The place is Atherton Gardens, a public-housing estate in the Melbourne inner-city suburb of Fitzroy: four 24-storey towers, 10 flats a floor, more than 2000 residents, although no one is ever quite sure of the exact number of people. It was built in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, a late example of postwar slum clearance. The estate was intended to be a modern, affordable, healthy inner-city community, close to jobs, schools and transport. It was supposed to offer a dramatic improvement over the existing neighbouring housing, with sunny interiors, up-to-date plumbing and electricity, and lots of outside space for children to play. It was built by what was then the Victorian Housing Commission, using precast concrete slabs manufactured offsite. Some histories of Melbourne’s public housing suggest that by the time this estate was constructed, the main reason for persisting with the demolition of inner-city neighbourhoods and their transformation into tower blocks was to keep the government concrete-casting factory going.

Atherton Gardens is now the site of a new form of technology-driven “community building”. The project is a residents’ network, using donated and refurbished computers, volunteers for training and government funding for network cabling and staff salaries in the roll-out period. The residents are given training, their own computers and access to email and the local network. For a small charge they can also surf the web. Eventually, it is hoped, the residents will run and maintain the network themselves.

This simple idea departs from conventional “digital divide” schemes, which are usually about the creation of public or community resources, such as internet-access points in community centres or public libraries. Instead, this project provides the computers and training free of charge to the residents themselves, who may use them as they wish. But it also creates a new public space - all the flats are connected to a local network, which carries forums, residents’ individual web pages, community information and useful links. Here again the project diverges from orthodox information policy. It is not primarily concerned with connecting people to the internet or giving people “access” to computers. It does not see access to the internet as a sufficient or necessary step in redressing the “information poverty” of the residents of Atherton Gardens. Instead, the
The emphasis of the project is on enabling the residents to own and operate their own network, with the additional benefit of connecting to the wider world.

The circumstances of this online community are very different from those of Atherton Gardens in 1970. At some point in the life of the estate, probably quite early, it ceased to offer cheaper and better housing than was generally available nearby. Since then, what it has provided has been cheaper and worse. It is as conspicuous as ever. Atherton Gardens is now an isolated, disadvantaged pocket in a gentrified suburb, surrounded by welfare agencies. A visible and conveniently accessible outcrop of urban poverty, the estate has been extensively studied by academics, social welfare organisations and governments. Most of its residents depend on Commonwealth payments. There is a level of cultural diversity that would have been impossible to foresee 30 years ago. More than 60 per cent of the estate’s residents were born in Asia. Atherton Gardens is not a “community” in any straightforward sense; it is a place where social and cultural connections cross over, where there are many communities, not virtual but both local and remote.

In a place like Atherton Gardens, there will always be higher priorities for action than information technology or communications. Thirty years on, the flats need work. The common areas, the stairwells and gardens, are run-down. The shared laundries have become places for drug taking. Better security is a priority for the residents - the estate has periodically been used as a centre for the drug trade. A few years ago, the Herald Sun devoted a sensational front page to the perils of the “Flats of fear”. In fact, a lot of money has been spent on improving the standard of Victoria’s public housing since Labor returned to power. The physical environment has improved. At Atherton Gardens, flats are slowly being refurbished and the outside landscape has been systematically redesigned and enhanced. Access to the towers is now controlled and guards patrol the estate around the clock.

Some social workers still see the computers as irrelevant to the needs of the residents. One described the network as “space-age technology in a stone-age environment”. That comment almost concedes the point. Naturally the idea of a new response to old problems is attractive when the old solutions do not appear to have worked. Many people and many organisations have supported the Atherton Gardens network and state government funds have, more than anything, turned the idea into reality. But there is no doubt that the fact that the network exists at all after many years of argument and persuasion is down to Andrew Mahar and his colleagues at the Infoxchange, a local non-profit IT company with the slogan “technology for social justice”. Mahar’s challenge has been to communicate the idea of the network to others: the residents, of course, because it wasn’t their idea; the local and state government agencies; and all the community and
private-sector partners. Because the idea of the project is not the obvious one - let’s give them all access to the internet! - it’s been difficult to explain the concept. With many partners involved, there are different ideas about what the network is for, different “visions” and sometimes competing ideas about what a successful outcome would be.

The directions and emphases of housing policy over the life of the estate have also dramatically changed. State government attention, and the money that follows it, has periodically moved elsewhere and then returned. The language of social-policy debate has developed rapidly. The impulses for positive change are now expected to flow from the community itself, rather than from government planners and engineers - even when the community and its environment are the creations of government. Policy makers are now concerned about managing the risks of social exclusion, about the problems information poverty poses for electronic government and about building and sustaining social capital.

It is easy enough to draw the obvious contrast between the state-financed, controlled and managed construction of the Atherton Gardens environment in the ‘60s, and the apparently community-driven agenda of “neighbourhood renewal” in the new century. But both projects also have substantial points in common. They are both ambitious, technically inventive attempts to reconstruct a specific community and place around a new set of relationships. Despite the central role of the residents and their various associations in the Atherton Gardens network, the online community was and remains the inspiration of highly capable technical experts with a reforming vision. Mahar and the Infoxchange people are in some ways the descendants of the housing-commission engineers who first imagined a modernised, transformed community inhabiting the spaces of Melbourne’s “slums”. They had their own simple idea with complicated consequences. Thirty years apart, both projects revolve around the endemic problems of liberal government: identifying disadvantaged populations and intervening to provide the opportunity and skills to access important services and to participate in civic, social and economic life.

These are some of the connections between the “community building” of today and that of the past. Even so, the network stands also as a remarkable example of an emerging form of social policy. Writing in The Australian Financial Review (November 7, 2003), Vern Hughes, secretary of the Social Entrepreneurs Network, describes Australian social policy as having “stood still for three decades”, fixated with the false idea that government spending is the “primary determinant of good policy and good outcomes”. Hughes describes the “service-delivery paradigm” as follows: “a plethora of agencies dispense services to disconnected, passive and disempowered ‘clients’ using standardised programs and resources for which the agencies are accountable not to their ‘clients’ but to
their funders.” Hughes describes a number of small-scale community-based initiatives that attempt to break out of the old paradigm. He talks about community services that are built around and directed by the needs of the consumers rather than the funders: an integrated primary health-care centre in Melbourne’s west run by its patients; an indigenous credit union on Cape York; a “charter school” on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast.

In ways that have both helped and hindered, the Atherton Gardens project is closely aligned to the spirit of empowerment discussed in Hughes’s article. Yes, it will help government agencies to communicate more easily, more economically and more directly with the residents. But it does this by attempting to place the residents themselves in control, not only of their own computers but of the whole network, including the infrastructure, training, support and management systems that must support it. The residents are supposed to end up with some degree of control over how services are provided. The network functions by using associations and contacts among the cluster of community agencies already existing around the estate - it is an evolution of already existing networks. And it also draws heavily on new resources: volunteer labour and corporate philanthropy. Whether the program will ever succeed in placing the network completely in the residents’ hands remains to be seen.

Hughes remarks that two things have prevented the Australian social-policy debate moving forward: the lack of a consumer voice in public discussion and the failure to connect questions of social-capital formation to social-policy reform. On this second point, community networks such as Atherton Gardens may eventually be judged. Will the network break down isolation and exclusion? To what extent will it extend or deepen residents’ existing social connections? To what extent will it enhance communication inside the estate, across cultural and religious boundaries as well as within them? Will it improve access to information about public affairs as well as public services? Will it contribute to a sense of greater trust or security?

The network is still too new for us to be sure about the answers to these questions. But the early indications are that the residents do see the network as a useful alternative communications system. Content from the residents is slowly accumulating on the local servers. They are using it to contact their families in other countries, to find out about useful services and community events, and to read foreign newspapers. The network gives them a kind of informational mobility. They are using it to host forums where residents chat about what is happening on the estate. They are using it to help their children with schoolwork.
Not all of what happens is going to follow the new social-policy script. Some of the things the residents want to do seem to fall within the vision of the local network. Some of them are more about using the technology to make existing personal and familial connections stronger, deepening affiliations that already exist. Some of them seem to be about extending communication across established cultural and linguistic boundaries, and all these uses might be interpreted as building social capital, if that’s how we want to look at them. But the social-capital calculus risks understating the more mundane, perhaps old-fashioned, benefits that the computers bring, such as being able to help children do their homework. Many parents would see that as the most important positive use of the technology.

And then there is the bigger question of how the project can be sustained. Infoxchange put the initial work in, with a lot of help from others. The State Government paid for the wiring, the residents are being trained and may soon be running it. So who will end up owning and operating this thing?

The network at Atherton Gardens is a digital-divide project that plays the current policy game but at the same time departs from orthodoxy. Part of the game involves betting on results: selling the story in advance of the outcomes on the ground. But we don’t really know what will happen. The project has been extraordinarily successful to date but the implementation of this simple idea is so complicated and contingent that the final result may be different from what anyone expects.