

# Tuscany Towers Case Study

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## Background

### 1.1 Development summary

This paper summarises the results of resident and stakeholder interviews conducted in relation to Tuscany Towers. Tuscany Towers is a medium density housing development built between 1999 and 2005 on a former clay-pit for the New Lynn potteries. The approximately 100 units are a combination of 3 and 4 bedroom and 2 and 3 story units. Further details are summarised below:

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Information</b>
<b>Developer</b>	Ambrico Apartments and United Homes
<b>Address of development</b>	Ambrico Place. New Lynn
<b>Management</b>	Body Corporate plus on-site manager
<b>Location type</b>	Brownfield. Previously clay pits for Crown Lynn potteries. New Lynn town centre.
<b>Design and construction</b>	Timber frame with fibre-cement board and polystyrene window surrounds and detailing.
<b>Demographics of residents</b>	Very mixed. 50% Chinese (many are renting) 50% others includes many different ethnicities. Wide variety of household types.
<b>Tenure mix</b>	50:50 rented and owner occupied. Some owner occupiers will also have tenants.
<b>Number of units</b>	97
<b>Parking ratio</b>	2.4 At least 2 spaces for each property (including 1 garage) and 9 visitor parks. Some 3 level houses have double garages.
<b>Mix of unit sizes (number of bedrooms and or floorspace areas)</b>	Approx 26 4 bedroom;. 72 3 bedroom units. Section sizes from 123-164m <sup>2</sup> .
<b>Price range</b>	Initially \$250k-\$330k. Recent sales around \$150K due to leaky home problems. Rentals around \$350 per week.
<b>Site area/density</b>	2.3 Ha. 42/ha
<b>Stage of completion</b>	Construction 1999-2005

### 1.2 Methodology

#### 1.2.1 Residents

Ten interviews were conducted face to face with residents in their homes. Respondents were recruited by means of a letter (in English and Chinese) delivered to approximately 30 households with the offer of a \$100 incentive to take part. Houses were selected in conjunction with the on-site manager who suggested houses which would give us a good selection of household types, in terms of tenure and composition. Composition included ethnicity and structure. Individuals then called to make an appointment and the researchers visited the properties.

Interviews typically lasted for one hour and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Details of the sample composition are outlined below:

<b>Household Types</b>	<b>Tenure</b>	<b>Persons in household</b>	<b>Cars</b>
Extended family, 4 adults including one couple and 1 pre-school child.	Renting	5	2
Couple (60+)	Owner	2	1
Single Male (40-50)	Owner	1	1
Family with daughter (20+) plus other children at weekends	Owner	3 (6)	3
Single female. Retired	Owner	1	1
Working age couple	Owner	2	2
Family with older son (20+)	Owner	3	3
Extended family; 5 adults comprising 2 couples plus one other relative.	Owner	5	2
Young family with 2 pre-school children and 2 additional adults.	Owner	6	3
Young family with 1 pre-school child	Renting	3	2

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Female (40-50)	Sth American
Retired Couple	NZ European
Male (40-50)	NZ European
Couple (40-50)	NZ European and Chinese
Female (65-80)	NZ European
Male (40-50)	NZ European
Couple (40-50)	Chinese
Couple (40-50)	Indian
Female (30-40)	Chinese
Female (30-40)	Indian

<b>Employment status</b>
Business owner and student
f/t Full time (transport)
f/t Professional, and student
f/t Service industry
f/t Service industry, retail and student
Full time sales
Full time sales
Part-time (Business owner)
Retired
Sickness beneficiary, unemployed, retail and service worker
Voluntary work

Based on our interview questions about who lives at Tuscany Towers, we believe we have a good cross section of respondents with the following exceptions:

- Short of renters, reflecting reluctance of Chinese community (reportedly making up the majority of renters) to be interviewed.
- Many Chinese occupied houses have extended families and large household sizes.

### **1.2.2 Stakeholders**

Stakeholders included planners, Body Corp. officers and on-site manager . Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to the respondents.

## 2 Inside Tuscany Towers

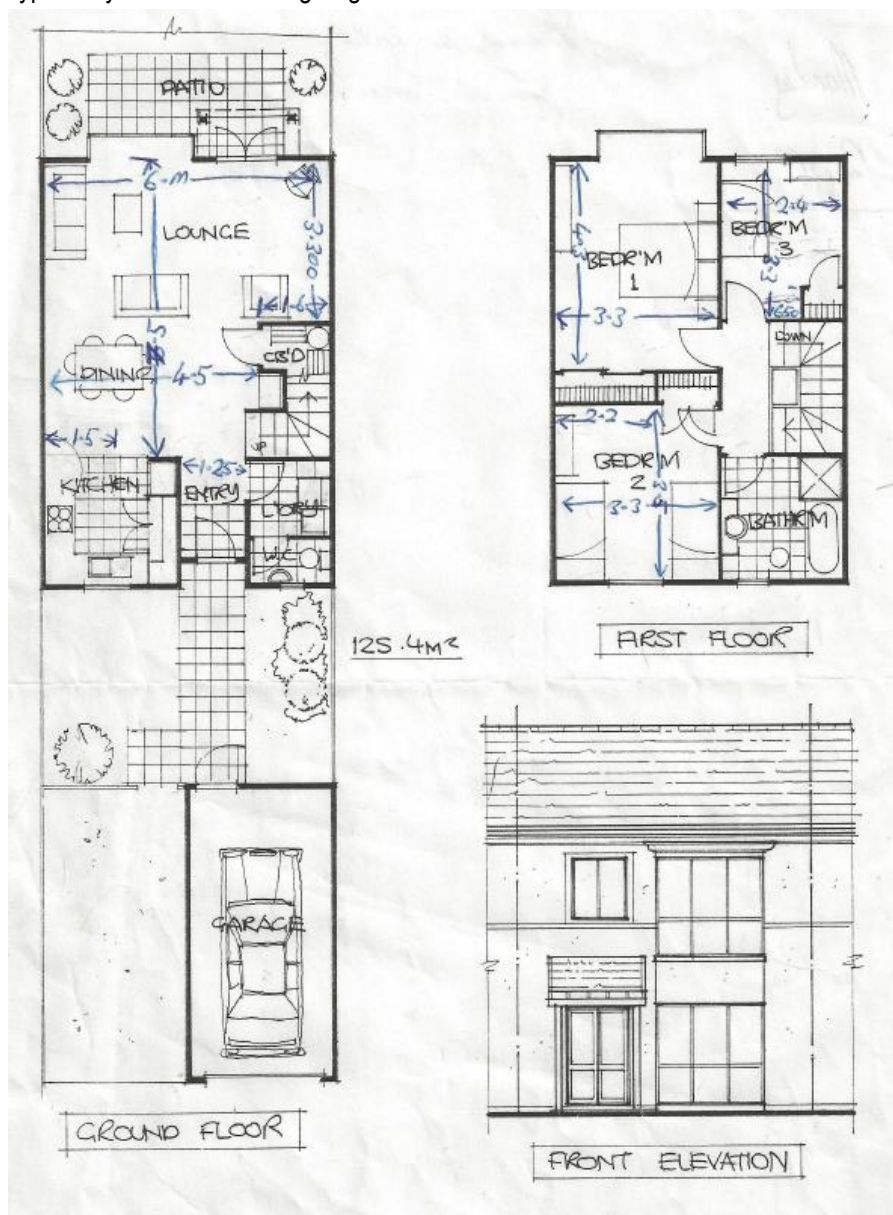
This section summarises characteristics the characteristics of the house and gardens including shared ownership spaces divided between what works well and the concerns, as expressed by residents at Tuscany Towers.

### 2.1 What works well?

This section highlights what works well from the residents' point of view. Bullet point summaries of the comments are provided and these points illustrated with photographs where possible.

#### 2.1.1 Internal Features

Typical layout with external garage.



## Typical layout with internal garage



- Open plan layout provides good light in living areas downstairs.
- Houses are well insulated and warm.
- Good size rooms are appreciated.
- Second lounge upstairs is useful.
- Garage often used for storage space not cars.

### 2.1.2 External Features

Mixture of 3 storeys and 2 storeys, double and single garages but all with a similar “Tuscany” style.





- Some of the larger units with street frontages onto Rankin Avenue are used as business premises, or combined business and residential uses:



- For several years this was perceived to be an up-market development with good prospects for capital gain.
- Small gardens require less maintenance than traditional detached houses on traditional large sections:



- Extra space for car parking created by concreting over front gardens:



- Sense of security provided by gates and eyes of neighbours on properties:



- Body Corporate rules help keep the area tidy and on-site manager helps communicate and enforce the rules.
- Recreation facilities are appreciated with "village green" (originally the site of a proposed swimming pool), tennis courts and (outside Tuscan Towers) a council-maintained playground.





- The amount of green space and landscaping also creates a pleasant environment to live in.
- The area is generally quiet and considered safe to move around in.

### 2.1.3 Community Issues

- The strongest community ties within Tuscany Towers appear to relate to the “owners committee” who manage the Body Corporate. There have been at least 2 legal battles fought by the owners committee, one to replace the previous Body Corporate administrators and more recently a legal battle to gain compensation for the leaky buildings.
- There is an annual general meeting of the owners where issues are discussed but renters are not included in these events.
- The council playground adjacent to the development is mentioned as a place where the young children of all ethnicities play together and form friendships. Parents (typically mothers) watching also form acquaintances.
- One couple have been particularly active in caring for some of the older single women in the development, checking on them and hosting film nights in their garage movie theatre.
- Overall the residents are seen to keep themselves to themselves:  
*“...most people keep to themselves....typical kiwis I guess, they don't know who their neighbours are”*  
*“..most of us Chinese people like very quiet..”*
- Apartment living in China considered not conducive of community interaction so this is not expected here either.
- In contrast, one Indian family found the quiet of NZ hard to get used to. Apartment dwellings in Mumbai have communal facilities at ground floor level where residents interact and celebrate festivals.
- Mixed reports of Chinese sense of community; some accounts of social interaction within the development and at the nearby Community Centre which caters for Chinese community.

## 2.2 What doesn't work so well?

This section summarises the concerns expressed by some residents which indicate other important aspects of design quality:

### 2.2.1 Internal Features

- Some upstairs bathrooms often have no external wall and ventilation is considered poor.

- Sound insulation could be better.

### 2.2.2 External Features

- Development identified as “leaky buildings” leading to legal battles (now resolved) and considerable uncertainty around property values. Also, exterior maintenance of the houses was stopped pending decisions about re-cladding. Appearance has suffered as a result.



- Lack of privacy in gardens



- Security concerns caused by lack of fences and pedestrian access to main road:



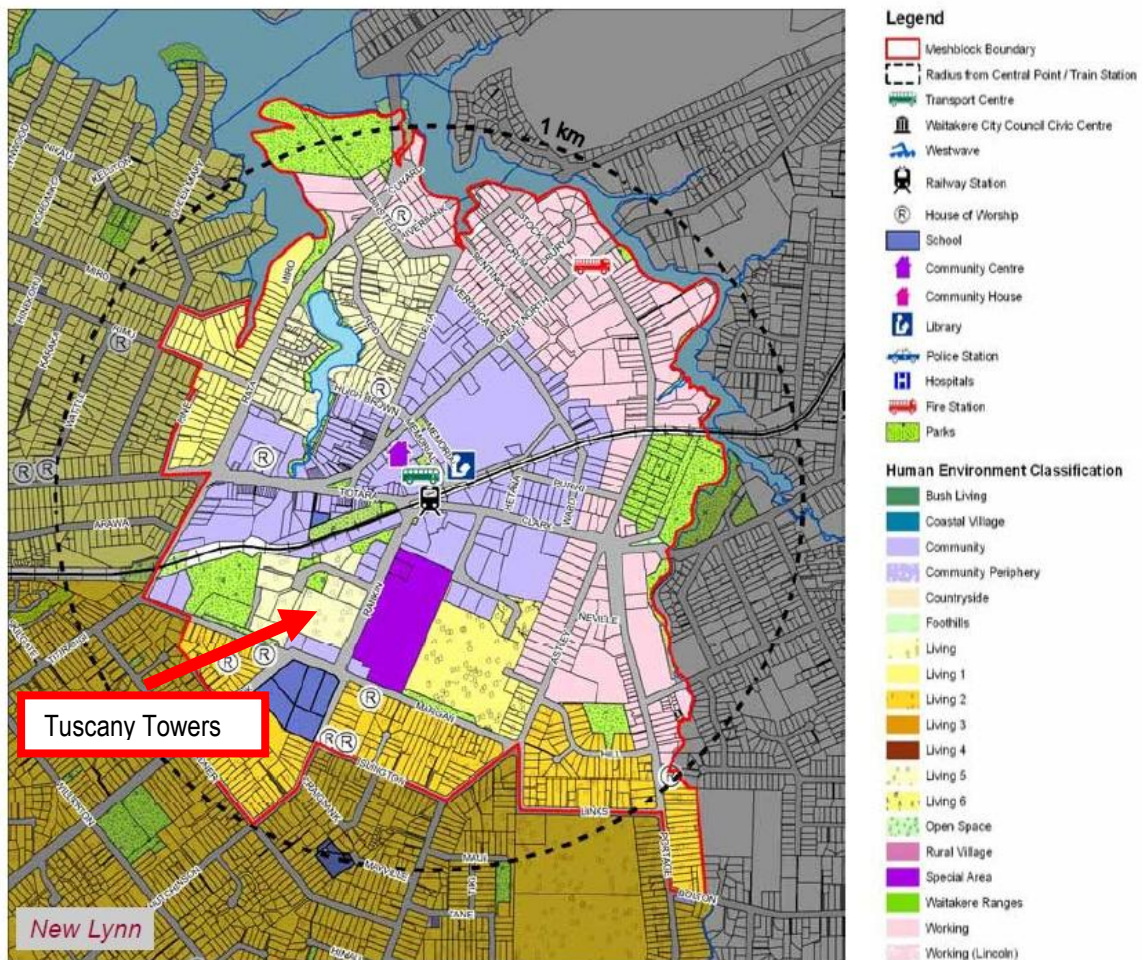
- Some resentment regarding Body Corporation rules e.g. those restricting installation of personal Sky TV satellite dishes and any physical additions to outside of houses.
- Because of the large Asian community there is also a demand for the larger satellite dishes that can receive Asian TV stations some of which are 3mtres diameter.
- A communal Sky TV satellite system is provided but is subject to service interruptions.
- Shared staircases to 3 storey dwellings seen by some as a breach of privacy and security.
- Some problems with youths driving too fast, managed by speed bumps and the resident manager.
- Crime in the area is a concern including burglaries and car break-ins but felt to be similar all over Auckland.
- Street lighting could be better.
- Navigation inside Tuscany Towers made difficult by absence of street names (there are 5 or 6 distinct streets) and one continuous numbering sequence.

### **2.2.3 Community Issues**

- There is a view that the strong community that existed when the first occupants moved in has largely disappeared.
- One reason given for this is the scale of the development: seen by some to be too large and larger than they anticipated:
- Another reason relates to the high proportion of renters in the development, many of whom are Chinese who do not generally mix well with others. Some of this may be caused by language difficulties but how much is not clear.
- Community ties within the development are weak with little more than informal greetings (“good morning” etc.) being the norm.
- We cannot say how strong the Chinese community is in Tuscany Towers within itself as we were unable to recruit any Chinese renters for interview.

## 2.3 Neighbourhood

Tuscany Towers is located close to the centre of New Lynn and a range of facilities indicated on the following plan. The benefits of this location are described below.



Draft Growth Strategy for Waitakere City August 2006

### 2.3.1 Neighbourhood benefits

The neighbourhood around Tuscany Towers is Ambrico Place and New Lynn town centre. There are many facilities available locally which provide opportunities for the residents of Tuscany Towers to obtain essential services and recreational amenities and to meet up with friends and family.

Many of the facilities are within an easy walk and respondents enjoy being able to walk where possible. Some mothers (or grandmothers) with young children particularly enjoy taking the stroller to the shops or to the park to feed the ducks.

The following points summarise what residents like and use in the local neighbourhood. Not everyone uses all the facilities but these were all mentioned in the course of the interviews.

#### Shopping, restaurants, cafes and bars

*"..we've got two times as many major supermarkets..restaurants ..bars....Chinese supermarkets so that's keeping up with the increase in housing*

- The Lynn Mall shopping centre is approximately 10 mins walk and has a good range of shops including a supermarket.
- A new (New World) supermarket has recently opened at Crown Lynn Place
- Specialist food stores for Chinese and Indian cuisine are available in New Lynn.
- New Lynn has a range of restaurants and cafes all within walking distance of Tuscany Towers.

### Education

- Early Childhood centre under construction in Ambrico Place and there is some enthusiasm for this among residents.
- New Lynn School (primary and intermediate) is along Rankin Ave at junction with Margan Ave.
- Lynfield College is 10 mins by bus from the New Lynn transport centre.

### Recreation and Sports

- New Lynn primary school grounds are used by some families at weekends
- The Less Mills fitness centre recently expanded to 3 floors of the building on the corner of Rankin Ave. and Clark Streets.
- The Manawa Wetland is 3 ha of wetland reserve with walkways and birdlife adjacent to Tuscany Towers. Popular for walking and taking children to feed the ducks.



- Olympic Park is located within a 15 minute walk and provides a wide range of passive and active recreation including play areas, public art and formal sports grounds for soccer, cycling and athletics.

### Community Facilities

- New Lynn Community Centre is very close by and is used for a range of different interests including some aimed at the local Chinese community.
- The New Lynn library is adjacent to the Community Centre and has developed a selection of Chinese material.

### 2.3.2 Neighbourhood disadvantages

Some neighbourhood issues less popular with residents included:

- Concern about the local movie theatre closing down or the lack of a movie theatre in New Lynn.
- Walking home after dark from the town centre was not considered safe by some.
- The additional developments in Ambrico resulted in an increase in traffic movements and resulted in a one way system in Tuscan Towers to make access and egress safer.
- Proximity to the new transport interchange has created parking pressures in Ambrico place as commuters use it as an unofficial park and ride. Some maintain that the gates on the development were mainly to keep this parking out rather than for security reasons.
- There is some concern that petty crime has moved from the transport interchange to other areas (including Ambrico) as the new security patrols move the would-be criminals.
- Some people view some additional developments in Ambrico place as attracting more “undesirables”, bringing with it the threat of more crime. However, most respondents were not at all concerned and didn’t see any disadvantage in this housing.
- Little was known about proposed development of the Monier Brickworks site for residential and commercial uses. Some felt that high density residential development would be undesirable. Respondents generally were not keen on apartment living. At least not in New Zealand.

### 3 Connectivity

The case study interviews indicated the degree to which residents are part of a wider community, particularly for work, study, friends and family.

Connections between New Lynn and the rest of Auckland are therefore as important as they are diverse.

Not surprisingly most respondents mentioned the proximity to the transport interchange (particularly the train) as an advantage. Five households had people who use the train service regularly, 2 were students, two used the services for recreation and social trips and one worked in the central city. In one case, the student’s need for easy access to the CBD was a major determinant of house purchase.

Most other trips were made by car.

Other locations important for work, family or friends included:

- Te Atatu
- Glen Eden
- East Tamaki
- Mt Roskill
- Manurewa
- Titirangi
- North Shore
- New Windsor
- Dannemora
- Three Kings

These connections indicate the broad geographical context for the broader concept of community.



## 4 Tradeoffs made in dwelling selection

### 4.1 The Dream

*“The style of Europe –the feel of home”*



The first house buyers (back in 1999) were attracted by the concept and the convenient location, on the flat, close to the New Lynn town centre. Most had existing ties to New Lynn so where not moving to a totally new area. Concept strengths included:

- Low maintenance property
- Appealing design and appearance
- Prospect of capital gain (good investment properties for some)
- Sense of community
- Affordable prices
- Recreation facilities (including the promised swimming pool)
- Expectations that owner occupiers would be predominant.

These attractions contrasted with the traditional house style, further out and with high maintenance requirements.

Triggers for the change were often family and health related.

### 4.2 The reality

More recently, the buildings have been blighted by the leaky building problem and the market distorted. Currently the house prices are in the mid \$100,000s but the rental prices have not suffered. This has made the development attractive for investors and a dominance of tenants over owner occupiers. Some owners have moved out while others have sold.

The development is now one of 8 developments in Ambrico Place and has the Monier Brick Works across the road.



New Lynn has a growing Chinese population generally and the Tuscany Towers development is an attractive option for the Chinese. The houses are close enough together to provide some security, resulting from neighbours' observation and they are large enough to accommodate extended families. The Chinese are attracted to the sense of community that the development offers and the landscaping provides a better living environment than the apartment living back in China. The proximity to New Lynn town centre with the specialist shops and Chinese services at the community centre are an added bonus.

For students, the access to the CBD by rail is an important attractor. CBD rents are much higher and body corp. fees are reported to be higher in the CBD also.

Other places considered by residents include Albany, Henderson, other developments in Ambrico and older houses around New Lynn.

Tuscany Towers is preferred to other Ambrico place developments (despite the leaky buildings) because of the quality of the development. There are good green spaces, parking is good by comparison and there is a sense of security from the scale, the gates, the on-site manager and an effective Body Corp.

## 5 Post construction governance issues

The development history of Tuscany Towers is a sad one. The developers got so much right that this is a model for medium density housing in many ways. However, the development started at the end of a property cycle and the developer's finances were stretched. Original owners still at Tuscany Towers talk of the consequences of these financial difficulties with considerable anger. Tradesmen employed on the development were paid with units when the money ran out and cheaper tradesmen were called in with consequences for the quality of the buildings. Even the Waitakere City Council apparently were paid in units in lieu of some of their fees.

During this time the Body Corp. was reportedly unsympathetic to the residents' needs and closely related to the developers. The developers built additional houses on land that was earmarked for a park and did not follow through with the swimming pool.

When the developers and builders went into liquidation the owners were faced with the difficult task of replacing the Body Corp. It took a court case to finally get them to stand down but the owners were unable to recover the funds they believed they were entitled to.

Add to this the discovery that the development leaked and it can be seen how the opportunity for an exemplar became a nightmare for the owners. Some owners sold while others moved out and rented out their houses.

The good news came recently when the new Body Corp. and the owners successfully achieved a financial settlement towards the cost of remedial work. Owners are now looking forward to the re-cladding and repainting of the units and the potential to restore the value lost in recent years. Renters are less certain of their future.

These events served to give the Body Corp a high profile at Tuscany Towers which may not be typical of other similar developments. The owners committee recently appointed a part time on-site manager who helps manage the development by communicating and enforcing the Body Corp rules.

The manager's job is made more difficult by the characteristics of the Chinese population who do not appear to understand their responsibilities and the role of the Body Corp and the residential manager. The manager is often asked to sort out problems that are properly the responsibility of the landlords. In one case a house was being used for commercial food preparation servicing local restaurants. Language is a big problem but also is the suspicion of authority; some Chinese are reluctant to report crime to the police. The Chinese community seem to prefer to keep themselves to themselves. This is a generalisation and based on what researchers were told. There are exceptions and we have not substantiated all these claims.

More generally residents talk of annoying rules which impinge on their freedoms. Examples include:

- No pets
- No alteration to the outside of the buildings
- No residents parking in visitor parks
- No TV aerials
- No washing visible

However, most residents accepted that these restrictions on their freedom were adequately compensated by a quiet, tidy and safe environment.

Body Corp fees of around \$1200 per year were also seen as good value for the services provided in terms of landscape maintenance, the resident on-site manager and the legal representation in the leaky home dispute.

Clearly the Body Corp is an important part of life at Tuscany Towers and seems currently well performed.

There are some residents who would like to see a greater sense of community in the development. While this is not a responsibility of the Body Corp. or the on-site manager it is something that requires some outside intervention.

The police have held a barbeque at the local playground and used interpreters to try and encourage neighbourhood watch activities but with no apparent effect as yet.

Theories of strong communities suggest that building strong networks in a community will help encourage participation and develop community resilience, allowing them to take greater control of their own circumstances. Such networks would include renters who are currently excluded from the governance structures, and encourage a more unified community view.

## **6 Development difficulties and possible solutions**

This section considers ways in which the interests of the local community, developers, land owners and new occupants could be reconciled through better communication, design and closer attention to spill-over third party effects.

The development at Tuscany Towers followed a “charrette” conducted by Waitakere City Council in 1996 which followed the well established “Enquiry by Design” process. The charette was a means for involving the wider New Lynn community in development plans for the New Lynn town centre. The developers of Tuscany Towers were involved with the charette and quickly moved to take advantage of the support emerging for medium density housing in Ambrico Place.

The area was previously industrial land and effects on neighbouring properties were negligible.

The difficulties that followed for Tuscany Towers were unrelated to the charette which appears to have been a very effective way of moving forward on the implementation of New Lynn town centre.

Planners involved with this exercise however, concede that provisions of the District Plan at the time were inappropriate. Residential development was allowed as of right on industrial land and the haphazard further development of Ambrico Place is a consequence.

In retrospect, some guidelines for medium density development would have prevented some of the wider problems at Ambrico place, not so much from Tuscany Towers (the first development) but from the 7 subsequent developments. Some of the problems of these subsequent developments are illustrated below:

<p>Access to garages poor and no space to park outside garage. Slope of land is awkward. No visitor parking</p>	
<p>Parking inadequate and not considerate of pedestrians or cyclists.</p>	
<p>Parking inadequate and not considerate of pedestrians or cyclists.</p>	

The Waitakere City Council subsequently amended their District Plan and have introduced Guidelines for Medium Density Housing which aim to substantially improve future developments. The guidelines are presented as assessment criteria and are grouped under the following Design Elements:

- Neighbourhood Character
- Site Layout
- Building Location
- Visual and Acoustic Privacy
- Car Parking and Vehicle Access
- On-site Outdoor Space

- Entries to Buildings
- Site Facilities
- Landscape Treatment

These guidelines appear to cover most of the likely physical planning issues associated with medium density housing.

What is not covered here is the potential for some partnership arrangements between Local Authorities and developers to make sure that adequate standards of amenity are provided for the areas identified for intensification. The local authorities have played a role in Ambrico Place with the provision of a playground, car parking and street lighting. More could have been done to provide, landscaping and pedestrian access some of the other developments.

The recently published New Lynn Urban Plan provides a useful framework for future development and references the need for a “Special Purpose Delivery Vehicle” for making sure the expectation of the plan match the reality of what is delivered. This is positioned not as another layer of bureaucracy than as an active tool to bring about change.

It seems that such an approach may have a significantly role in future medium density housing programmes, particularly where affordability of the housing is likely to be an issue. The public sector contribution to provision of amenity may make otherwise financially unviable schemes viable.

## 7 Lessons from Tuscany Towers

The following bullet points summarise the main lessons from the Tuscany Towers case study:

- Over promise and under-delivery a turnoff and source of frustration
- But physically quite well liked and seems to work well for the people interviewed
- Some disappointment that the standard (and the promise) has not been sustained or matched by subsequent developments
- Like the locality and the capacity to use transit
- The ability to do things locally (especially shopping) is well received.
- Despite this, reasonably widely distributed functional and social spaces, reflected in car use
- Would like a little more individuality and character – street identification, the capacity to modify the appearance of their own units;
- Body Corporation seen as important, although potentially a source of annoyance if get it wrong
- The shift from predominantly owner occupied to predominantly rented has seen a change in character including the emergence of an enclave of Chinese immigrants. This creates a sense of internal separation (both) for them and non-immigrants which militates against a strong sense of community within the fabric of Tuscany Towers.