

FORMULATION OF THE TOWN PLAN

Once the condition of the town was established and the hazards and risks realised, the development of a clear picture for the future town was the next step in Rabaul's restoration. SMEC played a pivotal, independent role in the Town Plan development. SMEC was able to act as facilitator in the process of developing a plan, evaluating dissenting opinions and reconciling solutions. The Town Plan was therefore a compromise. Rather than having negative connotations, it expressed a positive meaning towards establishing an intermediate position between conflicting opinions and issues reached by mutual concession. The Town Plan was to become the key instrument for the use of government, the community at large, and the funding agencies.

Starting Point. Initially SMEC aimed to achieve a balanced, accountable framework for development. The process had to begin from an unbiased position, and proceed in an objective way. Much sentiment had been bred over a period of three years during which nothing had happened. Opinions surfaced in various quarters, and demands or expectations were high. At the outset the issue of risk had to be addressed head-on. It could not afford to allow an issue to remain unresolved, capable of rearing its head at any point during the process in a destructive way.

Risk. SMEC found the concepts that were embraced by the community included the following:

- The idea of a risk-free living environment was unrealistic, and personal perception of risk varied widely. The importance of any risk to the Rabaul community cannot be scientifically evaluated,
- Rabaul Town is not the sole product of a stable physical environment, but rather social and economic factors are more important,
- Risk is a comparative concept. People made judgments by making comparisons elsewhere. Members of the community compared some major cities in the world (and the western world at that) located in areas of high risk, and
- The biggest risks on earth statistically are hunger and war, both of which are absent in Rabaul. Community conception of well being focused more importantly on social and economic factors, rather than whether or not there may be another eruption in 30 or 40 years.

While the above were powerful arguments, this holistic view crystallised a common understanding that the real-world issue was really the financial risk of investing in renewed infrastructure.

The Cost/Risk Factor. This became a public responsibility issue, and encouraged a consensus that the new town should be constrained in size. There was clear logic to exclude the southern extremity of town which is closest to the most active volcanoes, most ash cover (therefore cost to rehabilitate), and also the most likely to suffer a future similar fate.

The Government Position. Policy framework reflecting the official position, from National down to Provincial and Local Government level had been well thought through and was clear.

The Provincial Capital functions had been relocated to Kokopo as part of an associated thrust to develop economically in other urban areas of the province outside Rabaul. The importance of Rabaul to the provincial economy as port was reinforced due to its magnificent natural harbour. Other acknowledged roles for Rabaul were as a commercial centre and tourist destination.

Rebuilding Rabaul

SMEC provided the impetus through the services of Ms Sandra Finster (Urban Planner) for the government and community to realize a common goal. Having officially accepted a future role for the town, and with it a community willing to return, government of every level had to be prepared to drop the barrier of 'volcanic risk' issue and deal with planning issues in a positive way. While any form of hazard cannot be prevented, the focus of government control was shifted to minimizing its effects.

The Driving Forces. The pent-up impatience to re-build was evident in various sectors of the community, the most vocal being port-related industry, land owners, and users of community facilities.

It was apparent that if the new Town Plan was to be sensitive to need, and considered successful in its implementation, the planning process had to focus on the positive attributes and strengths driving the desire to re-build. It was clear to identify that Rabaul had unique qualities to do with its setting and historical past. The legacy of an enviable economic structure and social harmony have been difficult for other towns to emulate.

Obstacles. A big difficulty to any development in Rabaul was recognised at the outset. It was to do with property insurance. The insurance industry had ceased to underwrite property within the area of influence of Rabaul's volcanoes, including the whole town. Resolving this problem was identified as vital to the success of any plan, and an initiative was taken to open up discussion direct with the insurance industry.

The Planning Process. With some big issues out of the way, and a relatively neutral canvas, the routine part of the exercise was much like any other including the collection and analysis of information, evaluation of this data, and design.

The complexity and detail lifted this study out of the ordinary. The difficult part of the process was the dilemma in evaluating the criteria, weighting them, and applying value judgements. This was under intense scrutiny, and must be answerable to any of the numerous stakeholders. SMEC understood there was no perfect answer. The aim was to maximise benefits across the board and the challenge was to unite the interests in the concept of a community-owned town image that everyone related to.

A Steering Committee was established to oversee the planning process, and must take credit for the success attributed to the final Town Plan. The committee performed numerous functions providing guidance, organising access to information and people, participating in assigning values, and decision-making in general. Its highest role was in acknowledging ownership of the outcome on behalf of government and the community. The committee had a broad representation, was knowledgeable, reliable, and above all committed. It had power and clout. Such a structure forming the backbone of the planning process was an ideal model for any study to follow.

A conscious effort was made by SMEC to keep design issues in the plan simple, flexible, and easily understood. In particular the oft-made mistake of introducing design prescriptions was avoided, but rather an encouragement was given to the implementation agencies to focus on town "character" and locally relevant impacts.