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Planning for Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia

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Aboriginal Communities in WA

There are more than 280 discrete Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, accommodating some 17,000 people. Eighty per cent of the residents of these communities live in approximately 80 large, permanent communities that support populations of between 50 and 800 people.

Development in Aboriginal communities has historically occurred outside normal statutory regimes, and as a result, people living in Aboriginal communities have not enjoyed the standard of living most Western Australians take for granted.

Western Australian Planning Commission

The Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) is the statutory authority with statewide responsibilities for urban, rural and regional land use planning and land development matters. The WAPC responds to the strategic direction of government and is responsible for the strategic planning of the state.

The WAPC operates with the support of the Department for Planning and Infrastructure (DPI), which provides professional and technical expertise, administrative services, and resources to advise the WAPC and implement its decisions. In this partnership the WAPC has responsibility for decision-making and a significant level of funding while the department provides the human resources and professional advice

State Planning Policy No.3.2

State planning policies are prepared and adopted by the WAPC under statutory procedures set out in part 3 of the *Planning and Development Act 2005*. The process of preparing a state planning policy also includes public consultation and consideration by the Minister for Planning and the Governor.

The WAPC and local governments must have 'due regard' to the provisions of state planning policies when preparing or amending local planning schemes and when making decisions on planning matters.

State Planning Policy No 3 2—Planning for Aboriginal Communities provides a framework for the planning of large permanent Aboriginal communities in WA. The objectives of this policy are to improve the standard of living and quality of life of people living in Aboriginal communities by:

- » providing a framework to ensure that large permanent Aboriginal communities are afforded a high level of service;
- » ensuring that these communities and associated land uses are appropriately identified and zoned within town planning schemes; and
- » providing a mechanism that will enable both local government and the WAPC to approve community layout plans.

Planning for Aboriginal Communities Project

The WAPC has run the Planning for Aboriginal Communities Project in its current form since 2002. The project aims to implement State Planning Policy 3 2 through the preparation and endorsement of community layout plans

Community Layout Plans (CLPs) are basically mini town plans that are approved by Aboriginal community councils, local governments and the WAPC. Over 80 CLPs have been approved since 2000 and more than 30 plans are currently underway

Community Layout Plans

Community Layout Plans are developed in close consultation with communities, represent the aspirations of the residents and provide a basis for future housing and infrastructure programs. This is ending the ad hoc approach to development that has characterised construction in Aboriginal communities for many years

The Planning for Aboriginal Communities Project enjoys a high level of support and collaboration between state and local governments, the private sector and Aboriginal communities.

CLPs are plans prepared in-house and also by consultants. Determining priorities for preparation of CLPs occurs in consultation with the Department of Housing and Works through the Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Council.

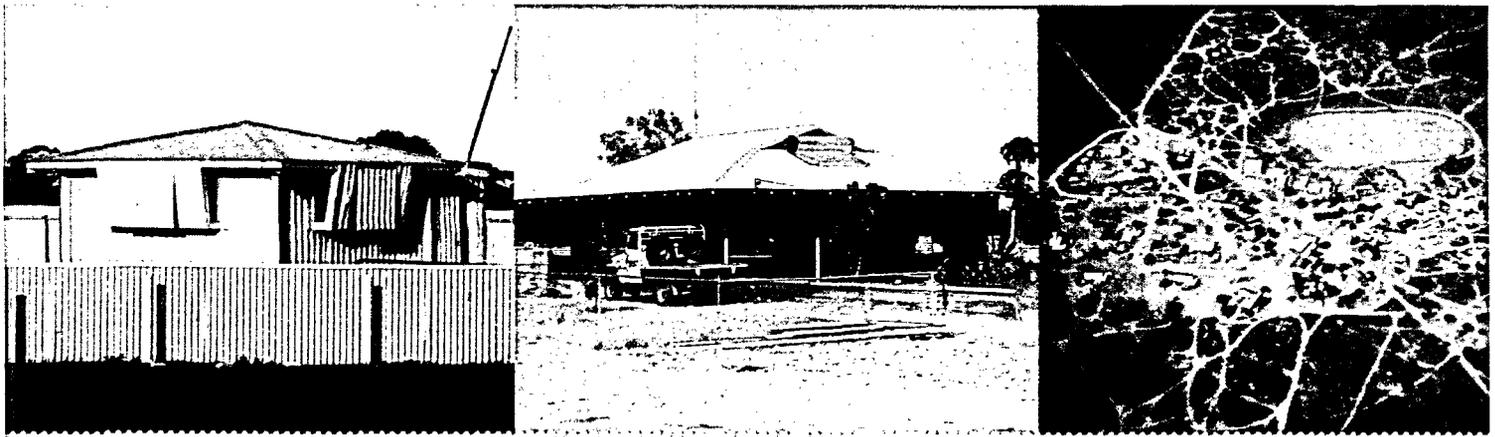
The main benefit of CLPs is to bring to communities the services and facilities that people in WA take for granted, such as protection of drinking water source, separation from noisy, toxic or hazardous activities, sealed roads, serviced housing lots and adequate drainage.

Communities are also able to use their CLPs to negotiate with developers when housing or construction is due to take place in their community. The Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) has resolved that all development on ALT land should conform with community layout plans, and has introduced a Land Use and Development Policy to that end.

CLPs have also proven to be a useful vehicle for tenure reform and rearrangement on Aboriginal communities. This can include recommendation to the ALT to transfer land from its estate to the incorporated body that runs a community and recommending revised land title types, and boundaries that match existing and proposed land uses.

Housing Demand

Housing need on remote Aboriginal communities is often dire. When preparing CLPs an average household size of 5 people is assumed as an accepted comfortable density. The present reality is often far from this ideal, with some households on communities housing more than 10 people. In WA the primary developer of houses on Aboriginal



Left: House, Ninga Mia, constructed in mid-1970s. Centre: Typical recently built house on remote community (Joy Springs). Right: Tjuntjuntjarra.

communities is the Department of Housing and Works. Other entities that build houses on communities include non-government agencies such as the Catholic church and health and education agencies. However, these entities often build houses for support staff working on the community, as distinct from houses for community members.

The structural pre-conditions for land development in the free market do not exist on most Aboriginal communities. Generally, Aboriginal communities are on communal land holdings with non-mainstream essential service providers responsible for water, sewage, electricity and so on. Therefore, housing need has not translated into market demand and remains the responsibility of the state.

Residential Lot Design

Residential areas on CLPs often appear to be inefficient and irregular in comparison to the development of mainstream towns. Multiple discontinuous residential fronts are easily identified in many communities, with the respective CLP most usually respecting this organic arrangement. On occasion, a CLP may also plan for the restructuring of a community into distinct residential enclaves if this is an aspiration of the community and is supported by the Department for Housing and Works. A common reason for this is the reflection of community desire to separate different groups within the community into spatially separate living areas. Reasons for such groupings may include 'skin', language, religion or other cultural characteristics.

CLPs use simple commonly accepted techniques used in town development and management such as street and lot identification, contiguous lot pattern, regular road reserve width, and so on. This provides a rational and orderly framework for development and management of the community, where none previously existed. However, the reality of community life is that houses and other buildings are fixtures that often do not include a culturally defined curtilage for private use. Fences may exist, and if they do they will often be misaligned with the road network and relatively close to the house. It is not uncommon for house yards to be defined by fences that are very close to the house. This leaves space between and about houses that can be used for informal walking tracks and on occasion, informal driving tracks. House lot size is generally large (800m² to 1200m²) with a preference for minimum 30m frontages. This is big enough for the large houses currently preferred by communities and builders, whilst leaving sufficient space for movement between them.

House Design

Construction costs for the development of new houses in remote areas of Western Australia are very high. It is estimated that construction of a 4 bedroom 2 bathroom steel framed and clad house in the Kimberley

today is no less than \$500,000. This cost does not include any costs associated with land or servicing. A large part of the cost structure of house construction in remote areas is labour and mobilisation (i.e. getting workers and equipment to site). Access constraints (i.e. long distances, rough roads) mean that builders prefer lightweight easily transported materials, such as corrugated steel. Materials that are hard wearing are also favoured due to the climate, limited maintenance capacity and high density of residents.

Many Aboriginal people living on remote communities maintain law and cultural practices and preferences that predate modern concepts such as towns and houses. Simple daily things like a preference to sleep outside at certain times, putting a high value on mobility, putting a low value on material accumulation, needing space for visitors who may stay for extended periods, a preference for cooking outdoors, and so on. This has resulted in sometimes unexpected adaptations to house use and preference, but surprisingly, there appears to be a strong preference for the detached bungalow style houses typical of Australian country towns and suburbs.

Housing stock on Aboriginal communities is often representative of the fashions and whims of Australian architectural practice over the past 35 years. Easily identifiable housing types on communities in WA include the asbestos and jarrah Housing Commission standards of the 1970 and early 80s (increasingly rare due to termites), rammed earth (generally abandoned), breezeway homes (fancy sheds), inside-out homes (still going), soc homes (look like a soc piece from the air and are valued at half that) and so on. Aboriginal communities have generally taken what was offered in terms of housing design and now tend towards favouring the conservative and the functional. But this, we will leave to our colleagues the architects.

The Future

The Planning for Aboriginal Communities Project has proven to be a successful initiative of the WAPC. Community Layout Plans are now an accepted development and management instrument used by communities, local governments and developers to effectively improve the lives of people living on large remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

To find out more, including viewing endorsed and draft CLPs, visit the project webpage at www.wapc.wa.gov.au/aboriginalcommunities.