

## Community Consultation (part two)

### The Kensington Association with the developers '*Assemble*'

Quite honestly, the band of stalwart residents in the Kensington Association are pretty cynical about 'developers' and their motivations! The prevailing perspective would be that they are out to make 'big bucks', nothing more. There is certainly good reason for scepticism (and cynicism) since stories of 'rogue developers' are pervasive. Given this deep scepticism - which developers must be aware of - you would expect consultation between the Kensington Association and any developer to be somewhat .... tricky.

A bit of history:- towards the end of 2020 I was alerted that 402 Macaulay Rd (which is adjacent to a series of residences in Barnett St) had been purchased by *Assemble*, and I was very happy to be introduced to their head of urban design, Andy Fergus. I thought 'this is great to have a chance to talk with someone in 'a driver's seat' early in the development cycle'. Andy was recommended to me as smart and knowledgeable about all things 'planning' - and he was. Before meeting Andy I did a letter-box drop along the East of Barnett St (I live close by), to tell residents I was meeting with him, and to let me know of any priorities and concerns. That was probably a big question to spring on the neighbourhood, but I wanted to make the most of the early opportunity.

The prospect of a meeting with Andy raised a question in my mind - 'what does ideal consultation look like in such a situation?' One wouldn't expect a developer to have early consultation with the community, at least before they had something to show, but that is more or less what seem to be happening in this case. Andy shared some very rough sketches with me shortly after I met him. One of the biggest issues in consultation is the power and knowledge imbalance between parties. Andy is a young, knowledgeable, professional, and idealistic (to the extent that anyone can be in his position) representative for a large developer, and I am a relatively naïve and less-young community leader/volunteer. Such a scenario is invariably the case, but I recognise there is a point at which one must have some trust in your co-consulter!

Andy and I embarked on a tour of the 402 Macaulay Rd site, he talked (mainly) and I listened; I hadn't heard anything from Barnett St people. He shared with me some of the issues they were considering in the early planning, and both of us expressed some concerns in relation to the proximity of the residents in Barnett St. Following our tour I heard little from *Assemble* for about 6 months until we invited them to make a presentation at the Kensington Association meeting on June 7<sup>th</sup>.

Like most consultative meetings participants join with different expectations, different agendas, different knowledge, and different levels of cynicism. *Assemble* were represented by Andy and two other representatives, Emma Telfer, Director of Culture and Strategy and Maggie Mckeand, Communications Engagement Manager. Emma and Maggie began with a comprehensive outline of *Assemble*, its history, aims and objectives - all very admirable and forward thinking. They outlined some of the differences between 402 Macaulay Rd plans and the other *Assemble* developments South of Macaulay Rd (to be finished in October) and the Thompson St development (to be finished in 2023). In my view *Assemble* does not even get close to fitting the stereotypical image we at the Kensington Association have of developers, ie. ethics free scavengers who worship the almighty dollar. Andy shared some of

the plans they had for the development and attempted to answer many questions and concerns raised by the meeting. Barnett St residents were understandably concerned by the prospect of large multi-storey residential blocks shadowing their backyards and invading their privacy; the large hulk which is the Webb warehouse behind them might be high and ugly, but it does not have balconies. Residents questioned what was allowable with respect to 'built form controls', and *Assemble* on their part explained how they were proposing to mitigate the impact on residents by deep planting and set-back from the laneway on the western border of the site. The discussion was lively and varied, covering parking, planting, the flood plain, community infrastructure, and building design etc. *Assemble* plans further consultation with the community in August. In a subsequent conversation with Maggie, she assured me that she wanted it to be meaningful consultation about aspects of the development that are still negotiable. (Refer to Community Consultation part 1 .. NWCN Issue 05).

The response to the meeting with *Assemble* by members of the Kensington Association ranged from .. 'It was just a promotional exercise' to 'better than expected'. One member from Barnett St said she was heartened by the prospect of quality planting on the border behind her property. The stark reality for Kensington is that there are (and will be into the future) many developments similar to this that challenge us. As human beings we are generally suspicious of and resistant to change. If we have been living happily in our locality for decades, change over fence or round the corner is challenging; we are all NIMBY'ish. I feel that at the Kensington Association we nibble away at anything that will mitigate 'bad change' wherever we can stick our snout in. I also feel that *Assemble*, while clearly charged with making a profit by its financial backers, also knows that to build outside of any moral or ethical framework is bad business which will come back to bite them.

Readers can access some questions and answers from our meeting with *Assemble* that weren't able to be answered before the meeting ended. Go to [kensingtonassociation.org](http://kensingtonassociation.org) and navigate to 'Activities' and '402 Macaulay Rd'.