and the existence of a coastal eucalypt forest and heath land. These different and competing social, material and natural
elements were combined to come up with a new approach that involved the integration of the existing natural vegetation and landscape into a residential development.

The integration or prospect of integration, of social, material and natural elements was then used as the basis to stage new possible experiences for the North Wallarah Peninsula, and specifically in relation to Murrays Beach. These new experiences are based on new interpretations and visions, as well as the actual existence of the estate.

Creating new experience is part of the production of the estate, and includes new visions, new interpretations. In the case of Murrays Beach the experiences associated with conceptual production increased the value of the estate. Lensworth purchased the land for at a low price, but with no development potential, and sold it to Stockland at a high cost with development consent for Murrays Beach. The design reflected the type of experiences being offered - this flowed into the marketing and sales discourse. Residents may consume the experiences, but through participation in the life of the estate they also help to produce the experience. Nevertheless the living experience does not always reflect the intended experiences of the developer.

References


