FAMILY FRIENDLY AFFORDABLE HOUSING CLOSE TO THE CBD

by Martin Ulenberg

One of the big questions facing our city is how to house a growing urban population affordably whilst balancing infrastructure demands and the desire to retain green spaces.

DEVELOPMENT MODELS

Low density, detached single lot sections.

While leafy, low density suburbs are attractive and pleasant to live in, this model leads to city "sprawl", creating inefficiencies in the delivery of infrastructure and encouraging car dependency. As the city sprawls, it is difficult to provide adequate public transport, and increased car dependency clogs the motorways. Historically, this has been the main urban growth pattern in New Zealand. It is generally accepted that sprawl is less than ideal and higher density, "compact city" models are now being championed.

Subdivision.

One step towards increased density is subdivision of the existing suburban grid. Whilst this increases density by a factor of two, it is not enough to provide an affordable solution and doesn't solve the problems of a sprawling city.

High density, apartment living.

This seems to be the most popularised answer to the housing affordability crisis. As the cost of land is the main component in house prices, increasing the number of units on any given parcel will reduce cost. However apartment living is not suited to everyone. While some people love the vibrancy of living in a bustling urban centre, apartment living generally leads to increased exposure to pollution and decreased access to green spaces. It may be an appropriate lifestyle choice for some empty nesters, couples without children and single people but apartment living is typically unsuitable for families who want outdoor spaces for their children to play in.

Medium density attached, terrace housing.

I believe this is a good compromise between high and low density options. It has been well deployed throughout much of Europe as well as the new world. It is just not very common on our shores.

Some of the benefits associated with this type of housing are:

- Individual access allows residents to feel connected to the neighbourhood.
- Private open space allows for outdoor recreation.
- Parks/ allotments can be incorporated for communal natural amenity.
- Increased density means efficiencies in the delivery of transportation and infrastructure.
- No body corporates.
- Increased affordability due to reduced lot sizes.
- Car dependency reduced due to a more compact city.
- Reduced build costs due to less exterior wall area.
- Heat conservation due to reduced exterior walls.

In light of the benefits listed above, I think the best option to produce vibrant, high quality, affordable, family friendly communities is medium density, attached, terrace housing close to the CBD. This means urban intensification. However as our suburban network is already established in favour of detached single lots, a dramatic reinterpretation of the existing suburban grid would be required to achieve this end.

CONCEPT

If we take a typical block close to the CBD and assume there are no special heritage considerations, this block could be redeveloped into affordable terraced homes. The homes could be built around the perimeter with room for a central park for fruit trees, vegetable gardens and play areas (refer fig 2). If we take a nominal 1.65 hectare block, say 5-10km from the city, that is already nearly fully subdivided (refer fig. 1), we would be increasing the density by close to 3.

To increase density to this level, the terraced houses would need to be narrow. Working on a 3.6m grid and extending to 3 stories, 4 bedroom homes could be achieved (refer fig. 4). This is relatively narrow but is not uncommon and is very workable as illustrated by the drawings. Staggering the homes in and out and alternating the roof pitch could be used to avoid row house monotony. Other design elements could be incorporated to emphasise individuality and character.

With an internal lane running behind the homes, 2 car parks per unit could be achieved as well as street parking at the front. Across the lane would be the park (refer fig. 3). This would make the homes family friendly, as kids would have green space to play in. Also fruit trees could be planted and potentially vegetable gardens in this central area to help reduce living costs and encourage a sense of community.

An additional option for consideration would be having the lane and the park ultimately vested with Council. This would shift maintenance and governance responsibilities away from the residents and remove any need for a body corporate.

Challenges.

This proposal would not be without challenges. The main two that I can foresee are:

All the lots in a block would need to be purchased. The existing owners may need to be offered a premium above market value to encourage them all to sell with the option to buy into the development. This would reduce social disruption, maintain the existing neighbourhood community and give the current owners a new house and some cash as inducements. There would need to be a clause in the sale and purchase agreements for the transaction to only go through if all owners in the block agree. This would avoid the scenario of purchasing some but not all of the lots, as all would be required to proceed with the development.

The project would not necessarily fit with Council's zoning and planning for the individual sections as they would not be imagining the entire block be redeveloped in one scheme. It accords however with Council's objective of increased density and would help relieve the housing crisis.

NUMBERS

To give a high level sense of the numbers involved, below is based on a typical block in a suburb not too distant from the city (say within 5-10km):

Existing historic full lot sections	22
Current individual dwellings	45
Potential 4 bedroom terraced homes	122
Total value of existing dwellings based on current CV s	$33.2m
Including say + 10% inducement above CV to encourage conditional sale	$36.5m
Value of construction based on $1,500 p/m2 (155m2 per house x 122 houses)	$28.4m
Nominal sum for landscaping, roading and park	$5.0m
Assumed total cost of development	$69.9m
Assumed cost price of each 4 bedroom house	$573,000

NB. This is approximate and purely indicative of the concept, as any specific block chosen for such development would need to be specifically assessed, surveyed and costed, and other relevant costs such as architects and consultants fees, Council fees, etc would need to be built into final costings.

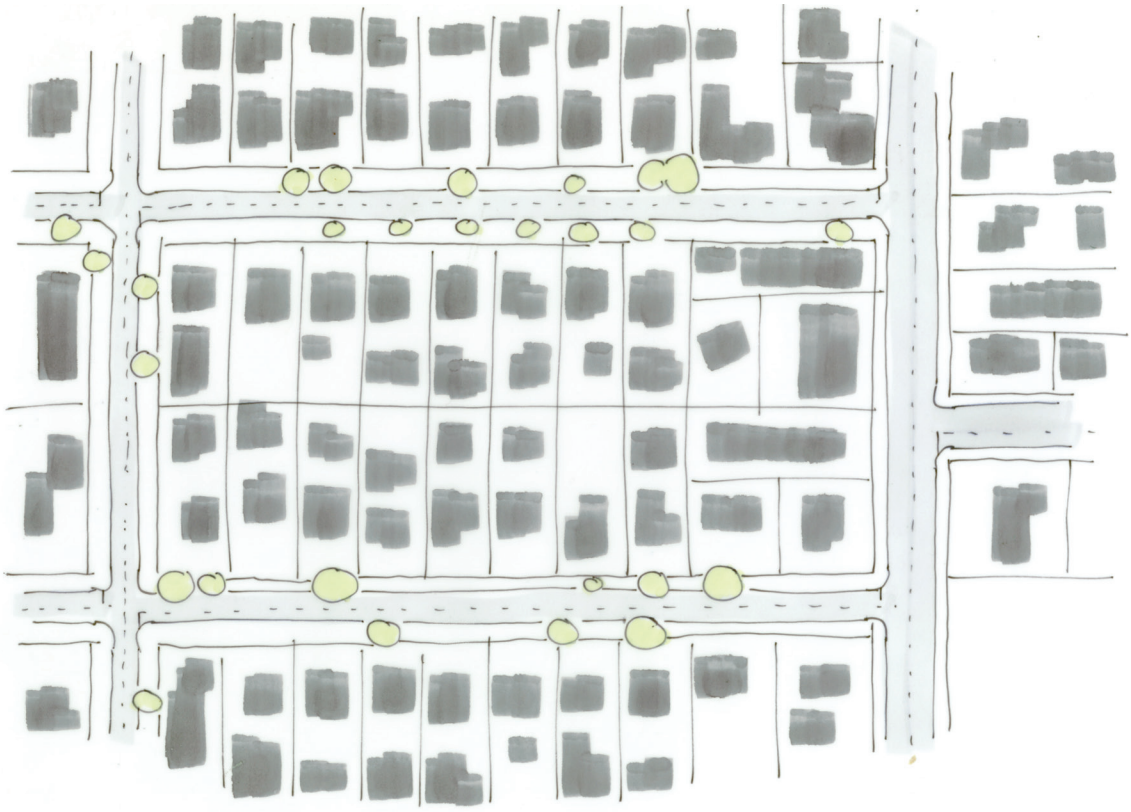

FIGURE 1. *Existing typical neighbourhood block, nearly fully subdivided.* Scale 1:2000

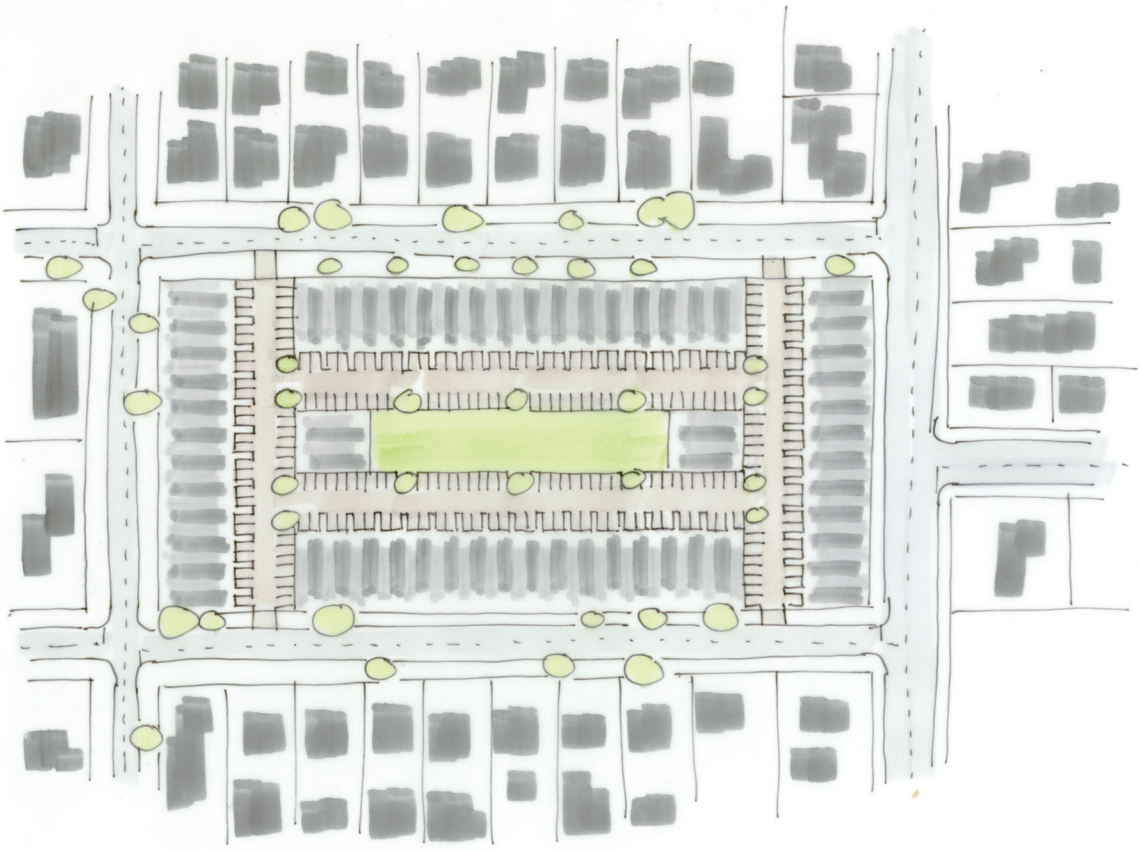

FIGURE 2. *Proposed medium density development with central park.* Scale 1:2000

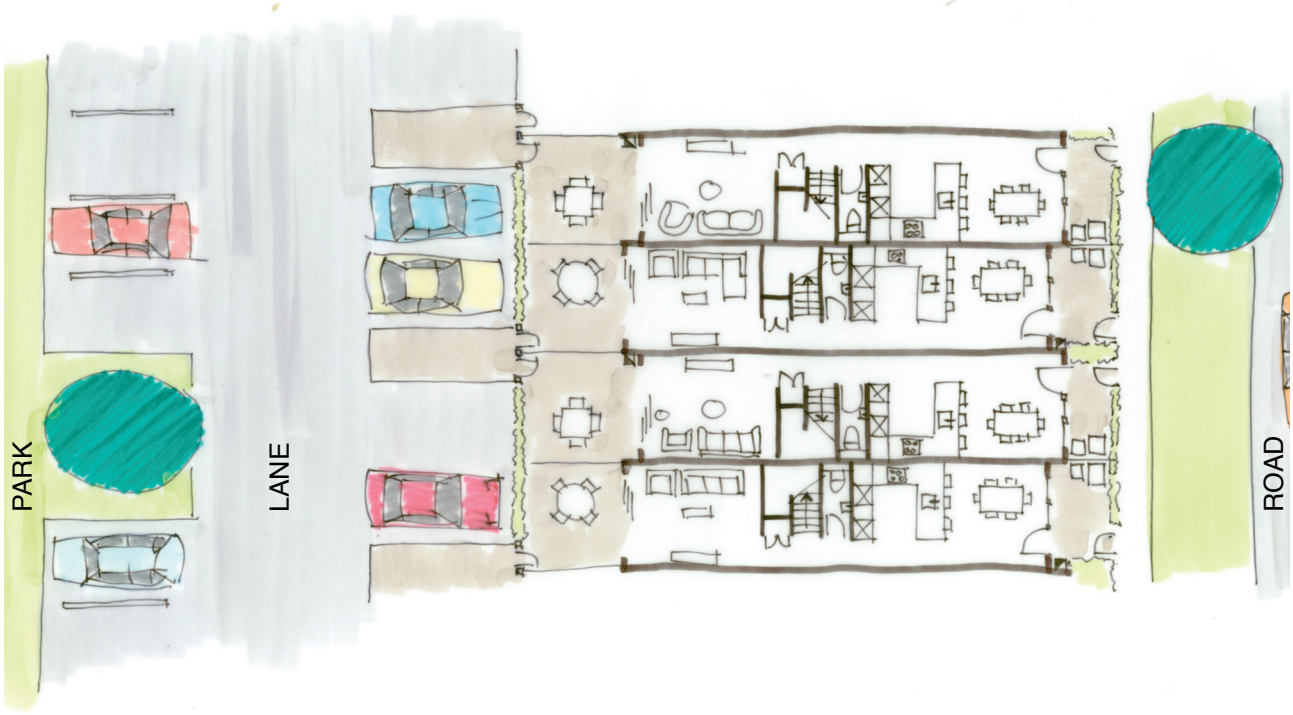

FIGURE 3. *Part site plan showing park, lane and road.* Scale 1:250

Ground Floor First Floor Second Floor

FIGURE 4. *Floor plans* Scale 1:200