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We all know the facts. Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world, with nearly 90 percent of the population living in urban areas. On the ground this urbanity has a very low density. Australia’s enduring love affair with suburban living has shaped the landscape – and in turn this landscape has shaped us. There are lots of positive things about suburbia and of course a number of significant issues. Setting aside the bigger questions, the reality is that the bulk of Australia’s urban growth occurs through the development of large-scale greenfield sites on the urban fringe. The design of these masterplanned communities is a staple for landscape architects. And yet informed discussion about this significant contribution to the built environment is largely absent. Kirsten Bauer and Adrian Marshall, the guest editors for this issue of Landscape Architecture Australia, have taken on the formidable task of telling this story. We would like to thank them for the rigour and enthusiasm they have brought to the project. Kirsten Bauer, Victoria President of the AILA and director of Aspect Studios has long been involved in landscape architectural education. Landscape architect, writer and editor Adrian Marshall is currently developing a grasslands guide for the University of Melbourne, and guidelines to promote grasslands health for the Victorian National Parks Association. He has always lived in the inner city. Drawing on their collective experiences and expertise, Kirsten and Adrian have identified exemplars, scoped the challenges and found good reason to celebrate the profession’s contribution to the establishment of new communities.

CAMERON BRUHN
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, ARCHITECTURE MEDIA
CAROLINE SPRINGS
DOES IT MASTER OPEN SPACE?

Launched in 1997 in Melbourne's west, Caroline Springs by Lend Lease offers insight into how people approach and live within masterplanned estates, and how residents use the open spaces that have been carefully designed for them.

WORDS LOUISE C. JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY DIANNA SNAPE

MASTERPLANNING NEW ESTATES PROVIDES AN opportunity for designers to correct many of the wrongs long associated with suburban developments. If the Australian suburbs of the 1920s and '30s were centres of banality, conservatism and materialism, those of the '50s, '60s and '70s were associated with ugliness, monotony and limited physical services. Suburbs built during the '80s and '90s were further demonized for their environmental wastefulness, fortification, social isolation, exclusivity and privatization of lives and services. These latter social and physical outcomes were attributed to a rampant free market and neoliberal state. With more active government interventions in urban planning now underway, along with growth in the scale and ubiquity of masterplanned estates, it is important to explore whether the increase in masterplanning suburban developments, seen since the 1990s, would exacerbate or ease these many concerns.

While there is some research conducted on the privatization of masterplanned estates and the tendency towards high-priced housing within them, others have noted the many benefits of these estates. These include the provision of facilities that are open to all; the range of house and block sizes available, which attracts diverse populations; and the fact that Australian masterplanned estates are rarely gated and fortified like their overseas counterparts. There have also been studies into how the large-scale, environmentally sensitive designs of estates have lessened surface run-off, water usage and energy consumption. There is, therefore, research that suggests that masterplanning can and does ease the association of masterplanned suburban developments with environmental wastefulness and social exclusivity.

Little research has been done, however, on just how people approach and then live within these masterplanned estates and, in particular, how residents use the many open spaces that are usually central to the estate's design. In creating these large-scale suburban environments, the physical layout is a vital concern of the developers. The layout not only drives the yield of lots per hectare, but it is also central to the image, character, environmental impact and definition of the community. When combined, these elements create marketing appeal and lifestyle quality. For large-scale developer Lend Lease, building a community is central to the planning and marketing of their many estates. One way to achieve social interaction and a sense of community is through the provision of public, open spaces. Linear parks along waterways and dramatic water features ensure a high recognition, facilitate walking and exercise, and advance environmental objectives for runoff management and wildlife and flora preservation. Large ovals, often co-located with schools and pavilions, maximize social infrastructure and help incorporate children and teenagers into the community. The smaller parks, rotundas, barbecues and playground facilities, strategically located in the centre of each "village" or neighbourhood, are also vital to community formation.

But how well are such open spaces used and do they realize the many objectives set for them? A series of observations of one estate - Caroline Springs by Lend Lease (previously known as Delfin) in Melbourne's west - offers some clues to answering this question. >
Launched in 1997, Caroline Springs comprises a series of neighbourhoods, differentiated by name, design character and, to some extent, demographics and price. Comprising eight thousand blocks over eight hundred hectares, Caroline Springs has a projected population of more than twenty-three thousand people by 2015, living in a series of “villages” of three hundred to five hundred households. Within each neighbourhood social diversity is realized through a range of house and block sizes. While some see the result as a socially exclusive enclave of relatively high-income and well-serviced residents in the western suburbs of Melbourne, the result is in fact a range of residents, mixed in terms of their ethnicity, income and household composition (that is, not solely a suburb full of young families). Residents from neighbouring suburbs, who often have a lower income and are less well serviced, also access Caroline Springs through its intranet, large town centre and its open spaces.

Over two days in both April and August 2013, I observed two locations within Caroline Springs: the first, a small neighbourhood park, and the second, a larger oval complex adjacent to two schools and a neighbourhood shopping centre. Both days were sunny but cool and on each occasion – with the observations occurring for one hour at each location on a weekend afternoon – both spaces were remarkably well used. The first location, the neighbourhood park, features at one end a pond, a bridge, water grasses and ducks, and a rotunda, barbecue and children’s playground at the other, all ringed and crossed by walking paths. This location saw a range of users: parents walking or driving to the park with young children for fifteen-minute to one-hour sessions; teenagers sitting, walking and skateboarding; young and old dog walkers exercising through the park; and older adults walking singly and in pairs through and around the park. There was a range of ages, activities and ethnicities in this park, confirming its role as an activity centre within Caroline Springs, however, there were no large groups or casual interactions between individuals and small groups. The activity level at the second location, the oval, was similarly intense but as a venue used for organized team sports, was of a different nature. On the Saturday I visited, individuals and small groups were using the oval for casual training, but on the Sunday the oval was filled with teams playing sport and training, with
others watching, practising and being active in this very large space. The range of people present suggested a very broad catchment for the teams playing and training on these spaces.

These two open spaces at Caroline Springs, with their very different characters and purposes, appear to be fulfilling their designer’s objectives, in that both are well used and clearly acting as important physical and social centres for their adjacent suburban residents. These observations, along with other research into masterplanned estates, confirms that they do indeed provide a range of housing options and well-serviced social and physical environments to address many of the supposed ills of the great Australian dream. What is also of interest is who uses these open spaces (are the users local or do they come from more distant suburbs?) how these spaces meet their needs, and the degree of sociability associated with them and other community venues. Is the ideal of a well-serviced community realized at Caroline Springs? Only by talking to a number of residents can this important question be fully addressed. But this small study has confirmed that at least in two locations in the estate, there is an active engagement with the open spaces of Caroline Springs.


2 Observations approved by Deakin Ethics Committee HAE-13-067.