

When you Apply the Pub Test to Planning, do we Pass?

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So, I thought I'd ask the Question – When you apply the pub test to Planning do we pass? And while its now part of our everyday language, just to make sure we're all on the same page – the pub test doesn't mean I've been spending my time at the pub taking a poll, but rather it's a term most often used b the media to describe the collective opinion of everyday Australians, mostly about the conduct and reputation of public figures – politicians, celebrities, public events and decisions. It's a metaphorical test that evaluates the opinions of ordinary Australians and applies them in judging potentially dubious activities.

So, surely we're not partaking in dubious activities, although I wouldn't be so sure if I believe what I read in the press and saw in popular film. So where did this negative sentiment come from? Well I think it has something to do with our professional association with developers. And of course a reliable rule of thumb in Hollywood is that the developer is never the hero. The develop-as-villain has a long and distinguished history in popular film. While the hey day of the Hollywood evil developer was the 1980s, it actually dates back to the 40s.

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This is "It's a Wonderful Life", circa 1946. In fact in that first movie plot there was both an evil and a good developer, but the good developer seems to have fallen off the radar.

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Fast forward to 1982's horror flick Poltergeist, which still haunts me today, where an exceptionally evil developer builds a new master-planned community over a cemetery without telling anyone, with disastrous results. A town planner must have approved it. The Freelings, a nice upper-middle class family move into a new house but strange things start to happen and their suburban dream turns into their worst nightmare.

There's plenty of others – Beetlejuice, Two Weeks Notice, so many Scooby-do plots, even the wholesome Brady Bunch movie spring to mind. And in the ultimate hero versus villain story of them all:

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Superman comes to the rescue when Lex Luther plots to skin California, so that he can cash in on his desert property holdings when they become the new West Coast.

Whether it be the unsavory behaviours of the property tycoon, the threatened destruction of a beloved building if the local heroes can't come to the rescue, or the evil developer plotting to increase the value of their investment, its sending the same message time and again.

Wouldn't it be refreshing to see a plot where the wealthy homeowner is masquerading in the local conservation society, all the time cunningly plotting to keep out low income renters from accessing their neighbourhood and their exclusive schools district – who's the villain now? Unfortunately this doesn't seem to sell tickets.

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The media overwhelmingly sympathises with the Not in my Back Yard or NIMBY sentiment. In fact research from QUT and Griffith Universities analysed the terms used by the Queensland media to describe development and found they weren't simply negative but downright brutal, describing an epidemic – '*floods of development*', '*cities in crisis*', developers '*ripping the heart out of our suburbs*'.

The ban on developer donations to politicians over 'perceived' (not real) corruption in Queensland hasn't helped.

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Unsurprisingly, the results of the 2017 community survey of the most trusted professions ranks real estate agents (or property developers) almost at the bottom, at 7% trusted, only marginally above used car salesmen. Now I know we're not developers, but it seems that this pop culture is contagious. While we're not singled out in the survey, there seems to be an emerging trend on how town planners are being portrayed – a skills for developers, and as comical bureaucrats that constantly plan but getting nothing done.

One of the first references to town planners in film that I recall was relatively innocently on Seinfeld in the 1990s, when George's protégé disappoints him no end by choosing City Planning over Architecture – who would do that!

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More recently it has turned to satire, in the show that would be hilarious if it weren't so true – Utopia!

And then just last week I came across the most concerning characterization of all, on the unassuming Midsomer Murders, Episode 7 of Series 13:

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Not In My Back Yard! It's set at a community gathering, where the local NIMBY spokeswoman is loudly and aggressively voicing her outrage about a new housing project in the village – publicly accusing the local town planner of paying lip service to consultation, not caring about her community and being a crony to corrupt property developers. Covered every cliché there! If that's not insult enough, when the IMBY turns up dead, the greedy developer of course looks guilty but in a twist on the evil developer plot of the 19802, DEC Barnaby uncovers that the murderer is none other than the town planner! Sorry for the spoiler. What has the world come to?

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While this of course is simply for our entertainment, all in good humour, it seems to be an emerging trend that the role of the town planner is not always to be trusted!

So, back to my question – have we earned this reputation? Do our actions pass the pub test?

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To unpack this, I thought I'd consider the question in the context of common Aussie traits and values.

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Up there in importance with where we sit in a taxi and always expecting a sausage sizzle when it's time to vote, is a pride in our own 'BS' metre. We say 'tell him he's dreaming' when we think someone's trying to scam us, pushing us too far, or not telling the truth. Fair enough. It's good to have a level of skepticism, as long as it cuts both ways – government, developer, town planner, community activist alike.

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Number 6 on the ABC's list of the "*10 most Australian values that make Australians so valuable*" was a love of (TV) democracy – we are so profoundly democratic, so committed to participatory democracy, that our most prestigious entertainment award, the Gold Logie, is won on the basis of the public vote. A lot of people in the community think planning decisions should be made the same way. This comes up all too often in the Quest and other local paper's columns, with a vocal community member often shocked and outraged that their biggest concern (usually traffic) didn't result in refusal of the development application.

Planning is not a popularity contest – of course we value public opinion, but its time we help the community to understand that there's more to it than that – the planning scheme for a start! We need to help both the community and the media to understand this.

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We like to be in the know – not kept in the dark, and so early engagement about projects is a hot topic in the press. We hear “*Why weren’t we told?*” or “*They never asked us!*” This comes back to the pub test - it’s not anymore about whether it’s required by law, but rather whether it will pass muster - if we don’t let the community know what is planned, early on in the process.

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And my personal favourite, we won’t tolerate having the wool pulled over our eyes.

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Here’s an example – render V reality. This is a high rise apartment project in South Brisbane that promising greenery and a sub-tropical design outcome, yet spectacularly under-delivered. It spread like a virus on social media, not only a failing of the developer but at its heart, a failing of town planning and the town planning approval! No one could possibly say that passed the pub test!

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And where it is today, one year on? Its not looking much better. As a profession we need to respond, admit it when we fail, learn from it and tell the community what we’re doing about it. Without that, we’re losing respect.

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Here’s another example of render V reality on Commercial Road in Newstead, where the design and construct contract somehow dropped off much of the architectural detailing promised.

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Well another great Aussie value that we should all be proud of is that we ‘*give ‘em a fair go, mate!*’.

In this render V reality example in Newstead, the local Council took stock, amended their procedures, and introduced a new development condition (tagged the Metro effect after the developer) and now every new development has a condition that the Council gets to see the final drawings before building approval, just to be sure all the bells and whistles stay put.

If we admit it, respond and share, surely the community will give us a fair go!

And these stories are usually the one-offs, to which there are usually always a multiple of good examples that deliver in spades.

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We need to talk more about these examples, share them, celebrate them, and then inspire the community about the good outcomes of development that make for better living, which is at the heart of the YIMBY message.

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And no discussion of Aussie values and traits could overlook the Tall Poppy Syndrome, and this could not be more true when it comes to successful developers.

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I'm fascinated by the Nightingale effect – perhaps a topic for another day, but it's fair to say that taking the 'evil developer' out of the equation and regardless of how compliant a project is, it seems that we love it! Aussies love to support the underdog!

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We regularly deal with the NIMBY factor throughout our planning careers and it is those situations, particularly where a community loses a great opportunity as a result, that has made me an avid YIMBY campaigner. So much so, I co-founded YIMBY Qld – Yes in My Back Yard Qld, a not-for-profit organisation and part of a growing global network.

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Our target is the development industry, the community and our peers and decision makers alike, to raise the bar on development outcomes and shine the spotlight on good development and good planning.

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We say Yes in my back yard to good development that makes for better living. We aim to bring back the balance to the urban policy debate.

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We are doing this by balancing the conversation as loudly as possible, through our website, blog, social media, and of course as much press coverage as we can get. We also have a growing suite of tools available, and are working on a grant project to develop a platform to support early engagement about development projects in a low cost, simple and effective way, enabling developers and town planners to get the facts out about projects early and informing the community who don't want to be left in the dark about projects in their neighbourhood.

Rather than being defensive we want the YIMBY message to inspire planners to be proud of the outstanding work we do in shaping our modern cities and regions, and to be a positive part fo the backyard BBQ conversation, or the pub chatter, to influence, and inspire the broader community. We need to be story tellers, we need to humanise the story of growth.

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Recently we launched a community survey to better understand what the community thinks about development, developers, town planners and what is good development.

I have some early results and will publish once it's run for a couple of months. It's running from our webpage and shared by YIMBY Qld's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Linked in pages. Please complete it, share it, promote it and we'll share our results.

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Remember this is bigger than YIMBY Qld! There is already a YIMBY Perth on social media and we're working with YIMBY Vic already. We're also part of a strong global network who are sharing information, research and experiences.

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So, join the movement. Become a subscriber and follow us on social media. Or better yet, get your own YIMBY group going.

Thank you.