

News and Features

COUNCIL DIGS IN AGAINST SECT'S SITE

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IT was a visible clash of cultures.

The divisions between the spectators in the low-ceilinged, airless chamber of the Blue Mountains City Council were evident at a glance. People who happened to be seated close enough to touch each other looked as if they inhabited worlds that came in contact only by accident.

The most conspicuous, women from a religious sect called the **Exclusive Brethren**, wore coloured headscarves and long dresses. They had long hair and their faces, free of make-up, seemed to have been wiped of all expression.

The men from the sect were in dark trousers and open-necked shirts. They had short hair, one way to pick them from the other blokes in the place, a number of whom had the the general demeanor of refugees from the 1960s.

It is sometimes said that the Mountains have lured a disproportionate number of people on the margins, from aging hippies and dropouts to Jesus freaks and new-fangled fundamentalists.

But the **Exclusive Brethren**, by all accounts an excessively clannish lot with thousands of adherents in Australia, homeland of the present world leader of the sect, claim to have been in the Upper Mountains since the turn of the century.

Indeed, the dispute that brought them to last Tuesday evening's council meeting involved the building of a church. Having outgrown their church at Leura, they had applied to build a bigger church in Katoomba on a five-acre block of bushland a kilometre from Minnehaha Falls.

The **Exclusive Brethren** declined to be interviewed for this column, and no-one else is quite sure why they selected the site, but one thing is certain: they did not choose it for the view.

The churches they build are windowless.

They are devout too, of course, and even by the standards of other fundamentalists, are so intent on denying themselves heedlessly innocent pleasures that they are said (by ex-members) to be forbidden everything from socialising with unbelievers to sport.

Perhaps it goes without saying that the original plan for the church they proposed to build at Katoomba had all the stylistic nicety of an airplane hangar.

Following a round of negotiations with the council, the developer, Katoomba Gospel Trust, agreed to decorate the brickwork a bit, to make the blind walls of the building look less monolithic. But it had grown into a hall with seating for 600 people.

"I'd imagined it as a much smaller church with a little car park, not a car park bigger than the one at the local council," said Rod Brooks, 44, a sandy-haired schoolteacher who lives across the road from the site.

Brooks and his wife, Boz, a special education teacher, feel as if they are constantly forced to fend off threats to the environment.

They had moved into the district before they found out about its hanging swamp, wetland that environmentalists believe should be preserved, Boz Brooks said, "both as a wildlife breeding area and because it functions as a water-filter system".

Practising what they preached, the Brooks have listed their own land with the Environmental Management Plan instead of sub-dividing it.

Other people they knew had done the same thing, said Boz Brooks.

Just what the locals felt about the prospect of the church building with parking for 148 cars was spelt out on the signs visible from the narrow roads thereabouts. "This is our heaven," said one. "Leave it natural," said another

But there were "For Sale" signs scattered between the insignia of protest and there was some talk of the community feeling itself besieged. For all the presence of longhairs, permaculture people and the feller who managed to make a living trapping funnel-web spiders, more than half the residents were older people who may have settled in because the place was a couple of minutes' drive from the hospital out on the highway.

They not only voiced anxieties about the trail of cars to and from the church, they did something about it, joining a resident action group and organising a survey to try to show the extent of the disruption.

In the end, the Blue Mountains City Council agreed, going along with a report from its own officials to vote the proposal down unanimously last Tuesday.

The Katoomba Gospel Trust, anticipating something of the sort, had just appealed to the Land and Environment Court.

But unanimity itself seems something of a miracle in a council where things have got so fractious that someone bombed the building, blowing the front door off, during a meeting last year, a few months after municipal elections had changed the guard.

"It went from being a council that represented real estate agents, property developers and entrepreneurs to a council that just represents ordinary people," said local Ken Quinnell, who likes to keep an eye on the council.

The old guard had suffered another big defeat with the appointment of a general manager a couple of months back but continued to resist the interruptions to business as usual. Considering the atmosphere in the council, perhaps it was not altogether surprising that Alderman John Pascoe from the new guard saw nothing particularly dramatic in the fracas over the church building.

He had walked over the site the day before, Pascoe told me, and with the building and the car park pegged out, he had at last been able to visualise the scale of the thing.

His impressions had been borne out by the council's report: it all looked like an over-development of the site.

"This matter is really straightforward and non-controversial," he said drily.

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