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Racing into the future 2010 2018

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Residents of Sydney's Oran Park joke their suburb is so new they can't order a pizza, because their streets don't appear on Google Maps, writes Garry Maddox.

Lisa Tonkin and Matthew Houston camped for a week to buy a block of land on the site of the former Oran Park racetrack in south-western Sydney. They slept in a car, swapping shifts when the other went to work, and snapped up a home site on the old racetrack straight for \$250,000.

Cows were grazing as bulldozers cleared the land nearby at the time.

Five years on, the couple share a spacious four-bedroom house - Houston jokes he's never even been in one of the bedrooms - with their infant son Archer and a sloppy Great Dane called Zelda. Almost 3000 homes have sprung up around them as the population of Oran Park Town has zoomed from zero to an estimated 7500 in eight years.

Houston, 36, is from Campbelltown, 14 kilometres to the south-west. Tonkin, 33, grew up in Silverdale, 30 kilometres in the opposite direction. They both work for local councils: him in IT, her in community events.

"It was a good fit for us," Houston says. "About half way between both families. A nice growing area."

Tonkin adds: "We didn't have anything when we first moved in - they were still building the shops and the start of the restaurants - so we've watched them all from scratch."

Things have been moving fast at Oran Park for a long time. From 1962 to 2010, the racetrack twice hosted the Australian Grand Prix and the World Superbike Championship and was a regular venue for the Australian Touring Car Championship. Now it's one of the country's fastest growing urban areas.

Every week, residents move into 12 to 15 new homes with another 400 houses under construction. "Every year we're probably pumping out more lots than anywhere in Australia," Mark Perich, a director of developer Greenfields Development Company, says.

It's a suburb that is called a town for a masterplan that carries on the identity of the racing track, with roads named after the likes of Peter Brock, Colin Bond, Allan Moffat, Mick Doohan and Mark Webber, parks called Grandstand and Grand Prix and a shopping centre named the Podium. In the town centre, near bronze statues of the cattle that escaped to the Macarthur area from the First Fleet, is the Australian motorsport version of the Hollywood walk of fame.

It's all so shiny new that locals joke that they can't order a pizza or an Uber because their streets don't appear on Google Maps. And the plan is to keep building 600 to 800 new homes every year - adding up to 2400 people annually - until Oran Park has a population of 45,000 in 25 years.

It already has one of the state's biggest Woolworths, a public primary school, Catholic and Anglican schools nearby that go from kindergarten to year 12, three floors of offices including a "smart work hub", two artificial lakes, pedestrian walkways and cycleways, an aged care centre and a new library and community resource centre that opens soon.

There are also plans for a public high school, a leisure centre with indoor swimming pools, basketball courts and a gym, a major extension to the Podium shopping centre, a medical precinct that includes a private hospital, a children's splash park, a legal precinct, a hotel-convention centre, more lakes, a skate park and two nursing homes totalling 350 beds.

A precinct is being developed with 1000 terrace-style homes as "the Surry Hills of Oran Park".

Perich says the idea is that people will hardly need to leave the area as it grows. Adjoined by other suburbs emerging from paddocks that Greenfields is also developing, including 6000 blocks at South Creek West, it is expected to benefit from a jobs boom around the new Badgerys Creek Airport, 20 kilometres away, but is projected to eventually have 10,000 jobs on its own turf.

Perich is a member of the dairy farming and real estate family - estimated wealth \$1.59 billion last year - that produced milk on the land through Leppington Pastoral Company before Greenfields, another family company, took over development. "We're in a very fortunate position in that we've started with a clean sheet of paper - it was a big paddock where cows roamed - and we've had the ability to create a place that hopefully everybody will enjoy and a place that works," he says. "We don't have high levels of graffiti or vandalism or people doing the wrong thing because people actually perceive it as their place, which it is, and respect that."

For Greenfields' general manager, Mick Owens, Oran Park is a \$4 billion project "creating \$10 billion worth of real estate" over two decades. "We're pretty proud of trying to make a complete town, with everything that goes to make a town," he says.

But as with any rapidly growing urban area, there have been growing pains including community angst over the route of a proposed rail line from Campbelltown to St Mary's via the new airport. After negotiation, the line has been re-routed away from homes and trains are expected to travel through a tunnel to the south of the town centre and a sunken cutting to the north. But Perich thinks the first train might be 12 years away.

If it seems like another sprawling housing estate in the booming south-west, where the biggest issues seem to be the ever-busier traffic on the link roads and keeping cool in summer, Oran Park has reached a new stage.

Greenfields wants to start building up - first offices, then apartments - raising the same questions about population density and access to transport as other parts of the city.

With the state government confirming Oran Park will have a station on the proposed rail line, construction of a six-storey office building in the town centre is due to start this year - with a third of the 10,000 square metres of office space already spoken for. It will be not just the tallest building in the town but the entire Camden municipality.

Three six-storey apartment buildings are due to follow, with the first likely to get underway within 12 months.

Greenfields has a proposal before Camden Council to increase the height of buildings within the town centre to 20 storeys so that a residential tower of 18 storeys can be built on top of the shopping centre as it is extended, although it is also considering just an extra 12 storeys.

Perich believes the railway justifies extending the current seven-storey height limit to allow high-rise apartments but concedes he may not get council backing until there is certainty about when trains will start running.

"We're positive that there will be a demand for them and that people will accept that sort of living within a town centre where there's a lot of amenity," he says. "But in terms of how many and how fast, we don't know, so we have to put our toe in the water and start with the first six-storey lot of apartments."

In the next 30 years, Perich believes there could be up to five towers ranging from eight to 20 storeys in the town centre.

But the mayor of Camden, Lara Symkowiak, believes it is too early for high-rise apartments. "I think it's inevitable in one or two decades' time but at this stage it's a huge unknown and I couldn't, hand on heart, dump a lot of people in a tower with no access to public transport - rail transport - on the gamble that it's 'coming soon'," she says. "If you increase density way faster than infrastructure is delivered, you're potentially creating communities that don't work so well. When will we see that rail connection? Is it 10, 15, 20 years away?"

Even without apartments, affordability is a big part of Oran Park's appeal. For \$750,000, you can buy a four-bedroom house with two or three living areas, two bathrooms and a double garage on a 450-square-metre block.

Perich says half the 800 blocks of land expected to sell this year will go to either families or investors, with the other half going to builders for house-and-land packages.

From the street, the suburb seems to be made up of similar-looking project homes with that western Sydney curse - getting brutally hot in summer. But it's a style of living that focuses on well-designed interiors rather than exteriors.

"Al frescos are a big thing," says Craig Herrick, a sales executive for Freestyle Homes in the suburb's display home village. As well as covered areas where families can cook and eat outside, houses have multiple living rooms and ducted airconditioning, which bumps up power costs.

"The first homebuyers still generally target the four by twos - four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a double garage," Herrick says. "Your downsizers are selling your big Ponderosas and wanting a smaller one."

Symkowiak says that as young families buy their first home in the town, their parents often follow to stay close to their grandchildren. "The diversity is changing too," she says. "We're finding there's more of a mix of backgrounds moving into Camden. It's predominantly been Anglo-Saxon but we're getting people who've moved from Liverpool

or Fairfield or Bankstown; Campbelltown even."

Herrick agrees the area has become more multicultural, including immigrants from India, Iraq, Nepal, Africa, Bangladesh and China, as prices in the likes of Edmondson Park and Middleton Grange drive first homebuyers further from the city.

While Sydney's urban expansion was once all about quarter-acre blocks - roughly 1000 square metres - Oran Park's lots come in three smaller sizes. Herrick says 375-square-metre blocks have gone from selling for \$189,000 to \$428,000 in five years, with 450-square-metre blocks going from \$220,000 to \$450,000 and 600-square-metre blocks from \$280,000 to \$600,000.

Many buyers want a 2.7-metre high ceiling, a study and, even in a small backyard, space for a trampoline, garden shed and small pool "for the kids to cool off" in summer.

While Campbelltown, Liverpool and Parramatta are all getting major facelifts, Herrick believes Oran Park will always look more modern. "It's probably the slickest, most modern-looking town in Australia," he says.

Five years after moving in, Tonkin is not concerned about all the frantic development around them including those planned apartment towers.

"Given that we bought in an area that was developing from the start, we've expected it," she says. "And we expect it for some time to come until everything's finished."

But there are mixed feelings about the railway. "Good for the area, bad for us," Tonkin says. "We were told it would probably go underneath our house. We're just waiting to see what the finalised plans are."

For new arrivals, Oran Park represents that rarest of commodities: optimism.

First-home buyers Tori Pal, 22, and Joshua Finocchiaro, 25, are moving in next month. They both still live at home nearby - in Leppington and Kearns respectively.

Pal, a childcare teacher, came to know the area while playing goalie for the Oran Park Rovers soccer team. They were looking around other parts of the Macarthur area when the chance came up to buy a four-bedroom house for \$720,000, helped by a first-home buyers grant and Oran Park's \$10,000 rebates for complying with design and landscaping guidelines.

While the traffic in the area is already a concern, Pal likes that job opportunities are opening up with the new airport and shopping centre at Narellan and has no concerns about the pace or scale of development.

"Lovely environment, very central to a lot of things, lots of nice parks," she says. "Probably a perfect area for first-home buyers to bring up a young family."

GRAND PLANS

0 to 7500

people in 8 years

12-15

new homes ready each week

400

houses under construction

600+

homes to be built each year

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