

*A Community Service in a
Redeveloped Housing Area:
the Hotham Hill Neighbourhood
Association*

"Hotham Hill"

Historically the whole of North Melbourne was known as Hotham, and the northern section was called "Hotham Hill".¹ When Hotham became a city in its own right it was officially known as North Melbourne but the term Hotham Hill continued to be used informally for the northern end. When the neighbourhood association, in embryo, was groping for an apt title it appropriately seized upon the label "Hotham Hill". It was felt wise to define clearly an area for the purposes of association activity which was not too large and was bounded by clear-cut features. The area chosen was comparatively compact—approximately one-half a mile by three-quarters of a mile.

Composition

Hotham Hill comprises a number of attractive and interesting features. The roads are wide, many of them having plantations of well-developed trees down the centre. The majority of the houses, both single and double storey, are of brick and about eighty years old. Amongst them are some very attractive and solid dwellings which were middle and upper class family homes before the turn of the century. The churches represented by properties in the area are: Anglican, Roman and Ukrainian Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian. There is a state primary school, a Roman Catholic primary school and a Roman Catholic girls' secondary school.

While industry is well represented on the whole, it is concentrated chiefly at the southern end so that the residential areas remain intact.

¹ This study was first published in R. J. Lawrence (ed.), *Community Service* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1966) and is reprinted here with the permission of the publishers and the Australian Council of Social Service.

The residents are predominantly of the tradesman-labourer type, but the erection of scattered blocks of own-your-own flats is bringing professional residents, nurses and students into Hotham Hill. Many Italian and Maltese families live in the area.

The housing estate

By far the most imposing and significant feature is the three-year-old Hotham Housing Commission Estate covering about ten acres of what was originally the most run-down and depressed section of Hotham Hill. This ugly area made up of little sub-standard single-fronted cottages and small factory buildings housed about 380 people. The same area now accommodates some 1,600 residents—predominantly young families with children. The estate is comprised of one three-storey walk-up block for lone aged pensioners, one three-storey walk-up block for aged pensioner couples, six blocks of four-storey walk-up flats for families, and one twenty-storey block containing 160 units. At least there are two lifts provided in this block, each lift serving alternate floors. A row of ten shops has also been provided. The walk-up blocks have laundries located on the roof, while the high-rise block has a laundry on each level serving the eight families concerned.

Of the ten acres involved, buildings actually cover about two and a half acres, thus giving the maximum amount of light, ventilation, parking space for cars, and lawn playing areas for children.

In this and similar developments around Melbourne, the Victorian Housing Commission has achieved a population density of about 210 persons per acre. By comparison, in the average middle class suburb the density is about 20 to 24 persons per acre. In parts of Glasgow, however, it is 800, and in Hong Kong about 1,000 persons per acre.

The flats are of the one, two and three bedroom type, are available for rental only, and a rebate system applies based on 20 per cent of the family income.

During the last twelve months a further area of about seven acres has been cleared and work has already begun on further high-rise blocks to house another 1,400 people. This second development is separated from the first by a four acre area, also being cleared, which will be reserved for informal recreational purposes. Further reference will be made to this later.

Social divisions

In general terms Hotham Hill, in keeping with all our inner areas, suffers from lack of communication. Here we see illustrated the fact that the more families are crowded together the less they desire to communicate with each other. Privacy is thus achieved at the expense of sociability.

In Hotham Hill there is very little communication between Old and New Australians, between own-your-own flat residents and the low income families in the old cottages, and between the residents in the Housing Commission estate and the residents in the older surrounding areas. The community is therefore composed of a number of social strata. Possibly the churches of the area provide the only common meeting ground at present, but this would apply to a very small minority.

The Hotham Hill Neighbourhood Association

An increasing awareness of the general lack of communication between the social groups, the absence of community awareness, and the special needs associated with high-density living brought the clergy of the area together on a new basis. Consistent with the spirit of the area, until now communication between the clergy had been almost non-existent. An informal "talking together" began, and out of it arose the decision to establish a community-based movement which would bring together the churches, industry, and local, state and federal government representatives in the interests of the Hotham Hill community.

A number of interested people were invited to meet in the April of 1963. Six people attended—three were clergy, one a Melbourne city councillor, one the head of a large industrial concern, and the other a private member of the community. This meeting elected an interim chairman and secretary. It resolved that a committee be established "which shall have as its role and function the initiation and maintenance of needful community service and action within the Hotham Hill area". The Hotham Hill area was defined geographically. Two people present were appointed a sub-committee to prepare a draft constitution. The association was born.

A further significant step forward was taken a week later, when by the good offices of one of the ward councillors, the Melbourne City Council made available a Town Hall committee room and provided for a representative luncheon gathering of approximately

twenty people. The gathering was chaired by the Honourable A. A. Calwell, M.H.R., Federal Member for Melbourne and Leader of the Opposition. The purpose was to focus attention upon the community needs of Hotham Hill and strengthen the committee already formed. The objective was fully realized in that all present, representing federal and state governments, the Melbourne City Council, the churches and local industry, pledged enthusiastic support for the venture.

Following the initial drafting of a constitution the association was happy to accept the services of a legal firm, made available through the generosity of a local industrial concern, and in July 1964 the association was incorporated as a public company.

Objectives

The memorandum of association sets out the objectives of the association as being:

- a) to establish, maintain, work for, and develop, an organization suitably equipped with buildings and facilities for the purpose of promoting communal activities within the Hotham Hill neighbourhood or in any other area of a kind beneficial to residents of all ages without discrimination on grounds religious or political
- b) to establish, conduct, maintain and/or supervise facilities for infants and young children including health centres, kindergarten and pre-school institutions
- c) to provide for the special needs of young people of both sexes by the establishment of suitable premises and facilities and by guidance through counselling by experienced social workers with a view to assisting them in the pursuit of higher education, the selection of suitable employment and the utilization of leisure periods in a creative or constructive manner, including sporting, social or other recreational activities and to do such other acts as may be apprehended to be for the benefit of young people generally
- d) to provide for the general welfare of elderly and infirm people and to provide amenities of a social and recreational nature for elderly people including library and reading room facilities
- e) to make provision for the establishment of psychiatric and medical clinics and general social and marriage guidance centres which may furnish assistance through counselling and material aid to individual persons or families

f) to generally supervise, integrate or direct activities initiated within the Hotham Hill neighbourhood for the development or advancement of the communal well-being of its residents and to provide effective means of approaching state, municipal or other public authorities and instrumentalities when considered necessary in the interests of the residents of the Hotham Hill neighbourhood.

Finance

The sources of revenue until the present have been the Melbourne City Council and local industry, church and residents. The Melbourne City Council, of which Hotham Hill forms a part, has expressed a practical interest in the association. A grant of \$500 was made toward a specific project early in 1964, and the association was placed on the council's "List of Annual Grants" and for the 1966 year received \$200 through the Lord Mayor's Fund for Metropolitan Hospitals and Charities. Two separate appeals have so far been conducted within the area, directed chiefly toward local industry. With a small measure of support from the participating churches these appeals realized about \$500.

Activities

Representations to public bodies

Very early in its history the association became aware of the necessity of establishing good relationships with state and local government bodies who were making decisions which would shape the future life and development of Hotham Hill. The association also saw the necessity for a responsible local body to vocalize and interpret the basic needs of the residents to these bodies who are not normally readily accessible to John Citizen.

So various members of the executive committee have several times interviewed the Minister of Housing, the Director of Housing, and other executive officers of the Housing Commission. Visits have also been paid to Melbourne City Council officers such as the Town Clerk, the City Health Officer, and the superintendent of parks and gardens. Subjects discussed have been the leisure-time needs of high-density flat residents, holiday play-centres for children, special needs of elderly people, provision of a community hall, and development of a recreational area. All public officials without exception have shown the utmost courtesy and given generously of their time.

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Parallel with the efforts of the clergy and other individual members of the association to listen to and understand the needs of the local residents, the association has provided three opportunities for the residents to speak their feelings and needs at public gatherings. The second of these was attended by eighty people, chiefly local, but coming mainly from the congregations of the churches. The object was to discuss the needs of all age-groups in the area and the group discussion centred around two premises: "What I like about living in the Hotham Hill area", and "What I dislike about living in the Hotham Hill area." A great deal of significant resource material was gathered and collated in the form of reports which were widely circulated amongst those concerned with future planning for this and other areas.

Children's holiday play-centres

Concern for the children of Hotham Hill during the long summer holidays resulted in the sponsoring in November 1963 of a children's play-centre for three weeks under the leadership of the National Fitness Council and the Playgrounds' Association, using the local primary school property as headquarters. Staff salaries and purchase of equipment were provided from association funds. Subsequently, the Melbourne City Council, in conjunction with the National Fitness Council of Victoria, was requested to sponsor fully future January play-centres for children of school age. This request was acceded to and these bodies sponsored the centres in 1965 and 1966.

These centres did not cater for pre-school children. The association itself fully financed other centres in an attempt to meet this need, and for the last three years centres under the leadership of Kindergarten Training College students, assisted by voluntary helpers, have been conducted within the Housing Commission estate, using both the estate lawn area and the adjoining St. Alban's Day Kindergarten. In each year the average daily attendance has been about seventy and special emphasis has been upon the creative, imaginative, spontaneous type of play.

Project—"Scrubbs' Building"

The residents of Hotham Estate, generally speaking, were pleased with the quality of their new homes. For many of them the

modern, well lit, well ventilated, easily cleaned flats represented a vast improvement on previous accommodation. However, all age groups expressed in various ways needs relating to leisure time. There was no garden to "potter in", nothing similar to the private back yard, garage or small shed where odd repair jobs or hobbies could be indulged in.

Teenagers in particular were at a "loose end". Television was no longer holding them under its spell, and young people very soon after their arrival began to fraternize in large groups in the stairwells, sometimes creating a serious disturbance with noise. Until the police took action and night-watchmen were employed, brawls were numerous between youths who travelled to the estate from neighbouring suburbs and those resident in the flats. At the public gatherings already referred to, the one thing that kept coming through was that there was no readily accessible common meeting place where residents could meet in their own age groups and spend leisure time. The urgent need was for a community centre. It was known that the Melbourne City Council, as part of its long-range planning, proposed to erect a community hall in the area, but enquiries revealed that this would not materialize for perhaps five years.

The executive of the neighbourhood association saw a possible alternative. Why not use a suitably placed, existing factory building and rehabilitate it for use, at least as a temporary community centre? An inspection of the four and a half acre area which was being reserved for recreational activities was made, and a solid, well-roofed, red brick factory 100 feet by 50 feet with an office and toilets attached was selected. It was known as "Scrubbs' Building" and was still being used for the mixing, bottling and packaging of various detergents. The occupier informed the executive that he was about to move out, after which the building would be demolished. Immediate action was necessary. Correspondence and a visit to the Minister of Housing resulted in an assurance being given that the building would be inspected, and if considered suitable for the purpose it would be handed over to the Melbourne City Council for rehabilitation. The officers of the Victorian Housing Commission were favourably impressed and the ball came down in the city council's court. The city council's architect was likewise impressed and recommended renovations which would cost approximately \$10,000. The city council officer concerned, anxious

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that the building should have a maximum usefulness, recommended further work bringing the total expenditure to \$16,000. The final result was a most useful building comprising two halls each 50 feet by 50 feet, divided by concertina doors. Each hall has a kitchen and toilet attached. At the rear end four attached brick storerooms were added. The building was labelled "The City of Melbourne Hotham Community Centre" and was officially opened by the Lord Mayor in December 1965.

A local citizens' committee of twelve was elected at a public gathering soon afterwards, to be responsible for the use of the centre in liaison with an officer of the city council. This committee is now beginning to function reasonably well and the centre is already in use five afternoons and nights each week. Its activities now include play-centres each week-day for pre-school and school children; cubs and boy scouts two nights weekly; a club for teenagers; a dancing class for girls; a boys' gymnasium; a young wives' social club; and a children's theatre group.

Additions to the community centre

Almost adjacent to the newly provided community centre is a second equally substantial brick factory and so aligned that it can readily be linked with the centre by means of a new foyer. The possibilities of using this building in conjunction with the centre building were seen and support was given to the city council, in the form of letters to the Minister of Housing and to the Secretary of the Victorian Housing Commission, requesting the preservation of this second building. This request has also been acceded to and in due course the building will become a valuable addition to the community centre.

Development of surrounding recreational area

The four and a half acres surrounding these two buildings have yet to be cleared of old cottages. A tentative plan of development has been prepared by the council and the association has been invited to submit suggestions and guidance to ensure its most effective development for the use of all age-groups in the community.

Community week

Anticipating the official opening date of the community centre,

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the association planned a "Community Week" to follow immediately afterwards. A variety of activities was planned for each day of the week. The immediate objective was to focus attention on the provision of the new centre and to bring as many local residents as possible into the building. Interest and attendances were patchy but it is believed the initial objectives were achieved.

The association and Hotham Hill residents

The association since its inauguration has sought to hold and develop a two-way relationship, one with the local residents and the other with the various planning authorities. In so doing they believe both direct and indirect influences have been exercised upon the community life of Hotham Hill. It is not yet clear what sort of an image of the association, if any, has begun to form in the thinking of local residents. However, the association has received clear indication that responsible bodies who are involved in the shaping of the future community have accepted it as a responsible and concerned group of people who can be trusted, and whose knowledge of local needs is of value in planning. This of itself is a basic achievement and an encouragement to go forward.